

Projects of Power, Discourses of Dissent

The theme of this *Kasarinlan* volume is “Political Economy of Ideas.” It brings together five interesting papers with a common thread on ideas embedded in discourse. Generally, discourses in economics, politics, and society get less attention than the actual flows of money, commodities, and people, perhaps because ideas are even more fluid, intangible, and changing. Yet, discourse, which is not independent of the socioeconomic realities of those doing it, defines what gets to be discussed, to be seen, to be printed, and so forth; and, in turn, such attention redefines the discussions, the visions, and the publications.

Samir Amin explains that the dominant class is always strategic in choosing engagements in economics or in politics because the main goal is to achieve class interest. Take, for example, the idea of democracy. The democratization of societies was aggressively pushed for not because people in the end would enjoy freedoms and attain happiness but because through it, economies were opened to capitalist interests and engagement. Democratization provided the space needed by the capitalists to flourish (even compete among themselves) and, in the process, get to control the direction of economic progress within a particular area, or even the global economy. The same pattern can be observed with the idea of ecological calculation. Amin points out that ecological calculation is done not because it leads to a solution of environmental problems but because it obtains values that provide opportunities for capitalist interests and engagements. There is also a problem with the dominance of what Amin calls “vulgar economics” in economic discourse. It is important to stress that economics became “vulgar” as it was mixed with a type of libertarian philosophy with the resulting framework pushing for freedoms at all levels of society. “Vulgar economics” became the framework of capitalist interests that now clutches most societies. Thus, there is a need for social movements to use alternative frameworks that reflect social realities and challenge dominant class interests.

Dominique Caouette looks at the idea of globalization and how it is being problematized in political science. The dominant view looks at globalization as a process that entails market integration, individualism, and standardization. The alternative view—or alterglobalization—looks at globalization as a process that necessitates managing the market, shared identities, and variety. The former view is obviously put forward by the dominant political and economic classes, while the latter is presented by dissenters. Counterdiscourses to globalization are often dismissed as hot air babble by the dominant classes, part of their strategy to define globalization in their own way. In the end, not much engagement occurs between these two camps. Caouette, however, after reviewing the methodologies and analyses offered by political science, argues that globalization and alterglobalization are intertwined processes rooted in dialectical discourses. A meaningful account of (alter)globalization must engage contemporary transnational dynamics and multiscalar analysis. Political scientists must go beyond the nation-state and international institutions as entry points in discussing globalization if their intent is to create a newer and more innovative understanding of these global processes.

Rolando B. Tolentino considers the role of the dominant class, in the “massification” through films of the nondominant classes within a country. The messianic story is too familiar: the masses need someone to liberate them from their miseries. Finding one, they rally behind the liberator. It does not matter if the so-called liberator is actually not one of them. What matters to the masses caught in this idea is that their liberator is there to help them achieve their freedom. Indeed, it is a very powerful idea even if it is artificial. Tolentino discusses the case of Philippine president Joseph Estrada (1998-2001) and the Filipino masses. The parallels between Estrada in film and in politics are noticeable: Estrada was the actor-hero who fought landlords and capitalists, among others that oppressed farmers, laborers, and the likes; he was the politician-hero who challenged traditional politicians who forgot about the Filipino masses once ensconced in public office. It is thus not a surprise that, in both arenas, the Filipino masses, seeing Estrada as their liberator, did not desert Estrada even as the president was removed from Malacañang Palace. Indeed, there is no doubt that no former Philippine president had the same level of public attention and mass support as Estrada. One interesting observation that Tolentino notes is that, in the Estrada films especially, the Filipino masses were spoken for but were not allowed to speak for themselves, or when they

do, they spoke only in unison. The Filipino masses in film are portrayed as simple, even naïve, a group that could only say “yes” or “no,” a chorus amplifying the thoughts of the protagonist. But the more important message of the article is that the Filipino masses remain a class without a voice and, in the process, are exploited.

The national border is a defined concept and, like other concepts, it is not sacrosanct according to Djinora Velasco. Nonetheless, borders are important to states because they define sovereignty. It is within borders that states exercise their authority after all. What gets across national borders is defined by internal laws and policies, albeit they are modified in response to pressures from globalization and economic integration. Thus, border infringement is naturally a state problematic. There is, of course, a valid argument to define borders and exercise state authority in the context of public interest and welfare. However, beyond the notion of state, Velasco explains that there are also instances wherein what is defined as “border” is, to say the least, an artificial marker, and such is the case with the Philippines and Indonesia. The border itself is not well defined by the two states. The southernmost part of the Philippines and northernmost part of Indonesia shares a common borderzone in the middle of the Sulawesi and Sulu Seas. For centuries, communities around the said area cross “borders” with ease or have families that extend to both areas, and this situation exists without the need for state-issued documents like passports. In that part of the two archipelagic republics, the border is really fluid. There is no security threat to such border crossings. Rather, the crossings at the borderzone are celebrations of people’s identities and independence of communities, enriched by centuries-old cross-community engagements between the two peoples of the Philippines and Indonesia.

Luis Dumlao points out that there is a notion that the size of the economic pie means economic development. This is a mistaken thought. In the Philippines, the National Capital Region has the highest level of economic activity—measured in terms of the total income generated within, say, a year—but the concomitant urban congestion, environmental problems, and social ills, among others, are also of the highest levels. In short, a high standard of living should not be assumed to correspond with high concentration of economic activities. Of course, there are benefits to economic concentration like agglomeration economies (i.e., people are doing similar and related activities), which bring about economies of scale (i.e., prices of goods

and services are low) and even spillover effects (i.e., neighboring areas benefit from the activities in the center). The problem is that high economic concentration is sustained at the expense of less economic activities in the other areas. However, the reduced level of economic activities outside the economic center does not necessarily imply underdevelopment. Simply transferring economic activities to areas outside the economic center may not actually translate into higher standards of living. What needs emphasizing is that the conversion of economic activities into economic development requires basic infrastructure, like roads and transport facilities; utilities that help ease the flow of commerce and business, create jobs, and others. The aim for greater geographic diversification of economic activity and convergence of economic development must also transform into lives well-lived. ❀

Kasarinlan would like to welcome a new member of the editorial board and two new associate editors. Teresa S. Encarnacion Tadem, immediate past editor of the journal and professor at the Department of Political Science, University of the Philippines-Diliman, is now member of the editorial board. The new associate editors are Verna Dinah Q. Viajar, assistant professor at the Department of Political Science, UP Diliman and current TWSC deputy director; and Gerardine V. Paguibitan, member of the TWSC research staff.

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