

Landlessness, Insurgency and the Food Crisis in Negros

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THIS PAPER EXAMINES THE PHENOMENON of the food crisis experienced by the landless sugarcane workers in the island of Negros. Specifically, it focuses on the widespread hunger experienced by these people at the height of the socio-economic and political crises that beset the country from late 1983 to early 1986—a period that saw the decline and eventual downfall of the corrupt Marcos regime. The purpose of this paper then is to understand the phenomenon of hunger in a society in crisis.

Hunger is a multi-dimensional concept (Wells 1983: 339). The main view of this paper is that hunger is a product of particular historical, politico-socio-economic processes. Specifically, it is my view that the food crisis experienced in Negros island is both a cause and a consequence of the social inequality arising from a social structure created by processes involving capitalist expansion and internal colonialism in the Philippines. "Crisis" is defined in this paper as "an unstable state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending—a psychological or social condition characterized by unusual instability caused by exercise stress requiring the transformation of existing cultural patterns and values" (adapted from Webster Third New International Dictionary, 1971). It is under this condition, particularly the existence of insurgency, that I would like to examine the experience of food crises in the Philippines.

The Historical Factor

A study of the history of Negros shows that

the phenomenon of hunger is something closely intertwined with capital expansion, and the rise of monocrop economy in the island at the turn of the century. A development which, in turn, cannot be divorced from the broader realm of international economic relations in mid-19th century—a period marked by an unprecedented level of technological achievement in Western Europe which ushered in a new economic order.

International economic development in the mid-19th century came to mean, among other things, a relatively steady increase in the consumption of sugar, a commodity previously enjoyed only by the elites. With the 'trickling down' of the benefits of the technological revolution to the working class, especially in the United Kingdom, sugar became accessible to a wide number of people. Between 1750 and 1850, sugar ceased to be a luxury, and became a necessity (Mintz 1983: 197). Thus, from the 1950s to the first half of the 20th century, sugar had become an important commodity in international trading.

The upsurge and expansion of international trade in the 1950s had its immediate repercussions in the Western Visayas where Negros is located. In 1855, the port of Iloilo, "queen city" of southern Philippines, was opened to direct foreign commerce. This event became a watershed in the economic and social history of the region. That the chief agent of socio-economic change in Western Visayas was British (in the person of Nicholas Loney) was not surprising at all. Owning one-third of the total fixed

steam power installed in the world's factories in the 1850s, Great Britain achieved the highest national trade (Foreman-Peck 1983: 3). Significantly, a major part of British international trading was transacted with the Philippines. In 1868 for instance, 73 percent of the total Philippine exports went to England (cf. F. Jagor 1975: 332). Of the total export to England, sugar amounting to \$48,127 comprised 56 percent of the trade value (*Ibid*). Conscious of his nation's great demand for sugar, Loney actively pursued its commercial production in Western Visayas, particularly Negros.

Described as an "archetypal agent of change" (McCoy 1978: 17), Loney and the British trading empire he represented introduced changes in the region which transformed its export economy from one rooted on tertiary cloth manufacture to primary production of sugar. This was ingeniously carried out by Loney's deliberate promotion of cheap British cotton as a substitute for Visayan textile product and the encouragement of sugar production in Negros. (see McCoy 1978: 18).

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The opening of the frontiers of Negros led to drastic changes in its agricultural landscape and social organization. Prior to the establishment of sugarcane plantations, Negros had a diversified economy. Spanish chroniclers in the 19th century made specific references to an abundant rice production in the island, apparently not only for its consumption but for export to other islands as well. Other accounts also spoke of diversity in trade and skills, and portrayed a picture of relatively self-sufficient people who, though using what in European terms was primitive technology, managed to produce not only other staples as corn and edible root crops, but also cacao, tobacco and even wax. But with the introduction and formation of the 'Sugarlandia' system, this picture of a healthy economy would drastically change. Many of the formerly self-sufficient natives were reduced into mere wage-dependent plantation workers, as subsistence farming was replaced by commercialized agriculture. The economy was monetized and consequently, a new social structure was formed—one whose social relations revolved around the hacienda and with the emergent landed gentry in control of capital development.

Though the rural population managed to obtain some cash from their small agricultural production and wage labor in the haciendas, it was insufficient to raise their standard of living. Perhaps the greater harm which the peasantry came face to face with was the new economic order which demanded that they must possess capital to participate in it. Ironically, there was lack of credit and adequate credit facilities. As such, the unrestricted activities of money lenders, and their usurious practices finally led to large-scale alienation of land. The widespread fencing of land and the emergence of the haciendas and landlords, and a landless proletariat, further led to rural indebtedness, widespread poverty, seasonal scarcity of food, and an increasingly low level of nutrition resulting to serious health conditions. Inevitably, such conditions led to high mortality rates which were the final results of a complex of factors which ranged from hunger, natural calamities, and epidemics.

Moreover, outside sugar, trading was minimal and the prices of food commodities very high. With the limited infrastructure growth, traded food items hardly reached the interior areas which have been cleared of the forest and where the traditional subsistence patches of natives or the small migrant farmers can be found. The growing commitment of agriculture to sugarcane production made the emergent working class vulnerable to hunger with the onslaught of storms, droughts, or hordes of locusts (cf. Echaus 1894). In fact, from the second half of the 19th century onward, the scourge of hunger frequently struck the people of Negros. As one Spanish writer noted, it was sugar, more than the dialectic of births and deaths that determined the demographic rhythm of the island (Cuesta 1980: 239).



From the establishment of the American colonial government and the postwar period, the sugar industry became a traditional mainstay of the economy of Negros. The passage of the Sugar Act of 1934 (later superseded by the Sugar Act of 1937), ensured a stable price for Philippine sugar because of the high quota set at approximately one million short tons every year since the late 1930s. In the post World War II period, the country continued to enjoy the same high quota. By the 1973-74 crop year, the amount of sugar export quota to the highly profitable American market reached 1,600,000 short tons.

This lure of easy money and great profits from sugar led to the wholesale commitment of capital, land, and manpower to sugarcane production in Negros. As early as the mid-1900s, modern sugar mills costing millions of pesos were established with the impetus coming largely from American capital. National capital investment in the expanding sugar industry came mostly from Spanish and Filipino mestizo sectors. Spurred by the modernization of the milling sector, the hacienda-owners themselves followed the trend towards modernization of the sugarcane industry. In less than two decades after the introduction of centrifugal sugar production in centralized operations of the milling companies, sugar came to occupy central position in the economy of Western Visayas, especially Negros Occidental. As the region's major produce, sugarcane is the primary agricultural product, and its processing into sugar, the major industrial output. Inevitably, the dominance of sugarcane production led to the neglect and underdevelopment of Western Visayas' industrial structure.

The Social and Political Factor

By the time the country became a Republic, the sugar industry gained repute as the elite among all the Philippine agriculture-based industries. It also became the main basis for wealth and power of a strategic group of the landed gentry—the hacenderos, now commonly referred to as the sugarcane planters. Through its vast capitalization and large force (431,000 in 1976), sugar has historically been the most profitable and powerful of the export industries (see McCoy 1983:1). Until the major sugar crisis of the 1980s, the industry has been a significant source of the country's foreign exchange. In fact, sugar generally accounted for 25 percent of the total exports (cf. NEDA Statistical Year Book 1982:345-355).

At the national level, the centralized organization of the industry into a federation of sugarcane planters facilitated a smooth translation of export profits into political power. Be-

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fore the Martial Law era, the "sugar bloc"—a powerful clique of planters and millers—had powers of undue influence "apt to shake the confidence of any politician, regardless of rank" (Lynch 1969:2). With comparatively large plantations, mills and labor force concentrated in a few agricultural centers, the consolidated political influence of the sugar industry's elites were able to dictate its own terms to a pre-Martial Law congress and president (McCoy 1984: 4). For instance, by bartering US military bases and concessions for liberal US sugar quota, the Philippine sugar industry was able to increase its export to the United States from the post-war period through the early 1970s.

Philippine sugar production during the pre-Martial Law years had always depended on the trend in the US market. The American withdrawal of its sugar quota allocation to Cuba after the Castro-led revolution in 1962 and the devaluation of the peso during the Macapagal administration made sugar production a highly profitable undertaking, thereby resulting in an increase in area devoted to sugar—from 402,000 hectares in 1959-60 to 473,000 hectares in 1973-74 (Ofreneo 1980:44).

However, with the declaration of martial law in 1972, and the end of a half-century of preferential treatment in the US domestic market, the sugar industry suffered its worst blows. Its importance as the country's major export crop started diminishing over the years as a consequence of the declining sugar price in the world market. The removal of this quota in 1974, along with the expiration of the Laurel-Langley agreement, led to the eventual crisis in the industry. Though the expiration of the agreement was initially accompanied by a boom in the world sugar market price in 1974, the price collapsed not long after to as low as US \$0.07 per pound in 1975. This two-fold development effectively clipped the powers of "sugar bloc". And after sugar exports went down to only 6.3 percent of total exports in 1973, the hacenderos were shorn of their original powers.

Before the worsening crisis, Negros Occidental captured the major share of the Philippines raw sugar production and 44 percent of national sugar hectareage as late as crop year 1982-83. This wholesale dependence of the province on sugar production has led to massive labor displacement, widespread incidence of absolute poverty, and hunger. The collapse of sugar prices in 1983, and the contraction of the market, following decades of exploitation and excesses of the once-powerful hacenderos made the masses of displaced peasants and unemployed workers restive.

The Crises and the Rise of Insurgency

The last quarter of 1983 ushered in a series of events which changed the social, economic and political life of Negros. From the first protest rally staged against the assassination of Ninoy Aquino which saw for the first time a number of the elites marching alongside the working class, it was obvious that Negrense society was rapidly undergoing radical changes. Late in 1983 when sugar payments started being delayed and when the payments completely stopped coming in the first two months of 1984, the economy of Negros Occidental became moribund. Hundreds of haciendas were abandoned, the banks ground to a halt in their lending, and the planters cut off the workers' *consumo*. Hunger stalked the land and the crisis became so severe that the province became known worldwide as the Philippines' "Ethiopia." In a span of two years, the revolutionary movement has grown rapidly, and members of the New People's Army (NPA), the military wing of the banned Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), now freely roam sugarcane fields just outside city limits.

Largely a monocrop region whose vast land areas are owned by barely one percent of its population, Negros Occidental represents one of the few remaining vestiges of a feudalistic society. Structurally, Negrense society is best represented by a pyramid with its apex occupied by the dominant class of hacenderos—the landed gentry who traditionally maintained a group of permanent farm workers, the *dumaan* wholly dependent on them for survival. In better days of the sugar industry, the hacenderos acted as the social security system of the *dumaan*, providing housing, work, cash advances, medical assistance and other loans. In exchange, the *dumaan* was duty-bound to remain in the hacienda and render labor often below legal minimum wage. This dependency relationship between the hacenderos and the workers remained deeply entrenched until the 1970s when as a response to the crisis, the hacenderos started mechanizing their farms. With such efforts to rationalize sugarcane production, the century-old patronage system started eroding. At such a strategic point, the underground dissident movement started infiltrating farms through the organization of left-leaning unions. Aided by the sudden withdrawal of the total life support system in many haciendas, the dissidents led by some renegade Roman Catholic priests were able to form strong mass base support.

With many workers either displaced or underemployed, the province soon became the seat of labor unrest in Western Visayas. Despite strong military presence, particularly the Civilian Home Defense Force (CHDF) units stationed in the northern and southern portions of the province, mass actions increased in great number. Long marches and mass strikes called *Weigang Bayan* brought thousands of hill and interior workers and peasants to the capital

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city's paved roads.

As the economic crisis worsened, a gradual shift in the nature of mass actions became evident. More militant demands, like the toppling of the Marcos regime, were made. The growing militancy, and the increasing violent confrontation in the streets (one leading to the death of 27 demonstrators in the northern town of Escalante in September 1985) led to the dwindling participation of the landed gentry. Late in 1985, most of the street protesters hailed from the grassroots of Negrense society. At the same time, military reports showed the phenomenal rise in the insurgency (see Lopez-Gonzaga 1986: 20).

A key factor in the phenomenal growth of insurgency in Negros was widespread hunger resulting from the closure of some mills and the abandonment of many sugarcane farms. With the inability of the provincial government to respond quickly and effectively to the worsening crisis, the rebels who took up the cause of the rural poor gained large mass-base support. In fact, the politicization of displaced sugarcane workers, peasants and marginal fishermen facilitated the establishment of "red liberated zones"—*i.e.* an area said to have been secured by the NPA where its control is already to the extent that the military can only penetrate at the high risk of suffering significant casualties (cf. Montelibano 1985:5). By mid-1985, many of the haciendas and the upland settlements in the south-central towns of Negros have been identified as NPA "red liberated zones." According to a June 1985 military assessment, Central Negros was already in an advanced "sub-stage of insurgency," a condition where there is political support for the rebels and where the government has been isolated from the people. (cf. Lopez-Gonzaga 1986: 23). A former commander of the military task force in Negros himself described the NPA strength in the province in early June 1985 "as having already entered the strategic offensive stage." This was manifested, according to him, by mobile "mopping up" operations in some parts of Negros Occidental.

To counter the growing NPA spheres of influence, the military, under the defunct Marcos regime, set up a string of strongholds designed for offensive actions in different identified "red areas." This military campaign however, proved to be a failure. Having lost their credibility through wanton acts of "salvaging" by some of its paramilitary units, the military was unsuccessful in winning the civilians' cooperation in their "stronghold" campaign. A high-ranking military officer explained the failure of their counterinsurgency campaign as a direct effect of the raging crisis in the province: "The people have no food, they have no money because the planters too, are strapped for cash:



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thus, many of the people have been swayed by the NPA's propaganda campaign."

While the countryside poor of the province refused to cooperate with the military, some planters, particularly large landholders in the south, went all out to support the creation of special CHDF units to be attached to the military in the latter's counterinsurgency operations. This elite response to the insurgency problem inevitably led to the militarization of Negros during the 1985-1986 milling season.

In the short time that the special security forces were in operation, they made enemies for the military rather than curb the insurgency problem. Largely through their abuses, they further isolated the *pumuluyo*—the Negrense mass who saw the private militiamen as guardians of the vested interests of the few rich. In fact, in Cadiz, northern Negros, the CHDF militiamen were easily transformed into a private army of a known Marcos crony and political warlord. In the south, they became security guards in the vast sugarcane, coffee, and coconut plantations of two other Marcos cronies. Other large landholders and proteges of Marcos cronies appropriated the trained paramilitary men for their own private guards.

Expectedly, the militarization of the province led to gross violations of human rights, especially those of the interior and upland rural folks who stood in the "grey zone" of the NPA-military conflict. Civilians who engaged in mass organization and mobilization became easy prey for paramilitary units. Commonly "salvaged" victims were militant church workers, union organizers and plain unionists.

Militarization on the one hand, and the growing recruitment pressures from the Left on the other, led to a wave of peasant migration from the countryside to the capital city of Bacolod. The common reason cited by the new city migrants for fleeing the countryside is to escape the *gamo* (lit., trouble) between what they euphemistically refer to as the *taga-babaw* (lit. those from the upland, the New People's Army) and the *taga-ubos* (lit. from the forefront, the military). Neither pro-NPA nor pro-military, majority of the migrants moved into the city in the hope of finding a peaceful and independent livelihood. As one former rice grower puts it, "I am tired of the taxation of the NPA, and the constant asking for contributions of the soldiers."

Unfortunately, most peasants and agricultural workers find themselves in a worse state in Bacolod. The common lament of such migrants is that they have to pay nearly for everything, and without money they cannot eat. As one migrant from the uplands expressed, "In the hill, even when you do not have cash, you can find food by simply digging camote or gathering wild bananas. In Bacolod if you do not have money, you really get hungry."

Generally unskilled and moneyless, the new migrants end up living in makeshift shelters, or under cramped quarters with city relatives or close friends in quasi-communal settings. Meal preparations and eating are however, separate. With scarce jobs available in their new-found communities, the migrants commonly face the spectre of hunger in the city. While they have found relief in the capital from the crossfires between the military and the NPA, they have continually been haunted by the deprivation of basic human necessities. Life for those who stay in the sugarcane farms was not any better than the lives of those who moved out into the city. Completely dependent on low wages for their labor in the farms, when the planters stopped receiving payments for their sugar, many of the workers were themselves not paid, and were eventually displaced from their work. Finding no other option, many workers in abandoned farms resorted to eating edible plants, field rats and wild root crops.

The Negros Case: Implications

The study of the phenomenon of hunger in Negros (cf. Lopez-Gonzaga 1987) shows that it is not the consequence of the base population's inability to produce enough food. A review of the development of agriculture in the island shows that hunger emerged as a major problem because of the expansion of foreign capital which fueled the formation of a Sugarlandia. This new landholding class looked at



the lands as mainly a form of capital investment, and relied on cheap resident and migratory labor for the production of their commodity crop of sugarcane. From this, one may infer the fact that the early experience of food crisis in Negros was due largely to the establishment of new social relations within its society—that is, between those who controlled ownership of the land and dictated what is to be produced in it, and those who tilled the land and are dependent on their wage-labor for subsistence. The elite power that accrued from the fencing of the land by the agricultural entrepreneurs at the turn of the century, and the build-up of their capital from profits generated from sugarcane production, gave them unlimited powers to dictate what constitutes the agricultural "surplus" and how it is distributed. Thus, the historical account of development in Negros shows that while widespread hunger was experienced by the base of Negros' rural populations, the hacenderos did not suffer the same fate (Cuesta 1983, Echaus 1894). While great proportions of rural population died of hunger in the late 1880s, the historical records made no mention of the members of the hacenderos dying from starvation. The accounts in fact speak of the benevolence of the hacenderos saving the day for their workers. The history of sugar industry in Negros therefore shows that the problem of hunger is not one that concerns technology or organization but that of socio-politics.

The close dependence of its economy on the movement of sugar prices in the world market implies that the food crisis is also a macro social problem, traceable to the over-all subordinate position of the Philippine economy to the world political economy dominated by the capitalist industrial nations. To borrow the phrase of one sociologist, the "development of underdevelopment" (Wells 1983,344) has created peripheral states like the Philippines, and within it an "internal colony" like Negros where considerable economic inequality exist and sizeable portion of the population live in poverty. Under crisis, the traditional patron-client relationship between the hacenderos and the sugarcane workers have broken down and have been replaced by purely capitalist relationship. Land, food, and human labor alike have been treated as nothing but commodities and sources of profit.

Finally, the problem of perennial food shortage in Sugarlandia may be described as a social and ecological problem. With the transformation of the agricultural landscape from diversified subsistence farming into monocrop wide-scale production of sugarcane, majority of the rural base population who were absorbed in the hacienda labor force were forced to obtain their food from markets rather than their own production. Being dependent on their depressed wages, their limited purchasing power has kept their nutritional intake to bare minimum level. On the other hand, the massive clearing of the forests of Negros to pave the way for the expansion of sugarlands at the peak of sugar prices in the world market, deprived the rural folks (including the tribal people) traditionally dependent on hunting and gathering of forest products, of a major source for their subsistence. The available evidence from my study of phenomenon of food crisis in Negros islands shows that it is a problem that can be halted with deliberate and decisive state intervention. Under the government of President Aquino, there is a great hope that the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program may break the

pattern of social inequality, and provide the landless tillers access and control of land. The goal is to transform the tillers of the soil from sheer subsistence production to small-scale farmers engaged in diversified farming. Given the hard-won democratic space, there is hope that a sweeping agrarian reform may be implemented to once-and-for all deal with the problem of food crisis.

The handwriting on the wall—that of the communist insurgency is clear to all Filipinos; the answer is also clear. A question remains however—that of the political will of the President and the Philippine Congress.

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