

Editorial: The Politics of our Time

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Introduction

In our kind of democracy, it is the poor who elect the leaders, the middle class do the complaining, and still, the rich are the ones who profit from the system. The mechanism in which society must be designed should be rooted in fair procedures. Democracy is meant to empower the weak against the strong. But the poor are often helpless in defending themselves against the abuses perpetrated by the moneyed and powerful. In such a situation, it is clear why the law must favor those who have less in life. It is imperative in a democracy, in this respect, that the interest and well-being of the ordinary man, should take priority over others.

But real life has a way of thwarting ideal theory. Society privileges the role and position of some men over others. History records the exploits of the powerful but forgets to write the stories of their victims. People are judged because of the color of their skin, economic status, or personal history. The strict criterion set by society unfairly labels other people as inferior while reinforcing the sense of entitlement of those who believe they are a superior breed. Cancel culture is simply the latest version of the exclusion of human beings, whose voices are silenced, their ideas reduced into mere footnotes by a society that puts others on a moral high chair.

Philippine Politics is a Family Affair

Principles do not guide the decisions of Filipino politicians. The choices the electorate make is personality driven. People look into the qualities of a leader, not on the basis of one's virtue or competence,

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but in terms of popularity and influence. Voters, however, are conscious of the right thing to do when it comes to choosing who deserves to be in office. But the electorate makes mistakes along the way. The primary example, of course, was President Joseph Ejercito Estrada, whose short-lived presidency was characterized by scandal after scandal, an obvious manifestation of the defects of Philippine democracy.¹

Political observers have pointed out massive disinformation as the reason why a Marcos is back in Malacanang. Social media plays a huge role, whether good or bad, in getting an official elected into public office. Trolling, for instance, never existed before 2016. But while the above claim may be true, it can be argued that systemic injustice in Philippine politics is the actual reason why the liberal party lost the elections. The marriage of North and South – the Marcoses and the Dutertes – appeared to be a formidable force during the last national elections against an opposition that failed to unite under a common candidate.

In a way, people simply want some kind of continuity. But the issue is complicated. For instance, the critics of President Rodrigo Duterte denounce his populist approach and violent means in the war on drugs. The problem, however, is that critics also refused to acknowledge the reason behind the president's high trust rating. Joezenon Purog explains that the trustworthiness of Duterte was rooted in his tough leadership style and strong political will. Purog suggests that the reality of antagonism is the starting point of politics in the Philippines. Conflict is inevitable. In fact, Duterte simply took advantage of this chasm to win the hearts of the masses.

The “us versus them” dynamics of Philippine society means that the elite is seen as the adversary of the masses.² The reason for this type of “moral politics”, according to Wataru Kusaka, is structural. The rise of Duterte to power in 2016 was due to the same loopholes in Philippine politics that its elitist type of democracy naturally failed to address. But for the most part, Filipinos are simply frustrated. Paul Hotchcroft and Joel Rocamora write: “Some 100 years after the

¹ Julio Teehankee, “Electoral Politics in the Philippines.” In *Electoral Politics in Southeast and East Asia*. (Manila: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2002), 179.

² Wataru Kusaka, *Moral Politics in the Philippines*. (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017), 6.

introduction of national-level democratic institutions to the Philippines, the sense of frustration over the character of the country's democracy is arguably more apparent than ever before."³

UP Professor and Philippine Daily Inquirer columnist Randy David actually coined the term "Dutertismo."⁴ David describes the former president's approach as a form of autocracy anchored in the methodical use of intimidation to silence those who express their dissent. In my papers, I argued that Duterte's rise to power was the inevitable result of the politics of exclusion in post-colonial Philippines. Mindanao has always been secondary in the affairs of the state. Before and after EDSA, Manila was in control of everything whereas Mindanao was relegated to an age-old prejudice of being labeled as a land of conflict. "Bisaya na pud" resonated very well among millions of Filipinos, including those living in the capital.

Benjiemen Labastin explains the difference between my thought on Duterte's radical style and David's assessment. Labastin writes: "Maboloc's favorable reading of the president's politics and leadership style takes cognizance of "undemocratic ways" to deepen and substantiate democracy...By reading the Duterte phenomenon as a form of radical politics, Maboloc appeals to the long history of struggle by subordinate classes. In this spectrum, the desire for social change is expressed outside the bounds of the democratic process...While David privileges the institutional approach to social change, Maboloc amplifies the vision of subordinate classes as recourse to social transformation."⁵

The patronage system goes back to the colonial period and how the Spanish friars ruled the country. The same type of politics created the traditional politician. The traditional politician is a very divisive figure and so, the same system has resulted to factionalism within Philippine society. Julio Teehankee explains: "Some political scientists have traditionally viewed the two-party system as an outgrowth of

³ Paul Hotchcroft and Joel Rocamora, "Strong Demands and Weak Institutions: The Origins and Evolution of the Democratic Deficit in the Philippines," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 3 (2): 259.

⁴ Randy David, "Dutertismo," *Inquirer.Net*; [article online]; available from <http://opinion.inquirer.net/94530/dutertismo#ixzz5MnDS063X>; 01 May 2016.

⁵ Benjiemen Labastin, "Two faces of Dutertismo, two faces of democracy in the Philippines." In *Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy* 4:3 (2018): 37.

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local factionalism that constitutes the organizational base for national parties. Factions consist of vertical and unequal ties that bind prosperous patrons, who dispense material goods and services, with dependent clients who recompense with their support and loyalty.”⁶ As a consequence, Patricio Abinales and Donna Amoroso say that the Philippines is characterized by “the persistent inability of the state to provide basic services, guarantee peace and order, and foster economic development.”⁷

Nathan Gilbert Quimpo writes that “the members of the elite – old and new – dominate the country’s political parties”.⁸ Why, in fact, is factionalism common in Philippine politics? Factions, according to Teehankee are ties created out of the way rich political bosses dispense money and influence.⁹ The masses, who value connections to derive favors from their patrons, vote into office corrupt leaders. The changing of political patrons does not depend on trust or commitment. Rather, local politicians down to the barangay level realize the function of political ties, so that immediately they would switch party loyalty to join the majority to have a direct access to the boss. Such lack of a genuine party system weakens the state. Teehankee writes:

The inherent weakness of the state forces it to rely on the support of local politicians for governance. Unlike in the pre-martial law period when local politicians were largely independent and influential in determining the outcome of national contests, the erosion of kinship and personalistic relations in rural areas and the rise of urbanized, contractual and machine-based politics have made it difficult for local politicians to maintain their predominant role.¹⁰

Party switching, according to Teehankee, has become the norm. Part of the reason is the lack of clear-cut party principles that should guide politicians in terms of party goals. Political parties in the Philippines are defined by political expediency, the lure of money, and

⁶ Teehankee, “Electoral Politics in the Philippines,” 179.

⁷ Abinales and Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*, 1.

⁸ Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, *Contested Democracy and the Left in the Philippines after Marcos* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2008), 3.

⁹ Teehankee, “Electoral Politics in the Philippines,” 179.

¹⁰ Ibid.

the rule of local dynasties which make decisions in their localities in terms of who should compose the slate during elections. Politics in the Philippines, in this way, is a family affair. The 1987 Constitution has features that seek to limit the influence of political dynasties. But without an enabling law, the provision has not worked to benefit the people. Teehankee explains:

Cognizant of the elitist nature of Philippine democracy, the framers of the 1987 constitution introduced provisions designed to widen the democratic space and allow for greater participation of other sectors in Philippine society. These provisions include the banning of political dynasties, the introduction of term limits and recall elections, and the institutionalization of a party-list system for marginalized sectors. Yet, the political elites have managed to masterfully work around these provisions through adaptation and the effective use of their political resources.¹¹

Congressmen, who are eager to deliver projects to their constituents at the district level, have to do away with party principles because the people depend on their local leaders for the delivery of services such as roads, scholarships, and medical assistance. The bureaucracy is able to function but most politicians would rather use their privileged position. The same results to a culture of corruption that is rooted in the fact that politicians have the influence to choose the projects, including the contractors they are in cahoots with, so that they get their kickbacks in the process. In this whole scheme of things, people wrongly think that public officials are actually serving them. For Reynaldo Ileto, this boss-client relationship is political as well as cultural.¹²

Political Theorizing and Filipino Philosophy

A good example when it comes to appropriating the Western style of political theorizing is apparent in the paper of Enrique Benjamin Fernando III, a brilliant young academic who teaches at UP Diliman. His lucid article on the Wilt Chamberlain argument reminds

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Reynaldo Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution*, (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 1979), 9.

me of how every young political theorist begins his career. In his article, he makes a critique of the Rawlsian difference principle. The difference principle is at the heart of the effort of modern liberalism to reconcile freedom and equality. According to John Rawls, inequalities are permissible as long as they are to the benefit of the worst off.¹³

Fernando is correct in saying that the moral constraint against Chamberlain severely violates a person's right to make decisions with respect to how one intends to use his talents. Fernando argues that one's positive freedom does not necessary impede another person's negative right. In fact, it is an advantage on the part of society to develop more of the type of Chamberlain insofar as he creates opportunities for other people. The argument is that it is not wrong for others to be paid more since doing so will help society in the long run. Without this kind of incentive, the growth and progress of any society can be curtailed.

After Nozick, liberal politics opened its doors to the question of identity and difference. Such types of struggles are "a radical form of resistance."¹⁴ The reason, in fact, is that power relations, not moral ideals, determine the design of societal structures. Gerry Arambala presents his take on Filipino philosophy, which he labels as radical. By this, he tries to challenge the on-going universal interpretation of what it means to be philosophical. He writes that a Filipino philosophy "must be based on every Filipino's life experience and reflect their specific world views." Arambala says that philosophizing should not be based on one universal criterion. When it comes to the Filipino mind, what you call thinking is the thinking of the "common tao" (man).

Personally, while I am not saying that there's none, I just feel that a philosophy that is purely "Filipino" has never been an issue here in Mindanao. Our experiences point to the reality of exclusion as a facet of everyday life and while Manila enjoys its standing in carving the curricular requirements in the teaching of philosophy, present efforts to define our own niche to work out a novel paradigm is enough for us to stay relevant in terms of theory and practice. For me, right now,

¹³ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 52-53.

¹⁴ Chantal Mouffe, "Liberalism and Modern Democracy," in *Democracy and Possessive Individualism*, ed. Joseph Carens, (New York: SUNY Press, 1995), 186-190.

there is no point in working out a Tagalog, Bicolano, or Cebuano philosophy.

Nevertheless, Dr. Ramon Reyes explains that philosophy can be classified as systematic or traditional. Systematic philosophy includes the schematism built by important thinkers, from Aristotle to St. Thomas, Kant and Hegel. Traditional philosophy, meanwhile, emerges out of a people's way of life or religion. The important aspect of both is originality. Language, being a repository of human thought and experience, is a vital element. In one of my conversations with Bro. Karl Gaspar, he told me that while indigenous cultures do not have a Plato or a Socrates, the fact that they survived the assault of modernity against their culture means that they too can be a source of wisdom in terms of understanding our role in the universe.

In his paper, Menelito Mansueto discusses the prominent issue of epistemic injustice. This has come to be controversial given the fact that certain experts thread into fields that they have not previously engaged themselves in. Mansueto writes: "Epistemic injustice is a *hybrid* social theory that presupposes social ethical responsibility and epistemic justice among individuals, as well as in social institutions." The problem, however, is that there are academics who simply want to shut others out. When someone expresses an opinion, the same person is actually judged not based on what he tries to say, but on the part that this individual does not belong to a particular circle.

To be denied the right to speak about oneself is what epistemic injustice is all about. It concerns the way people are unable to make sense of their identity because of the way society largely impedes them from doing so. Mansueto amplifies the point when it comes to the reality of social exclusion, say for instance, in the way people are being labelled based on their group affiliations. In his paper, Mansueto explains distinction between "urban" and "rural." He says: "No doubt, the distinction urban and rural is carelessly often associated with being rich and poor, or, developed and underdeveloped as used in economic parlance." To add to this insult, being rural is seen wrongly as the equivalent of not having good education, being jobless, and worst, lacking class to join the ranks of the elite.

What complements the position of Mansueto is the idea that modernity is the enemy of identity politics. Mark Lataza argues in his

paper that “modernity is a double-edged sword and somehow institutionalized a culture of violence. It brought tensions in our conformity, freedom, and peace.” Rightly so, he observes that “this culture of violence is conflicts that assault the human individual by too much hatred, misunderstanding, unbalanced judgment, human rights violation, polarization, and others.” In fact, violence comes from unjust systems and the absence of respect for difference in society.¹⁵

Juichiro Tanabe provides a critical assessment of a much broader issue. Using the salient principles of peace and conflict studies, he looks at the problem from various angles, including human rights, globalization, and the economy. Tanabe, in particular, rightly believes that the distinction between West and Non-West has become irrelevant. He argues: “The conventional differentiation between the West and the non-West, or liberal or illiberal or non-liberal has come to lose its conceptual and practical efficacy for human survival.” Tanabe’s work explores the deeper roots of human conflicts, hoping in the end that reconciliation is possible amidst all the indifference in the world.

Asuna Yoshizawa provides the lens in understanding conflict as structural in nature. But she also says that people have enough competence in their ordinary lives to overcome it by being a community. Yoshizawa writes, for instance, that “while the armed conflict has occurred since around 1970 in the Southern Philippines, Muslims and Christians in the southern Philippines have developed diverse and dynamic relationships at all levels of society on the macro, local, and micro-local levels.” Indeed, the orthodoxy here is that many think that Christians and Muslims are enemies. They are not. Co-habitation is possible in the everyday interaction between two people coming from different religions.

Ian Anthony Davatos’s paper on feminism explores gender constructivism. People judge their fellow human beings. Roles and stereotypes assigned by a society that is governed by the prejudiced attitude of some who wrongly believe that they possess the right to define people. A woman is seen as less than a man. A boy is defined as

¹⁵ Iris Marion Young, “The Five Faces of Oppression.” *Social Ethics: Morality and Social Policy*. Edited by Thomas Mappes and Jane Zembaty. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 337.

someone who is not yet a man. Iris Marion Young expressed the problem in her epoch-making essay, "Throwing like a girl." Davatos laments that fact that people are unfairly undermined by rules propagated by an oppressive system. The same rules state that women should not be in the same division as men in sports because women are weaker than men physically. Such claim, Davatos says, lacks any scientific evidence.

Alexis Deodato Ito equally reflects on an important issue – the engagement of the clergy in politics. The question is, should priests and bishops endorse a candidate during elections? Ito argues, that "instead of busying themselves in teaching the chief tenets of Catholicism, they busied themselves in advancing their political moralism. Rather than doing religious catechesis, they went full blast in doing political cathexis." He explains that "the postmodern transformation of the political and electoral preferences of many Filipinos, resorting to political moralism smacks of an unintelligible and anachronistic battle cry."

My take on this issue is that the public sphere should be open to everyone. In his work, *Religion in the Public Sphere*, Jurgen Habermas recognizes the powerful voice of religious leaders. If we seek any moral justification, then the endorsements are easy to justify. As long as the public sphere is characterized by the pursuit of truth and justice, every citizen should be entitled to voice out his opinion on matters concerning the affairs of the state. No one should be politically neutral in the face of oppression and extreme injustice. However, if what the clergy seeks is motivated by his own political bias and personal agenda, then that is a separate thing to consider. Ito's position, in this regard, is well-taken.

Indigeneity and the Politics of Exclusion

The concept of indigeneity is linked to decoloniality. Decoloniality is about the liberation of our local way of life from Western influence. Mindanao is at the heart of the question since it has been ignored for many decades, excluded and yet is continually being exploited for the national economy. In the history of the Philippines, Mindanao presents a unique position because it has never been conquered by the country's colonizers. Renato Constantino says that the Americans did not bother to subjugate the Moros of Mindanao

because they did not consider the island as part of the Philippines. The politics of exclusion has had a tremendous impact in the socio-economic and political life of the Moro people, hence, their struggle for self-determination.

Broadly speaking, post-colonial politics in Philippine society sees elite democracy as the root cause of the systemic and structural problems in the country that has stifled its social progress and economic growth. People in the capital, however, often portray Mindanao as a land of conflict besieged by a Moro rebellion. But in painting the situation in Mindanao as a religious war, the reality of historical injustice is much blurred in the consciousness of the people. The way forward, according to Louigie Pontillo, is developing the culture of dialogue. He writes: “Believing and living a *life-in-dialogue* based on each one’s faith and tradition is a style of life, and it becomes “*culture*” when many who live it can nurture this seed in their cultures.”

Gaspar employs the Habermasian theory of communicative action to reflect and express the real situation of indigenous peoples. He criticizes the technological rationality of the West that has intruded in the Lumad’s way of life. Gaspar says that “it cannot be denied that parts of our indigenous roots persist in our imagination...” But people no longer see the value of remembrance. People make decisions without an effort to look back into the stories and lessons of the past. Gaspar tells us: “To think that this earth still provides hope for humanity is to remember the landmark events of the past and to re-imagine perhaps how the lessons learned can be mobilized for today’s struggle for full humanity.” Remembrance, he says, seeks to “re-ignite resistance as struggles persist until today.”

The reality of exclusion happens when indigenous peoples are displaced by “extractive industries.”¹⁶ Gaspar writes. According to Constantino, the purpose of the Spaniards as to why they came to the Philippines was not to promote Christianity. It was land grabbing.¹⁷ When the land is taken away from the Lumad, societal culture deprives their children of a bright future. Indigenous people suffer

¹⁶ Karl Gaspar, “Extractive Industries.” *Ethics in Contemporary Philippine Society*. Ed. CRB Maboloc. (Davao City: SMKC Publishing, 2020), 112.

¹⁷ Renato Constantino, *The Philippines: A Past Revisited*, (Manila: Tala Publications, 1974), 9.

from discrimination and prejudice. This latent injustice is reinforced by the fact that those in the margins of society are reduced to mere instruments during elections. Poor people suffer from a double injustice because aside from the fact that they have been reduced into being political pawns, there are others in in this world who project themselves as advocates for social justice but in reality, are equally guilty of contributing to the oppression of the powerless.

Conclusion

An elitist socio-political order and the age-old patronage system systematically impede the realization of a decent life for millions of Filipinos. This boss-client relationship reduces elections into charades in which the will of the people is not truly respected. Consequentially, the state is guilty of serving the interest of the few while the poor continue to live a life under the gutter. The problem is the system. Patronage politics and the reality of exclusion deny the ordinary man in the street and indigenous peoples the opportunity to realize the life both desire for their children. Gaspar is right in saying that there is a necessity to re-ignite our resistance against the evil forces that undermine Philippine democracy. What should remain constant is the reality of struggle. Political neutrality serves no purpose but the interests of the oppressor. Politics divides us, but it should be the radical desire for change that must define the politics of our time.

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