

## ***Comments on the Manifesto Papers***

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I confess that I feel out of place in this discussion group. Reading the other papers gives me this sense of having stumbled into a congress of communists and ex-communists who are figuring out the line of march and next moves of a revolution that may not be necessarily Filipino. Alternatively, I feel that I am back into one of those tedious ED (education) sessions on Marx's *Kapital* with Butch Hilario as the main discussant. I wrote a piece for this panel that seems to diverge from the mood and tempo of the other essays. It is a piece that is more academic in orientation, and like many academic pieces, wants to complicate things by posing additional nuances and problems to a communist resurgence in the Philippines as compared to the more optimistic prognoses of the other essays. Moreover, I am, in the final analysis, just an armchair intellectual, and as such would not and do not have any claims at political prescription.

Thus my comments on the other papers must be taken with a grain of salt. It is an academic's reflection of and commentary on what are evidently political pieces. But these are times of crisis and conjunctures for reflection for everyone who considers himself/herself as Left, so I would like to think that even politically effete academics like myself have something to say about the topic today as well as the other papers. So I will take advantage of this, I hope, temporary period of confusion and reassessment to put in a forthright note or two on the papers.

### **Reaffirmations a la Sison**

The first essay that attracted my attention was that of the Filipino Ayatollah. I admit that the dullness of its title (can't Joema be a bit more imaginative and refrain from constantly repeating the word "reaffirm"?) and the crudeness of his synopsis of the Manifesto were what first drew me to it. For, as most of you very well know, the Ayattolah is not anymore the exciting writer that he used to be ever since his arrest in 1975 and his subsequent self-imposed exile away from the main arenas of struggle. But it was perhaps because of this simplism and, dare I say dogmatism, that I thought the Sison piece was the most interesting one.

Simplism allows for broad generalizations as well as over-arching predictions. True, the capitalist system is in crisis, true that more and more people are being proletarianized, and thus, following Sison's logic, the "prospects" for a revolutionary resurgence is there, ever present. My problem with this is that once we overlay history over this rhetoric, the picture becomes more nuanced than what the Ayatollah has presented. Consider some of the more obvious problems of this manifesto on the Manifesto:

a) Sison still thinks that Stalin did a great thing in the USSR, but really, the available evidence (and we can even limit ourselves to leftists like Moshe Lewin, Isaac Deutscher and Eric Hobsbawm) show that the opposite was true. Stalin essentially destroyed the Russian Revolution (albeit signs of its weakening were already there by 1921), compromised socialism during the Spanish Civil War and his initial agreements with the Nazis, and ended whatever possibilities of socialist unity with China by the early 1950s.

b) When the world is simplified, contradictions in one's arguments also become a start. Thus the Ayatollah argues that "alas the new bourgeoisie through the Khrushchev revisionist clique overthrew the proletariat in the Soviet Union" (without explaining how this came about), and then confuses us by saying that these revisionists were toppled (by whom) by the same capitalist forces that they represented in the first place. So are capitalists now overthrowing capitalists?

c) If capitalist restoration in the USSR was characterized by "public assets...brazenly privatized and social turmoil" spreading, what then to make of China today which is experiencing similar processes? Isn't China going capitalist by privatizing its assets, entering into trading arrangement with capitalism, and de-collectivizing the countryside? The Ayatollah is silent on this, allowing only a curt statement that China is "undermining its own industrial foundation" (what industrial foundation? The Great Leap Forward failed)" and even having the gall to describe the Tienanmen massacre as a "social turmoil" (thus implying that the students were equally at fault; for it takes two to tango through a social turmoil).

Unfortunately there is nothing worth learning from Sison's piece (a post-modernist might be interested in the text itself as relic of the kind of left-wing language that Stalin and Mao had nurtured), as it does not

really say much about the Manifesto and today's world. The platitudes are there, but they are only good for the CPP's website, and do not deserve space in a planned third volume of the TWSC's *Marxism in the Philippines* series (unless the TWSC is willing to give the Ayatollah free advertising piece). Which brings me to Frank Pascual's and Mon Casiple's papers.

### **Pascual, Mon C and their Political Reflections**

In terms of writing styles, they are definitely much more readable and better written pieces than Joema (although Mon C's title is a little bit pedantic). They are good summations of the Manifesto for the uninformed and the newly-politicized activist, and their attempt to explain the "present crisis of the capitalist system" within the framework of the Manifesto is equally commendable. I was hoping, however, that these papers give us more concrete examples and cases and not just general statements.

I would take issue with these papers on two areas. The first is with regards the state. The Manifesto, as many radicals following Marx, observed, has said very little about the bourgeois state.<sup>1</sup> What left intellectuals have pointed out of late (notably Perry Anderson and Giovanni Arrighi) was that the dramatic expansion of capitalism in this century as paralleled by an equally astonishing development of the state. The modern state grew and was refined alongside capital's world explosion. The impact of this was far-reaching and also contradictory. On the one hand, we now confront modern states that do not only rely on coercion per se to destroy revolutionary movements, but have also unusual capabilities to coopt (and undermine) radical opposition, appropriate some of their mobilizing themes (welfarism, elections as a democratic popular exercise) and refine their administrative — and thus unoverly coercive — capacities (collecting taxes, bureaucracies, etc.). This capitalist state — in its many variations — is also something that radicals cannot underestimate, for it is also a learning state. It studied revolutionary movements at the same time as it fought them, and in the process it has accumulated a vast amount of information about its radical protagonists to deal, cope, anticipate and keep the latter under control. This is not just a coercive automaton of the bourgeoisie; it can actually educate itself. Which is why in this century you can only count by your fingers successful left-wing revolutions. With technology, many of today's

nation-states are better equipped to deal with their citizens and subjects; a far cry from the days of Marx and Engels.

Yet, because capital knows no national boundary (a principal argument of the Manifesto), the same state is also in danger of losing some of its powers to “other forms of organization of the international bourgeoisie,” as Pascual puts it. Consider, for example, the power of George Soros, a global speculator who brought the British pound down, who destroyed and then helped rehabilitate (partly) Russia, and is accused of being one of the main culprits of the Asian crisis. States cannot stop Soros from moving his capital around, and destroying national systems. This is one notable thing about the present phase of capitalist development. The question we need to answer then is whether Soros is a new phenomenon, a new twist in capitalist development (and as such further intensifying capitalist exploitation), or is he merely a late 20th century version of the Morgans, Rockefellers, Dupont and Krupps?

Moreover, the resurrection of neo-liberalism has also led to capitalist societies weakening their respective states by cutting off their resources, limiting their ability to provide safety nets, and cutting down their sizes. One reason for this is indeed the intensification of inter-capitalist competition; but it also suggests that the nation-state has become a fetter to continued capitalist development (a.k.a. globalization). There are these contradictions and general statements that will not be enough to resolve them. In Pascual’s and Mon C’s papers, we do not only need to look at concrete historical experiences, we also need to consider the possibility of giving equal if not more attention to the “political” than what the paper — and the Manifesto — have devoted to.

A note on Mon C’s section on socialism. His argument that the Bolshevik Revolution was premature and succeeded only through sheer political will, is one of the first admissions I read from a former cadre that all was not well with Lenin and his comrades. Mon C, however, tends to conflate intricate time periods. The socialist plan swung between centralization and allowing for some “free enterprise” to move around, and the Bolsheviks — until the ascension of Stalin to power — debated how to go about this: thus the scissors’ crisis, thus the NEP. Dodong (Nemenzo) can probably tell us more about this. The command economy that eventually emerged under Stalin was not a plan, not a well-laid alternative, but the product of people tinkering with a social system that

was agricultural even as they had to learn as fast as they can how to run it, politically, economically and even culturally. This socialism was specific to Russia and it is one of the most serious ironies of the proletarian movement that those who were inspired by 1917 also tended to think that the “great socialist fatherland” embodied the universal model of the alternative society. Mao did not believe in this, of course, but nevertheless Mao still abided by many of its features — notably state industrialization, one-party regime and brutal repression of any opposition. Mon C. is right that after the USSR “there exists no acceptable socialist alternative model either,” but this is not because there are no models out there, but because it was wrong to create such models in the first place.

I am amazed that both papers hardly make any mention of the Philippines in the Pascual and Casiple pieces, and this surprises me given that, as I argued in my paper, some of the major economic arguments of the Manifesto have found resonance in the country, particularly under Marcos. I hope that the panelists and the audience will devote time on the Philippines and the Manifesto for there are a number of issues that may be of relevance to the discussion. For example, if we situate the NDF’s revolution within a global time frame, two things become apparent. On the one hand, the movement grew at a time when the rest of Southeast Asian communism was on decline after Vietnam. How would we account for this? Does this suggest that the Philippine revolution’s ultimate source of strength is domestic or are there regional impulses that also affected its dramatic growth? On the other hand, among the three successful attempts at overthrowing a state through revolution in the 1970s, only Vietnam really seemed to conform with the Marxist “formula”: a vanguard party being able to overthrow an imperialist-supported state. The other two revolutions were driven by a populist coalition (Nicaragua; yes it had a left presence in it, but of a make-up dissimilar to Vietnam, China and the Bolsheviks), and by religious fundamentalism (Iran). One can even argue that while the Vietnamese revolution was headed by a communist party, the VCP could equally be described as a nationalist party. Again, what do these suggest in terms of the diversity of revolutionary processes, and how would this help Filipino radicals rethink aspects of revolutionary strategy?

Along national time frames, the CPP also faced a revolutionary counterpart that was — at least until the Misuari sell-out — underpinned by religious and ethnic impulses, two “identities” Marxists consider as

subordinated to “class.” But as events in the world show today, they may be ancillary, but they have also become powerful rallying symbols for many movements, revolutionary or otherwise. Other non-class issues persist as mobilizing symbols but the papers merely skirt them. Mon C., toys around with environmentalism and Joema makes a perfunctory, and frankly patronizing, remark on women and gender politics, but none of these authors have really explained how these non-class identities relate to and have changed the Manifesto.

Finally, if it is indeed the intention of the other authors to deal with the Manifesto as an international document (thus in a way also excusing themselves from putting a Philippine twist to its significance), I think that it is also necessary to assess the impact of so-called socialist states to capitalist development. Eric Hobsbawm, in his grand sweep of this short century, makes mention that the USSR (and perhaps by extension China) did constitute for a time, a system autonomous of the capitalist world (a point noted but unelaborated by Pascual). To assess the Manifesto, particularly in this century, may therefore also involve our reflecting on the experience of socialism, no matter how bureaucratized it was. To do this, however, also demands that we read about them.

As for Mr. Gueco’s paper, I think it deserves to be in a forum on Kapital. Perhaps this can be the topic for the next panel? Thank you. ✿

### Endnote

- 1 Marx had very little to say about the state save in the 18th Brumaire, and while Engels did talk about the state, in relation to private property and the family, his discussion of the state’s development tend to simplify a more complex growth of what — in the final analysis — is an executive arm of the ruling class. But only in the final analysis.