

From a Society of Prowess to a Knowledge Regime

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Philippines 2000 is intended to transform the country into a newly industrializing economy (NIE) by the 21st century. Whether or not the country could thus be transformed in the immediate future is highly debatable; what is undisputedly certain, however, is that this future is crucially dependent on the steady accumulation of, and access to, knowledge. While the industrial revolution during the 19th century resulted in the enormous increase of manufactures, the electronic revolution in the 20th caused fundamental transformations in the accumulation and utilization of information. In the new era of information technology, the capacity to produce, store, and use knowledge becomes the most important element determining a country's economic, cultural, and political viability.

The requirements of modern capitalism resulted in an extraordinary expansion of the structures of knowledge. Not

only does capitalism require the coordination of ever increasing economic structures, it also seeks to achieve this through the rational competition of consenting agents. The first condition brings together an array of distinct local economies, while the second presents formidable cultural barriers for consensus formation. Their resolution can be achieved only through an ever expanding system of information retrieval and dissemination.

Structures of communication making possible the rational basis for resource allocation had to be developed for the overall economic system to persist. Whereas early capitalism was fueled by the need for booty satisfied through military adventures, late capitalism can be serviced only by a knowledge regime. The latter is a form of domination possible only under specific epistemic conditions exemplified in the contemporary Western state. Its most significant feature is the knowledge of the conditions for the production of knowledge. This is exemplified in institutions specifically dedicated to research such as universities and centers of technological innovation.

The abovementioned conditions do not presently exist in the Philippines. This absence partly explains the low levels of competence expected of the country's public officials. Such public officials generally treat their public duties as mere extensions of their private interests which are, in turn, determined by concrete and idiosyncratic obligations rather than formal agreements. In this context, the acquisition of abstract and professional skills is seldom necessary. In their

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place, Filipinos cultivate a highly developed personal network whose members exchange a wide range of services and resources. Beyond having a solid core of dependent kin and close friends, the main rationale for such a network is of a strategic and instrumental nature; thus, its members may hold distinct, and sometimes divergent, interests.

Under such conditions, the requirements for the acquisition of knowledge and other abstract skills are limited since their possession by an individual, in the absence of appropriate public structures, is insufficient for success. Instead of a regime of knowledge, Philippine society is based on a form of personal and collective prowess ensuring protection for allies,

friends or kin, and marked by a predatory orientation towards others. Strangers are fair prey until they are converted into consociates, often enough through a mechanism of obligatory hospitality. Foreigners are often puzzled and charmed by such expressions of hospitality, a rarity in the West, until they realize that these represent attempts at their incorporation into a personal network. While such displays of hospitality may be strategic, they are not necessarily duplicitous but simply ways of transforming a stranger into a consociate. Such a transformation is necessary if interaction is to proceed amicably rather than predatorily.

Philippine society has undergone several social and cognitive transformations from its pre-colonial to post-colonial periods. While the majority of pre-colonial Philippine societies consisted of preliterate cultures, existing systems of writing were primarily used for aesthetic rather than bureaucratic purposes.

The Spanish period resulted in the replacement of writing as aesthetics with the use of literacy as the means for the propagation of religion and as a basis for national administration. Hierocratic concerns determined the structures of knowledge and set limits on their effective dissemination. The University of Santo Tomas and other Catholic colleges prided themselves for reproducing orthodoxy. The Pauline injunction against the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake (*noli altum sapere*) was rigidly enforced. Free inquiry was considered subversive and was actively discouraged, especially among the rising native bourgeoisie. The result was delightfully caricatured by Rizal in his novels, where semi-educated priests regularly confused hellenic with latin allusions. Rizal's death not only marked the end of a promising life but also reflected the termination of a cultural tradition which was slowly but inevitably becoming increasingly self-conscious. Another century has passed before Philippine culture rediscovered itself, but now, global conditions dominate the local.

The American period took advantage of an existing literate class and transformed it through the utilization of scientific knowledge. Schools were universally introduced and education became the key for social and material success. Whereas schooling during the Spanish period had been a mark of the elite, in the American era, education became the main channel for social mobility. The American school teacher and sanitation inspector, backed by a superior American army, constituted

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the basis for the newly established knowledge regime. The Americans were very concerned about their new role as colonizers and tried to demonstrate their superiority over the Spanish friars by utilizing science as a basis for domination. Ethnological knowledge rather than theological orthodoxy became the new basis for administering society. The University of the Philippines and the Manila Bureau of Science were seen as model institutions paving the way for an enlightened and rational social order. Young American administrators and scientists were enticed to work in the new colony as a first step towards later recognition. Their work was accepted as highly competent and the institutions mentioned rapidly established an international reputation. Schools, hospitals, prisons, and aspects of everyday life were organized along this new basis even if the resources necessary for their successful operation were not available.

Filipinos did not accept all these changes passively but, as usual, subverted some of them for their own ends. The often haphazard and clearly misunderstood basis for Catholic conversion during the Spanish period was paralleled by the extraordinary acceptance of schooling without corresponding changes to cognitive practices. Just as they had earlier used Catholic conversion to preserve their basis for domination, the Filipino elite accepted American schooling to achieve similar ends. With greater opportunities given by the Americans for Filipinos to manage national affairs, the basis for organizing local society soon reverted to its traditional condition.

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While no longer primarily a warrior society, contemporary Philippine life still requires its members to test their abilities against competitors in individual contests. Success in subduing competitors attracts followers who can then be used as a basis for further contests. The political arena is the clearest manifestation of these contests which are seen as *mano-a-mano* duels rather than ideological or even collective conflicts. This results in extraordinary coalitions often involving people holding opposing ideological positions who combine as individuals against other similarly placed competitors. *Tunay na lalake* or *pudno nga malalake* are men who astutely succeed in these contests either by subduing their competitors or outsmarting their superiors.

While knowledge and information are often important ingredients of success, guts, valor, and personal skill are ultimately more essential. The contemplative monk, the introspective scholar, and even the disinterested scientist are replaced by individuals skilled in using strategies aimed at practical success. Women can also play this game since success is its only goal. A common joke during the Marcos dictatorship was that the only man in the high judiciary was a woman. Women entering the public domain generally have to adopt the same strategies used by their male competitors.

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Interestingly, women of prowess do not necessarily lose their femininity.

An indication that public interaction often requires the expression of prowess is provided by men who take on female mannerisms, often including personal subordination to male lovers, but whose public behavior is no less aggressive than that of most men. In other words, *bakla* take on female characteristics as part of their sense of private self which, in turn, does not prevent them from asserting their prowess in public encounters. The converse appears in the case of men noted for their violent public behavior but who display a tenderness towards children. Unlike in the West, where macho men are expected to conform their private lives to their public roles, Filipino men are allowed to switch affective styles when dealing with friends and close kin.

While personal prowess has been the basis of Philippine society throughout its colonial and post-colonial history, contemporary conditions call for its reexamination. Global structures presently favor societies with the capacity to accumulate and utilize knowledge. In this context, local strategies may result in the failure to achieve national and global success. While the Americans, in line with their own motivations, attempted to install a knowledge regime in the Philippines, their Filipino counterparts quickly dismantled this emerging structure and replaced it with the traditional strategies of personal prowess. The Manila Bureau of Science and other

scientific institutions were the first casualties as they were allowed to deteriorate rapidly into irrelevance. Research in areas such as typhoon prediction and management, volcanic eruption, earthquakes, and other natural calamities which regularly affect the Philippines were allowed to languish through neglect. The University of the Philippines managed to retain international standards for a longer period of time, but it has not been provided with necessary support since the country's political independence. Low levels of salary make it impossible, if not irrational, for competent scholars to consider university research and teaching as a viable career. Movie stars, sports personalities, flamboyant entrepreneurs, and people with a known capacity for violence enjoy a greater degree of public reputation than a successful scholar, an insightful artist or someone with a peaceful disposition.

The personalistic nature of Philippine society must be distinguished from the Western notion of individualism. Filipinos consider themselves as the center of a personal network of alliances based on ascribed elements such as family and locality. To this network is added whatever personal ties become available as they progress through life. This world largely consists of consociates with whom they share personal experiences and moral obligations, outside of which are found strangers or enemies with varying potential for assistance or hostility.

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In contrast, the Western individual exists in a world of contemporaries with whom he shares common projects but who maintain their anonymity from one another. Whereas Filipinos personalize their world in order to achieve their ends, Westerners ensure that society applies its laws and rules equally and impersonally. Only in the latter context can individuals act rationally and predictably without fear of arbitrary impositions arising from personal advantage.

This condition is possible only through the presence of a strong and intervening Western state. Its absence, as in the case of the Philippines, encourages a strategy of personal prowess where success ensures the stability and loyalty of

followers while simultaneously cowing potential competitors. By asserting self-interest, Filipinos ensure the protection of their dependents; this is not the case with respect to a Westerner who must first concede the autonomy of structure before pursuing individual goals.

The Filipino operates in a world inhabited by other persons (including supernaturals) whose cooperation or opposition must be considered. The Western individual faces an impersonal structure serviced by functionaries ideally detached from personal obligations. The first encourages a personal morality backed by the possibilities of mollification or the threat of retribution. The second requires a rigid acceptance of rules and an understanding of their consequences. The former more closely validates immediate experience while the latter is predisposed to abstract analysis. For this reason, Filipinos have an extraordinary capacity to adjust to a wide range of social

situations but rarely formalize this ability abstractly. Outsiders have often misinterpreted this personalism as a form of irresponsible egoism due to a 'damaged culture.' In an increasingly globalized world, Filipino culture is no more damaged than any other. Indeed, it has shown an extraordinary capacity to resist the impositions of colonial masters by representing assent as consent. However, the Filipino emphasis on personal strategy, while successful in its context, is inappropriate in a world requiring collective and structural responses. In this sense, some elements of contemporary Filipino society may be anachronistic. Nonetheless, other elements ensure a vigorous civil culture which has successfully challenged transgressions by overzealous state officials. This latter aspect was admired by the West during the 1986 EDSA revolution against the authoritarian Marcos regime.

The difference between these two systems of acting is illustrated by the orientation towards the public and private spheres. Filipinos personalize the public sphere and, when possible, use its resources to pursue private gain. Such an expropriation does not necessarily indicate selfish motives, since a true leader redistributes these gains among his followers. However, the public domain is seen as potentially exploitable by enterprising individuals who are keen on expanding their circle of opportunities. This domain is inhabited by strangers whose loyalties and alliances are available for incorporation into personal networks.

For a Westerner, the public domain consists of impersonal rules which must be kept distinct from private interests. Moreover, this public sphere guarantees the integrity of society which is frequently threatened by the

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upsurge of personal ambitions. In the absence of a common morality brought about by a secular consciousness, the public domain in the West is upheld by a complex set of rules and laws implemented by disinterested functionaries.

In contrast, Filipinos act within a moral universe, embedded in the private sphere, which ensures that actors conform to the norms and expectations of society. In politics, this has produced the slogan 'Pro-God, Pro-family, and Pro-life,' – largely meaningless clichés that refer, however, to the fact that public life arises out of a personal and common morality. On the one hand, this morality, arising directly from a religious

base, impedes a secular orientation towards life which assumes that moral differences can be politically rather than theologically resolved. On the other, it provides a stable core within which the instrumental and even authoritarian goals of the state may be meaningfully assessed. This explains why Filipino Christians and Marxists were able to forge cooperative alliances in the past.

In this personal and moral world of the Filipino, the notion of disinterested knowledge is difficult to sustain. Some years ago, a congressional investigation was held following reports that the Tasadays, supposedly a stone-age society, were in fact an ingenious fabrication of Elizalde and Marcos. Many anthropologists supported the fake theory, but some steadfastly maintained that the Tasadays were really a distinct and archaic society. While the general consensus now is that the main claims regarding their separateness were greatly exaggerated, there are some grounds for accepting that the Tasadays were in fact different from their neighbors. This consensus was reached in an anthropological meeting held in the United States, away

from the heat of the local controversy. The congressional hearings managed only to further confuse the situation and even resulted in the disappearance of crucial witnesses. The interests of the contending parties prevented them from reaching an understanding, despite the intervention of the state apparatus designed to resolve such disputes.

A more recent example concerns the role of the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) in resolving question regarding the murder of Delia Maga. After the disastrous announcement regarding the finding of an allegedly platinum-rich treasure, this institution suffered a lack of credibility. Hence, its support for the popular belief that Flor Contemplacion may have been innocent, while welcome, was nevertheless unconvincing. To resolve this question, Filipinos had to rely on foreign experts. Local knowledge is clearly suspected of being contaminated by partisan interests and thus, the only disinterested perspective is an outside one. During the Contemplacion episode, normally balanced journalists could not resist making personal and often outrageous attacks against the Singaporean authorities. A government commission established to investigate the matter began its report by making patronizing comments about the adequacy of Singaporean legal and political institutions.

While the discourse may appear abusive to an outsider (including Filipinos in Singapore), it is mainly meant for a local audience accustomed to rhetorical excesses. In other words, knowledge is part of the strategy for obtaining one's goal rather than a relationship to an ontological condition - it is not related to truth but simply to success. As a commentator put it

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after American experts agreed with Singaporean authorities, "The American pathologists did not know it...[but] they were also expected to uphold Philippine national honor in an emotionally charged dispute with Singapore." (*The Philippine Star*, July 15, 1995) What was incomprehensible to this commentator was that the experts reached this verdict despite America's displeasure against Singapore for the caning of Michael Fay.

The difficulty of a disinterested perspective creates problems for the intelligentsia, a class normally dependent on public support. The weakness of state institutions prevents the development of an independent perspective on the part of scholars, artists, and others engaged in

intellectual critique. The few with independent means are able to pursue a critical scholarship, but even they are caught in the personalistic universe in which Filipinos operate.

The factionalism which pervades society intrudes into intellectual and scientific activity. Disputes are conducted passionately and are as often directed against the person as against the argument. The network among intellectuals is highly personalized and scholarship is pursued largely within the circle of the consociates. It is not unusual for a major work in history or the social sciences to proceed as if other perspectives are absent or irrelevant. Sustained research is generally impossible and in its place are minor studies or collections of essays. In the humanities, the short story or the poem is the favorite genre. For most people, intellectual work can be pursued only as a hobby or part-time undertaking. Energy and

interest are as much spent in contestation as in fruitful scholarly cooperation. Scholars, writers, and scientists rarely elicit public interest except when involved in scandals or legal disputes.

Like the natural sciences, the social sciences are weakly developed in the Philippines. They were introduced during the early days of the American regime to provide a scientific basis for organizing society. Ethnological studies were conducted to determine the needs of cultural minorities and sociological surveys carried out to discover the needs of urban populations. Much of this research was initially conducted by the US Army Board as part of its work on the effects of tropical climate on caucasians and, later, on Filipinos.

After the establishment of the University of the Philippines, particular departments, such as that of Anthropology, continued this research tradition. The first couple of generations of Filipinos at UP received good education which prepared them for further studies abroad. On their return, these Filipinos trained others, but by then, the University had been steadily deprived of funding. From being a flagship of the colonial regime's scientific approach to government, the University became the nursery for the new generation of nationalists. At this juncture, the Philippines once more valued prowess over knowledge.

These conditions do not appear to be conducive for the establishment of a Filipino scientific culture. The long-term

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presence of institutions of higher learning and the introduction of a scientific perspective by the Americans initially made the Philippines one of the most promising modernizing societies. At the turn of the century, the country could have boasted of having the most Westernized, cosmopolitan, and locally trained elite in Asia. Unfortunately, instead of using this advantage to further develop an indigenous regime of knowledge, Filipinos dismantled or neglected the institutions which could have ensured the country's success. In their place, a society of prowess was re-introduced. While this has preserved a tradition of freedom including regular elections, the country has settled into an economic decline.

Part of the problem arises from the projection onto the public domain of a strategy more suitable for a village community rather than a nation-state. While the solidarities of a small community may be expected to dampen the divisiveness of private interests, a large and anonymous polity requires public institutions through which all members, regardless of personal situation, may expect reasonable equity. The absence of such institutions in the Philippines means that politics is mostly perceived as the pursuit of partisan interests rather than the acknowledgment of a common good. For this reason, government funds and projects are allocated on the basis of reward rather than entitlement.

During the Marcos dictatorship, the country was plastered with notices indicating the personal magnanimity of the first

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couple as they disbursed funds for various projects, even as they raided the treasury to accumulate private wealth. Whenever Imelda was asked whether she felt guilty about her obvious display of wealth in the context of the country's increasing poverty, she answered that such displays were vicariously enjoyed by poor Filipinos. Under these conditions, it is not surprising that political discourse is largely symbolic and rhetorical rather than analytical and communicative. This discourse is not unlike that found among the purveyors of contemporary mythologies such as Hollywood and modern advertising. While Filipinos are as gullible as Westerners concerning the latter, they generally are aware of the former's deceptions.

Philippines 2000 appears to indicate that a serious interest in knowledge production has finally arrived, but the language sounds depressingly familiar. Instead of a sober analysis of the crisis facing the nation, we hear of fantastic claims about making the Philippines the center of education in the region by 2015 when ironically, other countries presently spend ten times more per student. The Department of Education, Culture and Sports' (DECS) solution to the shortage of teachers is to require principals to teach as well as to double everyone's teaching load! The start of each school year is marked by increasing chaos and corresponding frantic denials by concerned bureaucrats. Schooling rarely involves learning critical skills; instead, it mostly consists of formulaic memorization. While there are many universities and tertiary colleges throughout the country, almost all have inadequate libraries, ill-equipped

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laboratories, and poorly paid instructors. The decision to establish a university is based on purely political factors rather than a realistic assessment of existing resources. Universities recycle outdated information rather than contribute to the universal stock of knowledge through research.

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routine events, pervades most aspects of public life. Instead of employing sober rationalism arising out of a methodic examination of social life, many Filipinos still yearn for a millenarian or Marian solution to the country’s problems. The Yamashita treasure and the Marcos billions beckon, or at the very least Mama Mary, may bring about another miracle. The proliferation of churches throughout the Philippines suggests that never have so many prayed so hard for so little.

In the meantime, hordes of Filipinos struggle abroad trying to provide the bare necessities for their families at home. The interest in Flor Contemplacion may finally represent a collective consciousness that the solution does not lie in the strategies of prowess or prayers adopted by Filipinos, but in the anonymous and routine work of millions of otherwise unimportant people. Such a consciousness will soon realize the importance of developing structures of knowledge competent to deal with the myriad intricacies of contemporary life. Only by establishing a locally based regime of knowledge will Filipinos be able to finally play their rightful role in the global condition.