



Session 2: Commentary

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A Question of Generations

I confess to an abiding discomfort when I wrote this response to Prof. Rey Ileto's paper. For one, our histories as graduate students at Cornell University were somewhat different; in fact, in they were quite the opposite. I accidentally entered graduate school with no intention of going beyond my first year, and wanting to study history. I ended completed my PhD as a student at the Government Department with Benedict Anderson, whose concerns are not exactly the same as those of American political science. Cornell was also a chance to take stock of my politics, especially after the assassination of two good friends, and to write about my immediate political experience. I did not go there to seek further enlightenment through a scholarship "abroad."

I went to Cornell therefore, with a what I now regard as a displaced confidence borne of out political involvement, to learn about theories, perspectives and histories so that I may better understand the political dynamics back home and contribute more meaningfully to the political debates that I was – before Cornell – already a part of. As indicative of this selective and somewhat critical attitude towards Cornell and graduate school, I had the gall and was drunk enough to tell Ben straight to his face that I found his brother Perry's writings more compelling than his. He simply smiled.

My encounters with the people Rey Ileto mentioned in his piece were similarly the reverse to his. Take the case of the late O.W. Wolters. In my first meeting with the retired Wolters, he reminded me of how much he learned from Rey's works, repeating this a number of times in the course of our

conversation. Not exactly the stern mentor who demanded full obeisance from Rey in August 1967. It suggests that the supposedly old Orientalists do change.

Perhaps because of the impact his perspective has had on clarifying some of the questions I was working on for my dissertation, my response to Wolter's scholarship was, and still is, not as guarded as Rey's. I thought that Wolter's idea of localization – i.e., the incorporation of external ideas and practices by communities in a way that they are made useful for local society – gave an alternative perspective on how to best understand the seemingly contradictory responses of Muslim elites to American colonial rule and the efforts of the post-colonial Philippine state to bring the southern “periphery” of Mindanao under its firm control. It was not simply a case of outright resistance or collaboration; their responses – in the tradition of Wolter's localization – were far more complex, shifting and variegated; actions that reflected their attempts to preserve their local power by exploiting a more powerful external force to their advantage.

The other theme in Wolter's scholarship that I found useful is his idea that SEA is not simply a region of some centers; its one enduring feature is its multi-centeredness. In arguing that each locality is its own center, this Wolterian perspective therefore runs in contradiction to historiographies that equate national histories with the story of the capital. Again, to go back to my own work. It was Wolters – and Iletto – who actually made me realize how problematic Philippine history and political development are if we view both processes from the southern periphery that is Mindanao Island. For the latter has a much richer and more dynamic historical development in the “modern era” than compared to the capital, Manila, and even the rest of the country. Its breadth was more regional and, in a way, more cosmopolitan until the Americans disconnected it from Southeast Asian moorings and transformed it into a periphery of the nation-state. The latter condition that was further legitimized by a national(ist) historiography that assumed that the farther one were from the capital, the less history one has, thus the lesser are its contributions to the national story.

This is perhaps the reason why the stern, seemingly insensitive Wolters warned Rey not to write the kind of history Agoncillo and Guerrero wrote as textbook.

Localization and multi-centeredness, therefore, have opened for me a door to a more real, inclusive nationalism; one that recognizes not only resistance but also selective incorporation as a way in which communities dealt and continuing to deal with external agents. These ideas have helped me explore other pathway in understanding the history of the Philippine periphery and its purportedly marginalized communities.

Which brings me to John Smail. I think Rey's paper can be further strengthened and refined if he not only engage Harry Benda's and Wolter's scholarship to decipher their Orientalism but also give Smail's "autonomous history of Southeast Asia" argument the same substantive concern as the two more senior historians.

For when I reread Smail seminal essay after I went over Rey's piece, I though his ideas seem not that contradictory to Rey's after all. Listen to Smail argue for an autonomous Indonesian colonial history:

All I have been trying to do for the moment is to awaken the thought that there is an authentic Indonesian body beneath the clothes we call the Netherlands Indies, that this body has its own history, autonomous in the fundamental sense. I am arguing that we are dealing here with a society that is coherent and alive and not merely a rubble used by the Dutch for a new building, a society which, by being alive, generates its own history – which like any other history must be seen first of all from the inside – and does not merely receive it. (56–57)

Smail's perspective also seems to show a more complex picture of the Indonesian nationalist revolution, which echoes the kind of nuance that Filipino nationalist historians like Teodoro Agoncillo and Rey argue in their respective works. Again Smail:

[A]n emphasis on internal history enables us to fit the great bulk of the people into the historical picture. In its foreign relations aspect, the Revolution was essentially a struggle between a foreign and domestic elite; both sides took it for granted that they had the full support of the people, and historians have tended to follow the one view or the other, thereby displacing attention from the complexities and importance of the elite–mass relationship in this period. In its internal history aspect, the Revolution appears as the period in which in many ways a working relationship developed between the domestic elite and the people, a relationship often incomplete or shallow but certainly far more profound than the foreign elite had ever achieved. But this was an achievement of the period, it was the partial working out of the fact of Indonesia at this time. It was not a given, having existed for centuries or having appeared full–grown on August 17th; to assume so, as do anti–colonial historians, is to miss one of the most important historical developments in the Revolution period.

What I am suggesting here is that I think that Smail and Rey are not miles apart in terms of what perspective could give us a more accurate picture of Southeast Asian historical development. But I am also aware of Rey’s discomfort with the Smail school, and I think the source of this is not so much Smail’s “Orientalism,” but the question of what form and substance the autonomous perspective will take *if written within and by Southeast Asians*. This, I think, is a core issue that the paper – in its revised version – may need to address.

Which leads me to the last contrary experience: that with the so–called nationalist historians.

While Rey finished out of the private, elite school of the Jesuits (which by 1967 still resisted the entry of women and was openly anti–nationalistic), I graduated from the University of the Philippines, the premiere state university of the country, and main producer of the country’s professional and political elite from out of mixed bag of young urbanites and

provincials, rich and poor, Christian and non-Christian, and of all genders. It was, by the late 1960s, also fast becoming the center of resurgent radicalism; in fact, 90% of the membership of the CPP's original central committee graduated from UP.

I entered UP in its most radical phase, but also went through college under martial law. The Marcos dictatorship then was out to destroy UP's radicalism as it was trying to reformat the university to serve its interests. As students, we were children of martial law, we were also the first to fight it. Our education, therefore, was not merely intellectual but it was overtly and openly political and anti-authoritarian and radical. This was in this context that I encountered Agoncillo's nationalist history; in fact, we were the old man's last class before he retired.

Given the limited time, let me focus on just one notable lesson from that encounter.

While the nationalist impulse behind Agoncillo's teaching remained passionate, it was also intensely tempered and subdued by the dictatorship. It had lost the luster that made it the inspiration of many a young radical a year or two before Marcos declared martial law. In fact, it had become a nationalism that serviced the interest of the dictatorship that had appropriated the nationalist of the themes of the radical student opposition – ironically with the help of former radicals themselves. I remember Agoncillo continue to rail against imperialism and colonialism and extolling the significance of the Philippine revolution, but I also could not forget how he and his supporters refused to acknowledge the analytical superiority and moral pre-eminence of radical and popular nationalism (this time bannered by the CPP) as compared to state nationalism.

The silence inevitably turned to full collaboration. Agoncillo and his colleagues at the UP Department of History formed the core of ghostwriters and consultants for Marcos' epic project, *Tadhana*, which (re)sketches Philippine history in such a way that the dictatorship becomes one, if not the acme of the quest for nationhood. This slide to the mercenary (the pay was

very good) has tainted these scholars, especially since none of them publicly spurned and condemned the project even when the dictatorship was on its way out.

Worse, this deradicalized and mercenary nationalism had actually become a weapon in which many Filipino historians have refused to acknowledge and have become dismissive of the scholarship that followed them.

The nationalist reaction to fellow Filipinos who wrote abroad can be summarized into two words – patronizing and contempt. Agoncillo was openly rude to both *Pasyon and Revolution* and the local history of his protégé Guerrero for their conclusions (not matter how much they were inspired by Agoncillo's nationalist history) were also critical of Agoncillo's. Rey roots popular nationalism in folk Catholicism, while Agoncillo traces it back to the Enlightenment. Guerrero saw a more nuanced relationship between Filipino elites and mass in regards the Revolution; Agoncillo attributes the Revolution as solely a revolt of the masses. In fact, both sought to transcend the arguments of Agoncillo, perhaps in a sincere attempt to strengthen the nationalist argument, but ironically perceived to be threats to the Master's narrative and perspective.

My take on these ironic twists of events is that it is something expected given that the nationalist historiography of the late 1960s that Rey describes in his paper had, by the 1970s and onwards, jettisoned its radical and anti-elite component. It had become servile to and supportive of the nation-state; something that is not entirely unexpected of most, if not all nationalisms. But my views are perhaps also representative of a younger generation that has been exposed to not only the deadly consequences of American hegemony but also to the perfidy and criminality of the Filipino elite and the failing of radical and separatist movements. Hence, it is a generation that has also come to see the need to interrogate Filipino nationalism itself, particularly when it comes to the imbalances of power within Philippine society.

I look forward to more meaningful exchanges with Rey and his generation.