

REVIEW

BOOK

The Sovereign Trickster: Death and Laughter in the Age of Duterte

By Vicente L. Rafael

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The Sovereign Trickster: Death and Laughter in the Age of Duterte offers an investigation of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte's regime of fear which weaponizes death to control life and masks violence through his obscene and vulgar articulations. It is an interrogation of the machinations of the sovereign, a political strongman, in relation to the governed. The book also examines how Duterte's surge to power was contingent on the Philippines' history of electoral violence and its people's neocolonial condition by using Michel Foucault's "biopolitics" and Achille Mbembe's "necropolitics" as analytic lenses.

Vicente L. Rafael, the author, is a professor of History and Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Washington in Seattle. He has written books on Philippine history, culture, and nationalism, which include *Motherless Tongues: The Insurgency of Language amid Wars of Translation* (2016), *The Promise of the Foreign: Nationalism and the Technics of Translation in the Spanish Philippines* (2005), *White Love and Other Events in Filipino History* (2000), and *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule* (1988). *The Sovereign Trickster*, the most recent addition to Rafael's scholarship, contributes to existing critical appraisals on Duterte which include Nicole Curato's edited tome *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte's Early Presidency* (2017) and Richard Heydarian's *The Rise of Duterte: A Populist Revolt against Elite Democracy* (2017).

Expounding on topics such as death and life, fear and obscenity, and the maneuverings of an authoritarian vulgarity, Rafael asks important questions whose answers elicit a unique perspective in analyzing Duterte as a political figure:

What is the relationship between life and death under Duterte? How does he, like all modern rulers, use one to contain, exploit, and deploy the other?

In other words, how does he manage to instrumentalize life to allay death, and how does he weaponize death to control life? What are the conditions that allow him to succeed, as well as fail? How does Duterte's authoritarian imaginary feed off, even as it disrupts, the vernacular articulations of community and intimacy, especially among the poor? What is the role of obscenity in the making of his grotesque persona, and how does it feed the formation of fear among those he governs? (2022, 3)

To answer these queries, Rafael provides detailed discussions in five chapters, an insightful conclusion, and several short essays or "sketches." These "sketches" serve as extensions of the discourses presented in each chapter and tackle a range of topics—from the idea of benevolent dictatorship to the biopolitics of reproductive health; from imagining Duterte's "Hobbesian World" to examining his matrix, his sense of time, and his fecal politics; and from the origins of death squads to a comparative appraisal of extrajudicial killings.

Rafael begins the first chapter, "Electoral Dystopias," by contextualizing Philippine politics in 2016 as part of a larger global trend that saw the rise of authoritarian governments in other nation-states (6). To understand the Philippine experience, the author conducts a historical inquiry into the role of colonial biopower in affecting local elections—for example, by mobilizing state and paramilitary forces, which then takes a different form in the postwar years where, in addition to violence, personality cult and vote buying manipulate the elections (7-12). Rafael argues that "elections, money, and violence" are essential facets of colonial and postcolonial state affairs (12-17). What is underlined in the chapter is the institutionalization of necropolitics by the Marcos dictatorship and the rise of vigilante groups and death squads during the Aquino administration, thereby setting the conditions for localized regimes of fear as exemplified by Duterte's Davao City (14-17).

The second chapter, "Marcos, Duterte, and the Predicaments of Neoliberal Citizenship," probes into the necropolitical component of Marcos and Duterte's biopolitical governance. Furthermore, Rafael argues that the transition from the late Marcos years to post-EDSA Revolution engendered a newer form of biopolitics which "has been articulated along the matrix of neoliberal discipline..." creating "new social cleavages that cut along classes, forging divisions between the 'deserving' and morally responsible population, on the one hand, as against those who, for whatever reason, fail to make the changes demanded of them, on the other. The latter are seen as less full citizens, 'undeserving' and therefore alien to the emergent neoliberal society" (31). Thus, Duterte's brand of politics thrives in this context where he, to assuage the anxieties of the neoliberal citizen, identifies drugs as the problem and elimination of its users and dealers as the solution. The "necropolitical moral cleansing" in Duterte's drug war gives the authoritarian leader an excuse to disregard people's rights and weaponize death to secure life (34).

The third chapter, “Duterte’s Phallus: On the Aesthetics of Authoritarian Vulgarity,” is an examination of the nature of Duterte’s power as documented in his crass and unstructured public speeches. The discussion gives weight to how Duterte talks lightly about death and murder, and jokes about rape and the personal trauma obtained from his abuser, while boasting about his phallus and belittling his deteriorating health (42-56). In the process, Duterte escapes his trauma, ridicules death, and solidifies his masculine and misogynist image. Indeed, Duterte’s joke-telling masks his violence but flexes his power over an audience that simply bursts into laughter (53-54).

The foregoing chapters show how Foucault’s idea of “biopower” appropriated into Mbembe’s “necropower” translates as a method of imposing sovereignty with an “aesthetics of vulgarity” (64). Rafael succinctly discusses this in the beginning of the fourth chapter, “The Sovereign Trickster.” The author then translates Foucault and Mbembe to Duterte’s Philippines where the necropolitical subsumes the biopolitical. This is evident in three examples: first, Duterte’s barbaric notion of justice by killing “inhuman” drug users and dealers (66-71); second, the “necro-economy” which fuels Duterte’s Oplan Tokhang (71-75); and third, Duterte’s crime and drug war, which is a civil war that pits Filipinos against each other out of fear (76-78). Rafael finally sums up Duterte as a “sovereign trickster”—a sovereign who has the power to disregard the law and decide who dies, and a trickster who uses jokes and obscenities to disguise his aggression and endear himself to his supporters (78-82).

The final chapter, “Photography and the Biopolitics of Fear: Witnessing the Philippine Drug War,” offers the most vivid discussion on Duterte’s drug war as seen through the work and testimonies of photojournalists. The author explains how photojournalists face their trauma from documenting death and, at the same time, participate in the process of grief by consoling the relatives of victims (103-120). The author stresses that amid the astounding cases of mass killings, the regime of fear dissociates people from reacting against the gruesome drug war for the sake of “peace” and “security” (121-27). Rafael’s conclusion, “Intimacy and the Autoimmune Community,” presents the perspective of the people who are most affected by Duterte’s drug war. The author explains how poverty-stricken communities operate as “communities of intimacy” which generate their own inequalities and hierarchies based on *pakikisama* or “getting along” (137-38). And it is this factor that makes communities of intimacy autoimmune because they produce the undesirable “other” in the process of guarding their own security (139). As a result, the widespread support for Duterte immunizes him from critics because he “speaks in the familiar accent of intimacy” and vows to exterminate drug users and sellers who infect communities of intimacy (140-41).

In sum, *The Sovereign Trickster* provides a unique means to understand Duterte's regime from an inter-disciplinary lens. Rafael historicizes the colonial and postcolonial contexts by underscoring the timeless roles of elections, money, and violence which gave birth to Duterte's necropolitical and biopolitical governance. The author dissects Duterte's language in order to explain how it operates within the larger framework of an authoritarian vulgarity that feeds off the precariousness of a neoliberalized society. Rafael successfully shows how trauma, death, masculinity, and misogyny are conflated into the authoritarian's articulations that flex power over the people. The behavioral and psychological impact of fear and coercion are likewise accentuated in the author's discussions to explain the existence of autoimmune communities that are gravely affected by the drug war. Using various sources which include news articles, journalistic works, human rights reports, and ethnographic studies, Rafael crafts distinct interpretations that add value to existing academic discourses about Duterte and his politics. Since the book deals with the tumultuous present, it is both timely and useful for a people confronted by a Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. administration that vows to continue Duterte's drug war.

REVIEWER

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