

Montiel, Cristina Jayme, Judith M. De Guzman, Marshaley J. Baquiano, and Audris P. Umel. 2013. *Political Psychology of Land Conflict and Peacebuilding in Central Mindanao: A Social Representations Approach*. Quezon City: Institute of Philippine Culture, School of Social Sciences, Ateneo de Manila University. 80 + x pp.

Growing up in the 1990s, I watched the Berlin Wall torn down on television. This was also the time of Francis Fukuyama's (1989) "end of history" thesis. It seemed plausible enough to me, back then, that whatever new conflicts were coming our way, it would be much different from what has gone before. After all, in an increasingly interconnected world, why risk war over something as pedestrian as ownership of land? We should fight over more interesting stuff, like the fate of the galaxy or something.

Clearly, I had zero aptitude for political science. It would thoroughly depress my younger self that, from the West Bank to the South-China Sea, we are today still fighting over totally uninspiring patches of dirt and piles of rock in the sea. It is still all about territory.

In reading the book *Political Psychology of Land Conflict and Peacebuilding in Central Mindanao: A Social Representations Approach*, I was reminded of another earlier fight over land that played out in the continental United States, as that nation expanded westward in the nineteenth century. Mindanao is our own Wild West in the Deep South, and the research by Professor Montiel and her co-authors uncovers the same pioneer versus native rhetoric, this time coming from the Instagram-sending, instant noodle-munching descendants of the original contenders at the start of the new century. Put that way, it is a bit damning that the basis of conflict should be so familiar, the same old story across cultures and periods. The book's gift is the airing out of these narratives in a dispassionate way, which I think is badly needed. The authors carefully draw out and analyze the existing discourses surrounding the land disputes between Christians and Muslims. They also try to offer ways of moving forward based on their findings. I think they are, with only a few exceptions, successful with the former, although I have reservations about the latter.

*Land Conflict and Peacebuilding* starts by laying out the historical origins of the conflict, which by itself was a fairly useful read. But the core of the book is in the way the researchers elicited and juxtaposed the opinions and narratives of present-day Muslim and Christian respondents, and how they use it to build several distinctive, occasionally

clashing, pictures of the southern island's troubles around land. They derive their more general, nomothetic claims from a sample of 100 college students who identified as Christians and 131 Muslim students. To complement that, a smaller, more select group of Christian and Muslim community leaders were engaged in two separate focus groups. This latter sample provided material for their discourse analysis. From the subsequent analysis of this data we see a consensus emerging among Christian informants that, among other things, the conflict should be understood as a predominantly legal issue, with the solutions located at the level of specific actors and relationships. On the other hand, the results from Muslim samples generally emphasized the historical and systemic dimensions of both the problems and solutions. We also see a broad spectrum of agreement, especially from the survey data, regarding the need to put a stop to the violence and the recognition of collective responsibility.

As an empirical exercise, the treatment of the subject is commendable. The book helpfully guides the reader into the methodology involved in investigating social representations in ways that would be invaluable to an interested graduate student, and indeed to me as an academic who has never attempted to study social representations. It is a bit of a shame though that the psychological basis for some of the analysis was not elaborated on. The survey analysis, for example, clearly relies on some notion of cognitive salience and accessibility that would have been interesting to review. But putting that to one side, the authors clearly invite us to engage with them in the processes of thinking through a qualitative research, and this is very much appreciated. The transparency of the method helps readers get a sense of the logic that harnesses evidence together with the conclusion, something that cannot be taken for granted in social science writing.

The authors have a very light touch in their treatment of the responses and themes, especially the data coming from the focus group discussions of community leaders. I think that there was a deliberate effort to try to stick as closely as possible to the actual utterances and apparent intentions of the participants, layering it only with the barest of inferences. What results is a restrained theorizing evidenced in the modest claims of the citation-free fifth chapter.

I think the foregrounding of the voices and stories of the respondents is a refreshing antidote to the sometimes overwrought theorizing I encounter in the social sciences. Prof. Montiel and colleagues offer us

the data, cleaned and curated, and they then step back to allow us to do the appreciation and connecting-of-dots ourselves. It is a *fiesta* of sorts with a healthy spread of diversity on hand, and the book trusts its readers to be discriminating and well-informed in their judgments of what to ingest and what to reject.

But there is no free buffet. If I am correct that the authors intended to be more democratic in the way they handled the topic, then we would have been better served by an article-length treatment than a book. The text works better as an argument for social representations methodology than it does as an exposition of the psychosocial forces underlying the conflict. The major takeaway we learn by the end of the book is that Muslims and Christians have different opinions about a range of topics, and agreement on others. Based on the sample, Muslims, by and large, see the recent past in the context of historic injustices, which Christians seem willing to recognize to a limited degree. For their part, Christians want to uphold the legitimacy of the existing legal situation and put an end to the violence, with the latter being largely echoed by Muslims. Did I need a spoiler alert for that? Was any of that previously in doubt? I will never claim that only novel findings are valuable in science, and I actually believe that the use of social representations to confirm this divergence between the two communities is long overdue. But I think that point can easily be made in less than the book's eighty pages.

The authors' reticence and deference towards their respondents also makes them seem timid in interrogating some very revealing statements. Take for example this earnest-sounding suggestion from one of the leaders during the Christian round of the focus group, "Perhaps it would be best to educate the leaders or the Muslims so that they would no longer insist on reclaiming the lands they had already sold" (60). The book puts that statement, and other similar claims under the rubric of "Education," and so on the surface seems to nicely converge with calls from the Muslim side for greater access to education. But because I have a less charitable nature than my Atenean friends, rather than a happy coincidence I see worrying implications of propaganda. Revisiting my cowboys and Indians theme, observe for example how David Wallace Adams neatly summarizes one side of the school regime imposed on Native American children in the U.S. at the end of the nineteenth century, "The objective was to persuade the students to accept the idea that it was inevitable and entirely justified that the Indians lose their ancestral lands to a more progressive people"

(1988, 19). The odious whiff of “re-education” is clear in this historical example, which is why the parallels with sentiments in Mindanao, even if a minority opinion, are chilling. I think this, along with the absence of more incendiary Bangsamoro nationalist views, hints at why this book falls short of providing a road-map for future intergroup understanding. Many of the themes seem familiar, maybe because these are over-rehearsed positions that people repeat under circumstances of interrogation (such as in the presence of a friendly qualitative researcher). The apparent agreements in the themes from both sides might merely be the safe answers that people supply when they suspect they are being tested in some way. The solution would have been an analysis that problematized the straightforward narratives given, but this requires a much heavier theoretical hand than what the authors seem to be comfortable with. Unless the deeper representations that animate these opinions are examined more clinically, we risk building bridges that cannot clear the gap.

I am willing to give the authors the benefit of the doubt in so far as they seem to want to strike a conciliatory tone. With their stated aim of wanting to constructively contribute to the peace process, maybe they were wise to avoid stirring up controversy in this instance. Maybe.

At this point I will be slightly unfair by bringing up the prose style. I am a firm advocate of academic writing that is actually interesting and enjoyable to read, especially if it is a book. *Land Conflict and Peacebuilding* is perfectly serviceable as far as academic exposition goes, its arguments clear and uncluttered in the way that brings a smile to thesis advisers everywhere, but there is an irony to the fact that a piece of work championing the power of narratives would lack a clear narrative voice of its own.

Whatever else I might find wanting in this book, I am not conflicted in saying that this book deserves to be read by scholars in social psychology and social science, and by students exploring the methods of qualitative research. I am unashamed to say that I approached the book with very little background on social representations, and finished it feeling more enlightened and optimistic about it as a technique and perspective. The writing is unpretentious and accessible, and while the book avoids reading too deeply into the more contentious statements of its respondents, that might be for the best. There are probably other things that are more worth a quarrel, like the fate of the galaxy or something.—**ADRIANNE JOHN R. GALANG**, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY, DE LA SALLE UNIVERSITY AND POSTDOCTORAL FELLOW, NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY, SINGAPORE

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