

REVIEWS

BOOK

Moral politics in the Philippines: Inequality, democracy and the urban poor

By Wataru Kusaka

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Moral politics in the Philippines: Inequality, democracy and the urban poor book is the product of Wataru Kusaka's attempt to offer an alternative explanation of Philippine politics through the lens of the urban poor by utilizing the disciplines he trained for—ethnography and political science. Kusaka delves into political culture, a subfield that had been sidelined in previous years but which has made a strong comeback with the election of Duterte and similar leaders in many parts of the world. This is where the book gains more currency. In the aftermath of Duterte's rise to the presidency, and with it the ascendancy of populist thought, Kusaka's book is a welcome addition to the growing literature on Duterte's early presidency and possible trajectories (Curato, 2017).

Seven chapters make up the whole book. The book's Introduction and the first two chapters are Kusaka's theoretical explorations which he terms as Moral Politics. Living and working among the urban poor Kusaka a vantage point from which to view the poor's attitudes towards the elite and the central state. The next three chapters are reiterations of this worldview as he reflects on the 1986 EDSA People Power event and its yearly celebrations, the poor's attitudes during election time and their relationship with the state's regulatory agencies.

Kusaka's journey into this field started when, as a graduating student back in 2001, he became enthralled with Philippine society and its politics. Early that year, the second version of People Power put an end to Estrada's presidency. This so-called EDSA 3 had a great impact on Kusaka and his work. The author approached the study by posing three questions: Why did the middle-class play

this ambiguous role vis-à-vis the consolidation and deepening of democracy (read: why did the middle class move against a president so loved by the poor)? What type of moral “we/they” relation would promote or advance democracy? And lastly: Would moral politics offer new insights into why democracy in a stratified society is easily destabilized (3–4)?

Kusaka’s moral politics opens up a discourse on the rupture or fissure within Philippine society by enumerating and discussing three junctures of disconnection: the gulf between the middle class and the poor; the academic world and the actual world; and, the NGOs (non-government organizations) and the POs (people’s organizations) which come from the organic members of a community. Kusaka then forwards the idea of a dual public sphere—the mass sphere composed of impoverished classes and the civic sphere represented by the middle classes. In between them is the contact zone, the arena of encounter which may be that of cooperation but more often than not, one of contestation.

The book’s critical theoretical foundations and perspectives need to be understood in their contexts and timing. They came at a time when the widening divergence between NGOs and POs maybe at its peak. Prior to 1986, POs and NGOs were almost one and the same, with NGOs existing solely for the POs. The advent of democratization however opened up new avenues of participation and engagement. The need for more inputs in crafting government policies as well as the numerous consultations for the Ramos–era sponsored summits made the work of NGOs closer and more aligned with that of the government. This new path towards specialization in policy-making however widened the gulf between NGOs and POs even further. Moreover, foreign funding agencies, seeing the success made in the field of community organizing during the martial law era, started to shift their programs towards democratic deepening that focused on local governance, gender equality, decentralization, and many others. The funding window available towards community organizing found its way into the newly democratizing countries of Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Asia. As is becoming apparent, specialization in policy-making and implementation became the order of the day, creating a career path towards employment and consultancies in international organizations or multilateral agencies and away from the mass work, once the hallmark that defined NGOs.

The exodus of pioneers and practitioners from community organizing into other fields left the poor exposed, and perhaps susceptible, to other forms of organizing, primary of which was electoral organizing geared towards the formation of political parties and the election of their candidates. The poor, both organized and unorganized, thus became the fodder in rallies or in other forms of mobilization. In this type of organizing, the goals, ethics, practices or even principles of previous community organizing work are disregarded in favor for transactional gains, i.e., supporting less desirable candidates in favor of quick

and tangible results. This flirtation with electoral politics where the poor are treated as no more than supporters to be paid and voters to be bribed may have interjected to the poor's utilitarian view and instrumentalist attitude against the established order—you use us, we use you.

Whereas Wataru, and many others before him, bemoaned the historical exclusion of the poor, the book takes a step further by coming up with an equally exclusionary analytical frame against the elite—class. Here, the book is inimitable in its portrayal of the poor's identity as pristine in its relations with the so-called civic sphere. However, this notion of horizontal integration, a hallmark of classical Marxist analysis, has a critical flaw as a mode of understanding Philippine society. Whereas solidarity is presupposed to occur among kindred sectors having similar interests and acting together to compete against the elites, Philippine politics has demonstrated that vertical integration instead seems to be the norm rather than the exception. In many instances of electoral contestation, the poor, organized or unorganized, tend to align not with themselves but with the elites. If the author looked at national level politics during general elections, his views on the poor's voting patterns may have changed. One major flaw of the book is that it failed to account for the rivalry among the poor. When a segment of the organized groups themselves with, say the Liberal Party, the tendency of other organized groups, oftentimes of different persuasions and traditions, is to align themselves with other political parties or candidates. Aside from providing a platform of government and warm bodies for mobilizations, the chance of becoming appointed to a government agency offers a bright hope for both the group and the sector. In short, groups within a sector do not often unite as a class as there is competition for resources and power. Put another way, two similar sectoral-based organizations gravitating towards one candidate may eventually lead to one cancelling out the other in the search for both resources and relevance.

In the search for a new paradigm to analyze the poor as well as to critique similar works done in the past, the book may have overlooked a number of pioneering works that define this field. The famous popular education teacher Paulo Freire, who spent a great deal of his life teaching in the *favelas* (slums) of Brazil, reminds us to veer away from romanticizing the poor (1970). As victims of oppression, the poor carry with them the cynical view of the oppressor, as well as the tools the former employs—"The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guideline, are fearful of freedom" (52). And yet, Freire instructs us that "no pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption" (54).

Inadvertently, the book may have fallen into the trap of what Saul Alinsky has cautioned us about populism, i.e., romanticism with the wisdom of the poor

as an unpretentious pragmatist resulting in a pursuit of localism with a corresponding disdain for universalist ideology. As Alinsky argues, distinction should be made between community organizing efforts that aim to liberate the poor from dependency and populism which thrives on it (Bretherton 2012, 261). Kusaka is an exemplar worthy of emulation among young and/or foreign scholars alike embarking on this journey. Likewise, the author is atypical of many other scholars that content themselves with banal or overused methodology. As a result, Kusaka produces a unique view on political culture. Indeed, his immersion into the lives of the poor animates a work that is unique and thought-provoking. The book should also be commended for its scholarship. It is exemplary in its review of similar works, both past and present, as well as his take on them. The book however is an initial attempt by a committed young scholar to weave through this conundrum. And while a few readers may not agree with Kusaka's approach and findings, this book reminds us that it takes a trained eye to see through the maze and haze of Philippine politics and society.

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