

Weaving Together A Tapestry of Generative Themes: Popular Alternatives for the 1990s

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Often, in situations of confusion, debate, and yes, even of collapse it is very convenient to think that we can start anew and just sweep into the so-called “dustbin of history” those things that we believe to be politically inutile. But real life and realpolitik is not a Mills and Boon novel. The popular movement has its own traditions, roots, and currents. Tradition, more than anything else, has a big part in shaping the way we think today. It is the thread that links us to past praxis and theorizing efforts. It influences how we contemporarily conceptualize and do politics. Some of these threads are emotional and affect the level of trust or suspicion that we have on “comrades” whom we debate with; or even influence the kind of alliances and configurations that are created. Other threads are more cerebral and somehow shape the contours of paradigms that we use to frame political and ideological arguments.

But the political and emotional threads remain just threads, disparate until they are woven together into a political and ideological tapestry. Developing a political and ideological alternative is like weaving together a tapestry.

Tourists often make the mistake of analyzing the beautiful tapestry made by indigenous communities in terms of the past, as if tapestries had the clue to a deep, dark, and ancient ritual. The same thing often happens in politics and ideology. The political tapestries we make are often reduced by well-meaning political analysts to ‘archaeological analyses’ of line, faction, and dogma.

In indigenous communities, tapestry-making is also about creating dreams. In fact., tapestries are powerful links between a tribal community’s heritage and their future. Political tapestries, therefore, should not only represent a reading of the past. They should also articulate the movements of the present, and more importantly, capture the visions that we want to realize.

Therefore, tapestries are efforts at creation. Tapestries are intended to be regenerative. It is in this spirit, I hope, that we come here together to discuss, not so much to engage ourselves in the popular pastime of left-bashing but to find ways by which we can collectively move the popular movement further forward.

The tapestry that we are trying to weave together has many images. The first set of images is dissonant:

- the collapse of state-centric socialist models
- increasing economic tension and differentiation between the North and the South
- intermittent crisis in the metropolises of the world capitalist system
- the collapse of a bipolar world and the emergence of various trade blocs, i.e., US-Mexico-Canada, Japan, European Economic Community
- the rise of various fundamentalist movements (religious, rightist, leftist), and
- the faltering of Asia's economic tigers that demonstrates the unsustainability of dominant development models.

And yet this set of images also suggests hope. The unilateral conclusion of the Cold War has started to shift the terms and turf of struggle in various parts of the world from geopolitics to issues of civil society — peace, democratic participation, and sustainable development.

The Philippines has its own parallel set of images; ghostly pain-racked images of those disempowered because they

- do not own, cannot access, nor administer resources for sustained economic production
- are not part of an urban and lowland economic and socio-political mainstream that excludes indigenous communities
- are oppressed by a society that disenfranchises women

- are marginalized by an elitist and militarized political system, and
- are deprived of their sovereignty.

And yet some feel currents, both old and new, of various streams of the broad popular movement. Among them are those who

- pursue comprehensive ideologies and political lines
- respond to specific issues and concerns
- advance coalitions for collective action
- speak out from mainstream electoral parties and institutions, and
- defend and build communities of resistance.

At the moment, the currents are on the fringes of the tapestry. Some say that they are on the edges, citing cold military statistics of declining left presence in the villages, or simply by listing 1987-1992 left electoral performance.

But the images that constitute the dominant discourse are also confusing, if not tragic – a mythological Cronus eating his own offspring.., images of conflict within the Ramos government. In the Institute for Popular Democracy we describe the contending factions mathematically as X-Y-T

X for generals

Y for Yellow politicians

T for traditional politicians.

It would be easy to stop at images. But tapestries are not just about images, they also represent themes. The difference is that themes attempt to interpret images in terms of what space they offer the popular movement for it to move from periphery to center-stage.

I will discuss these themes in order to understand where the popular democrats are coming from, how we understand the emerging international and local political context, and how we intend to conceptualize and practice our politics.

In this paper I list 5 themes:

PEACE

GRASSROOTS

MOVEMENTS

VOTES

LINKAGES

THEME I: PEACE

Peace is one of the in-words today. It means different things to different groups. Peace, some cynics say, is farthest from the intentions of the major contending political groups, linked as it is to the modern-day counterinsurgency/revolutionary tactics. In street language: “pampapogi lang ngayon ang kapayapaan.” [To be a peace advocate is to be hip.]

But who knows, events may yet create a dynamics beyond the intentions of some of the major players. The crucial issue is whether peace negotiations and political settlement will become part of the strategic landscape, rather than just a tactical issue. Internationally, it may be difficult to sustain support for the classical armed seizure of power as the South African and El Salvadoran experiences will attest. Domestically, the human, intellectual, and physical costs inflicted by a long drawn-out war may make it more difficult to reconstruct the nation. Moreover, given the various pressure points and current balance of forces, political negotiation toward political settlement might possibly be more realistic.

This should not be construed as an argument for the abandonment of the armed struggle, but an advocacy for the demilitarization of Philippine

politics towards a greater and more autonomous role for open mass movements in the resolution of the conflict.

THEME 2: GRASSROOTS

Today, 'grassroots' are either the 'political base' of a strategic political line or 'program beneficiaries' of a Non-Government Organization (NGO) network. Both concepts reflect advances in constituency building since the 1970s. Both concepts can be very condescending and can lead to new dependencies.

The challenge is to forge new relationships between NGOs, ideological movements, and people's organizations as autonomous centers of people's power. Some groups have taken this further. Under the banner of community-based alternative development strategies, integrated area development, or building-empowered and self-sustaining communities, community organizers across the political spectrum are talking of transforming local power relations.

This has implications on classical narratives regarding state and revolution. 'Seizure of power' is still an important concern, but popular movements are talking of relative transformation of power at the local level even above but, nevertheless, complementary to long-term agendas. The burning interest in local elections and in the positive provisions of the Local Government Code are indicative of this new trend.

THEME 3: MOVEMENTS

Many of us in the Left were politically honed in the tradition of street barricades and the *welgang bayan* (people's strike). But democratic opportunities have multiplied the frontlines of struggle.

Politics need not be conceptualized as just an exclusive arena of the political blocs. Some of us are looking at pressure points in other arenas with particular nuances, logic, and organizing approaches distinct from that of mass demonstrations. The academe, media, parliament, and even the conservative business community are potential progressive frontliners of advocacy. In other words, we need to re-imagine political intervention.

Coalition is another by-word of the political landscape. The challenge is to go beyond the least common denominator of issue-based and agenda-based coalitions and move towards comprehensive coalitions that address issues of governance and power.

Movements must also be democratic, not only in the liberal conception of multi-party/multi-tendency politics but also democratic in the Filipino sense of a pluralism of community and ethnic groups. More, importantly, democratic in terms of how movements can integrally pursue gender equality in the development and democratization process. We should go beyond the 'women's issue' as merely a secondary or a sectoral concern. How do our movements systematically enhance gender consciousness and women's empowerment in all levels of leadership? How do we promote a non-sexist regimen as an integral concern that is not separate from our traditional concerns, one that is merged but remains distinct?

THEME 4: VOTES

Power and democracy, as linked to elections, will remain a major concern in the forthcoming years. Elections, with basketball, jueteng, and cockfighting is the Filipino's favorite sport. Unfortunately, it is also the left's Pandora's box. On the national scale, the left has a ritual of either dividing its ranks during elections, debating on reformism, or recalling from memory classical Marxist works for or against electoral participation. On the other hand, on the ground level we have built a generation of power brokers, who are able to negotiate with traditional political clans for an access fee, additional space for our NGOs, or as in the case of the 1992 local elections, for some electoral victories of municipal and city officials.

Whether we like it or not, electoral struggle is already a part of the popular alternative. What is important, however, is to move from a generation of voter education experts, electoral theoreticians, and electoral brokers, to a more progressive electoral tradition. Some sectors in the Movement for Popular Democracy (MPD) are even talking about forming a party.

The power of the traditional clan lies in the way it is entrenched in the day-to-day lives and rituals of rural and urban communities. We have, to a certain extent, intruded on that power through issue-based or movement-

based organizing. But the challenge of the 1990s is to transform these communities into electoral constituencies for progressive and popular politics.

THEME 5: LINKAGES

Global linkages have always been intimately connected with our sense of nationalism. This leads us to two questions: 1.) What is Filipino nationalism?, and 2.) What is our relationship with the changing international order?

On the first point, nationalism has been expressed by the popular movement in negative terms, i.e., anti-imperialism/anti-colonialism. In the non-activist section of our population, Filipinos tend to be more regionalistic. When migrant workers go overseas they identify more with their regional roots (forming Ilocano, Pangalatoc, or Bicolano associations rather than Filipino overseas groups.) And yet there are moments in recent history as the anti-U.S. Bases Treaty campaign, when a sense of Filipino nationhood emerged. How do we build on our struggles towards a positive re-imagination of nationalism?

On the second point, solidarity has understandably been understood in terms of the world's commitment to Philippine issues, struggles, and projects. The collapse of several socialist models, the failure of dominant development models, and the crisis of capitalist metropolises have laid bare oppression and repression in various forms; not only politico-economic, but also in terms of race and gender.

In other words, there is an oppressed Southern flank not only in Southern countries like ours, but also within the North. It is important to link up with Southern partners, not only for support, funds, and resources (which will always be important) but also for insights that can be learned and for the forging of a new internationalism that combines state, party, and movement (non-party, non-government) linkages.

A common malaise of popular democrats is our penchant for trying to link things together. As the late Lean Alejandro quipped, "put a popular democrat and a pig together and they will form an alliance." The same

metaphor can be used in our efforts to find a framework to link these ideas and themes.

Some of us suggest that the linkage between the five themes and the questions being posed in this forum today is power and governance. What we are actually doing is reconceptualizing a paradigm for power and empowerment. Strangely, the Ramos government is also involved, at least rhetorically, in defining the same concepts.

Others within our ranks say that to locate these concerns in a framework is premature. The era of grand narratives is over. The era of debates, of totalizing ideological platforms monopolized by contending political groups is over. As far as the left is concerned, the process for defining an alternative for the 1990s will have to take a different path from the way various left groups defined alternatives in the 1960s and the 1970s.

Deliberately, these themes are open-ended and incomplete. They do not intend to prescribe the way forward, the correct path, or the alternative program and strategy. They do underlie the programs that the individuals and the organizational affiliates of the MPD seek to realize. It is around these that we seek to build a distinct constituency. There may be other themes or concerns that various progressive constituencies would want to weave.

It is here that I feel we can learn from the feminist movement who have always been suspicious of patriarchal and totalizing approaches to ideological debate. In describing the possible process, my choice of the metaphor of tapestry weaving is deliberate.

These themes are merely threads in the tapestry we collectively want to weave, but by looking at these themes and engaging ourselves in practical things around developing themes maybe the tapestry can be more colorful, imaginative, and more importantly, realizable. ❁