

Academia and the Gorbachev Phenomenon

The volatile and unpredictable changes in the socialist states have become one of the most covered issues in the world today. Both media and academe have dipped their fingers into the turbulent pies, attempting to give both their superficial and incisive analyses on why the Gorbachev phenomenon has generated tremendous changes in the socialist world. The number of books by journalists, Sovietologists, Sinologist and whatever on the socialist regimes have markedly gone up creating a boom within the publishing world.[1]

In the Philippines, however, save for some media writers whose knowledge of socialist societies is fairly marginal, the dominant explanation of what is happening in the socialist world has been originating from the most inane of minds. Its most influential epitomes are Jaime Cardinal Sin and Fidel Ramos who have ludicrously categorized the Gorbachev phenomenon as proof of the complete failure of the socialist alternative. Their "views" have hugged the headlines simply because these were made in the context of further delegitimizing, propaganda-wise, the revolutionary project of the Communist Party of the Philippines.

The problem is that most Filipinos have come to accept these obtuse remarks as the final explanation to the changes occurring in the socialist world. This can be attributed not merely to the relative success of the anti-communist hysteria launched by the government (complemented by reports of revolutionary excesses in the guerrilla zones) but also to the historically-grounded ignorance of Filipinos of what was and is happening in the other side of the "iron curtain."

Academe shares a big responsibility for abetting, if not sustaining this impoverish popular view of socialist societies. For one, there is a dearth of scholars specializing on these particular studies.[2] These specialists can be

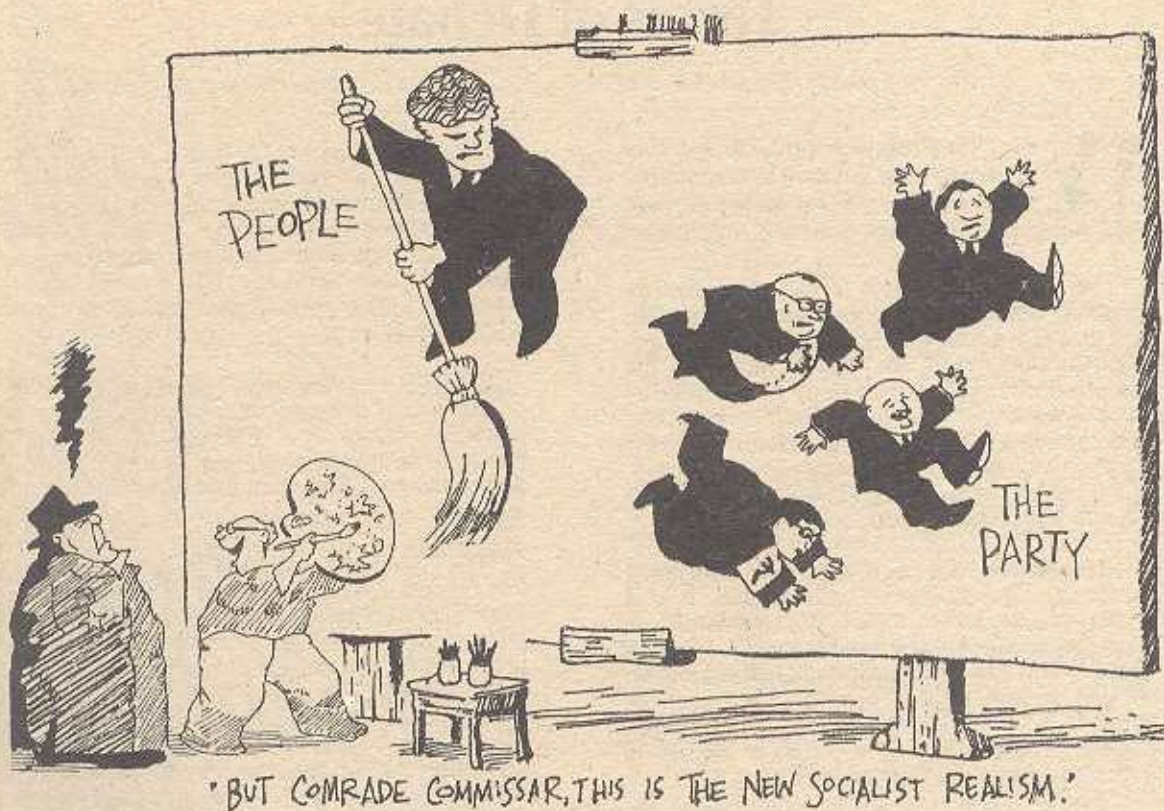
counted with one's fingers; worse, one suspects that only one or two are linguistically familiar with at least the Chinese or Russian languages. Earlier scholars who may have taught courses on socialism are also very much comfortable with the Western-conceived, Cold War-induced framework of totalitarianism whose conceptual validity and utility has been seriously questioned.

Moreover, academic concern about socialist societies has largely been statist in focus; a consideration which is largely a spin-off from the primacy of this totalitarian framework which sets as its unquestioned premise the unchanging hegemony of the Party and the State over civil society. There is no written Filipino academic work that deals with the Russian (or Chinese) social system and its attendant groups, classes and institutions which socialism-despite its manifold aberrations from the socialist ideal (foremost of which is Stalinism)- has evolved remarkably in the last two decades to facilitate the re-emergence of civil society and its tensions with a centralized political authority. (The global reaction to the brutal events in China and the fascinating revival of Soviet democratic processes attest to the serious way in which these contradictions between the State and civil society have created reverberations within and outside the socialist world).

It is therefore imperative that *academia* give due and serious attention to the events of the socialist world. This is not only prompted by the need to lift the veil of ignorance that has given Filipinos a jaded sectarian view of the socialist world. More important perhaps is the need to continuously re-examine this alternative to the current underdeveloped capitalist abyss in which Filipinos are presently mired. For it appears that these socialist societies have still shown to the peoples of the underdeveloped societies that the many facets that made them

enduring options to the capitalist world have survived, albeit qualitatively changed.[3] And it is a survival that, based on the intensity by which the capitalist world has reacted, may just once

more resurrect the political, social, moral and intellectual validity of socialism as an alternative to the present order.



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NOTES

1. Which reminds one of the plethora of literature—mostly impressionistic—that emerged after the 1986 EDSA uprising.

2. One even suspects that Filipino scholars on socialism are all Manila-based which makes the thought of how socialism is taught in the provinces so appalling.

3. The electoral exercise for the Soviet parliament, for example, appears to be quite novel as people can

actually prevent single candidates from winning by simply refusing to cast their votes. There is also the dramatic impact of the emergence of a sizable professional and urbanized sector in these societies which considerably alters the manner in which civil society functions in these centralized regimes. See Moshe Lewin's engrossing account *The Gorbachev Phenomenon: A Historical Interpretation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988. pp.42-82. See also Boris Kagarlitsky's very candid piece "Perestroika: The Dialectics of Change," *New Left Review*. May-June 1988, No. 169. pp. 63-83.