

*Book Review*

*Kusaka, Wataru. 2019. Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality, Democracy, and the Urban Poor. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press. 341 pages.*

**Reflection of a Divided Nation**

A sustained critique of Philippine institutions, in particular, and of the Philippine democratic system, in general, that looks into the glaring social class disparities prevalent in understanding contemporary Philippine society. Philippine Studies literature, which cuts across disciplines, would always carry undertones within the context of class divisions. Such underpinnings can be seen both in present-day political theory formations in the abstract discipline of philosophy and political science and in the more applied rendering of disciplines such as, but definitely not limited to, history, sociology, gender studies, public administration, and economics. Class disparities and class divide have been the major aspects of, if not considered as the main variable in, social theories that aim to understand and explain contemporary Philippine realities.

This trajectory in theorizing is clearly demonstrated in the works of Marxist and neo-Marxist academics in the Philippines who bank on class disparities in offering a critique of the capitalist-founded social institutions and democratic processes with the end-view of economic and political emancipation. Differences in social consciousness of socioeconomic classes in rendering historical phenomenon had also been the subject of intellectual discourses in the country's formation of historical narrative. This led to the claim of nationalist historians that the revolution that started during the Spanish colonial period is a revolution that has yet to be won, i.e., an unfinished revolution. These lines of thought conclude that there are two counterhegemonic elements of Philippine revolutions: one is the revolution won by the elite class, and another is an unfinished revolution of the impoverished class. The same epistemological frame has been applied in examining Philippine institutions and democratic processes. Hence, the client-patron approach, cronyism and patrimonialism perspective, and the cacique-peasants underpinnings have been the dominant theoretical framing of sociopolitical discourses in the Philippines in comprehending developments of social institutions. Consequently, it is not an overstatement to mention that the interclass struggles and the social relationships formed, if not reified, by this track have been the underlying theoretical anchorage of current intellectual scholarship in the Philippines.

Exemplifying the said intellectual line, albeit with a different flavor, in understanding Philippine democracy is Wataru Kusaka's *Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality, Democracy, and the Urban Poor*. Drawing from a hypothesis of the existence of dual public spheres (i.e., the civic public sphere of the middle class and the mass public sphere of the lower class), Kusaka claims that counter-hegemonic public spheres created a "division of the nation" in the context of moral politics. This division clearly manifests the paradoxical characteristic of democracy—as democracy aims for equality, it also simultaneously creates complex social and political arrangements that further widen the gaps between and among social classes.

Departing from earlier studies in the field that placed much emphasis on "interest politics" in explaining class disparities in the Philippines, the book takes cognizance of the fragmentation of the Philippine state that can be better explained through the moral antagonism between the middle class and the masses as seen in the proliferation of discourses within their respective public spheres. Through a careful scrutiny of the historical genesis and development of these two public spheres, Kusaka argues that the "moral division" of the nation is perpetuated by "language, education, media, and the living space" (p. 5) that have taken stratified goals and aims across class lines, and that are deeply entrenched in Philippine social and political history. This moral division of the nation resulted in moral antagonism in the form of a clash of perspectives with regard to people power, elections, and urban governance. The author elucidated these episodes of moral antagonism by providing several illustrations of political exercises, policy formulations, and policy implementations where the civic public sphere clashes with the desires and consciousness of the mass public sphere.

The moral antagonism examined by the book is framed within the antagonistic "we/they" relations that the author calls as "counter-hegemonies theory." This presupposes a "we" that views itself as the "good" and the other "they" that is being viewed as the "evil." On one hand, the civic sphere's "we" takes the modern promise of institutional reform through a relatively strong state imposing its will upon the people via efficient implementation of laws and policies, no matter how harsh the other "they" may take these policies. On the other, the "we" of the mass sphere will always invoke equal rights with regard to livelihood (*hanapbuhay*) and the affirmation of their dignity (*dangal*) with primordality that, in many instances, run counter to the modern state's wielding of the same power. These differences in perspectives and aims of the two spheres created a moral antagonism that for the author precludes, if not totally destabilizes, the aims of democratic systems and processes.

Antagonistic as it may seem, these two spheres, have a window of convergence, as postulated by Kusaka. This convergence happens in what he calls as "contact zone" where the two spheres conflate. This conflation also results in "moral solidarity of the nation. *Sine qua non* to the formation of this contact zone

is “moral nationalism” that implies the existence of an “enemy of the nation,” which usually comes from the elite ruling class. The enemy of the nation is considered by both civic and mass spheres as the evil that must be ousted, since the enemy of the nation espouses leadership that betrays both the civic sphere’s aim for modernistic institutional reform and the mass sphere’s goal of livelihood preservation and upholding of dignity. Illustrations provided by the book in this respect are the moral solidarity engendered by moral nationalism during People Power 1—the ousting of a dictator—and the moral nationalism demonstrated in the election of President Benigno Aquino III, which was seen as an offshoot of the people’s discontent with the administration of Pres. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, who was also viewed, as the author puts it, as enemy of the nation.

However, these sporadic and, to a large extent, very loose episodes of moral solidarity take a temporary stance in concealing the moral division of the nation. It is in this respect that the book concludes that the underlying basis of a sustained national solidarity cannot be found in the realm of moral politics since “when multiple publics formulate moral antagonism against their respective ‘others,’ opposition by counter publics may not only fail to ameliorate inequalities but also exacerbates the moral division of the nation and pose a threat to democracy” (p. 254).

Undoubtedly, the book is a major contribution to literatures that examine contemporary Philippine democratic systems and processes as it tries to deviate from the traditional structural-institutional approach and to veer away from the overemphasis on economic materialism in the field. The study offers a relatively new horizon in understanding the interclass divide in Philippine society through the lens of moral politics. By highlighting the moral antagonism between the civic and mass spheres, the work renders the actors as politically active participants of the democratic process and as conscious agents of change, which though limited by their economic life-worlds, are not just absolutely determined by it. Instead of merely stipulating the divide across class lines in the materialistic sense, the book exposes a more substantive class division founded on the abstract conception of good and evil—an approach usually ignored by traditional studies on the topic. This trend of culling consciousness in the purview of moral politics is also relatively overlooked in the field of Public Administration. As manifested in the book, this conceptual approach can inform both scholars and policymakers with theoretical frames that can, if examined deeply while being interlaced with existing public administration theories, translate into praxis that is within the governed’s contextual life-world—something that current scholarship in the field can explore both in the areas of theory-formulation and actual governance practices.

The demonstration of the fragmentation between the middle class and the impoverished class in moral terms is also noteworthy. While most of the

studies in the topic only identifies between the elite and mass lines, the book offers explanations about the further divisions in the mass lines that can be demonstrated in the antagonism between the middle and lower classes. This reality can further lead one to the conclusion that the stronghold of the elite class in contemporary Philippine democracy cannot solely be attributed to its hegemonic power in social and government institutions. The fragmentation of moral lines present between social classes, which are supposed to offer counterhegemonic discourse to elite dominance, is also partly to be blamed. Even the sporadic convergences of these two spheres cannot be an alternative for a sustained solidarity that can withstand the force of the elite class. As Kusaka argues, the moral solidarity fostered by the moral nationalism against the supposed enemy of the nation paradoxically created a venue for elite politics to further its hegemonic claim. Indeed, the temporary solidarity offered by these phenomena in Philippine political history cannot be a force that can reckon with the well-entrenched hegemony fashioned by elite democracy rooted in post-democratization Philippine polity.

Notwithstanding Kusaka's development of an understanding of the contemporary Filipino situation established on new lines, the book fails to offer a clear and attainable alternative to the failed moral politics as a vehicle for a lasting national solidarity project that could be the basis for a better democracy—one that promotes equality and the good life. Looking for a possible alternative, the author posits that neither Rousseau's liberal nationalism nor the Habermasian concept of constitutional patriotism can offer a solution to this dilemma. Argued in a rather sketchy manner, the book proposes that the close contact of the two spheres that would enable diverse people to interact with one another, coupled with a temporary deference to the moral concept of "right" and "wrong" and savoured with interest politics founded on ethics of care, could offer a solution. As alluded, this proposition is, to say the least, rather vague and obscure. Taking arguments along this line only undermines the power of moral politics, the very concept that the book devoted its time into, in the actual systems and processes of democracy. It would have been more fruitful if the book explores the inadequacy of the present Philippine democratic system in capturing the different, albeit contrasting, consciousnesses of contemporary Philippine society and the practices of actually integrating these in policy formulation and implementation—this is supposed to be the authentic significance of public sphere in the Habermasian sense. A more grounded and concrete alternative could have been proposed in the form of democratic inclusivism, where the democratic system simultaneously hears and integrates these spheres, hence making institutions more responsive to institutionalization of modern reforms while fostering a state that promotes inclusive growth. Narrowing the linguistic divide in the performance of democratic practices can be the first step in this exercise. Merely settling on the avenues of public sphere, in the case of the Philippine political and governance settings, will neither attain sustainable results nor maintain the supposed contact zone since even the very concept and

the modes of this public sphere in the Philippines is problematic. The success of Philippine democratic institutions in the framework of good governance is partly within the platform of real and tangible citizen participation. The nature of this participation should not only be integrated in the shallow level of formality but it must be practically integrated in the actual processes of policy formulation and implementation both in the national and local levels of public governance.

Though there have been attempts in the conduct of public administration as praxis in the Philippines through participatory governance, there is still much to accomplish to actualize the real purpose of this approach. For one, it can be argued that there exists a system of incorporating views and perspectives from the margins in the Philippine democratic system via the party-list system that is part of the legislative process in the national legislative body. While this system had indeed been devised to include the agenda of those in the margins of mainstream legislative politics, the current practice of this system in policymaking calls for a review in terms of its composition and legislative tasks if it is to really uphold the desire to perform genuine sectoral representation. It is the belief of the author that participation from below, due to lack of a better term, can only be sustained if it leads to the production of pragmatic results, i.e., if their consciousness and moral politics are not just articulated but becomes part of governmental policies and projects. Otherwise, no matter how lively and strong the public sphere is, genuine citizen participation cannot be sustained. Secondly, the strengthening of sectoral representation in the local bodies to meet the demands of good governance founded on the principle of citizen participation is not only desirable but imperative. If moral antagonism is to be translated into a more inclusive framework, institutionalizing citizen participation through sectoral representation in the grassroots level through local governance is crucial. Though there are local bodies that include mandatory sectoral participation, these exercises have only been arbitrarily practiced. Only through an institutionalized mode of sectoral representation—something that will not just allow them to speak but make them part of the whole process—that the impoverished class can truly be included in mainstream governance. Realization of the aforementioned will not just lead to good governance but will also be the advent of attaining the real meaning and purpose of fostering a culture of bureaucratic and governmental democracy.

A point of concern can also be explored in Kusaka's methodology in extracting the supposed consciousness of the mass sphere. While the book's rendering of the civic sphere—taken largely from print media (particularly newspaper articles) with validation through interviews of individuals who belong or identify as urban middle class—can be said to capture civic consciousness, interviews with observations cannot fully characterize the public sphere of the masses. Distinction and nuance should have been made with regard to the difference between a real public sphere and mere individual political opinion.

Indeed, unlike the efflorescence of vehicles of the middle class's civic sphere, rendering, let alone analyzing, mass public sphere is quite problematic. If Kusaka is speaking of a public sphere that has been defined and characterized by Jurgen Habermas—where private subjectivities are carried forward into the public through the process of free flow of communication—then, interview may not be the most appropriate method to employ. Interviews will just arbitrarily elucidate individual political opinions by the participants rather than expose a public sphere that is a product of communicative undertaking. To examine the real mass public sphere, a clear discussion about the nature and types of mass public sphere should have initially been provided first before highlighting the insights extracted from the interviews. Otherwise, no matter how common the opinions among those in the postulated class line are, the interviews cannot really encapsulate the real mass sphere in the strictest sense of the concept.

Finally, it must be mentioned that laudable in this work is its attempt to let the voices of the impoverished—those who are marginalized in the current democratic practices in the Philippines such as the urban poor—be heard. However, this is definitely risky for people from the academe to undertake since they can be a paradoxical character—while they attempt to give voice to the impoverished class, some can be apathetic to and ignorant of the plight of the poor. Unless the state institutionalizes avenues for the marginalized class to fully participate in the project of nation-building to work towards being more democratic, moral politics in the Philippines will always be a reflection of a divided nation.

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