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Revising Colonial History

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Review Article

Revising Colonial History

VICENTE L. RAFAEL

PHILIPPINE COLONIAL DEMOCRACY. Edited by Ruby Paredes. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1989. 166 pages.

The four essays that comprise this collection continue one of the most fruitful and salutary trajectories that has characterized the writing of Philippine history in the last two decades. Each well-crafted piece brings with it a revisionary agenda: that of demythologizing received ideas—whether these come from the left or the right—regarding Philippine history by bringing to bear the analysis of local data on national patterns, and reconfiguring national history in terms of larger, global movements. In this sense, these essays share a common problematic: that of tracing the process by which the Philippine nation-state was invented.

The four papers edited here by Ruby Paredes were originally presented at the annual conference of the Association for Asian Studies in Philadelphia in 1985. Although they deal with the country's political history between 1890 to 1941, they encourage the reader to think through the profound continuities between colonial and post-colonial institutions and practices. The oxymoronic title of the book alone forces one to reflect on the inherent contradiction between colonialism and democracy that has to a large extent shaped the Philippine nation-state. As the Introduction makes clear, each essay in the book problematizes the nature of representative institutions in a colonial context and focuses on the persistent if highly ambivalent workings of patron-client relationships in setting the conventions of political practices among both Filipino elites and American colonial officials in the country. A "politics of patronage" tended to override all attempts at establishing liberal-democratic forms in the Philippines. It also subverted the more racist presumption of those Americans who were constrained to enter into relations of reciprocal indebtedness with the Filipino elites. Finally, a politics of patronage assured the consolidation of a social hierarchy that had emerged by the middle of the eighteenth century, one that was based on the monopoly of economic and cultural resources with which to insure political influence.

The accumulation and deployment of political influence among Filipino elites, however, has a highly complex history. Glenn May's essay on municipal

elections in late nineteenth century Batangas shows that a considerable gap existed between the prescriptions and practices of local elections. Through a careful reading of archival sources, May demonstrates an important but largely overlooked fact: that those who occupied the offices of *gobnadorcillo* or *cabeza de barangay* were rarely those who had any wealth. Rather, office holders were of marginal means for the most part and served as surrogates for the contending and at times overlapping factions of Batangas. These factions—ranging from wealthy landlords, to the Spanish clergy and those opposed to them—held the real reins of power in the municipality. Local politics, cut off as it was from national politics, thus became a stage for playing out factional conflicts where the stakes were limited but nonetheless hotly contested. May's essay thus serves as an important corrective to the tendency to link political office with economic and social affluence. Power was refracted but by no means summed up by the possession of office in the late Spanish period. As with Christianity or Castilian, the Filipinos recast Spanish political institutions, using them for other ends.

That the colonized always refashioned colonial institutions and practices in ways that could not be entirely foreseen, much less accounted for, by the colonizers is precisely what renders problematic the distinction between collaboration and resistance. If participating in state-sanctioned elections, for example, also meant subverting their pious ideals or Machiavellian intentions, and if such subversions meant securing a local and therefore separate realm of authority for Filipinos, did not joining them constitute some form of resistance? It is this ambiguity that is suggested by Ruby Paredes's essay on the Manila-based Partido Federal, the first officially recognized political party under American rule. Paredes shows how a politics of patronage informed the Manila elite's dealings with the Americans on the one hand, and their understanding of the imperatives of nationhood on the other.

The Hispanized, conservative and wealthy Federalistas held out the hope of Philippine assimilation to the United States just as they had earlier hoped for Spanish citizenship for Filipinos. Hence, the seeming alacrity with which they seemed to form a consensus with Americans such as Taft regarding the needs of the colony; hence, too the swiftness with which they have been dismissed by later generations of historians as retrograde, even reactionary forces whose pro-Statehood aspirations were easily eclipsed by the more "radical" Nacionalista Party. Yet, as Paredes points out, the story of the Federalistas was far more complicated. Taking the career of T.H. Pardo de Tavera as an example, she shows that the Federalistas led a conflict-ridden relationship with their American patrons, often contesting bureaucratic decisions and appointments of those who, like Luke Wright, were deprecatory of Filipino capacities.

Indeed if the Federalistas were marginalized by 1905, it was not for ideological reasons—the Nacionalistas by eagerly fielding candidates in local and national elections were no less complicitous with the colonial regime. Rather, it was the very same mechanisms of patronage that proved their undoing. As Taft, Forbes and other colonial officials came to realize, Pardo de Tavera and others like him were far from being lap dogs. As such, their criticisms of

colonial officials plus their lack of influence outside Manila made them expendable. Increasingly, American officials sought to favor "new men," younger and more ambitious politicians with firm bases of support in the provinces, men who could more easily mediate between the local and national levels and thus assure the consolidation of a centralized, archipelago-wide political order. The most prominent of these were of course Sergio Osmeña and Manuel Quezon, the subjects of the next two essays by Michael Cullinane and Alfred McCoy, respectively.

In his perspicacious account of Sergio Osmeña's career, Cullinane locates his ascent to power within the intricacies of Cebuano factional politics. Osmeña's rapid rise to prominence, Cullinane shows, lay in his ability to cater to conflicting factions in Cebu. Though originally of illegitimate birth (Osmeña's paternal origins to this day remain a matter of conjecture), he charted his course in the most calculated fashion, marrying into a wealthy Chinese mestizo family, thereby assuring acceptance into the ranks of the Cebuano elite. He attended law school in Manila and thus established important contacts with nationalist *ilustrados* there. Osmeña also started a newspaper in Cebu, gaining an important medium for influencing Cebuano politics. He lost no time ingratiating himself with whoever was on top of the colonial hierarchy. Siding with Spain during the revolution, he then methodically crafted a craven and cautious persona in order to win approval from the Americans. However, through his friendship with nationalists he also came across as a moderate champion of progress. Osmeña appeared to support religious freedom and thus the rights of the Aglipayan Church; but through his wife's close friendship with the Bishop of Cebu, he also presented himself as a staunch defender of the Catholic Church. His Chinese mestizo ties assured him of considerable wealth and social prestige in Cebu, all of which in turn allowed him to establish close contacts with local American businessmen and officials in Manila. Osmeña early on thus proved to be exactly the kind of attractive client that Americans such as Forbes found useful, just as his association with the colonial state made Osmeña an even more powerful patron not only within the province of Cebu but, by 1907, among other Nacionalista politicians as well.

Osmeña's career represented the refinement and normalization on a national level of the politics of patronage—a politics based on the potentially infinite accumulation of clients below and ever-shifting attachment to patrons above. The paradox then of "colonial democracy" lay in this: it systematically instituted a local, essentially parochial political practice as the basis for national and international relations. Factionalism among political elites was both a symptom and a guarantee of this contradiction. And where the cultivation of factionalism was concerned, Manuel L. Quezon proved to be perhaps the most remarkable practitioner.

Alfred McCoy's fine essay on Quezon returns to the earlier concerns sketched out in the Introduction: that of suggesting analogies between pre- and post-war political institutions and practices in the Philippines. McCoy convincingly argues that Quezon's Commonwealth regime laid the groundwork for the emergence of authoritarian rule under Marcos. The former set the legal and extra-legal precedents for the latter's assumption of dictatorial powers. It is

during Quezon's tenure as president of the Commonwealth that we can see the other side of patronage. For as much as patronage can serve as a means for contesting the limits of colonialism in the way that it renegotiates the rules and undermines the assumptions of the colonizer, it can, under other conditions, also lead to a despotism that verges on the fascistic.

As McCoy shows, Quezon, like Osmeña, benefited from the vicissitudes of a colonial policy seeking to locate new agents for the consolidation of a new regime. As the other dominant member of the Philippine legislature, Quezon used his connections with American officialdom in the colony and in Washington in order to cajole and intimidate other Filipino politicians. Reducing his political opposition to submission, Quezon handily won the presidency of the Commonwealth in 1935 and lost no time in seeking to perpetuate himself beyond the limits set by the constitution. He did this by manipulating the legislature and thereby winning a constitutional amendment that would allow him to run for a second term. In addition, he also sought to bypass the authority of the American High Commissioner and establish a direct patron-client relationship with the U.S. president. In doing so, Quezon appealed to the "moral responsibility" of the United States in the Philippines and thereby played a crucial role in shaping the myth of "special relations" between the two countries.

McCoy also details the subtle but no less effective ways by which Quezon encouraged factional contests in provinces such as Iloilo. Such tensions invariably redounded to his benefit, positioning him as an indispensable patron of all clashing parties. The other side of Quezon's abetting of factionalism was his cultivation of cronyism. Active in land speculation, Quezon also participated in spurious infrastructure developments contracted out to his friends, especially in the construction of the city that would bear his name in 1940. Despite the poverty of the Commonwealth, Quezon poured as much as 25% of the government's budget into the development of what was then seen as a largely megalomaniac move to establish his place in history with the chartering of Quezon City. Hence, the exploitation of factional strife, the resort to cronyism and the use of government funds to build monuments to a living ruler so characteristic of the Marcos years must rightly be seen to have their origins in the precedents set by Manuel Quezon.

Finally, McCoy points out that the authoritarian bent of Quezon included his cooptation of radical rhetoric and shrewd use of peasant and labor leaders. Confronted by widespread unrest, Quezon responded with his "Social Justice Program." But as McCoy states, "it was far from being a rhetorical flourish proclaiming government intervention on the side of the poor but a rhetorical feint masking State repression of the radical peasant movement." (p. 140). For not only did Quezon quash legislation for economic reform; he also unleashed the military against peasant and labor organizations even as he sought the friendship of their leaders by offering them money. In a similar vein, Quezon publicized his defiance of the American High Commissioner as proof of his nationalism, yet was quick to offer concessions to the Americans in the form of retaining Philippine land as the site of U.S. military bases in exchange for preferential trade agreements that would benefit principally the elite. The

parabolic stretch of Quezon's career is thus wholly consonant with the paradox of "colonial democracy." In closely considering its multiple dimensions, McCoy provides us with a context within which to understand the emergence of Marcos and martial law not so much as a disturbing interlude in the progress of Philippine democratic institutions, but in fact as the historical outcome of the Commonwealth.

There is thus much to recommend in this book. Among other things, these four essays establish — along with those that have appeared in other collections such as *Philippine Social History* (edited by Alfred McCoy and Ed. C. de Jesus), and *Reappraising an Empire* (edited by Peter Stanley) a more complex evidentiary foundation and a more supple interpretive framework within which to rethink the history of colonialism and nationalism in the Philippines. Taken together with the path-breaking works of Benedict Kerkvliet and Reynaldo Ileto, such revisionary histories pull us away from the temptation to essentialize (and so dehistoricize) such notions as "collaboration" and "resistance," "patron-client relationships," and "democracy." Indeed, the attitude of radical skepticism which often informs such histories opens up to a reconsideration of the nature of Philippine politics as a whole: that politics is not merely an institutional phenomenon emanating from above the social hierarchy; it is also the conditions of possibility that allow for the ceaseless and multiple renegotiations of power on the level of the mundane and the quotidian. It is in this last sense that politics is conjoined most fully with history—history seen, that is, as the realm of contingency, of that which could and might yet come to pass.