

The Third World Studies Center at 20: Reaffirming Its Critical Tradition

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I cannot be with you to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Third World Studies Center.* I am requesting Mrs. Nemenzo to represent me. Rest assured I shall be there in spirit because I take special pride in having had a hand in the founding of TWSC.

In response to Dr. Maris Diokno's call for "think pieces," I would like to share with you my recollection of how TWSC came into being. This may give the young an idea of academic life in those bleak days of martial law, when we had to play cat-and-mouse to carve out some space for free thought and expression.

As Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences in 1976-1981, sought to make Palma Hall an oasis of freedom in the intellectual desert that Marcos had created. The task was complicated by the fact that the dark lords of the mainstream Left saw the university as a mere venue for agitation and recruiting ground for the armed struggle. The student activists under their influence indulged in sloganeering, fist clenching and flag waving. Many of us in the faculty who had a basic sympathy for their cause felt that such childish militancy could discredit academic freedom itself. We, therefore, resolved to blaze a different trail.

Marcos provided us the opening. In a major policy speech, he identified the development of relations with the Third World among the four thrusts of his foreign policy. I immediately took advantage of the invitation to be the commencement speaker at U.P. Baguio to discourse on how the university might contribute to this laudable objective. To my surprise and joy, the Marcos controlled Daily Express reported my speech on the front page and ran an editorial endorsing the idea of a Third World studies program.

*When he wrote this, Dr. Nemenzo was in Tokyo as a visiting professor at The International Christian University.

With Professor Randy David and a few other faculty members, we had a brainstorming session. We agreed to establish the Third World Studies Program. But the problem was where to find the money. Wait for the next UP budget? That would delay the launching of the project. Besides, we were not certain that the central administration shared our enthusiasm. Lobbying for special appropriation from the Interim Batasan Pambansa would reduce our credibility.

I asked the budget officer, the late Professor Pablo Botor, to scan the college budget if there are undesignated items that we could use. The only item was the Dean's discretionary fund. Even if it meant depriving my office of the means to meet contingencies, I committed almost the entire fund to the Third World Studies Program.

Since Randy was mainly responsible for conceptualizing the project, I appointed him the Director. Besides a research assistant, his budget allowed him to hire a librarian. But there was no money left to buy books and subscribe to journals. The core of the TWSC library were books donated by the newly established Soviet embassy. It was a risky decision because a sharp eyed witch-hunter could cite that as evidence of our subversive intention.

More risky was our choice of a newly released political detainee as research assistant. Rafael Baylosis was one of my brightest students before martial law. I recruited him to the Department of Political Science faculty but because the semester had started, I asked Randy to accommodate him in TWSC. After a few months, however, he returned to the underground without saying goodbye. Then our second research assistant, Ricky Esguerra, was arrested for being the alleged editor of *Ang Bayan*, official organ of the Communist Party of the Philippines. Honestly, neither Randy nor I knew of his underground connection. When we learned of his arrest, we were prepared for a crackdown. Fortunately, the crackdown never came.

Marcos was doubtless a despot but, in retrospect, I think he was not as efficiently repressive as Lee Kuan Yew. He was quite discriminate in his repressiveness. While he silenced the mass media, he did not ransack the libraries and bookshops. For good reason: few Filipinos read

books! I'm sure Marcos was aware of TWSC, but much as we tried, we were not a serious threat to regime survival, so he allowed us some fun. The restrictions to intellectual freedom, I suspect, were not imposed on orders of Marcos. They were imposed by overzealous and narrow-minded bureaucrats below. When I became the Dean, dug up the records and earned that several faculty members of the College of Arts and Sciences (including myself) were recommended for dismissal for being "notoriously undesirable." President S.P. Lopez disapproved it. Dr. Lopez was not called to task for that reason. The cause for non-renewal of his appointment was a speech he delivered in Hawaii years after the declaration of martial law.

What could have killed TWSC was opposition from within, but I took care to dissipate that anticipated problem. In UP, when a new program is set up, the various departments would get jealous. I, therefore, announced from the start that TWSC would not have a faculty of its own and would not offer courses offered in the departments and provide assistance for faculty members who wish to do research on Third World issues.

The Third World Studies Program served as a refuge for radical academics. It sponsored small research projects and published occasional papers and reprinted significant articles in the radical tradition. A breakthrough came when the Pacific Asia Research Center (PARC) of Japan sponsored a study on the banana industry and the United Nations University (UNU) made the Third World Studies Program as coordinator of its Southeast Asia Perspectives project. Out of these spawned a series of excellent monographs.

Some eminent French scholars came as guests of then President O.D. Corpuz. They wanted to get in touch with the Third World Studies Program, but President Corpuz never heard of it. The French scholars insisted that they had read its publications. If indeed such a thing exists in UP, President Corpuz reckoned, it could only be in the College of Arts and Sciences. He called me to inquire and only then did he know of this ongoing program, President Corpuz called me to his office the following day. Rather than reproach me for doing something behind his back, he was most enthusiastic. He suggested that we legitimize the Third World Studies Program.

Randy hurriedly bundled a project proposal with copies of its publications. That was a delicate matter since most of them were critical of the dictatorship. Randy, therefore, reproduced the speeches of Marcos on the Third World as occasional papers. These we submitted to the Board of Regents, and the project proposal was adopted.

That was how Third World Studies became an official program of UP, not just of the Dean's Office of the College of Arts and Sciences. I was no longer the Dean when the program was elevated into a center under the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy.

Is Third World Studies still relevant in view of the collapse of the Second World, the Soviet bloc? Has the time come to rename the Center?

[A slight digression: I don't like this business of changing names of institutions, streets, etc. If I only have the power, I would restore the historic names like Azcarraga, Pi y Margal, Herran, Buendia, Mendiola Bridge, etc. But if we must change names, why not start with that of our country? Ours is the only sovereign nation that is named after its colonizer. Philip II was among the most despicable Spanish kings. I understand he died of syphilis. Why immortalize a syphilitic conqueror?]

In the so-called "New World Order," we may designate the lone superpower – the United States – as the First World; and the other advanced capitalist countries which are not superpowers (Europe, Japan, etc.) as the Second World. The Third World are the semi-colonial countries like the Philippines who are still being bullied around. Whether they submit meekly to U.S. imperialism and the IMF-World Bank or stand defiantly (like Cuba), they have much in common.

But think we should not confine our studies to the Third World countries. To understand their predicament and grasp the historic possibilities for liberation, we should go deeper into studies of the First and Second Worlds. The current intellectual fashion of admiring the so-called NICS for successfully imitating the development models of the United States, Japan and Europe stems from our ignorance of the models as well as the way Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan achieved NICHood.

I hope to see the Third World Studies Center will reaffirm its critical tradition by encouraging research and discussions on the internal dynamics of the old and new industrialized societies. ❁