

From Proletariat to "Cognitariat," a Future to Dream About*

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Harking back to a deep-seated Asian tradition of learning and intellectual achievement, a number of Southeast Asian leaders have cited the creation of a "knowledge" society as among their targets for the next century. From Singapore's appeal to its professional women to bear more children (thereby stamping their educated mark on future generations), to then President Ramos' dewy-eyed vision of the Philippines as Asia's educational hub (despite the country's shamefully low ranking among Asia's universities), the yearning for this future of learning has made itself evident in official rhetoric.

By western standards, knowledge generation is measured by what is put into the system – gross expenditure on R&D, greater private than public sector spending on R&D, education budget – and by what is produced – literacy and numeracy, patents and scientific publications. While these measures are difficult enough to achieve, attendant to them are value systems or cultural ways that support the creation of knowledge. For now it is these systems or ways that concern me as I contemplate on the future of a knowledge society in our midst.

Just recently, a Singapore judge ruled that for having given a speech without official permission, the sole opposition member of parliament was guilty of violating the Public Entertainment Act. It did not matter whether or not the parliamentarian had something to say which the people could choose to learn from or simply ignore. Without the consent of the state, that person's thoughts were to remain his alone. In Burma, for two years now universities have been empty of undergraduate students. Standing serenely, the universities are a lovely place to teach in, I tell myself. That I would not have an audience, though, seems to be beside the point. And in my very own Philippines, attempts to seriously discuss capital punishment were shrugged off by a rally of

* Piece read at the workshop on "Transitions and Futures in Southeast Asia" held in Cebu City, 3-4 February 1999 and sponsored by the Southeast Asia Regional Advisory Panel of the Social Science Research Council (New York). The term "cognitariat" was borrowed from Filipino physicists Roger Posadas and Jose Magpantay

politicians and movie stars openly calling for the death penalty as their loyal fans shrieked away.

For countries like ours with very fundamental needs, the kind of knowledge we create is just as important as how we create it. One reason why a knowledge society is an attractive future is because it goes to the core of the Asian family's dream – to send the children to school so that the next generation enjoys a life far better, or less difficult, than their parents have had. Proud indeed is the parent whose child surpasses his standing in life. Yet the kind of schooling our children receive ought to be given as much attention as simply being able to go to school. We have high school graduates who do not know how to read. The Philippine high school math and science curriculum probably does not differ much from that of Japan. But Filipino students do badly in math because many of our math and science teachers are not trained in these subjects. Having come from recent visits to universities in Thailand and Malaysia, I see where Philippine academic institutions lag behind our neighbors and fear that in the years to come, UP's standing among Asian universities will fall below its present rank of 46.

How we create knowledge, then, affects the knowledge we create. Public discussion of capital punishment in the Philippines has been clothed in all sorts of emotional and religious imagery such that the essential questions surrounding the issue are left forgotten. The victim of the man executed on February 5 faced the camera enshrouded by a veil, while the wife of the prisoner who passed on from death row tearfully pleaded for her husband's life. In answer to the Catholic church's objection to the death penalty, President Estrada confidently quoted St. Thomas Aquinas. Never mind that he did so out of context. To me it was vastly amusing that the president, with a self-admitted predilection for wine and women (not always in that order), dared to trade barbs with the holy of holys in religious language and all.

Unconvinced, the Catholic hierarchy warned of a "culture of death" evolving from the public outcry for the death of the convicted rapist. Children now playfully call a prospective loser or enemy "Echegaray" (the convict's name). As the death penalty debate has permeated just

about every layer and age of Filipino society, government officials plead with movie producers not to glorify the crime by making a movie out of Echegaray's life. Interestingly, his victim is considering having a movie made out of hers.

In building a knowledge society, how would or should intellectuals reach out to the public given the present tendency to present issues in populist, not necessarily accurate, terms? A recent development in Philippine cinema makes an interesting example. The three-hour film on Jose Rizal, a 19th century Spanish-speaking, European-educated intellectual and the Philippine national hero, defied or exposed as myth current stereotypes about Filipino moviegoers and Philippine film in general. Film director Marilou Abaya explains these myths as follows: that the Filipino attention span does not stretch beyond 1½ to 2 hours; that history as a subject of film is commercially a loser, in contrast to sure winners like sex and violence; that the Filipino audience is turned off by movies with subtitles; in short, that sensationalism in all its raw emotion is the grist of Philippine cinema.

The film turned out a commercial hit and the audience sat throughout the movie, subtitles and all. Was "Rizal" a fluke? Or does it represent a step toward that nebulous knowledge society of the future? The only way to answer these questions is to make more good films. I, for one, am convinced the public will buy them. But even now I am pleased that the movie has caused a public debate about the historical facts surrounding Rizal – whether he actually returned to the fold of Catholicism as the film portrayed, or not – and the relatively minor role the film gave to Bonifacio, the founder of the revolution. Thanks to the film, questions once confined to (boring) historical treatises (I am a historian) are now wide open for the public to chew on.

If how we create knowledge is as crucial as what we create, what kind of knowledge do we wish to produce in the future? Ideally the answer is easy. We desire knowledge that enhances our humanity, helps us understand ourselves and our physical surroundings in new and better ways, knowledge that buttresses the capacity of societies and individuals

to freely decide for themselves and live with one another with all their differences and imperfections.

In practice, sadly, the answers do not come easily. On the one hand, a globally wired world opens tremendous possibilities for learning and the exchange of ideas and information. News about the trial of the century in Malaysia is daily fed into countless e-mail boxes all over the world. Subtly but surely, information technology confounds even the most authoritarian states which, happily, find it increasingly difficult to control the flow of ideas. On the other hand, globalization favors wealthy and powerful countries, which patent the rich bounty of flora and fauna in underdeveloped countries and ably protect their home industries as they remove all barriers to foreign markets. In the highly competitive future posed by globalizing processes, a future divided between “cognitariat” and proletariat, those incapable, mostly poor, countries will face a hard and taxing future.

And what of the people, whose interest all this is about? The future will continue to yield as many people(s) as there are viewpoints. Clearly the Filipino people Marcos fondly called his own (as in “the Filipino people, my *kababayan*”) were not the people who ousted him from power, though they were truly his countrywomen and men. Muslim Filipinos do not feel alluded to by the term “the Filipino people” but they do when called *Bangsa Moro*. The Communist Party, which continues to wage a “people’s” war, has its own people in mind, while at the other end politicians avidly appropriate the voting population as rightfully “their” people. One of my favorites is the phrase used by well-off, well-meaning (though perhaps unenlightened) Filipino matrons who do charitable works for “their poor people”.

The question is, where/how do all these people(s) fit in? Evidently societies today cannot or refuse to accommodate them all. By outright exclusion, through privilege and access to power, or by war, which hopes to exterminate the enemy however that enemy is defined, the tragedy of our century is that tolerance and respect for other views and beings remain elusive or not important enough to be part of the norms that govern our collective lives. In an effort to assert their Asian identity,

though I suspect more to maintain authoritarian rule, some Southeast Asian governments regard free thought as un-Asian, a betrayal almost of one's cultural roots. Such political and cultural intolerance reduces the already tight social space for diverse groups and communities.

The future must thus have enough space for us all and academics, public intellectuals, social activists and movements should start creating that space now. Wouldn't it be the irony of the millenium that as globalization pushes the frontiers of capital and the market to no bounds, societies, communities and nations are unable to expand the living space for all people(s)? ❁