

Dispatch from within the “Belly of the Beast”:
Interview with Filipino Scholar E. San Juan, Jr.

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*On the Asiatic coast, washed by the waves of the ocean, lie
the smiling Philippine... There, American rifles mowed down
human lives in heaps.*

— Rosa Luxemburg

*Filipinos may be vanquished now and again, but as long as they
are denied every kind of rights, there will not be a lasting peace.*

— Apolinario Mabini

I've lived in the belly of the beast and I know it well....

— Jose Marti

Readers of this journal may ask who is this author, “E. San Juan, Jr.,” who presumes to give us knowledge about ourselves and our predicament. This interview (recorded in October-November 2021) of San Juan with some later emendations, may provide some clarification. It was initiated by Dr. Rainer Werning, a widely known political scientist and journalist based in Cologne, Germany. Werning is considered an authority on the history and culture of the Philippines, Korea, and other Southeast Asian countries. He wrote *Crown, Cross and Crusaders* (Essen: Verlag Neuer Weg, 2011) and co-edited *Phiippines Handbuch* (2024). A part of the interview was published in the German newspaper *Junge Welt* No. 283 (December 4-5. 2021), and has been revised for this occasion.

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1) Where and under what conditions did you grow up? What were the most formative experiences of your youth?

I was born in Manila, Philippines, the only U.S. colony in Asia at the end of 1938, and now an inveterate neocolony. It was a month before Barcelona, Spain, fell to the Franco army aided by Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. Memories of the Japanese occupation (1942-45) – fleeing to air-raid shelters during Japanese bombing, evading Japanese brutality – gave me lessons about the horror of war. In 1946, the Philippines was granted nominal “independence” but only to become a neocolony with U.S. military bases utilized in the vicious war against Korea, Vietnam, and indigenous (Moro; Huk) rebels. That subordination persists, with tawdry alibis such as the Visiting Forces Agreement and other secret diplomatic protocols.

My formative years (1946-58) occurred during the anti-Huk/Magsaysay/CIA witch-hunts and counterinsurgency bloodbaths at the height of the Cold War. I recall the newspaper headlines about the Korean War. My parents, alumni of the University of the Philippines (U.P.), were biology teachers reared in public schools. My public schooling exposed me to the proletarian slums in Blumentritt, Sampaloc, Tondo, San Nicolas, Divisoria, and the ferocity of class struggle among the urban lumpen elements and uprooted peasants in impoverished postwar Manila. I spent part of my childhood in Montalban, Rizal, where I witnessed the Huks surround the town at the height of their insurgency in 1950-51.

My father came from the peasant class while my mother grew up in a petty-bourgeois milieu stabilized by patriarchal habits. In college, I was influenced by the secularist, progressive faculty in U.P., where I taught English literature in 1958-60. The sectarian controversy between Catholics and Enlightenment partisans (Bertrand Russell and Alfred Ayer were often invoked in our circle) also shaped my worldview. My exposure in local politics began with my participation in the Recto-Tanada electoral campaign in 1957-58, and my association with the partisans (Ricardo Pascual, Alfredo Lagmay, Cesar Majul, Leopoldo Yabes) for academic freedom and nationalism against clerical obscurantism and U.S. imperial domination. As a staff member of the *Philippine Collegian*, I reported on the conflict between the religious sects in U.P. and the college fraternities in the 1950s. I collaborated with Armando Bonifacio and Rony Diaz in editing *Inquiry* and the *Literary Apprentice*. The most decisive turn came with my involvement in the anti-Marcos dictatorship movement here (1969-1986), working with the national-democratic group UGNAYAN, the Friends of the Filipino People, and other organizations while also engaged with local party-building debates in the Seventies and early Eighties.

2) What prompted you to go to the United States?

My generation had parents who were grateful to the U.S. for “saving” us from Japanese barbarism. Everyone thanked General Douglas McArthur for liberating us; we all sang “God Bless America” in grade school. My uncles sheltered American journalists in the hills of Montalban, Rizal, during the war (see Doris Rubens, *Bread and Rice*, New York 1947). The U.S. was the fantasized utopia of freedom, prosperity, liberty. We marveled at EuroAmerican glamor and tragicomic ordeals via Hollywood cinema. My contemporaries all aspired to share in the blessings of that consumerist paradise. Indeed, I was a neocolonized subaltern, long before the postcolonial vogue.

My situation (in Sartre's sense) was engendered by the Others and the *habitus* imprinted by colonial State ideological apparatuses. Since I was already a creature of U.S.-designed institutions, the best way to insure tenure then was to follow the mechanics of earning a higher degree from a U.S. university. Even before I read Marx, Engels and Gramsci, any free choice was already conditioned by circumstances already operating before you knew it: thus, freedom is always a recognition of necessity, which means moving between a hard rock and the inscrutable Dice-caster.

Incidentally, I recall that before this, I went to the German Embassy in Manila to apply for a scholarship to study Goethe and Hegel, but all they had were slots in forestry, farming, etc. The Dice-thrower somehow awarded me a Smith-Mundt-Fulbright Award which enabled me to study at Harvard University in the historic period of the Civil Rights struggles (1961-65) and the accelerating opposition to the IndoChina carnage. Peace Corps veterans and KM (Kabataang Makabayan) militants fresh from MetroManila were influential in spreading news of the national-democratic struggle before and after the First Quarter Storm (January 1970). We celebrated a Mao-mass party in the heart of Manhattan, the "belly of the beast."

3) *What were the most important stages of your political commitment and academic career there?*

We were moving toward the climax of the Cold War, with confrontations against China, the Soviet Union, Cuba, Vietnam, etc. While at Harvard, I was further indoctrinated in New Critical doxa with I.A. Richards, the venerable British sage. However, my other teachers were orthodox, traditional philologists like the Canadian Jerome Buckley, my adviser for my thesis on Oscar Wilde; Douglas Bush, the Renaissance scholar; and Howard Mumford Jones, the major liberal Americanist during that period. This was long before my 1972 edition of Georg Lukács' writings translated into English and my book on Bulosan. Scarcely can you detect any influence of Lukacs on my 1972 book *Carlos Bulosan and the Imagination of the Class Struggle*. But the Yenan Forum was hovering around. We never read any Black or ethnic author, nor women, in the Harvard seminars during those smoldering years.

While finishing my graduate work, I began a correspondence with the beleaguered poet Amado V. Hernandez and other reputedly subversive artists. This led to my contributing articles in Filipino (Tagalog) for Hernandez's newspaper. I also translated some of his poems into English, published in *Rice Grains* (International Publishers, 1965). I wrote on William James and the Anti-Imperialist movement against U.S. colonial aggression (I did not know then that C.S. Peirce, the founder of pragmatism, was also involved; see my 2022 book). When I returned to the Philippines in 1966-67, I became involved with the ad hoc Manila circle around Alejandro Abadilla, the bohemian poet, and helped edit his avant-garde review, *Panitikan*. I finally met Ka Amado, whose conversations summed up his entire career, from the Thirties to the union struggles in the Forties and Fifties (he had met Bulosan and other Filipino activists when he travelled to the U.S.); his correspondence with me still needs to be edited and published.

Aside from the censorship of my 1957 dramatic monologue, "Man is a Political Animal," in the *Collegian*, I should mention here that my invited lecture for the Surian ng Wikang Pambansa, entitled "Paglingkuran ang Sambayanan," was banned and copies destroyed in 1972. However, I

was able to include the text in my 2004 *Himagsik*, published by De La Salle University Press, thanks to Ben Medina Jr. and comrades.

My experience of teaching in U.P. and Centro Escolar University in 1966-67 was catalyzing and pivotal, in many ways. My understanding of colonial subjugation sharpened – even before Marcos declared martial law – and impelled me to shift to writing in Filipino with a commitment to popular-democratic principles. A few years before the First Quarter Storm, the nationalist movement took off under Jose Maria Sison’s leadership, with the help of leftwing public intellectuals like Renato Constantino, Teodoro Agoncillo, Jose Lansang, Francisco Nemenzo, Nemesio Prudente, Dolores Feria, and others.

Let me back up a little. In the meantime, after my first two collections – *Balagtas: Art and Revolution* (1969) and *The Radical Tradition in Philippine Literature* (1970), I finished *Carlos Bulosan and the Imagination of the Class Struggle* published in September 1972 (which narrowly escaped Marcos’ censorship), endorsed by Salvador Lopez. That was after a year of teaching (1965-66) at the University of California, Davis, where I made contact with “old-timer” Manongs for the first time and discovered the roots of the farmworkers’ “conscientization” (to borrow Freire’s term). I was able to access the Bulosan Collection at UC Berkeley. Since then, the diasporic community has changed – no longer are our compatriots here farmworkers. Most professionals have assimilated by mimicking petty-bourgeois, faux-managerial life-styles. Meanwhile the proletarian majority continues to struggle to survive in the abysmal interstices of a violent racialized society in rapid decline after the 2008 crash and the rise of China as an industrial powerhouse. We could scarcely anticipate the rise of Black Lives Matter after George Floyd’s killing and the Trump backlash amid the Ukraine War and the Gaza genocide still raging (as of May 2024).

In the period 1967-1986, we saw the beginning of socialist renewal, amid the neoconservative Reagan-Thatcher counter-revolution. I was involved in the project of educating/mobilizing our compatriots in the U.S. to help against U.S. imperialist war-crimes in IndoChina, and U.S.-guided counterinsurgency in the homeland. It was the period of urban rebellions still smoldering from the assassination of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. We helped initiate the anti-Marcos movement among migrants, and collaborated with the Friends of the Filipino People (FFP), which engaged mainly in pedagogical and lobbying efforts.

As a representative of the FFP (together with Charito Planas), I attended the Fifth Oil Workers World Anti-Monopolist Conference held in Tripoli, Libya, in March 1980. Tripoli then was a lively progressive city under Muammar Qaddafi with his now legendary *Green Book*. It was during this conference that I met the youthful members of Misuari’s Moro National Liberation Front with whom I discussed the art of National Artist Abdulmari Imao, the avatar of the Lumad’s resurgence.

Times have changed, however, so you find the majority of Filipinos here rallying to the white-supremacist program of Trump and his ilk. With the beginning of the neoliberal ascendancy, I became more involved with ethnic and racial studies, with left-wing comparative cultural studies, while participating in the debates on the National Question, party-building, ideology-critique, post-structuralism, post-conceptual art, etc. From 1993 up to the new millennium, I have focused on research into Philippine history, cultural politics, and the problem of “uneven and combined

development,” including the interface between semiotic pragmaticism and classic historical materialism (see my *Peirce’s Pragmaticism*, Lexington Books, 2022).

In the meantime, after revising my *Sisa’s Vengeance*, I am engaged in writing on Apolinario Mabini’s unprecedented contribution to the birth of our historical consciousness, one which continued in our novelists Faustino Aguilar, Lope K. Santos, Lazaro Francisco, Lualhati Bautista – see my books on Faustino Aguilar and Lualhati Bautista, the first serious critical studies of the entire oeuvre of these two artists, the first a classic novelist of decolonization and the last, a militant feminist nationalist. But this historical sensibility is now unfortunately repressed by the reifying apparatus of the market focused on instant gratification, abstract exchange-value, nuanced versions of commodity-fetishism, and the libido in various seductive incarnations. Despite this, inquiries into the history of the “unfinished revolution” remain on the agenda for all dissidents.

4) *Where were you during the overthrow of Marcos? How do you assess this event, which after all received a lot of attention worldwide?*

I was then teaching at the University of Connecticut. From that base, we helped the natdem leadership to mobilize local communities to expose Marcos’ murderous violation of human rights. We collaborated with Filipino union activists to establish solidarity with U.S. counterparts. We were constantly in touch with our comrades in MetroManila and knew how the boycott tactic boomeranged, and how the unilateral focus on armed struggle in the countryside failed to actualize the concept of counter-hegemony. Such errors have been rectified, we were assured by trusted contacts. Still there seemed to be a delusive romanticization of guerilla war derived from the Chinese example, which, I hope, has now been dealt with. It might be good to remind ourselves that tactical war of position and of maneuver, always combined, and other moments of the counterhegemonic strategy always depend on the changing alignment/balance of forces, the totality determined by the dynamic configuration of power at every specific conjuncture of the class struggle. Reality, as Lenin used to say, is richer than our ideas or concepts of it.

We are still in the juncture of a new-democratic revolution (anti-feudal, anti-comprador, anti-imperialist). In fact, the election of Duterte and then Bongbong Marcos testifies to the prevalent archaic, tributary mindset or habit-patterns of cacique/elite electoral “democracy,” the fragmented or coopted union movement, and the addiction to neoliberal beliefs/values inimical to the development of a nationalist sensibility rooted in our long durable history of anticolonial struggle. In short, we have not yet gone through the crucible of the 1789 French Revolution, not to mention the Paris Commune. This is not the occasion to elaborate the complex vicissitudes of our national-democratic struggle. We are a long way to a full-fledged socialist reconstruction, as witnessed in Cuba, Venezuela, Nepal, and other dependent, neocolonized formations in the so-called Global South.

For some critics, the old Maoist dogma of protracted war of frontal assault became a sectarian principle. It acquired an obsessive force that ultimately negated other modes of mobilizing the masses. We still need to refine and improve the necessary political organizing and revolutionary praxis needed to win middle forces, isolate the diehard reactionaries, and affirm intellectual-moral leadership of the national-popular front – the hegemony needed to legitimize the transition. I think we have enough experience to accomplish this. Of course, these two should

be dialectically adjusted at every conjuncture. In my opinion, there was really no historical-materialist strategy of how to transform the neocolonial social relations – the received habits, mentalities, practices – even on the basis of a semi-feudal, dependent infrastructure with the dissolution of the patriarchal family and the rise of secular, self-reflexive rationality in the public sphere. The question is: can we get rid of religious illusions without eliminating the material conditions that give rise to them?

Our contacts believed that dialectics was abandoned in favor of an empiricist-opportunist wager for easy sectoral victories. And for a quasi-religious cult of martyrdoms and hero-worship of so many young brilliant minds of at least two generations now. One is awed and rendered speechless by how so many intelligent, generous and creative minds have been sacrificed to the altar of gladiatorial combat. But, as Mabini intimated, this is the painful process we have to go through up to the end to forge or construct that Subject, the free and sovereign Filipino agency of national self-determination, without which everything cannot be ventured further to overcome the horrific nightmare of the colonial/neocolonial past.

And so the February event, while indeed a popular uprising in MetroManila catalyzed by years of leftist organizing, was captured by the Aquino camp of traditional, self-serving politicians. It led to the consolidation of oligarchic rule despite coups by disgruntled military elements. The Marcos cronies were out, the old technocrats and corporate-backed managers were in – a change in personnel. After Aquino, the Ramos presidency solidified the continuing dominance of those classes that once supported Marcos – the bloc of feudal landlords, compradors, religious fanatics (incited by U.S. evangelizing agents patronized by the Aquino-Ramos administration), and reactionary bureaucrat-capitalists. The gang of crooks and hustlers behind Estrada, Arroyo, Aquino III, and Duterte were financed by Marcos operatives, or obtained clandestine support from them, including the expertise of some who claimed to be veterans of Maoist guerrilla fronts and neo-Marxist polemics – they are now accomplices of red-tagging mercenary technocrats. They are now lackeys/flunkeys of the Marcos-Duterte machine for plunder and violent repression, welcoming back the Yankees to expanded military bases and brothels, presumably to ward off the Chinese threat.

Duterte himself is a Marcos wannabe but without the *faux* legalism of his idol – a gangster, pseudo-populist provincial “godfather” schooled in warlord violence, now subsidized by foreign agents and big druglords. He is a transmogrification of the Filipino *jefe*. Lacking any genuine political program but armed with vulgar folk-gestures, Duterte relies on vigilante methods, bribery, threats, and manipulation of military/police operatives. He also relies on the passivity of the middle-strata and the opportunism of the old elite – the Ayala-Elizalde, Lopez, Araneta, Cojuangco clans, etc. But this is a very precarious mode of rule that, despite the alibi of pandemic exigencies, displays lunatic symptoms and nihilistic perversity so flagrant in the fixed agendas of social-media trolls and paid public relations impresarios. Perhaps this is barbarism with Filipino characteristics, as the saying goes.

One can hypothesize that Duterte’s regime – and its accomplice, Bongbong’s bloc of sycophants – may be the last gasp of neocolonial political shenanigans that the U.S. started when they coopted the ilustrado class in the early twentieth century. That method of “Benevolent Assimilation” climaxed in the Quezon-Osmena patronage/clientelist machine, and then maintained by U.S. puppets Roxas, Quirino, Magsaysay, Garcia, Macapagal, and Marcos. That genealogy

characterized the old school of political bargaining and *Realpolitik*. The sequence from Cory Aquino to Duterte, at the tail of the Cold War and the advent of neoliberal globalization signaled by 9/11, is now sputtering out with the bloody, expedient rule of thugs, criminals, and their hirelings. Their sole legitimacy depends on the Anti-Terrorism Act, which justifies the provision of billions of tax money to the NTF-ELCAC (National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict) clique and their accessories in the Philippine National Police, the Armed Forces of the Philippines, and various criminal syndicates with international linkages.

One can speculate that these are all symptomatic of the decline of U.S. imperial “democracy” and the onset of a multipolar world where China has become in fantasy the new enemy of the U.S.-led coalition of morbid corporate/finance capitalism. Or else it is a local phenomenon with quaint “Filipino” characteristics. A new world war is in the works (of which the U.S.-NATO proxy war in Ukraine against Russia is a symptom) – unless climate change and ecological disaster overtake us all.

Meanwhile, as Gramsci reminds us, morbid symptoms or monsters roam in the interregnum between the moribund old order and the new world struggling to be born, convulsed with all kinds of schizoid, enigmatic phantasms and hallucinations.

5) In 2022 the next presidential elections will be held – with Bongbong Marcos as a promising candidate – and it also marks the 50th anniversary of the imposition of martial law by his father, Ferdinand E. Marcos. How do you explain this rather bizarre continuity?

Bizarre, yes, but also explicable as part of Filipino accommodationism, bargaining or ad hoc utilitarianism. The youthful generation today are either ignorant of what happened during the martial-law era, not to speak of 1898, or the Filipino-American War (1899-1913). Or we have been taught that the Marcos regime accomplished wonderful things – Imelda’s Cultural Center, Green Revolution in rice-farming, etc. Marcos-appointed or patronized bureaucrats are still in government or in highly remunerative positions in business, elite cultural circles, etc. This is not a strange development because the 1986 February uprising did not change the class-polarized structure enabling neocolonial injustice and inequality. The form of rule – from Marcos’ authoritarianism to elite/cacique democracy (with some computerized frills) – was a version of the old neocolonial pattern of client-patronage, compadre opportunism, equilibrating a profoundly conflicted system. It did not transform the mode of production, the form of exploitation and appropriation, and the associated social relations reproducing it. Today we have to factor in the role of outsourcing businesses (call centers, etc.) and the more substantial remittances of millions of OFWs (Overseas Filipino Workers) that pay for the foreign debt and enable the status quo to subsist, even if precariously,

After the EDSA revolt, the ideology of Marcos’ “New Society” was refurbished or retooled. Meanwhile, the country remained underdeveloped, lacking any viable big industry, reliant on the exploitation of human labor (chiefly the remittances of overseas Filipino workers) and natural resources by foreign and local elites. We remained a peripheral appendage of global finance capitalism. The school system and various religious/charitable agencies reinforced the petrified family and bilateral kinship as the primary conservative institutions (entertainment, sports, virtual games/gambling) that sustain the neocolonial production of goods, services, and

world-view (the complex of illusions, fantasies, wish-fulfillments), and its endless reproduction in everyday life.

But not everything looks stable and solid – in fact, precarity renders everything vulnerable to heterogenous forces, to contingent circumstances. Our situation is really one of permanent emergency, in which urgent triage is needed. One need only recall the terrible devastation of Marawi City, the ongoing destruction of Lumad communities, the unrelenting demolition of urban squatters, and the extent of ecological wasteland encroaching. The tide of misery keeps rising. Lots of changes, then, despite the old structures of domination still functioning, proof of contradictions and opposites fused together at every stage in the inexorable unfolding of the historical process – our daily lives.

A new element in the political economy, initiated by Marcos' policy of labor export, began to calibrate domestic as well as transnational policies. I am referring to over twelve million Filipinos scattered across the planet. We already touched on this. Dollar remittances from OFWs – the “new heroes” celebrated by Cory Aquino – became crucial for relieving the foreign debt, population density, homelessness, unemployment misery, drug addiction, anomie, etc. Alienation in neocolonial societies breeds all kinds of symptoms (for a sample of the tribulations of OFWs, see Marivir Montebon's *In the Belly of the Beast* (2017)). But this new stratum of workers (feminized labor) harbors a potential for anti-oligarchic mobilization, that is why the Marcos-Duterte camp is trying to control it. But with the deterioration of the economy in city and countryside, this sector might introduce an unpredictable tendency whose politics depends on subjective political agencies. How to organize and mobilize them for self-emancipatory ends is the big challenge.

A note of cautionary advice is in order here. The decline of job opportunities in the Middle East and elsewhere also injects a worrisome element for Filipino oligarchs determined to hang on to power and to their luxurious if abusive life-style. After all, the Philippines is a neocolonial outpost that claims no privileged status or drawing-rights. In fact, it is a pawn now in the China-U.S. jockeying for world hegemony. With China instead of the Soviet Union as the main enemy (with Iran and Muslim extremism as Pentagon/CIA alibis for continued drone warfare), a whole reservoir of Orientalist racism and geopolitical demonizing is opened up for a new Cold War and its horrendous consequences. Some pundits are speculating that the continued attacks on Asians (Filipinos being mistaken for Chinese) in New York, San Francisco, and other cities are symptoms of a virulent xenophobia concurrent with unemployment, urban decay, hostility to immigrants, natural disasters, breakdown of public services, persistent pandemics, etc. It may be the tip of the iceberg of a White Supremacist-initiated civil war in the aftermath of the January 6 Capitol riot.

The United States has to reckon with Chinese support for Duterte and the Marcos-Duterte regime safeguarding him from the tentacles of the International Criminal Court. But so long as the extant mode of production remains basically feudal, with the rentier class tied to comprador/militarized allies, and with the social consensus pivoting around clan/family dynasties, the structure is there to support Marcos clones and his epigones – whether Duterte or some other populist surrogate. Despite cracks and fissures, the material base still sustains the ideological State apparatus reproducing it. If electoral politics fails to normalize the political economy, then authoritarian rule/militarized administration might be the temporary remedy. Why not since

Duterte's regime is de facto martial rule that Bongbong Marcos has inherited, absent the challenge of any other populist strongman supported by fractions of the ruling elite?

Meanwhile, of course, the Makabayan bloc and other progressive-nationalist forces are still around, not as strong as before, but formidable in the cultural and intellectual fields. This is my positive estimate, maybe I am wrong. Whether they can summon enough counterhegemonic efficacy, win more activists and marshal collective energies remains to be seen. The future is still open – the class struggle grows sharper everyday – so either we transform the decaying structures, or we persist in misery and wretched victimhood until a proletarian Messiah is born in our midst.

The ancient regime is dying, but the new is suffering convulsive birth pangs, hence morbid symptoms afflict everyone. Sooner or later, either the people's representatives gain ascendancy and seize power, or the whole country edges toward intolerable misery, criminality, agonizing deprivations, depravities, and deaths under the reign of violent terrorist death squads and warlords. It is easy to conjecture all sorts of dreadful scenarios, of course, since the conflicted reality resists the old Parsonian structural-functionalism or the neoclassic politics of Western modernization. Reality is more complex and tangled than any theorizing can handle, as Lenin said, so we need to continue inquiring and analyzing highly mutable variables, the balance of forces changing at every conjuncture, and try to adapt our thinking to the needs of social praxis for more sustainable liberating interventions.

6) *How would you categorize the Duterte administration and its performance?*

In 2016, there was severe dissatisfaction with Noynoy Aquino's laid-back style of governance culminating in the Mamapasano massacre as well as the collapse of social services during periodic natural disasters. So the mood prior to Duterte's notoriety as Davao's action-oriented mayor was a demand for aggressive leadership. Filipinos tend to believe that a change in leadership personnel signifies a change in the whole system – a pattern cultivated since the period of U.S. tutelage. They were duped by this homegrown magician.

Duterte inherited a structure of authoritarian rule inspired by the senior Marcos' model of reliance on the State's coercive agencies (PNP, AFP, a corrupt bureaucracy; controlled legislature and court). Like all State operations, it is based on the client-patron model managed by a patrimonial coalition of big landlords, comprador, and financial bureaucrats. We still suffer from the effects of 300 years of Spanish colonialism and over a hundred years of U.S. tutelage. The term "postcolonial" is thus a misnomer or an alibi for continuing dependency and marginality.

The Marcos dynasty's money and crony support funded the polling surveys and social media that inflated Duterte's image as the awaited savior. His performance, misogynistic, demagogic and contemptuous, can only entertain but not produce substantive changes: the drug problem has considerably worsened. To aggravate nationalist sensitivity, China has claimed more territory in the West Philippine Sea despite Duterte's inutile bravura, and acquiescence to China's elite, who will surely back his daughter's (Sara Duterte's) candidacy.

Contrary to the pundit's view that Duterte is a populist leader backed by grassroots farmers and petty-bourgeois fractions, we can speculate that his mediatized charisma exploits the cinematic

role of a neighborhood tough-guy who can do things quickly, ignoring customary proprieties. His campaign against drugs – the killing of more than 8,000 suspects (according to government records; the total is probably near 30,000) – coupled with the pandemic crisis, has intensified corruption. Officials siphoned off the budget for health/medical services and anti-Covid vaccines. It has allowed the police-military to inflict multiple abuses. After using the peace talks to uncover Communist Party networks and kill peace consultants, Duterte has resorted to red-tagging under the cover of the Anti-Terrorism Act to maintain peace and public order. The real situation is chaotic, with citizens making do and coping with hunger, sickness, desperation all around with *diskarte* expediency.

Notwithstanding the arguments of Ernesto Laclau and Nicos Poulantzas, Duterte's ascribed populism is a tawdry mimicry of Peron or any tinpot Latin-American *jefe*. Duterte has no wide trade-union support or ideological party machinery. He appeals to alienated individuals and fear-stricken middle-strata. But this style of campaigning has a Filipino provenance, dating back to Quezon's "social justice" slogan to Magsaysay's anti-Huk campaigns and recently to Marcos' "New Society" agit-prop. On the whole, the regime depends on the fear, panic and anxiety shrouding mass consciousness. Its hackneyed rhetoric glorifies Duterte's role as protector of the masses, so its personalism bears affinities with fascist authoritarianism rather than with Russian Narodism appealing to underprivileged, dislocated groups.

Neither does Duterte's regime resemble classic Bonapartism nor Caesarism. It's really an ad-hoc setup of mediocre, thuggish compadres to shore up the bankrupt cacique democracy we suffer under. Duterte is annoyed or challenged by the critical ethos of progressive forces of radicalized youth, women, religious activists, immiserated peasantry, rural and urban workers, etc. But I suspect that he is more disturbed by the indignant grievances of middle-strata professionals who are forced to become low-paid migrant workers whose remittance of over \$12 billion a year pays off the foreign debt and enables a tiny percentage of 110 million Filipinos to indulge in orgies of vacuous consumerism.

7) Why haven't the left had a real chance of doing reasonably well in elections so far? Do they lack mass appeal and/or won't a left-wing project – however well founded – fail because of the powerful bastion of Catholicism on the islands?

I surmise that there is a perennial problem of implementing united-front policies or principles on the part of the national-democratic camp in the arena of electoral politics. This is an old stumbling-block since the Huk rebellion in the 1950s with its adventurism and sectarian dogmatism born of the complex alignments during the Pacific War. Especially in a predominantly Catholic country, Gramsci's dialectic of war of movement and war of position needs to be examined again and carefully adjusted to our unique social formation. Applying mechanical formulas from old experiences may not work.

Religion or its manifestation in folk millenarianism should not be a problem, as the theology of liberation has shown in the case of Latin America. Millenarianism is a symptom of the crisis of the system. We had a really flourishing native version of liberation theology in the Seventies and Eighties – until the Vatican stifled it, though Pope Francis seems to have revived it in his own unique way. But the conservative and even reactionary forms of cultish Bible-based sectarianism

introduced by American evangelicals with the blessing of the CIA/Pentagon during Cory's time to counter the National Democratic Front's popularity may be a problem for Christians-for-National Liberation activists.

We have many progressive democratic partisans in the Church and other religious formations, including the Muslim and indigenous (Lumad) groups who have all responded productively to the appeal of Bayan Muna and national-democratic programs and objectives. A united front of diverse groups may be emerging in the wake of Duterte's terrorism and the Marcos ascendancy. I think the proven success and viability of the Bayan Muna (Gabriela, Anak Pawis, etc.) bloc testifies to the left's resourcefulness in electoral politics amid bribery of barangay officials by traditional politicians. Money may win votes, but loyalty and political allegiance defy pecuniary distractions. By any measure, Bayan Muna's performance in previous electoral exercises has been a phenomenal success, despite Neri Colmenares' failure to garner enough votes for a senate seat.

As you will recall, the People's Party in the 1990s initiated the first attempt to test if electoral politics can be utilized to promote a national-popular agenda. This resulted in the assassination of Roberto Olalia and Lean Alejandro, and murderous threats on all national-democratic organizations. This symptom of Cold-War hysteria still infects the whole State apparatus and bureaucracy, from the lower courts to the Supreme Court, Senate and Batasan. It is a symptom of political fragility if not bankruptcy. This fascist mode of conducting governance can lead only to the destruction of the unstable political economy of the country and the anarchistic war of oligarchic wolves.

8) Would you agree with me that underneath the thin surface and facade of alleged democracy, electoral processes and macropolitics in the Philippines still remain essentially feudal?

That is precisely what needs to be addressed: the mixed, conflicted modes of production that constitute the singular social formation of the Philippines in this current conjuncture. "Feudal," of course, is a general term in the political-sociological discourse, so we need to contextualize it in Philippine history. One aspect of feudalism experienced in the Philippines is the lack of awareness of racism – the white-supremacist ideology and practice of U.S. colonialism which reinforced the Spanish/Eurocentric strategy of dividing groups according to ethnic/racial categories, and establishing hierarchies of power. The techniques of how U.S. white-supremacist ideology and practices were institutionalized among Filipinos need to be fully analyzed and evaluated, an imperative task for all Filipino activists so that we can begin to explain why a majority of Filipinos in the U.S. support Trump's flagrant racism and demagoguery.

Most Filipinos, both at home and abroad, have been educated/trained to identify with the white-racial code of norms, so that most Filipinos in the U.S. continue to support Trump and his unconscionable racist politics. They do not see themselves as victims of U.S. imperial domination. They are grateful for being tolerated or accepted as part of the hegemonic consensus because they see themselves as individuals, not as an oppressed group, rewarded for trying hard to adapt or adjust. The threat of anomie is warded off by identifying with Statist authority. The lack of any sense of national/racial solidarity among the victims of imperialist-colonialist subjugation may be

diagnosed as a symptom of the feudal mentality, the native's colonized ethos of subordinating herself/himself to the lord-master's will.

I submit that no amount of analyzing Hegel's dialectic of lord and bondsman, or scrutinizing the intricacies of the class struggle portrayed in broad strokes in the Marx/Engels canon, can remedy the Filipino *habitus* (if I may use Bourdieu's term) of subalternity. We have our own counterpart to Fanon's discourse on racialized violence and resistance in the works of Rizal, Mabini, Agoncillo, Constantino, Sison, Lumbera, and vernacular artists such as Faustino Aguilar, Ramon Muzones, Amado V. Hernandez, Lualhati Bautista, etc. But Filipinos don't really know these writers, nor the Rizal-Mabini genealogy of counter-hegemonic resistance. So, again, we need a new age of Enlightenment (with appropriate pedagogy) to purge the toxic legacy of feudalism and its postmodern variants – a virus worse than Covid-19 – sustained by imperialist patronage and charity.

9) *In your opinion, what are the main weaknesses and strengths of your compatriots?*

Your question, provocative and perhaps redundant in the light of what I have already discussed earlier, invokes the permanent need for historical specificity and contextualization. They cannot be discussed in the abstract, only made intelligible in concretely discriminated historical contexts. If you inquire closely into the vicissitudes of our anti-colonial struggles, we suffered two defeats or reversals: the suppression of the revolutionary first Philippine Republic by the U.S., and the breakdown of the Huk rebellion in the fifties. One other defeat may be the failure of the EDSA rebellion to enact thorough land reform and eliminate political dynasties – the foremost being the Marcos-Arroyo-Duterte collusion. Lessons have not yet been fully extracted from those events, given the inadequacy of our history textbooks, our Westernized intelligentsia, and our amnesia-stricken national memory as a whole. We also lack a steady corps of fulltime organic intellectuals mediating between the middle-strata and the grassroots. We have no sustained public forums and genuinely free press to promote participatory democracy, given the terrorist government threats and rampant arrests, with hundreds of political activists jailed and tortured or extra-judicially neutralized. We cannot dialogue with ourselves uninterrupted by arrest, death-threats, and outright executions.

In my view, if I may be permitted a guess, we as a people have not completed the process undergone by the masses in the French Revolution, or the decades of Mao's intuitive but systematic mobilization of China's countryside. Our neocolonial situation does not permit it for now and the foreseeable future. Our "enlightenment" stage was cut off by the colonial imposition of U.S. individualist-utilitarian habits that continue to commodify bodies, souls, dreams, fantasies. Underlying it is the seemingly impregnable mold of feudal-dependent mores, customs, and sensibility that suppresses critical, reflexive reasoning and prevents any integral judgment of the totality of collective experience. We have a long way to go.

Our neocolonized belief-system has inculcated obedience and worship without questioning purpose, means, or ends. The *compadrazgo* mechanism functions under the umbrella of a comprador-middlemen way of conducting business that makes a mockery of the judicial-meritocratic paradigm of industrial capitalism. We are still a profoundly colonized formation without any heavy industry and an impoverished agricultural sector exporting cheap raw materials

– lately, including our staple crop, rice. Our main exports now are OFWs (Filipino Overseas Workers), about 12 million worldwide, including Filipinos settled in North America. The market-oriented economy subsists on the hedonistic consumerism of people with relatives working abroad. Since everything is reduced to abstract exchange-value, humans are alienated and the whole milieu reified. Urban MetroManila, however, boasts of supporting a network of call centers and transnational corporate clearing-houses with sophisticated technological platforms required by inclusion in a neoliberal system of commerce and transnational communication.

As for strengths, they are part of our weaknesses. Our *sikolohiyang* Filipino experts usually cite the *bayanihan* and *pakikisama* modes of cooperation. These are basically survivals of what Gramsci call's "common sense," harboring both negative and positive ingredients – truly a mixed bag. We have some formidable trade unions and public associations engaged in scientific research and humanistic pedagogy. Nonetheless, our public sphere is dominated by clan/familial networks of *damayan* and *pakiramdaman*, barkada companionship and lugubrious sentimentalism. Witness to this is the nationwide sympathy for Flor Contemplacion, the Filipina migrant worker hanged by the Singapore government, that panicked the Ramos regime. And earlier, the country was shocked by the killing of Senator Aquino on the airport tarmac, a distant echo of the martyrdom of the three secular priests garroted by the Spanish tyrants that produced traumatic effects on Rizal and the Propagandista movement. This may explain our predilection for martyrdom, the slave-penchant for *ressentiment*, vindictive *amor propio*.

Now, however, a form of inverted millenarianism has infected the academic milieu with the postmodern nihilism of Deleuze, Foucault, even Rorty and Butler, and other Western celebrities lauding the end of ideology, history, Marxism, etcetera. We are surely facing the end of the Duterte-Marcos symbiosis, but can the International Criminal Court and Maria Ressa's Nobel Prize prevent the daughter from safeguarding the father's responsibility for his crimes?

10) *So what is your prognosis of what's in store for the next decade or two?*

Our American friends always remind me that Filipinos have one of the longest and most durable revolutionary traditions in the whole world, not just in Asia. Mabini already prefigures this in his letters and memoir. And so I should perhaps rest by merely alluding here to a certain stubborn, hard-headed quality of patience learned in centuries of surviving colonial privations. Add to this, we are endowed with a more than Christian sense of hope that the Messiah, flying the red flag and singing the "Internationale," will intervene at any moment now. There is an emergency, particularly when we are plunged in the moment of danger and intolerable suffering, while Duterte-Marcos trolls whip up the old anti-communist hysteria. This moment of peril is the emergence (in polling surveys and social-media advertisements) of Bongbong Marcos as a favored candidate, which became a reality just after this interview. An ironic twist of events? Or a bad joke by the algorithms of Twitter, Facebook and paid opinion-fabricators?

Cultural commentators (as the present interviewee) should refrain from forecasting the outcome of elections, so hazardous is the enterprise of gazing into the crystal ball. Prophets are often cast out from their homeland, if not crucified. However, one can speculate about trends. The trend is often manipulated, but one can discern the public's desire for some form of reasonable, well-managed, efficient governance, especially in controlling wild skyrocketing prices of

electricity, gasoline, transportation, food and other basic necessities, and helping the disabled, the unemployed, and the many victims of natural disasters.

The shameful failure of Duterte's militarized approach to the pandemic, which brought about the mushrooming of "community pantries" red-tagged by the police and military, is sure to spark opposition to the Marcos-Duterte collusion. In other countries, such a failed regime would have resigned, shamed widely, or booted out of power. Public figures like the mayors of Manila and Pasig are now highly acclaimed as honest, competent administrators, notwithstanding their links with traditional politicians. In this regard, the "pink" candidate Robredo is trailing behind the popularity of other candidates who are paid surrogates for shadow politicians, or just plain mediocre. In this climate of free-for-all jousting, even the boxer Manny Pacquiao has been tossed into the electoral ring. Senator Pacquiao scarcely attended the Senate sessions; he has absolutely no qualification for the job except, maybe, his physical prowess and stamina – which, not to underestimate these qualities, may be what is lacking in Duterte's debilitated and narcotic if not wholly wasted physiognomy.

So if money-driven propaganda and poll-surveys are discounted, I think there will be a change to another regime with personnel not completely beholden to the Marcos-Duterte collusion. In any case, Filipinos have not lost hope in a change for the better, although their choice of Duterte landed them from the frying pan into the fire, so to speak. It is time to say, "Enough! Basta!" Indeed, how long can one endure imprisonment, torture, unwarranted arrests, extra-judicial killings, rape, rampant abuse of authority, corruption, insult and injury to women and Lumads, and anyone who criticizes such atrocities? How long can one endure such brutal privations? How long can one suffer servitude without raising a cry of protest and vote one's conscience (one act allowed by law) to transform the *status quo* into a more egalitarian and just society? There are, of course, collective means and ways other than elections to change the current situation. This is not just the usual display of "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will." We expect the conscientized citizenry in the Philippines to register their general will and elect a humane alternative to the bloody Duterte regime and its farcical replacement, the Bongbong mimicry of his father's reign.



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