

High Culture and the Philippine Middle Class

RAUL PERTIERRA

Much of what is problematic about Philippine society is related to the undeveloped role of the middle class. Lacking in both material and linguistic capital, members of the middle class are unable to fulfill their role as the nation's cultural entrepreneurs. Due to the weakness of the middle class, the possibilities for constructing a viable national imagination are significantly reduced and societally flawed. Instead, this imagination is dominated by the elite which views culture as mere form of display or by the masses which sees culture only as the expression of collective and primordial sentiments. Until the middle class is able to play a more significant role in the constitution and the popularization of culture, uninformed elitism and popular misconceptions will continue to undermine Philippine society.

One of the major questions facing sociologists in the Philippines is the extent and significance of the middle class, particularly in determining economic, political and social issues. Most theorists of modernity point out the crucial role of the middle class not only in providing society with its professional skills but also in instilling the value of paid work and the rewards of achievement. People born to wealth or those trapped in a cycle of poverty tend to view the world as constitutively determining their future. They do not see life as requiring a long period of apprenticeship, during which one obtains formal professional qualifications entitling its holder to dispense appropriate services. For this reason, people born to wealth or to the cycle of poverty naturally depend on kin and other personal networks, rather than on achieved and public competence.

If life in the palace or the village is characterized by the intimacy of relatives, friends and neighbors, modern middle class life consists of interactions with strangers. Such strangers exchange services on the basis of formal rules and criteria of competence, while simultaneously preserving their anonymity as part of normal urban life. To facilitate such exchanges in the context of anonymity, members of the middle class resort to a conscious strategy of politeness. For those used to a more personalized world, such as the elite or the peasantry, this strategy is seen either as a pretentious display or as a form of insincerity. In a world of contemporaries rather than consociates, a formal propriety ensures that one is well disposed to a continuing and possibly more intimate

interaction. Much of middle class life consists of learning complex codes of behavior (linguistic, cultural and social) appropriate to such public interactions. Other classes may possess equally complex codes but these do not refer to the distinction between a private and a public world. More importantly, the latter do not deal with the transition between an interiorized subjectivity and its collective constitution via publicly validated forms of argumentation.

The public sphere, within which interactions with contemporaries are conducted, is characterized by a complex set of formal rules. These rules are part of a generalized body of knowledge whose perspectives allow subjects to view the world from interchangeable positions. In contrast, the private sphere arising out of direct consociation assumes a fixed perspective based on personal knowledge. For this reason, the formation and orientation of middle class interactions are marked by an acute awareness of applying formal and impersonal rules of behavior. A traditional aristocracy, accustomed to its privileges, is less likely to show respect for general rules, while members of the peasantry cultivate complex stratagems for avoiding their consequences. In both cases, the private sphere takes priority and determines the response to public structures.

In contrast, the middle class is a product of the public sphere and defines itself in its terms. For members of this class, the world is not constitutively given but must be created through rule-governed actions. While its members naturally have private interests, these are ideally separated from their public duties and expectations. For this reason, middle class life revolves around the distinction between domestic-private concerns and publicly appropriate behavior. Such a distinction becomes crucial in the context of urban life where most interactions occur between strangers rather than among a palace coterie or co-villagers. On the contrary, the private interests of the elite and the peasantry extend into the public realm. Moreover, for the elite or the peasantry, the concept of personhood transcends the private-public dichotomy; whereas for the middle class, such a dichotomy defines its members' notion of the person. Hence, there exists among the middle class the distinction between an interiorized and an objectivized perspective. This is why modernity with its conscious appreciation of artifactuality is intimately associated with the middle class. The givenness of the private sphere has to be balanced with the negotiatedness of the public sphere.

In the political sphere, the middle class is supposed to instill respect for law and individual rights, these being the foundations of a democratic polity. Theoretically, such a polity is formed by consensus where each party formally establishes its legitimate claims through processes of argumentation, that is, through processes which involve abstract and general rules implemented by unknown functionaries, rather than private decisions reached on the basis of hereditary rights. The middle class is also responsible for ensuring the independence of the public sphere with its guarantee of universal rights for all individuals irrespective of birth or status. Finally, the interstitial position of the middle class allows it to serve the needs of capital in the provision and management of labor. Most of the qualities of the middle class are associated with its strong emphasis on formal schooling as the determining factor for allocating social roles and inculcating cognitive structures favoring abstract modes of thinking.

What is less often associated with the middle class is its crucial role in popularizing high culture. This cultural role of the middle class has political functions since such a popularization is often the basis for the constitution of a national culture. Such a culture is necessarily representative of the entire nation rather than of a section or region. Moreover, such representation tends to be exemplary and serves as a normative model for the public sphere. In fact, much of the public sphere is constituted by such exemplary and general representations. While the modes of life of a traditional elite or a peasant community generate corresponding representations, these tend to be organically linked to the conditions which produce them. Representations in the public sphere (e.g., law, art and science) under conditions of modernity often exercise a transformative force not generally present in organically produced ones. While the former are consciously based on artifactuality and, for this reason, serve as counterfactual exemplars, the latter are usually embedded in particular life-modes. For the reasons discussed above, the middle class is ideally placed to express a national imagination and its members are best able to practice a way of life based on a conscious appreciation of culture as artifactual. Accustomed to view behavior as a set of abstract rules, the middle class is ideally poised to respond to the creative challenges of high culture and reproduce it for socially transformative ends. It is this neglected aspect of the middle class as cultural entrepreneurs and innovators which I intend to discuss in this short essay.

What is striking about attending any event of high culture in Manila is the general absence of members of the middle class. Two recent examples

will suffice. In March 1995, the Royal Shakespeare Theatre Company performed *Henry VI* to an almost empty house at the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP). Empty but for the expected attendance of Manila's high society complete in their elegant costumes and expensive cars. They were complemented by a strong contingent of expatriates obviously catching-up with the highest standards of classical theater. The performance hardly sparked a response in the press except for some favorable reviews. It is enough to be seen attending such a performance at the CCP but a detailed and engaged discussion of its merits and the issues it raises for contemporary Philippine society is beyond the interest or competence of the *gliterati*. However, for the host of teachers bravely trying to make sense of the Bard's complex language this could have been an accessible experience. The same can be said for the thousands of Manila's college students struggling with the original Shakespearean texts. Very few were present at the CCP not only because the tickets were relatively expensive but probably also because members of this middle class no longer had the English skills required for the play's appreciation. But apart from reasons of economy and even of language, Manila's middle class is too insecure of its position to insist on playing a culturally dominant role.

A few weeks later, a performance of Verdi's *La Traviata* was given at the old Metropolitan Theater. The Met's neglected condition contrasted with the glamor and glitter of its patrons and once again, the members of Manila's high society complemented the large presence of foreigners. The tickets were even more prohibitively priced than the CCP's, resulting in the almost total absence of people in the side galleries. The event turned out to be a disaster for Philippine opera because the imported singers were reputed to have left the country without being paid. Instead of tapping the support of the growing middle class, the organizers saw the event as principally involving the *gliterati*.

Shakespeare and Verdi have almost become the exclusive property of the elite — an ironic transformation since these artists' public status in their homelands is closely linked with their accep-

■ The middle class is ideally placed to express a national imagination, and its members are best able to practice a way of life based on a conscious appreciation of culture as artifactual. Accustomed to view behavior as a set of abstract rules, the middle class is ideally poised to respond to the creative challenges of high culture and reproduce it for socially transformative ends.

tance by the middle class. Fortunately, vernacular performances of the former at the University of the Philippines and Fort Santiago made it possible for people non-proficient in English to still enjoy Shakespeare. In the case of Verdi, I can recall a performance of *Traviata* at the CCP in 1990 which was sung in both Italian and Filipino to an audience that included young people attending their first opera. As expected, a constant chatter was maintained when the singers sang in Italian but a hushed silence overcame the young audience when Filipino was used. Italian opera is ideal for a local audience accustomed to the dramatic gestures and improbable plots of Filipino movies. The latter trace their origins to the *sarsuela* (*zarzuela*) and the *komedyá* (*comedia*), western performance and literary genres which, during the Spanish period, achieved considerable popular appeal. These examples are less concerned with the composition of the canon of high culture (e.g., Shakespeare, Verdi, Rizal) but rather with the way in which aesthetic judgments are argumentatively produced in the public sphere. Currently, Filipinos are subject to this canon but are not given the opportunities to discuss its relevance for contemporary life.

Institutions such as the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) as well as more specialized bodies like the Cultural Center of the Philippines have been tasked to generate and transmit the nation's cultural heritage. Much of this heritage include the Western canon but there are increasing attempts to supplement it with indigenous experience. While the rank and file of policy-making institutions necessarily draw on the middle class, policy-making is still controlled by people drawn from the country's most privileged elite. This is illustrated by the personal networks which control appointments to senior positions in government as well as the private sector. For instance, the recent chair of the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB) who, by her own admission, did not read much and hardly watched movies or attended the theater was nevertheless recommended for the position by an incumbent. When asked for her views about the role of film in society, the reply consisted of a string of clichés and moral exhortations. She felt called by God and President Ramos to act as chief censor for films Filipinos could watch. The tone was one of *noblesse oblige* typical of the elite's self-appointment as society's moral guide. Instead of an objective competence, personal and ascribed networks determine the occupants of the nation's leading cultural institutions. This last example is particularly relevant since film is one of the most accessible cultural media.

Another illustration of the elite's domination of the cultural landscape is the government's insistence that overseas contract workers (OCW) calling themselves entertainers learn ballet and other classical skills. Such a policy not only illustrates the control which the Philippine elite exercises over political institutions but also reflects their conflation of high culture with aesthetic competence. Such a competence, in whatever genre, is the only reasonable demand that can be made of these workers. In other words, government officials are imposing the elite's notion of aesthetics on other cultural workers.

The Philippines provides a good example for Bourdieu's notion of the convertibility of capital from its economic or political mode into its social and cultural equivalent. One can see daily evidence of this in newspapers, which offer their readers countless descriptions of important weddings, parties and other social gatherings of the elite. While these activities deal mainly, if not exclusively, with Manila high society, their readership includes a wider base whose main constituents belong to the English-reading middle class. As Bourdieu has pointed out, linguistic competence is a major way of displaying cultural capital, in this case a proficiency with English or increasingly with Filipino, the national language. What is odd, is that these accounts of social gatherings seldom involve typical members of the reading public and instead, describe the private lives of the rich and famous. Even columnists who are not themselves members of the country's elite, mimic this tendency to translate personal affairs into matters of public concern. The social pages of Manila's national newspapers resemble small-town gossip columns. In this context, the public clamor over the execution in Singapore of a Filipino maid (Flor Contemplacion) and its representation in the local media was uncharacteristic since the images and descriptions of OCWs are generally patronizing and even apologetic. In this case, a poor domestic worker was portrayed in the national media as a symbol of the long suffering Filipino woman, sacrificing herself for the sake of her family. This representation reached its peak when Nora Aunor, the country's most popular star successfully played the role in a movie. The extraordinary contribution of overseas workers to the Philippine economy is undoubtedly reflected in the sympathy towards Contemplacion but it also shows the growing significance of a working-class consciousness in shaping national perceptions. Since the majority of these overseas workers are skilled and hence, nominal members of an expanding middle class, one may expect their influence in constituting national perceptions to increase markedly,

particularly in association with an expanding urban proletariat. The ultimate failure and disenchantment of the Philippine revolutionary movement during the 1980s was caused by the absence of strong links between the dispossessed majority and the emerging middle class.

The strongest voice of the emerging Philippine middle class is found among intellectuals whose members have mostly replaced the earlier generation of ilustrado-capitalists and scholar-dilettantes. Teaching in universities or working in bureaucracies, practicing as journalists and writers or surviving as performing artists, a whole generation of mainly middle-class cultural brokers has entered the national scene. Characterized by a largely secular discourse, their orientation differs considerably from other perspectives which unselfconsciously invoke divine intervention or other manifestations of supernatural powers. In contrast, journalists' accounts of Mayor Sanchez and his special relationship with Mama Mary often contain a comic or parodic aspect. However, despite their influence, Filipino intellectuals lead an economically precarious existence. Since their natural domain is the public sphere, often drawing their salaries from the state or other non-profit institutions, they are easily persuaded to mute their social criticisms. The general weakness of public institutions in the Philippines, in particular those concerned with the generation or dissemination of knowledge, disempowers intellectuals as well as other members of the middle class. To survive, its members often have to serve private interests or adopt the strategies of exclusion characteristic of the elite.

The competence of members of such a middle class was demonstrated recently (1995) at a conference held to define the nation's cultural future (Culture and Arts in the Philippines 2000). As expected, leading politicians and members of the elite attended the conference but the substantial work, including the formation of concrete policy, was largely undertaken by experts and practitioners in their respective areas. The days when one could claim cultural competence simply through birth or connection are truly past. Instead, people claiming this competence have to demonstrate their grasp not only of esoteric theory but also of a dedicated and accomplished practice. In a modern world, cultural knowledge requires an understanding of its complex and artifactual constitution. Moreover, as the conference affirmed, cultural practice is not only part of a national perspective but also a reflection of its political and democratic sources. In other words, national culture is part of the

public sphere and must, therefore, be negotiated therein, rather than seen as an elitist expression of an autonomous and private subjectivity. It is precisely this autonomous and private subjectivity which the elite projects as the quality of high culture, in contrast to the manipulations of collective subjectivity characterizing mass or popular culture. A middle class perspective can, however, provide the connection between an interiorized subjectivity and its collective source in the public sphere.

Things were not always as they are now. European travellers in the Philippines during the 19th century noted how even in remote parishes one often heard congregations burst into operatic arias and other western compositions. Much of the popular music of the period included routinely used classical works in komedyas and sarsuelas. This reflected the Philippines' position as the most developed center of western classical culture in the region. This included regular visits and performances in Manila and other cities by international artists. An interesting feature of Rizal's novels was his use of classical allusions and frequent references to 19th century European literature. As Benedict Anderson has argued, Guerrero's translation involved not only a change in language (from Spanish to English) but more importantly, a simplification of style and an elimination of allusions. It is as though modern Filipino (English) readers can only understand an unsophisticated version of Rizal. This is not only a consequence of the fact that Rizal's novels are now obligatory reading in schools but also an indication of a cultural displacement. Such a displacement is expressed in the cultural hiatus between Rizal's generation, who were in the process of developing a hispanized but nevertheless Filipino perspective and the contemporary condition where global factors over-determine local perspectives, thereby preventing their consolidation.

Despite having greater material resources and an explicit national narrative made possible by Rizal's generation, contemporary works of culture lack the scope and depth of the brief but promising accomplishments of the 19th century *ilustrados* (Filipinos advocating Enlightenment values). Members of this group defined themselves primarily on the basis of their educational achievements rather than their racial or even social status. This awareness of their formal achievements laid the basis for a bourgeois culture which, due to a series of circumstances, including the impositions of new colonial masters (America's replacement of Spain), was unable to develop. Another century has passed before Philippine

culture discovered its voice but by now, locality is an aspect of the global condition.

Much of what is problematic about Philippine society is related to the undeveloped role of the middle class. The low wages of professionals, including nurses, teachers, civil servants and even junior managers in private enterprises prevent them from exercising a sobering and constraining influence in public life which, through their training and aptitude, they are ideally placed to exercise. This absence of the middle class is felt most strongly in the sphere of high culture, the preserve of the nation's *gliterati*. To add to its financial insecurity, members of the middle class often exist in a state of linguistic confusion, proficient in the vernacular but lacking in advanced English language skills. The contemporary global condition and the particular requirements of Philippine society make such language skills important if not necessary. Lacking in both material and linguistic capital, the members of the middle class are unable to fulfill their role as the nation's cultural entrepreneurs.

The importance of middle class intellectuals has been mentioned but their socio-critical function is severely constrained by their economic dependency. When associated with their relative weakness in constituting the nation's cultural life, the possibilities for constructing a viable national imagination are significantly reduced and societally flawed. Instead, such an imagination will be dominated by the elite's understanding of culture, a view which sees it as a form of display, a mere representation requiring at most periodic genuflection or, as far as the masses are concerned, an expression of collective and primordial sentiments. Contrarily, the middle class views culture as involving an understanding of the fundamental artifactuality of social life and hence, of the limitless possibilities for constituting human society. A view of culture which sees it not only as negotiable but also as arising out of rationally defensible criteria involving aesthetic judgments and encouraging its public discussion rather than simply its private accumulation or consumption. Culture is simultaneously an appreciation of the existing human condition as well as an expression of its counterfactual possibilities. It is this latter concern which members of the middle class are best able to explore. Until its members play a more significant role in its constitution, the Philippines will remain not only a bastion of an uninformed elitism but also trapped in populist misconceptions. ●