

REVIEW

BOOK

Plural Entanglements : Philippine Studies

By Dada Docot, Stephen Acabado, and Clement C. Camposano

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It may be an inconvenient truth, but for many Philippine Studies scholars, especially those based abroad, the Duterte period was a rousing shot in the arm, albeit short-lived. President Rodrigo Duterte's notoriety gave the Philippines a boost as a much sought after topic of academic conversation as well as a matter of bemused alarm and puzzlement. Perhaps the last time the international spotlight shone so scorchingly bright on Philippine Studies was immediately after the People Power Uprising of 1986, an event which would inform similar regime change exercises and experiments by Washington in the transition to the Post-Cold War era and beyond. Philippine Studies probably had another brief period of international resurgence during the celebration of the Philippine Centennial in 1998, but there were generally mostly doldrums after that. It was in the wake of Duterte's murderous brand of executive invective that innumerable books and publications, here and abroad, were suddenly, once again, flying off the shelves.

In contrast to the frenetically scandalous pace of the Duterte leadership, there seems to be a certain resigned quietism in the time of the Marcoses' return to Malacañang. The Marcoses, apparently single-mindedly intent on consolidating their current position, do not seem to want to rock the boat too much. Ferdinand Marcos Jr., probably a stringent follower of the adage, "less talk, less mistakes," hardly makes his verbal presence felt. How then would Philippine Studies situate itself within the current socio-cultural conjuncture?

The publication of a new volume of essays in Philippine Studies is always a sign of the times. Each reader necessarily has its own image of what Philippine Studies is, which may or may not be explicitly articulated by its editors. It may also be consciously, or unconsciously, aiming to fill a certain niche or gaps in previous scholarship. In this particular case, under the able editorship of Docot,

Acabado, and Camposano, many of the contributors count among the younger, emerging scholars in their respective fields. Several of these authors have already introduced some new and important scientific discoveries to Philippines Studies. Probably reflecting the backgrounds of its editors, a little over half of the main contributors in this collection are anthropologists by training. This gives rise to an image of Philippines Studies wherein ethnography is seen to be the principal mode of research. And, indeed, the volume does contain some very sensitive and well-written ethnographic accounts. Though some contributions are more theoretical and disciplinary in nature, most are oriented towards policy impact.

The decision to include only Filipinos or scholars of recent Philippine extraction in the collection is a statement in itself. Only a few among the contributors are based abroad in terms of institutional affiliation. While this stance recognizes the transnational academic locations of Filipino scholars, it also resolutely asserts a view of Philippines Studies as primarily being a conversation among Filipino voices. Indeed, this is a useful corrective to decades of subordinate speech of Filipino scholars, most graphically, for example, in the run-of-the-mill international Philippine or Southeast Asian Studies conferences firmly dominated by keynote speakers and celebrated participants from the Global North, especially the United States. Such an editorial decision should be understood in the context of resisting persistent colonial practices and imbalances which have arguably deformed the growth and development of Philippines Studies. Only those interested in maintaining the prevailing power relations in the field would accuse the editors of misguided “nationalism” or even “nativism.”

Moreover, by tirelessly emphasizing the local (non-Manila-centric) and ethnographic, this volume crucially and correctly foregrounds cultural, linguistic, emotional, communal, and even familial attachments as important aspects of the lived experiences of scholarship. Indeed, as the Japanese Indonesianist Takashi Shiraiishi once said, sophisticated works of scholarship by Southeast Asians themselves possess inherently unfair advantages over almost any project of “Western” scholarship which aims to “think like a native.” Filipino scholars can no longer accept the subordinate role of being mere native informants guiding the splendid academic journeys of scholars from the global centers of academic prestige and power. I heard it once said as a joke by a German professor in a conference by the Association of Southeast Asian Studies in the United Kingdom (ASEASUK) that Philippines Studies was reputed to be “Southeast Asian Studies for Lazy People.” The purported reason is that while one cannot claim to be an expert on Indonesia, Thailand, or Vietnam without any fluency in the relevant languages, foreign scholars on the Philippines could project immensely astounding authority on the subject with just occasional sojourns in Manila reading English newspapers and talking exclusively to English-speaking intellectuals. I heard this myself later from an Australian scholar who said that he initially began as a student of Indonesia but then found the language so difficult that he shifted his focus on the Philippines

where his avowed lack of linguistic talent apparently did not face too many obstacles in the colonial archives. This is not to say that there are great exceptions even today especially from the ranks of European and Japanese scholars who have traditionally placed great importance on the study of languages and literatures in area studies. Indeed, for foreign students of any culture, attaining linguistic fluency in a language is one thing but understanding its literary traditions, perhaps the most sophisticated possible expression of thought produced by any culture, is another challenge of a much higher degree. No one has stressed this more in Indonesian and Philippine Studies than the late Benedict Anderson.

Given the emphasis of classical “area studies” on languages and literatures as important entryways into cultures and societies, it is somewhat puzzling why the particular image of Philippine Studies that this volume presents is almost devoid of scholarship in the humanities. Though the shadow of Resil Mojares looms large in many of the essays and Caroline Hau’s “Foreword” gently provides orientation and guidance, chapters traditionally allotted to topics in the arts and literatures are notably absent. Moreover, though the editors’ introduction does give a nod to previous social science “indigenization” efforts and the sometimes furious debates around them, it does not broach the matter of writing the social sciences in Filipino or other Philippine languages, nor does it include any essay written in Filipino or any other Philippine language. One recalls the belated, aghast realization by the organizers of one important Philippine Studies conference in the US that not a single panel or paper was read there in Filipino. This is in contrast to many Philippine Studies conferences in Japan where this is a generally accepted practice. More broadly speaking, how does one bring back the results of anti-technocratic social science research to national and local communities if translational and linguistic questions are overlooked and remain unaddressed? How can one genuinely involve communities and social movements in the co-authorship of knowledge if the means of its production are resolutely made unavailable to them by conventional linguistic barriers and artificial academic impediments?

Finally, despite a palpable air of conformism in a few of the essays, one senses a certain niggling discontent in the collection as a whole with the now dominant neoliberal metrification of academic life. By reclaiming the centrality of emergent Filipino voices in Philippine Studies, this collection is a virtual manifesto, in the currently fashionable jargon, for “decolonizing” the field. It embodies a critical spirit which keeps the hope alive for something better to come beyond the unsettling present.

REVIEWER

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