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State and society in the Philippines

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Niels Mulder

Promising to situate the Philippines in global and regional contexts, the authors aim to ‘reconsider the narrative of Philippine political development’, to attempt a ‘sustained analysis of state formation over the course of a millennium’ and to develop a ‘framework for understanding Philippine state-society relations over time’ (page xv). Whereas the standard narrative follows conventional historical periodisation – “pre-Hispanic”; Spanish; revolutionary; American; Commonwealth; Japanese; and, in the Republican era, by presidential administration’ – the authors have written a book that ‘acknowledges the Southeast Asian connections of the Philippines and the changing rhythm of state and social formation across times and regimes’ (page 4).

The introductory chapter fails to mention to whom the book is addressed, though on the back cover an American professor states that the book is ‘very accessible to undergraduate audiences’. Perhaps the professor thinks so because of the ingenuous conceptual tools the authors propose, ie, ‘the state’ and ‘social forces’. This is followed by a touristy seven-page guide, where we read that the country is an archipelago of 7,107 islands (though we’re left in the dark about where the population lives); about its tribal affiliations and languages; a lengthy list of regions and provinces without being told where they are and why they exist (there is not a single map in the book); the false claim that the Philippine Independent Church was a product of the revolution against Spain; and that the Iglesia ni Kristo has 1.9 million members (on page 11), which grows to three million on the next page and shrinks down to one million by page 267.

The pre-Hispanic and the early Spanish chapters do a fairly good job of situating the islands in Southeast Asia and in relation to China, after which the encompassing region seems to be forgotten. The narrative, up to its very end, is conventional: whether addressing Spanish good intentions, the plans of the propagandists or the revolutionaries, American administrators, or any single president, it is, like school texts, always the same: after an initial spurt of enthusiasm, their projects come to naught. This discouraging narrative sequence is also said to hold for the ‘social forces’, primarily, voluntary, issue-oriented non-governmental

organisations (NGOs) and people’s organisations (POs), such as farmer organisations and trade unions, though the Communist Party of the Philippines is excluded. The demonstration of these ups and downs amidst a vast mass of random, mostly economic data – percentage of GNP, harvests of coconuts or rice – make for tedious reading until one no longer sees the forest for the trees. Had there only been graphs to show trends and changes in political, economic and social configurations!

An isolated narrative

The isolation in which the narrative unfolds is illustrated by far-fetched comparisons. The authors describe Commonwealth President Quezon as a child of his time by citing centralising and fascist tendencies in Finland and Poland (Japan is also mentioned) rather than contemporary, closer-to-home and far more comparable leaders such as Kemal Ataturk, Reza Shah and Phibul Songkram. The self-congratulatory observations on People Power – the Philippines as a guiding light – overlook the protracted demonstrations that brought down Sukarno. In 1973, people power succeeded in sending the Tyrannical Trio in Thailand packing and signalled, in 1978, the demise of the Shah of Iran.

Had the history of ideas – socialism, religion, constitutional thought, the public debate on nationalism or public opinion and its agents – played a significant role in this narrative of presumed state-society relations, many interesting developments would emerge, from early trade-unionism (1902) to Lope K. Santos’s 1906 novel *Banaag at Sikat* (From Early Dawn to Full Light). Instead we have to settle for a communist party that descends out of the blue. The Commonwealth constitution is avoided; Quezon’s megalomania and ‘constitutional dictatorship’ appear as the ideas of Filipino leaders, whereas Quezon, who saw himself as the embodiment of the Philippines, should rather be called the father of *trapo*-ism, the plague of ‘traditional politicians’.

Whether addressing labour or the development of political culture, the study unfortunately passes up on intra-regional comparison (Mulder 2000: ch. 16). Even though the authors ‘see indications of Philippine-style political dilemmas emerging in neighbouring countries’, they should have been less self-satisfied and at least acknowledge simultaneous developments in the region. In state-led developmentalism, President Garcia is

a contemporary of Thailand’s Marshal Sarit, while President Marcos’s godfatherism finds a compelling parallel in President Suharto. Student protests against their leaders and in the name of constitutional democracy – not nationalism – occur almost at the same time. As for the use of political violence, the parallel with Thailand has been well-drawn elsewhere (Sidel 1999).

For undergrads?

Probably the most serious omission is the non-elaboration of religion in contemporary politics. Whether in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand or the Philippines, religion is not only a companion of modernity, but alive and well in public life. Whereas the authors pay lip service to its importance, they neither theorise its position within state-society relations nor elaborate on it descriptively. Suharto’s aversion to politicised Islam strengthened it first as a moral stance and then as a social force that may well be on its way to overwhelming the public sphere; in Thailand Chamlong’s Force of Righteousness moved the middle classes to centre stage, while in the Philippines the aversion to the institutional church forced millions into the embrace of the Iglesia ni Kristo. If the authors had been better informed, they would have known that the Iglesia only counts adults as its members, so

that, if we want to compare its one, two, or three million members with Catholics or others, we had better double those figures; then the membership of the Roman Church wouldn’t stand at ‘almost 83%’ but rather 75% at most, as sectarianism of all sorts is simultaneously eating into that flock. Current religious developments are an important indicator of state-society relations, often prompted by disaffection with the state and the irrelevance of electoral politics to personal well-being.

When I finished the book, I noted that David Wurfel’s *Filipino Politics: Development and Decay* (1988) had not even been acknowledged, which prompted me to take it off the shelf. The book is unpopular, probably because it appeared at the height of the *Pilipinohiya* craze at the University of the Philippines when foreign contributions to Philippine Studies were denigrated as ‘for European consumption’. But when I consulted it, I was struck, again, by the conceptual lucidity that enabled the author to predict, after President Corazon Aquino had been in power for less than a year and a half, her largely negative legacy. In comparison, *State and Society in the Philippines* doesn’t come anywhere close to a theoretically sustained narrative. Unlike the back cover blurb, I do not recommend it to my undergraduate students. ◀

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