The Mythology and Politics of Philippine Education

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One of the most pervasive myths about Philippine society is the supposed quality and accessibility of education or, more correctly, schooling. Like all other myths, there is some truth in it but its basis is not what is commonly assumed.

Schooling is one of the few essential services which the Philippine state provides. While the state cannot guarantee its citizens such things as personal security, health care, housing, employment or basic utilities like water and electricity, wherever one lives in this country, an elementary school, however under-resourced, and a trained teacher, however poorly paid, are available. The rudiments of basic schooling are, therefore, generally accessible to the majority of the population. Secondary schools are more problematic and only recently has the state played a significant role in its provision. Hitherto, the private and religious sectors have been responsible for this level of schooling. Tertiary education is even more problematic. While some form of college training is available in many large towns and cities in the Philippines, its effectiveness is often questionable. This poor standard of tertiary training is found in private as well as state institutions.

The presence of schools and colleges throughout the country and their high enrolment levels are the main causes for the pervasive myth regarding the importance of education.

Many Filipinos proudly point to their democratic political institutions and their high levels of schooling as the major accomplishments of their society. Together with the refrain that the Philippines is the only Christian nation in Asia, this trinitarian litany constitutes the mythology of national identification, reflecting the country's colonial past as well as its postcolonial present.

By Asian and other standards, the Philippines has exhibited an extraordinary commitment to electoral politics, even during the Marcos regime. This concern with the basis of legitimacy may be traced to the Spanish colonial period and marks an unbroken line of Filipino political tradition to which the Americans added the notion of universal suffrage. Thus, from the period of Spanish hierocracy and predicancy, and the regime of American literacy and democracy, to the present dispensation where movie stars, basketball players, and socialites become candidates to public office as do traditional politicians, the Filipino elite's grip on its constituents has barely weakened even if the discourse of domination has changed. Underlying the different discourses of legitimation is a persisting social structure which favors personal prowess over collective or abstract skills. This prowess is primarily developed within the private sphere as part of a network that ensures its members' viability. The practice of elections and the promises of education have to be located within this persisting structure to explain why things remain the same in the face of apparent change.

In the absence of structural transformation, the diversions of electoral politics and the rhetoric of schooling provide the main ideological props for the status quo, occasionally allowing poor but competent aspirants to achieve high office and thereby confirm the system's democratic claims. In the meantime, public officials consider their offices as extensions of their private interests, defending them against outside incursions. Politics is mostly perceived as the pursuit of partisan interest rather than the acknowledgement of a common good. Consequently, government funds and projects are allocated on the basis of reward rather than entitlement.

Besides having a passion for politics, Filipinos very quickly learned the opportunities made available by American-introduced

schools. Education had always been a mark of the Filipino elite. Barely a generation after the Pontifical University of Santo Tomas accepted its first Malay students in the middle of the 19th century, the Philippines had the most westernized and cosmopolitan native elite in Southeast Asia. In the 1860s, Jose Burgos and his generation of locally trained scholars published ethnological studies on tribal Filipinos. The next generation comprised *ilustrados* like Rizal and Luna who complemented their local education with overseas training. They were followed by people like Pardo de Tavera and Palma both of whom, while still hispanophile and humanistic scholars, began to re-orient themselves towards American, and increasingly secular, education. Thereafter, the venerable University of Santo Tomas (older than Harvard University as Filipinos proudly point out) -- the bastion of conservative Spanish-Dominican learning -- was quickly overtaken by American-run religious and secular institutions. The University of the Philippines, the Ateneo de Manila Jesuit College, and Silliman (Episcopalian) University then became the forerunners of what would quickly become an educational boom.

Democratic politics and an oversubscribed system of education became the hallmarks of Philippine society which, up to the mid-1960s, pointed the way for other newly independent and modernizing nations in the region. During this period, the Philippines achieved rates of schooling comparable to those of 'developed' nations. In terms of gender participation, it surpassed even these nations by having more women than men in tertiary institutions.

What followed is by now well-documented. From being a regional leader in education, the Philippines presently lags behind its neighbors in both expenditure and quality of schooling. This is particularly obvious in the tertiary sector, where the market and the search for quick profits have resulted in oversubscribed as well as poorly-resourced universities. This has produced peculiar anomalies. While the country has an excess of nurses, hospital services are generally substandard, particularly since the best practitioners often choose to practice their profession overseas. In addition, poor rural communities often lack basic nursing care. This imbalance results from the pursuit of individual strategies by students, on the one hand, and the quest for profits by nursing schools, on the other. Attempts to balance these interests for the public good are rarely suggested. In the absence of strong public institutions, a discourse of collective needs is weakly developed.

Most Filipinos can now only afford to study professions which have either limited local opportunities, e.g., Commerce, or whose standards are unacceptable for overseas employment, e.g., low-level computer courses. Despite these difficulties, scores of students persist in spending their family's meager resources for often useless diplomas. Such unrealistic practice not only reflects elite hegemonic influence but also indicates the limited strategies available in a structure that emphasizes private interests.

Although electoral politics and impractically high rates of schooling do not by themselves prevent development, they combine, under certain conditions, to allow the reproduction of conservative structures. Hence, the processes of development cannot be located merely in the presence of certain key institutions like electoral politics and mass education but rather in the overall relationship these have with other aspects of domination. In the case of the Philippines, these institutions reinforce conservative power structures and prevent the rise of a progressive and emancipatory middle class. As a result, large numbers of Filipinos, who would otherwise constitute such a middle class, have to seek work abroad or stand in the queue at the American, Canadian or Australian embassies waiting for permanent resident visas.

Despite the presence of an extensive schooling system and what it prides as democratic politics, the Philippines remains trapped in traditional structures of domination made possible paradoxically by its successes in the spheres mentioned. A measure of this success is the fact that the Philippines is now one of the largest labor-exporting nations whose workers, while often college-educated, are mostly employed as unskilled laborers. The irony is compounded by the shortage of skilled workers in both the service and technical areas in the Philippines because of the low wage structure for professionals. Let me illustrate these points using a specific example.

Why, despite an active electoral politics and high rates of schooling, is a region such as the Ilocos not been able to achieve its potentials for capital accumulation and social change? This region has had a long history of commodity production and urbanization and its elite have successfully dominated the nation's political life but it continues to be among the most conservative and undeveloped areas of the Philippines. Hitherto, explanations for the lack of development have stressed external constraints, i.e., neocolonialism, or internal deficiencies, i.e., premodernity, without

adequately examining the mechanisms of local structures of domination. The Ilocos region is characterized by peculiar combinations of a politics of patronage and particular modes of production, i.e., petty commodity production and continuous cropping, which re-direct surplus along traditional channels despite growing potentials for change. This has resulted in a form of political involution marked by a high level of violence. Combined with a propensity for seeking greener pastures, those left behind are forced to preserve their political base through increasingly violent strategies and well-developed structures of patronage. Complex networks of alliances ensure that votes are delivered predictably following well-established agreements whose abrogation invites immediate retribution. This political involution ensures that while Ilocano politics is affected by national factors, its response is often controlled by regional interests.

The Ilocos region is noted for the passion of its politics, the distinctive characteristics of its population, and the relative lack of sustained development. Ilocanos are often portrayed as a dour, clannish, hard-working, and resilient people who have resorted to migration as a way of coping with the limited opportunities found in their homeland. These stereotypes of Ilocano society are often wrong but, like all such generalizations, they arise out of valid impressions found in the print media, on television, and the movies.

The Ilocano provinces of northern Luzon are usually described as homogeneous despite the region's ethnological diversity. What gives it an appearance of homogeneity is the prevalence of Ilocano as the *lingua franca* and the common experience of migration (direct/indirect and local/overseas) of many of its peoples. This reputed homogeneity has created certain political cliches and expectations such as the myth of the 'solid north' often used by former President Marcos and his opponents. However, it cannot be denied that the Ilocano-speaking areas have contributed disproportionately to the nation's politics, supplying four of the Philippines' six post-independence presidents. The results of the last elections indicated that except for some lingering support for Marcos Jr., the Ilocano national vote is not significantly different from those of other regions. Nevertheless, when it comes to local candidates, the Ilocos can only be described as still gripped in the politics of patronage and warlordism. The intense local political climate has prevented the region from developing economically while producing a rich source of national politicians. The Ilocos

represents a microcosm of the Philippines, indicating both its limitations and its successes. In a society which values personal prowess over collective needs, the limited structure of opportunities, like that found in the Ilocos region, forces people to hone their skills along particular paths. In the absence of economic opportunities, politics and education become the main strategies for social mobility. Success in these areas invariably meant leaving Ilocos for greener pastures. Thus, migration has become the established path both for the politically ambitious and the educationally successful.

If politics is an Ilocano's pastime, education is his obsession. In a recent study on Ilocano society (*Remittances and Returnees: The Cultural Economy of Ilocano Migration*, 1992), we noted that the desire to finance their children's advanced schooling was the most cited reason for adults seeking overseas employment. This desire for a college education is expressed as a basic need that parents must provide for their children. The common experience of unemployment in the region or the fact that Ilocanos find overseas employment mostly in the unskilled sectors have not significantly reduced the interest in tertiary schooling.

The quality of much of the tertiary education available in the region is generally of a low standard and seldom provides the student with relevant skills. Many researchers have noted how education often alienates students from their local communities while failing to provide them with adequate professional knowledge suitable for employment overseas or even in urban areas such as Manila. Schooling usually devalorizes local knowledge, including the appreciation of agrarian and other manual skills. In its place, the school becomes a site for the inculcation of civic virtue and curricular knowledge under the control of the possessors of cultural capital. This has led to the image of the unschooled -- *walang pinag-aralan, awan ti sursurum* -- as not only lacking in formal cognitive skills but more importantly, in the civic-moral spheres of life. It is mainly for this reason that Ilocano and Filipino parents strive hard to ensure that their children attend school, if possible, up to the college level.

In the study mentioned, we argued that Ilocano parents invest in their children's education both for pragmatic and cultural reasons. While the agrarian economy includes the opportunity for commodity production, the structure of local politics limits such opportunities and prevents their full development. Thus, in the

absence of investment alternatives, and in the context of a strong cultural validation brought about among other things by the nature of elite politics, Ilocanos resort to schools as a vehicle for social mobility. Interestingly, studies of participation in schooling of Ilocanos residing in Hawaii rate them as among the lowest in this state, but in California they rate among the highest. Such differences are as much related to economic opportunities as they are to cultural preferences. They also indicate that the rate of schooling has to be located within broader structures before its implications can be understood.

Schooling in the Philippines is more often a consequence of the limited structure of opportunities rather than a reflection of the needs of the middle class to equip their children with the skills necessary for employment. The middle class is referred to because other classes either do not need professional qualifications to succeed, i.e., capitalists, or lack the habits of thought, i.e., an impoverished peasant, which schools inevitably presume. This political inducement, rather than rational assessment, for schooling is illustrated by the continuous decline in the standards of tertiary education, as the educational system expands to meet the needs of individuals as opposed to the requirements of the labor market. This decline in standards applies as much to the so-called elite institutions like the University of the Philippines, Ateneo, and De La Salle University as it does to less prestigious ones such as the University of Santo Tomas or the Philippine Women's University. Others further down the academic and status hierarchy are often parodies of institutions of higher learning or blatantly profit-making ventures preying on the gullibility of their clients. Although it cannot be denied that there are competent and dedicated teachers and students in many of the country's tertiary institutions, such teachers and students arguably succeed despite, rather than because of, their institutions.

A necessary quality of a modern university is its fierce defense of the right of free inquiry. This was first suggested in 1618 at Leiden University and later advocated by the philosopher Immanuel Kant when he dared his students to breach the conventional limits of knowledge (*sapere aude*) rather than accept the medieval prohibition on philosophical speculation (*noli altum sapere*). This transition marked the beginning of late modernity and its full implications are still being felt. With the exception of the U.P. (the 1994 Timor conference comes to mind), very few Philippine universities feel comfortable with this practice. Most, in

fact, appear to discourage it. More interest is shown in policing dress codes or enforcing narrow moral conformity than in encouraging the exploration of new fields of knowledge and experience. For most Philippine universities, knowledge is seen as subservient to either a religious commitment or a partisan position. Rather than adding to the human quest for knowledge, most Philippine universities are more concerned with reproducing and protecting conservative interests or pursuing profits.

Another feature of an institution of higher learning is its contribution to research. This assumes that its faculty are in regular communication with their colleagues abroad and that they have the resources and competence to pursue original investigations. Even the U.P. would be hard-pressed to meet this standard since its facilities are often lacking and its staff unable to travel regularly to exchange knowledge with leaders in their field. It is well known that U.P. professors only partly depend on their salaries for their income. Many obtain their main income outside the academe. Even prestigious institutions such as the Ateneo and De La Salle have difficulty in retaining senior and experienced scholars, unless, like their religious counterparts, they are willing to practice the vow of poverty. These elite institutions also have great difficulty in recruiting or retaining promising young scholars and thereby fail to provide a stable academic community for research or teaching.

Other smaller institutions may have areas of expertise such as women's studies or rice technology but lack an overall perspective which locates knowledge within the broad spectrum of human civilization. It is a wonder what a venerable institution like the UST can claim to have contributed to the global episteme. It is even more amazing that the leading private university in the country, Ateneo, still has to rely on foreign charity for its building program while setting aside a parking lot for the valet driven cars of its affluent students. It says much about the value of education, if the country's richest families cannot support or endow one private tertiary institution to ensure quality training for their children. What such elite obviously seek is a cheap mimesis of a university where it can legitimize its economic status through the semblance of competence.

Instead, most colleges and universities in the Philippines exhaust themselves in the ineffective and routine teaching of hordes of students doing courses for which they are ill-equipped or for jobs which are non-existent. Even in this respect, many are

clearly failing in their mission statements if one judges them by the percentage of students passing board examinations. An extreme example is a nursing school which is yet to produce a passing graduate. Passing rates of 15-25 percent of graduating students in government board examinations are not unsual. Even those who pass these examinations are not exempt from suspicion following the various scandals associated with their administration. As a consequence of such anomalies, degrees and diplomas from the Philippines (except for a few leading institutions) are not held in high regard abroad.

The newly-formed Commission on Higher Education seems set to deal with most of the points raised but much of its rhetoric sounds discouragingly familiar. It seems that by reorganizing the education bureaucracy and setting for itself desirable goals, the Commission expects to solve the aforementioned problems. However, it leaves open the root cause of the problems which essentially consists of an oversubscribed and underresourced tertiary education sector. This has been brought about by the peculiar structure of opportunities which the Commission has not considered. This is obvious from its mandate which ensures quality education for all and respect for academic freedom and the integrity of research. Such statements can only come from public relations specialists or from politicians. They explain the persistence of the myths surrounding Philippine education and their close relationship with the structure of domination.

The present lack of support for institutions of knowledge reflects a society still operating under the structure of personal prowess more suitable in a village community than a modernizing nation-state. Modernization requires strong public institutions which ensure that citizens, regardless of their personal status, have equitable access to the opportunities of Philippine society. The transition from a society of prowess to a knowledge regime was initiated during the period of American colonialism (1900-1946), which marked not only the end of Spanish hierocratic control but also the formation of a national culture slowly becoming conscious of itself (see *Kasarinlan* 10(2): 100-116). The University of the Philippines and the Manila Bureau of Science were established to provide a scientific basis for governance. Competent administrators, teachers, and scientists were enticed to the Philippines to implement a policy reflecting America's self-image as an enlightened colonial power.

While the Americans were laying the cognitive basis for a new form of governance, they constrained the development of an emerging national consciousness by discouraging the use of Spanish and replacing it with English. European travellers in the Philippines during the 19th century noted how even in remote parishes one often heard congregations burst into operatic arias. This reflected the Philippines' position as the most developed center of Western-hispanized culture in the region. This included regular visits and performances in Manila and other cities by international artists. An interesting feature of Rizal's novels was his use of classical allusions and his frequent references to contemporary European literature. As Benedict Anderson has argued, Guerrero's translation involved not only a change in language but more importantly, a simplification of style and an elimination of allusions. It is as though Filipino readers of Rizal in English can only understand an unsophisticated version of his novels. This is not only a consequence of the fact that Rizal's novels are now obligatory reading in schools but also an indication of a linguistic and cultural displacement. Such a displacement is expressed in the hiatus between Rizal's generation, who were in the process of developing a hispanized, but nevertheless Filipino, perspective, and the contemporary condition where global factors over-determine local perspectives, thereby preventing their consolidation.

Despite having greater material resources and an explicit national narrative made possible by Rizal's generation, contemporary works of culture lack the scope and depth of the brief but promising accomplishments of the *ilustrados*. Members of this class defined themselves primarily on the basis of their educational achievements rather than their racial or even social status. This awareness of their formal achievements laid the basis for a bourgeois culture that, due to a series of circumstances which included the impositions of new colonial masters, was unable to develop. Another century has passed before Philippine culture rediscovered its national voice; unfortunately, the nation-state is no longer the principal source for representations.

The lack of a national perspective within which to anchor a modern consciousness prevented the new basis of domination introduced by the Americans from bearing fruit. As soon as Filipinos took over the reins of government (1935), they quickly dismantled the basis for a regime of knowledge and replaced it with traditional structures favoring individual strategies and personal prowess.

The Manila Bureau of Science and the National Museum were rapidly allowed to deteriorate into irrelevance, while support for the U.P. was progressively reduced. This has resulted in the present responses of fatalism, resignation, and despair towards natural calamities such as typhoons and volcanic eruptions, rather than their pragmatic solutions. The preference for personal prowess rather than cognitive competence not only prevents the development of a scientific culture but also instills a necessarily partisan and narrow view of knowledge. Such a view discourages the rise of an intellectual class whose task is to suggest solutions in the public domain based on the notion of common good. This explains the generally low status of public intellectuals in Philippine society, placing them below movie stars, sports personalities, and people with a known capacity for violence. This state-of-affairs further illustrates the preference for dissimulating strategies as a condition for success rather than the valorization of knowledge as an aspect of collective goals.

In conclusion, the crucial role of the middle class in determining the quality of schooling must be emphasized. Members of this class depend on their skills for their livelihood. They may be expected, therefore, to advocate public educational institutions ensuring universal standards. At present, however, members of this class flock to private schools and colleges in their desperate attempts to preserve the few advantages which they command. Lacking political clout or economic muscle, the middle class is forced to adopt the strategies of exclusion typifying the elite. In the process, they may ensure individual success but at the cost of public structures which, in the end, are the only guarantors of the values of competence and achievement characterizing the middle class.

While educational success is not the main basis for reward in Philippine society, one cannot expect institutions of learning to receive the resources and incentives which ensure their effectiveness. Almost all professions, from nursing and teaching to journalism and public administration, are meagerly rewarded in the public sphere. Even their equivalents in the private sphere are often under-paid. The recent furor about the lack of lawyers working to resolve pending cases of overseas workers resulted in the call for added personnel in exchange for a salary which is an insult either because it expresses the value of the required skill or because it presumes nefarious interests on the part of the applicant.

While President Ramos may be in the habit of donating his monthly salary to deserving causes, most salaried personnel have barely enough to cover their basic expenses. Hence, the spectacle of the country's professional workforce heading for the nearest overseas recruiting office.

The parlous state of the Philippine education sector was graphically illustrated recently in advertisements calling for applicants for undergraduate scholarships offered by the Australian government. These scholarships paid much more than the salary of a full professor at U.P. Moreover, it is not the case that the cost of living in Australia is much higher than in Manila but rather that an academic in the Philippines is obliged to accept a much lower standard of living than in many developing nations, particularly

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those in Southeast Asia. Until such an anomaly is sensibly addressed one cannot expect this country to compete, let alone achieve the economic success it desperately needs. For this to occur, the mythology of schooling and the politics which supports it have to be fundamentally transformed. This change is necessary for the Philippines to achieve a transition from a society of prowess to a knowledge regime. In the contemporary global condition, the capacity to produce, store, and apply knowledge has become the most imporant element ensuring a society's economic, political, and cultural viability. As a consequence of their search for profits or their insistence on orthodoxy, institutions of higher learning have not thus far shown much competence in fulfilling this requirement.

In a society where the circumstances of one's birth greatly constrain future choices, the significance of scholastic success is greatly reduced. In fact, this success will more often reflect social conformity rather than cognitive competence. Under this condition, schools reproduce inequality under the guise of providing opportunities for social mobility. For this reason, the high rates of schooling in the Philippines may represent a mythology protecting an underlying politics of exclusion and elitism.