

Context and History: The 1898 Revolution as a Case in Point*

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The first lesson budding historians are taught is the necessity of establishing the context of the event or aspect of history they propose to study. After all, among the gravest errors a historian can commit is to take a scene out of context. This is perhaps why the conference organizers, most of them historians, have emphasized the setting of the 1898 revolution as a major theme.

It is interesting that today the notion of historical context is being questioned, a development which some perceive as a post-modernist assault on the discipline of history, and which on the other hand, others see as a healthy challenge historians ought to confront. Historical context has for a long time been viewed as having an autonomous existence of its own so that historians are able to retell the past from the evidence. By the meticulous examination of written and oral texts, historians interpret and reconstruct history.

Textualists, however, are more skeptical of historical evidence. The text can be read in any number of ways, they argue, and how it is read reflects not only the way in which the text was constructed at the time, but also the manner in which today's readers interpret it. For textualists, the past hardly exists as an independent reality; for them the past is not, as Lowenthal asserts, "a foreign country." Rather, historical context from the textualist viewpoint is simply a structure of words whose meanings are read either from the text itself, on the basis of another text, or from actual human experience outside of the text.

Whatever one's position, the point is that historians, good historians anyway, do not take historical evidence at face value even as they look upon the past as a reality they strive to recapture and represent to living actors. Context is crucial however way one analyzes the text and in the case of the Philippine revolution, the political, economic, social, cultural and ideological contexts of 1898 are absolutely necessary. As the conference program indicates, the aim of the conference is to expand our knowledge and understanding of the revolution by looking into the manifold circumstances in which it developed and by comparing it even with events in the Americas at the time.

The other, more implicit, aim of analyzing the context of the revolution is to understand the context for itself, as a legitimate subject

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of study all its own. Quite apart from the insights one gains about the revolution, the study of the context yields invaluable information about Filipino life and society in the 19th century, no doubt an exciting period in our history. This was the time when we seemed to have broken out of the colonially imposed isolation, although in truth, we were never isolated from our neighbors. For centuries we could trade directly with Mexico and Mexico alone (very, very briefly with Peru), and even direct trade with Spain came rather belatedly in the 19th century. Not surprisingly, one of the outstanding paradoxes of the 19th century is that modern transport and equipment – railroads, steamships, telegraph lines, streetlights, steam mills and modern means of trade and exchange (merchant houses, bills of exchange or letters of credit) – were introduced here not by Spain but by the enterprising British.

One could, of course, argue that these changes were mostly external, that is to say, they hardly affected the masses. But they did, at least in areas which supplied the global market. However, the impact of these changes did not translate into more prosperity or higher standards of living for the peasant Filipino. Different worlds thus evolved: urban environs where foreign firms set up their warehouses and trading companies and enjoyed modern amenities, the world of *mestizo* brokers, many of them Chinese, who acted both as agents of foreign firms and on their own; the hacienda, whose owners flitted from rural life to the color and sophistication of the urban center; and the life of producers and laborers whose goods, highly valued in the world market, were worth far less at the production site.

The world of 1898 was indeed a complex world. As part of the Philippines entered the global market, other parts were hardly exposed to it. As some Filipinos profited from the export trade, most ordinary farmers did not. This could explain why some Filipinos more than others were attracted to the cause of the revolution. The Filipino elite did not enter the picture until after the revolution had broken out, and even then, perhaps, with reservation on the part of some. Revolutionary concepts of prosperity were expressed in terms of land, lower taxes, the absence of exploitation, areas in which the elite were also part of the problem.

So we want to know the context of 1898 for scholarly reasons: both to understand the revolution and learn more about the context itself. There is yet one more compelling reason to examine the context of the revolution, this time from the point of view of Filipinos commemorating a history of struggle, and that is so that we may better come to grips with ourselves and hopefully, be able to deal with our present. In my freshman history class (for whom I exert great effort to stimulate, given the youth's aversion to history), I like to read statements made in the

late 19th century without disclosing their date and author, and then ask my class to guess which period of our history these statements describe. Invariably they say that the authors are referring to the present time. My students are not entirely wrong, for although the statements were uttered in the late 19th century as a critique of that period, they still are relevant today.

Consider, for example, the lament of Spanish importers and residents in the Philippines and their families in Spain during the currency crisis in the 1880s and 1890s. Reeling from the fall of the Mexican peso, which they called *aguila*, they blamed the central government for its failure to solve the monetary problem. Although the circumstances were different from those we face today (that was a bimetallic world then), their complaints are similar: a weightless *media peseta* just like our coins today), the drop in real wages by more than 30 percent, and so on. Over a hundred years ago, Graciano Lopez-Jaena attempted to analyze the economic state of the colony. He opened his statement with these lines: "The Philippines is penniless; she does not have a cent. This is sad but it is true." Given the staggering and continually growing foreign debt of the country today, these lines could well speak of the present.

Or consider Rizal's little known piece about how the middle class swayed from one position to the other and back, depending on which side was about to emerge the winner. As victory neared, wrote Rizal, the 19th century *balimbing** (my term, not Rizal's) would sing the victory hymn "louder than the rest, rant and rave so that all may believe in the ardor of his conviction." I often tell my class I long for the day when I can read these texts aloud, confident that my students will see that the reference belongs solely to a time long passed.

But for now, we continue to live both in the past and the present. The struggle remains incomplete. Divisions within the revolutionary movement haunt us. The multiple worlds within our country continue to exist autonomously. The economy is in deep trouble. Our participation in the global market is still precarious, with the competition today fiercer than ever before. New forms and shapes of old problems have emerged, some becoming more complicated in the process.

Speaking as a Filipino, the context of 1898 becomes more important now given the present situation. I do not believe we still find our salvation in the past; that would ascribe to history the spiritual and redeeming qualities it does not possess and to historians, the ability to supply the answers that only goddesses and gods can know. But I do believe we will understand ourselves better, which is fundamental and essential to any people. If this conference achieves its academic objectives, it could well be called a success. If, as a result, we are able to know ourselves better as a people and a nation, I believe the next three days could rank among our more exciting and rewarding experiences. ❀

**Balimbing* is a star-shaped fruit usually with 10 sides.