Colonialism, Modernity, and a Stalled Nation-Building Process

The present volume of *Asian Studies* compiles six articles on Philippine history published by the journal over the last several decades. Like the papers in Volume 41, Number 2 (2005), these are early works of their respective authors and/or representative of well-researched scholarship in what has come to be known as "Philippine Studies." The thread that runs through them all is the multifaceted dynamics of colonialism, either of the American, Spanish, or even internal variety, i.e. the so-called "Manila imperialism." Except for Norman Owen's, many of these articles were written in the 1960s through the 1970s, that is, a period of heightened political and ideological awareness which, even if unrelated to some of the authors' temperament and intentions, was beginning to make the reading public receptive to alternative/unexamined approaches to Philippine Studies. But it was not merely nationalistic motivations which accounted for this resurgent interest: the ideological issues vehicled by the prolonged Vietnam War, the Algerian and Palestinian struggles for self-determination, the American civil rights movement, the Cuban Revolution, the Red Guards and even the enragés in Paris -- all of these heterogeneous elements merged in that epochal moment to thrust the matter of questioning all sorts of everyday 'received ideas' onto the international agenda of knowledge production. Serious scholars the world over could only rejoice, but in varying degrees.

Norman Owen's "**Maria Clara and the Market: Women and Change in the 19th Century Philippines**" (2000) initiates a long-overdue examination of the various changes on the general status of women under the modernizing economy and society of the then-Spanish colony. But instead of proposing new interpretations, the author (manifestly influenced by the "Annales" school) only suggests pushing the inquiry into still-unproblematized questions, e.g. the gender-specific consequences of increased state control in the late 19th century, or the role that geography, hence cash crops, might have played in the enlarged participation of working-class women in the economy. Even demographic change (as in those subsequent to migratory movements), Owen suspects, had considerable effect on the breakdown of certain gender stereotypes. But the lack of data on these topics is precisely what should prod scholars to take fresh approaches to the political economy and social history of the late colonial era.

John Schumacher's "**Philippine Masonry to 1890**" (1966) aims to avoid "glorifying or disparaging" the part played by Masonry in the early Propaganda period, but the text ever so subtly deflates the contribution of Masonic lodges to the Philippine independence struggle. Jose Rizal plays a very minimal role in this narrative: could his portrayal as a passive onlooker have to do with the issue of his alleged, subsequent retraction of Masonry? This indulgent rendition of Rizal may be due to Schumacher's identification with the then politically crusading Society of Jesus, or not.[1] But it will be remembered that the national hero was the object of his religious mentors' efforts to counteract radical liberal ideas he had acquired in Europe, and that the Masonic discourse contributed significantly to this enlightenment. It cannot be denied that the erosion of the hegemonic *frailocracia* was made possible at least in part by these Masonic freethinkers, whether they were *peninsulares* or *insulares*, scoundrels or morally upright men. That iconoclasm is explicit in the case of Marcelo del Pilar, who (unlike Rizal, at least in Schumacher's narrative) "intended to make use of Masonry in his campaign to destroy the power of the Friars in the Philippines."

"**The American Minority in the Philippines During the Prewar Commonwealth Period**" (1966) tweaks somewhat the familiar narrative of colonial power. Belonging at the same time to the dominant ethnic minority in a colonial society and, in terms of citizenship, to the colonizing nation was not seen as problematic in the days of empire. Indeed, that was the universal norm, and it was understood that the white man had the prerogative to rule over the natives, regardless of his minority position. As a unit of analysis, colonial minority status – hinting at being an endangered species of sorts – might seem to be beside the point (a more straightforward identifier would be "the *non-military* American community"). Gerald Wheeler, however, dismisses the idea of a monolithic American presence, as he examines four of the controversial areas (the Japanese threat; economic relationships; US investments in the colony; political independence) in which there were alleged differences of opinion among these demographically outnumbered Americans. In fact, Wheeler represents them as feeling mainly "uneasy and insecure" during the transitional Commonwealth period.

Milagros Guerrero's "**The Colorum Uprisings: 1924-1931**" (1967) participates in the revival of interest in peasant and/or millenarian movements, an interest that started the late 1960s and has continued since. The anti-imperialist discourse of the Colorums during a period of debate about national independence earned them a reputation as ideologically motivated radicals (although, as Guerrero points out, communism was still "a new idea in the Philippines at the time.") Significantly, the movement

had, early in the 20th century, spread from Luzon to parts of Mindanao and the Visayas, a geographical progression that would be replicated by other, even more radical elements, starting in the late 1960s. Yet Filipino peasants' mentality apparently resists facile categorization, the kind which originates from outside their world. Admittedly, the latter is in rapid change, and the ideological fervor may have abated in recent times, but millenarian beliefs persist and rural unrest stemming from landlessness remains a latent threat.

The subjugation and forced march towards modernization of Muslim Mindanao under American colonial auspices is the subject of "**Muslim-American Relations in the Philippines, 1899-1920**" (1968). Although this paper affords but brief glimpses into that epic effort (it reprises Peter Gowing's doctoral dissertation, *Mandate in Moroland*, which covers that exact time period), the reader will gain valuable insights into the long-festering problem of integrating Moro society into the mainstream body politic, the one generated and perpetuated by mainly Christian politicians and bureaucrats. In contrast, the American role in 'complicating' the culturally rooted problem for all concerned is minimized in Gowing's account. But reading this article 40 years after its original publication might also lead one to wonder if the United States had 'learned its lessons' in Iraq and Afghanistan, among other places, in the interim.

Lastly, "**Unity and Disunity in the Muslim Struggle**" (1973) by Samuel K. Tan offers a refreshing (for the era at least) perspective into the problematic of the "struggle" in Muslim Mindanao. Thanks to scholars like Tan, it is now acceptable to think in terms of a more complex multi-ethnolinguistic Bangsamoro (if indeed such a "national" construct exists and is universally accepted as a reality) than before. In the same vein, however, Tan's work also allows us to consider the Tausug component as the one historically and most likely to be resistant to impositions emanating from the seat of national power in Manila. The author, a Sulu native himself, resists the temptation to glorify his subject: he refers to a certain "weakness" stemming from "Tausug individualism," and (somewhat echoing Peter Gowing) decries the opportunistic initiatives of "Christian politicians and traditional Muslim leaders" who have allegedly victimized the (undifferentiated) Muslims of Mindanao.

Since colonialism figures as the prominent leitmotif of these studies, the theme of modernity cannot be far behind. With the possible exception of Owen's, all other papers hint at the difficult process, uneven at best or stalled at worst, of the post-colonial "nation-building" process. For

example, the twin readings of the Muslim Mindanao situation wittingly or unwittingly call attention to the fallacy of presuming a seamless weaving of the different clans and warlord dependencies in their own homeland, and much less their integration into the "imagined community" codified by the Republic and its presumptuous laws. For its part, the Catholic hierarchy may have withstood the Masonic "threat" posed in the late 19th century, but in turn has not avoided reappearing since then as an obstacle to socio-cultural development; moreover, its political partisanship – more or less sporadic, to be sure – has at the very least made it easier for other congregations to behave in a similar fashion. Likewise, the American colonialists bequeathed more durable political institutions, as well as a more viable civil-society template, than their predecessors, but failed to imprint their vaunted democratic model on the Filipinos' political culture. Where agrarian reform policy is concerned, it is true that the US (contrary to the communist dogma circa the 1960s) had a vested interest in breaking down the strictures of the feudal order which fueled so much rural unrest; but this interest was overdetermined by the American government's counterinsurgency imperatives in East and Southeast Asia for the duration of the Cold War, and as such, was abandoned as soon as the Huk rebellion fizzled out.

In short, a straightforward advance towards "modernity" and "progress" in terms of a presumably consensual nation-building experiment cannot be deduced from the available evidence so far – with all due respect to the official (State or even ecclesiastical) discourse. It is no small feat to argue this viewpoint, as the authors herein assembled have done, without recourse to the patented jargon that seems to dominate virtually all fields of contemporary scholarship. This is not to suggest that the authors could have or would have succumbed to the ruling "postmodern" fashion of an ulterior season. It is to state in no uncertain terms that all scholarly productions must be examined in the intellectual context, according to the professional norms, of their time and place.

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End notes

[1] It might also be recalled that certain Jesuits of the Philippine province were known for their anti-Communist preoccupations in a not so distant past: for example, one review in the *Philippine Studies* journal in the early 1960s had somewhat alarmist annotations of the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas' 'political transmissions'.