



Session 2: Discussion Highlights

REYNALDO C. ILETO: First, I would like to thank the discussants for reading my piece and of course making some very valuable comments on it. I shall begin by responding to Yoshiko Nagano's comments. I think she was asking me where I was coming from in a way, because I did title the first chapter of my book, "Toward History From Below", and she mentions Ranajit Guha and E. P. Thompson and others who were in the business of also writing history from below of sorts.

But of course as I said in my paper, my book was published in 1979 before I had not even heard of Guha, and I had not read E. P. Thompson, either, I am afraid. But the idea of history from below was really a take on Agoncillo's book, *The Revolt of the Masses*, and arose from the debates I was immersed in with fellows, mainly Philippino radical activists in the early 1970s, when I was doing field research, not in the archives, and noticing the obvious influence of Maoist ideas of peasantry in the discourse of the student radicals of the early 1970s. And my feeling then that peasant radicalism was not only there somehow, that revolution was not something that had to be imposed on the subordinate classes, but something which emerged by an exploration of certain features of their consciousness, and that one might be able to see how there was also some impulse from below which then would enable some of the ideas from above to be implanted upon certain social and revolutionary movements.

I was more influenced by phenomenology and a bit of structuralism and things I could pick up in the 1970s, without intending to identify myself in one way or another as belonging to a school of this or a school of that. My intention was to pick up whatever I found useful to eliminate this problem of the revolt of the masses. What was the revolt of the masses? I think Agoncillo said that the masses were behind the revolution in 1896. What does this

mean? And that led to my having to deal with the sorts of ideas that one might find at that level, in the form of songs and popular epics and rumors and folktales and so I had to discover techniques of dealing with them to somehow be able to talk about the mentality informing those sorts of records.

So it was only later, after the book was published, that I began to read about the work of Guha and eventually read E. P. Thompson, and that I began to use them in defending myself against critics, but this was after I had already written my book. So people often wonder why I display knowledge of all these other writers who have looked into the question of popular mentalities, whereas in my book I do not seem to cite them very much. The fact is I did not really have very much to cite when I was writing my book, but then later on as if to reinforce my approach, which I then later on labeled “history from below”, I found allies in Guha and others. And unfortunately I have been associated with this kind of historiography even though I have not been doing very much of this lately.

The Second point that Yoshiko Nagano raised has to do with the reading I made of the word *kalayaan* in Tagalog, which Agoncillo had most definitely interpreted to mean liberty in the liberal enlightenment sense, while I sort of traced its linguistic baggage going back to notions of childhood, bliss, and the parent, mother-child relationship and so forth. I do not think I can answer the question as to what is the prospective discussion on nationalism in history. The reason I bring up this question of nationalist historiography is to critique the way it has been located as a moment in a developmentalist framework towards a more universal and objective history.

And here is where I use Smail without criticizing actually the productive effects of his essay. And I do not deny for one, the observations that Professor Abinales has made about the importance of Smail’s work. What I am looking into is the way that autonomous history seemed to emerge, seemed to be posted as the answer to the dead end of nationalism versus Euro-centric history. So it is at that moment whereby a new kind of history is made possible by the marginalization of so-called nationalist historiography, which to me is somewhat similar to the way that a popular movement is

labeled millenarian in order to emphasize its backward looking and primitive aspects because there are more advanced forms like socialist movements and communist movements that make millenarianism archaic and somewhat, yes, particularistic, narrow, a bit irrational, a bit informed by emotions rather than reason.

And I thought nationalism and nationalist historiography might be a victim of another meta-narrative wherein nationalist historiography is located as a kind of a pre-something or a primitive something. So whatever Smail said about Indonesian historiography, I do not doubt the importance of it, and as I mentioned in my own paper, I was also partly inspired by that essay. But I sort of question the background from which it emerged and from which it actually became prominent. It became a slogan because it was also seen as a way of getting back at those bad historians like Sarkisyanz and Maung Htin Aung. Now there was a banner under which a new group rallied around because the bad nationalists were sort of dominating the field. They were not to be over there in Southeast Asia.

As for Wolters, well, I actually did not carry my story much beyond 1970. And I was reluctant to have this paper distributed precisely because there are some aspects of which I have not fully worked out, especially my relationship with Wolters. And I guess Professor Abinales has pointed out one of the dangers that already anticipated in having this paper circulated without the subsequent parts, part eight, nine, and ten all the way up to twenty if you want, that could chronicle my relationship with Wolters. I did point out that when I wrote the thesis, I eventually wrote, it did not really go against Agoncillo in the way that Wolters wanted. He did not oppose it. Actually, I think he saw the point I was making.

So as for Professor Abinales' final comments concerning his generation, and he was in the last batch of students taught by Agoncillo, that is also the point at which I joined the Department of History, the University of the Philippines, and I probably came in just as he was doing discourse under Agoncillo. Agoncillo, without having read my thesis, must have picked up from someone that I was not totally opposed to his way of writing history or to

nationalist historiography, but when he did read the first chapter, the first chapter of my book, he was so angry that he became, well, he made a life a bit uncomfortable for me in the Department.

So this is not an essay that romanticizes Agoncillo or tried to cast him in a good light. I merely want to show how, by sort of putting forward Agoncillo as an emblem of nationalist historiography by Wolters in 1967, which of course I should not make much of, it might have merely been one of those spur of the moment things by Wolters. He may have been regretting it forever, but he told me not to write like Agoncillo, but to put him up as a symbol of nationalist historiography. But not looking at the complex scene from which it emerged, and in which it was produced, is just as wrong as national historiography's faults itself.

And my subsequent parts of this essay when I deal with the late 1970s and 1960s will actually deal with some of the same issues that Professor Abinales brought up. And in fact, my first reading of the textbook by Agoncillo was provoked by my experience in the University of the Philippines where Agoncillo's textbook and its companion piece by Renato Constantino were regarded as bibles of the students which no longer, in a way, functioned as they did in an earlier period, of making students think for themselves etc., which was what Agoncillo had intended his textbook to be. By the late 1970s and 1980s, they had become the bibles for the nationalist movement, and Agoncillo especially was co-opted by the Marcos state. And that is the background for my 1988 critique of nationalist historiography, which showed that Agoncillo's history and Marcos' history were the same banana, or the same thing. So that is about it.

AKIRA OKI: It is all right. You still have four minutes. Is that all right? Thank you very much. We have about 20 minutes or so for general discussion. Do you have any questions? Yes, please.

KIICHI FUJIWARA: Before this discussion gets done, it's too interesting. Anybody who is interested in Philippine history would find Dr. Iletto somehow finding something positive in Agoncillo's work. There is a long history behind

that, but aside from all that, two things, Dr. Iletto has mentioned, can be accepted, that I think I can readily support. The first point is that national historiography has been occasionally, I always refuse, a kind of strawman, and especially in American political studies. It was described as a study that only shows naked prejudice. First, it selected a wrong side of prejudice. This kind of depiction would be quite unfair and unproductive and I certainly agree with Dr. Iletto.

The second thing that autonomous history or what Smal called autonomous history may still have been pretty colonial. And in spite of their self-conscious departure from colonial historiography, their words may seem to share or carry certain prejudices or assumptions that they may have been unaware of, but certainly would seem rather colonial from those who are living outside. And to that extent I agree.

Having said that, I do not really think we should make our own position in another dichotomy as it to take all those criticisms toward national history as the other. For it's not really that easy. For example, as you have correctly pointed out, your work, *Pasyon and Revolution*, too, was in a way a challenge toward a more simplified state-centred nationalism, nationalist's reading of Philippine rebellion, by your focus on the social aspects. You were reconstituting and kind of challenging the national history of that time. Whether to agree to your point or not is a totally different matter. The way you constructed history from below was a challenge to the very kind of national history. So in a way challenges toward national history as well as national history itself, too, can have a much wider and richer element.

The other thing, I want to bring up here is about the Cold War. You have discussed about the legacy of colonial historiography and the struggle to fight against it and other problems, but of course there was another element at least in American studies on Southeast Asia. It was that we called the Cold War. For one thing, it promoted studies on Southeast Asia and for most of historians and political scientists. They received a funding from sources related somehow to the Cold War. If nor Rand Corporation, Defense. And on the other hand, it also ignited criticism against American involvement in

Southeast Asia. In fact, those who were making criticism toward American involvement in Southeast Asia were writing their theses, but funded by Rand Corporation or related agencies. So here is a contradiction, but it also shows the two phases of the Cold War. And having said that, I think it cannot be denied that this Cold War period was by far the richest period in American studies on Southeast Asia. In other words, when they lost the war in Vietnam, they not only pulled out the troops from Southeast Asia, but their mainstream from Southeast Asia. It's not a nice thing to say, but maybe studies on Southeast Asia, not only Southeast Asia but 'developing world', before the criticism goes with it, maybe a product of an empire. It may be that the British works on India or China may have come out from the worst period of its dominance. Maybe it is possible to say the same for American studies on Southeast Asia.

And the more interesting thing is that within the period of dominance there are always those who resist that kind of dominance and still remain within that way of thinking or within that empire. In many ways, the people you have brought up in your report like, for example, Ben Anderson, would be very much an Anglo-Saxon, an Irishman, but at the same time he is working against the American empire. The same can be said about Kahin. When you have a period of dominance like that, you have both poles. When you retreat from an empire, you lose interest and the study itself is in trouble. A kind of narcissism, self-centred ideas, we can see in the United States, is not a character of American Southeast Asian studies. It is the character of the lack of Southeast Asian studies. So the final one, I come to, very briefly, but a nasty question. Can we have good studies without an empire? Thank you.

OKI: Will you respond now? This is very interesting discussion. Actually this is what I really wanted to discuss, too.

ILETO: I have to think about those issues. Can we have good studies without an empire? In a way, yes, that is right. I was writing the tale and we all write the tales for an empire. And when I discussed the Golden Age at the very beginning of my paper, of course, that was also at the height of the Cold War, and also at the height of the US government, foundation's support, financial

support, and I suppose my scholarship at Cornell would have come out of this fund, too. It is interesting to locate this within the bigger picture of empire and the Cold War, which I have not really thought about, so I will reserve my comments until some later time. Maybe next year.

OKI: It is interesting, because I know several people who were funded by the Pentagon and the CIA, and so suddenly my colleagues disappeared in the field of Vietnam. Later on, I learned that she became a CIA agent. So it was not at all rare at that time. So we should think the methodology of Southeast Asian studies within the bigger framework of the age or the world. It is too big to be discussed in a few minutes. Could I have other question?

KEI TAKEUCHI: When I consider the title, “Can We Write History?”, I interpret several questions about history. One type of question is, can we write the history of what? Is there, let us say, a history of Japan as a whole? There is some of the post-modernist approach, that this would be only a fragment of history: such as a history of cloth, a history of songs, a history of maybe anything, etc.? But not a comprehensive history of the society as a whole. And then I think that maybe we can write history and it is a kind of comprehensive universal history, but then what is the entity or unit of history? Can we write the history of Japan? But can we also write the history of Meiji Gakuin, or can we write the history of Minato-ku? It depends on partial history. Maybe on the other hand, we can write history of the human race as a whole.

But then, I think that the problem of nationalism is necessary. Can we write the history of something, of the nation which has already existed, but also there is a question how we can define nation in the narrative of history. And I think that is a very, sometimes rather important question, because history can sometimes define historiography and sometimes define nation, and not the other way around. So, for example, I do not know whether there is a history of Indonesia, for example. Of course, Indonesia exists now but when we can think of the history of Indonesia, we must ask, from what time did Indonesia exist? And maybe even sometimes some people in Eastern Timor would say that there must be a history of Eastern Timor, apart from the history of Indonesia, but I do not know whether such a thing could have existed.

And I thought the same thing could even be applied to Japan. And Professor Amino Yoshihiko recently wrote many articles arguing that the history of Japan only started from 400–500 years ago, and that before that no unified entity, that is Japan, existed. I think I agree with him. And this could be applied to even China, I think. Did China really exist, say, 2,000 years ago? Chinese scholars always say that they have a long history of 3,000 years. Of course, their histories or something started from 3,000 years ago. But 2,000 years ago, China meant only the northern part of China, and the southern part was considered as belonging to barbarians.

So nationalism in history writing has also the important aspect of how nation is defined in its historiographical description. And sometimes, it is ironic to see that nations are defined by colonial power. I think that the entity of India as a nation at least was only given existence, if I am a little provocative, by the empire. The Indian nation was defined by the British. Of course, India was a kind of world before that, but the nation of India was defined by the British, by the act of constructing the so-called Indian empire. So I think the same problem existed, especially in Southeast Asia, when I think of how Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and so on, or Vietnam, of how they were defined by colonial power, and of course not only by colonial power, but of course by some other aspects, but it is not easy to define things related history. I would like to hear your response to my comments.

ILETO: It is a bit difficult to respond. I guess, I will simply confine myself to the Philippines, to Philippine history, which I know a little bit about. I think the question of constructing a narrative of Philippine history is something that is of course inseparable from colonial contact, and I think there is a big difference from what Professor Sarkar said with respect to India. I find that the two areas are so different in that. In the Philippines, for example, we cannot claim to have some sort of autonomous culture or a great tradition or even any substantial monuments to designate as a pre-colonial past. Our notions of the Golden Age are so history-based and based upon a thin layer of evidence, that there are few who believe it.

So, it is a case of constructing a national history that is anchored on

the revolution against Spain in the late 19th century, and also anchored in the effects of the coming of liberal enlightenment ideas and economic development, and not anything much further than that. But the history of the revolution has always been read as a unfinished event, because the Americans came in and dismantled the republican government that had been in existence for only less than a year. The underlying notion in the Philippine national history is that it is unfinished, and therefore there is a question of how it will be continued and what form the construction of the nation state that began in the late 19th century will take, which is why I guess one of the points I was making was that historians like De la Costa and Agoncillo and Majul who in a way can all be called nationalist historians, they played a very different role from what we could normally think of national historians closely aligned with state education authorities determining the narrative, the framework, and the directions that history would take.

I think there has always been a struggle between government, between state and historians, with historians also trying to use the state in order to further their own ideas of how the Philippine national narrative will shape up. Unlike in Japan, for example, I think because of the prior existence of 3,000 years or something, there is a very long past. There is something about the great traditions of the past and it seems to be immovable and immutable and therefore it tends to make national histories a bit more black and white because you have a tradition to defend against the colonials, whereas in the Philippines, tradition itself is already constructed in the context of colonial rule and is therefore not based on some prior essence or age of greatness which therefore means that the shape that the nation state may take is not determined by a pre-colonial past, because there is hardly any. It is more open.

So, historians like Agoncillo and Majul provided evidence, traces from the past, from the revolution that helped newer generations in the late 1950s and 1960s, you know, to give them more material with which to fashion their own ideas about where the nation state would go. So this is a more dynamic view of nation state history than one would get. And I also agree that in the late 1970s and 1980s the Marcos state did attempt to provide some sort

of closure to history by determining how it would go, and in fact the history series written by Marcos, actually written by my colleagues in the Department of History, the University of the Philippines, represent the divisions of the late 1970s and the 1960s, and were sort of shaped in such a way as to promote the Marcos state.

CHIHARU TAKENAKA: I would like to make just one comment. It is very interesting to know the making of your first book and as you said, you did not know, for example, Ranajit Guha or E. P. Thompson. But it was almost at the same time when Indian historians had motivations to write social history, history from below. This, of course, was to overcome imperial history, but also to overcome the first generation of national history and simplistic anti-colonial history.

And it was the late 1960s and 1970s, so the time of the Vietnam War, too. For the people of this generation, the empire became an issue, again. For Indian history, there was the writing of new historians, so-called the Cambridge historians in the United Kingdom, who said that they were engaged in a more neutral type of history, or referring to your concept, some type of autonomous history. A more objective history, not like ideological one, such as nationalist or leftist history. They would never write an old type history of imperialism, and call it a new history, new series of the Cambridge history. Then came Ranajit Guha and Dr. Sarkar's partner, Sumit Sarkar. They began to write new Indian histories from the stand of new leftists. If we compare them with Dr. Iletto, all of these writers belonged to different regions, different countries, but they tackled empires and nation states in their own ways, around the same time. For the Indian people their empire was still the British Empire, and for the Philippino people American Empire. Thank you.

OKI: Perhaps we can have one last question. I myself have so many questions. The time is up already? Then, we close this session here. Thank you.