

BOOK REVIEW

**UNDERSTANDING CULTURE**

*The Work of Culture*

Raul Pertierra

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The word “culture” is now so much a part of the vocabulary of the prosaic that it could mean everything or nothing. It is sometimes compressed with art and sometimes distanced from it. Culture could also be a commodity in the same way that it is meant to be sold as a product to tourists and collectors.

Sometimes only a few people are considered to hold the key to authenticity, implying a “pure” culture rather than one tainted by foreign influences. For instance, the recent forays of the National Commission on Culture and the Arts and the Metropolitan Museum of Manila into a project titled “Culture Bearers,” focus on a concept that is so dated that the neo-functionalists must be rejoicing.

In *The Work of Culture*, Raul Pertierra tackles culture not just as a concept, a set of practices, or a process, but also as “a practical outcome determined by multiple contests on the part of differently positioned subjects.” Analyzing culture from its historical antecedents, the author examines its politicization and its transformation from the “modernist project of a standard, homogeneous, and consensual culture” to a “postmodern preference for the reproduction of difference.”

One of the most interesting features of the book is the way Pertierra lays out pluralistic concepts of culture. He tackles not just the dramatic events in recent Philippine history but also the slow unfolding of everyday life. Using social theorist Jurgen Habermas’ notions of private and public sphere, Pertierra

discusses how Filipino identity is learned and played out in those spheres. Most of the time there are occasions where these two spheres meet and become the bases for a negotiated identity among the multiple identities that we carry.

Such negotiated identities would not be possible without a thorough discussion of representation which the book does – a feature which makes it a remarkable reading. His careful accounts of events that transpired just a few years ago make it plain that Pertierra is very much interested in their unfolding. For instance, in his narrative of People Power II, he talks about the influence of mass media, likening the drama that led to the ouster of former President Joseph Estrada to a *moro-moro*. This is a metaphor for good and evil characters whose contrived appearances are as confusing as the politicians' behavior.

Pertierra also examines the manner in which ethnographies are written to represent the culture of a community. He points out that “life in a traditional society may be dull,” but could be exciting as reproduced by ethnographies. To illustrate, the author discusses *Visayan Vignettes* (1992) by American anthropologist Jean Paul Dumont, which is a study about the island of Siquijor. Specifically, Pertierra examines Dumont's field research methods and his views of the village and the poor who reside in them.

Pertierra's criticism of Dumont's work suggests how to do a thorough examination of an ethnographic-based research. He does not lurch into condemnation when evaluating a study. Instead, he provides explanations for why, despite the many strengths of Dumont's work, the author is unsuccessful in aptly portraying life in Siquijor even as it “confirms” the official typecasts found in tourism brochures.

On the whole, the book is a good read. It provides many exceptional examples relevant to students of, and those familiar with, Philippine history and contemporary events. Using the frames of sociology and anthropology Pertierra discloses the many fascinating aspects of culture. The rather dull cover of the volume does not give a hint of the remarkable analysis and narrative embedded in its pages. Still, the *Work of Culture* should be good material especially to those interested in evaluating anthropological studies of culture.

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