

Review Essays

***Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality,
Democracy and the Urban Poor.***

Wataru Kusaka

Ateneo de Manila Press, 2019, 341 pp.

As Filipinos are in search for solutions to their nation's problems of corruption, poverty, inequality, and different forms of injustice, Kusaka's *Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality, Democracy and the Urban Poor* takes a step back from seeking remedies to these problems and re-examines how these issues are commonly articulated. The book investigates moral politics, a discursive framework, in order to come to terms with how citizens form their understanding of social problems through their notions of good and evil. Under moral politics' frame, citizens view their nation's maladies as caused by morally wrong actions done by an individual (e.g. public leader) or a group of people (e.g. street vendors). By grasping how moral politics works, Kusaka's text shows how it prevents Filipinos from attaining significant social improvements.

There are many notable themes in Kusaka's work, but this review highlights only two points: first, Kusaka's examination of how neoliberalism takes effect in the country, especially in view of the shaping of the subjects, and second, his examination of how moral politics contributes or deters the development of democracy in the Philippines by identifying how moral politics prevents Filipinos from grasping the real issues. By emphasizing both insights, Kusaka not only shows how moral politics is formed, but also extends the argument by showing that this kind of politics has a profound effect on the community.

On the Production of the Neoliberal Subject

Kusaka acknowledges that his work on moral politics addresses issues on the development of concepts by the middle class and civil society. Both groups take part in the civic sphere, which is one of the contexts where he examines how moral politics works. In his book, he reaffirms the claim that the middle class is a diverse group. People in this class have the capacity to support various ideals and advocacies. Their spectrum could run from leftist NGO supporters to professional workers who hold antagonistic views against the masses.¹ In the same discussion, Kusaka highlights a critical view of civil society. Contrary to previous studies that are focused on its contribution to democracy, he points out

¹ Wataru Kusaka, *Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality, Democracy and the Urban Poor* (Ateneo de Manila Press, 2019), 9–10.

problems of exclusivism in civil society. He highlights that even civil societies tend to subscribe to a “we/they” labeling as they tag who are good or right citizens, excluding in effect those who do not fit their notion of citizenry.²

More than what Kusaka has initially acknowledged as significant of his research, his discussion of neoliberalism is also noteworthy. Kusaka’s work can be read along with the recent work of Ortega’s *Neoliberalizing Spaces in the Philippines: Suburbanization, Transnational Migration, and Dispossession*, which is also a study on the effects of neoliberalism in the country. However, while Ortega focuses on how peri-urban spaces create various forms of alienation as they are transformed by the neoliberal notion of development,³ Kusaka directs his attention to how the subjects and their moral politics are being shaped in view of their distinct class experiences. Kusaka never denies that moral politics in the Philippines is a “direct reflection of [the] worldwide rise of neoliberalism.”⁴ Noting such an insight, Kusaka’s book also sets the ground to examine the effects of neoliberalism to Filipino subjects. Hence, neoliberal production of the subject is investigated in the Philippine setting with its “substantive division of the public sphere caused by class disparities in language, media, and living space.”⁵ The Philippines’s stratified society serves

² Kusaka, *Moral Politics in the Philippines*, 11.

³ Arnisson Andre Ortega, *Neoliberalizing Spaces in the Philippines: Suburbanization, Transnational Migration, and Dispossession* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

⁴ Kusaka, *Moral Politics in the Philippines*, 250.

⁵ Kusaka, *Moral Politics in the Philippines*, 255.

as the setting for the study of the influence of market-driven subjectivity.

If *homo economicus* (a self-entrepreneur) is the ideal neoliberal subject promoted by the market, then Kusaka's research poses the question of the extent of this ideal's influence in a society beset by wide class disparities, such as the Philippines. His data shows that the values of *homo economicus* are only widely accepted by the middle class, rather than the masses. Middle-class Filipinos exhibit self-entrepreneurship through the attitudes of independence, self-sufficiency, and hard work to achieve economic success.⁶ They see themselves as self-reliant taxpayers who deserve good governance from their politicians.

These attitudes, however, are not as prominent if one is in the mass sphere. The masses see nothing wrong with the attitudes of dependency given their impoverished condition. They are also more inclined to appeal for help and mutual assistance,⁷ which goes against the ideals of independence and self-reliance.

Kusaka demonstrates the importance of class position to understand the effects of neoliberalism, and this should not be dismissed merely because of its problematic conceptual baggage in the traditional Marxist class theory. Certainly, Marxist class theory hardly captures the new forms of labor in capitalist societies. The bourgeoisie and proletariat, whose

⁶ Ibid., 39–40.

⁷ Ibid., 40–41.

identities are based on their relation to production, are inadequate categories given the recent rise of new jobs (e.g. middle-class professionals and top-managers) where ownership of production is an ambiguous basis for class distinction. Although this issue is a large debate that requires further research, one can initially sense that Kusaka avoids this issue, as his work's distinction on dual public spheres can be read as based on socio-economic status and not under traditional Marxist class theory. Similar to many social science literatures, Kusaka's class division can be interpreted as grounded on socio-economic status rather than the relation to production. Basing class on socio-economic status refers to "economic position and educational attainment," which are more specified markers easily grasped by an individual.⁸

By incorporating class condition in his analysis, Kusaka provides data to pose the question on whether neoliberal ideals are completely embraced across all social classes. His data debunks an acontextual employment of the concept of a neoliberal subject, which presupposes that all individuals under a capitalist society have succumbed to the ideals of *homo economicus*. Results of Kusaka's study further encourage empirically grounded studies on neoliberal subjectivity. Using surveys and interviews of people from different social spheres, Kusaka draws descriptions of their ideals and values

⁸ Antony S. R. Manstead, "The Psychology of Social Class: How Socioeconomic Status Impacts Thought, Feelings, and Behavior," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 57, no. 2 (April 2018): 269.

as experienced from the ground. This approach addresses the issue of the failure to verify how neoliberal ideals are being adopted by the people.⁹ Kusaka's method can consider the "success or failure" of neoliberal discourses; it could supply significant facts to examine the efficacy of forms of subjectification, i.e. to verify the assumption that neoliberal ideals are effectively internalized by the subject.

On Moral Politics and Democratic Ideals

Kusaka's study certainly provides conceptual and empirical contributions on studies of neoliberalism and how it works in the Philippines. Aside from these issues, his work also offers pointers in addressing democratic and social problems in the country. His book's underlying goal is to advance the "ideal" of democracy: an ideal that is not only a political system that provides "open competition for political power" through election but more importantly, a realization of "socio economic equality."¹⁰ Such a task can be put forward if obstacles against democracy can be addressed and resolved, and such an undertaking can be realized if one can first identify these hindrances. Kusaka's work on moral politics presents a subtle account of what prevents the realization of the ideal of democracy and provides some suggestions on how it can be advanced in the Philippines.

⁹ Jason R. Weidner, "Governmentality, Capitalism, and Subjectivity," in *Global Society* 23, no. 4 (2009):391.

¹⁰ Kusaka, *Moral Politics in the Philippines*, 8.

Discussions on why the ideals of democracy are hardly realized usually look at corruption and economic underdevelopment as its causes. While many Filipinos blame corrupt government officials as the culprit, others view the socio-economic structure as the problem. Leftist national democratic organizations, for instance, would cry slogans of feudalism, bureaucrat-capitalism, and imperialism as the root causes of the Philippines' impoverished condition. Instead of following these discourses on corruption and economics, Kusaka shifts the discussion to moral politics as another issue that needs to be addressed. This shift does not mean a complete rejection of corruption and economy as factors that affect democracy; on the contrary, his discussion on moral politics presents another context on how discourses on corruption and economic problems can be investigated to depict their actual impact on society.

By noting how moral politics views social problems in terms of the notions of good and evil, Kusaka describes the tendency of this politics to simplify issues, hindering an in-depth understanding of what really is the cause and solution to the social problems. This distracting effect of moral politics is one of the reasons why it prevents people from addressing important democratic issues such as social inequality. As Kusaka points out, issues on just distribution and social structure are hardly discussed, since moral politics is confined within the moral issues of its people and their leaders. As a case in point, Kusaka cited the 2010 presidential

elections. Despite the Filipino people exhibiting moral solidarity against the corruption of Arroyo's administration, the victory of Aquino—who is still a member of the traditional elite—shows how moral politics still preserves elite democracy. Through the election's results, we see that this type of politics does not rectify the unequal social structure, but could even maintain the parochial interests of the elites.¹¹

Another problematic consequence of moral politics to democracy hinted at by Kusaka is how it can generate disunity between the social classes, rather than advancing the common good. As its discourse demarcates groups as good and evil or “we” or “them,” it simultaneously produces exclusivism in their own social sphere, exacerbating the antipathy between the masses and the middle class, and furthering the instability of Philippine democracy. This gap between the masses and the middle class begins with what Kusaka refers to as the two public spheres. The poor are in the mass sphere, while the middle-class is in the civic sphere. Each sphere represents the “living environments and discursive spaces of the middle and impoverished classes,” which is established by division in “language, education, media, and livelihood gaps.”¹²

The disparity of the experiences of the two classes generates different and even antagonistic moral politics that is detrimental to democracy. One of the cases Kusaka cited is

¹¹ Kusaka, *Moral Politics in the Philippines*, 234.

¹² *Ibid.*, 5.

the antagonistic view of the masses and the middleclass during elections. While the poor have no qualms in voting for populist leaders or of accepting bribes, people in the civic sphere disapprove these acts. The middle class even denies the moral legitimacy of the poor, as they are viewed as ignorant, susceptible to manipulation, and culpable for exacerbating Philippine malaise.¹³ Kusaka sees the same gap in the issue of urban governance. Illegal vendors and settlers are more prone to practice non-legal means for their survival challenges. But the civic sphere would again view the masses differently. Because of their failure to follow the laws, they are perceived as lacking discipline and order; even worse, they are even seen “as an evil presence that threatens public safety and impedes modernization of the city.”¹⁴

Conclusion

By taking note of the issues of neoliberalism and democracy, Kusaka locates the notion of good and evil within their proper contexts. He articulates the effects of neoliberalism on moral politics in view of the subjects’ class position. He even extends his study of moral politics to its effect on the community, i.e. on how this kind of politics can be a source of exclusivism and divisiveness among social classes.

¹³ Kusaka, *Moral Politics in the Philippines*, 139.

¹⁴ Ibid., 168.

Kusaka presents a realistic depiction of results to be expected if one pursues this liberal form of politics and discourse. The results he described are not even about their unproductiveness, but focus more on the detrimental effects on the community. Their class-based notion of right and wrong could deter social change. Progressive and noble calls for justice, especially from the civic sphere, could become an exclusivist discourse, worsening the antagonism between the masses and the middle classes.

Kusaka's study implies that moral politics should not have a primary role in advancing the ideals of democracy. How, then, can this politics take part in the democratic discussion? Kusaka is not clear. What he evidently intends to pursue is interest politics, a form of politics that could provide a possibility of agreement in the context of differences. Kusaka depicts this condition in terms of "agonism": "an interdependent antagonistic relationship in which opposing forces exhibit consideration and respect for one another even as they continue to struggle."¹⁵

How would this materialize? Kusaka admits that what he provides are only broad prescriptions. Some of his suggestions include the avoidance of conclusive definitions of right and wrong in order to oppose exclusivism. He also promotes mutual understanding through the expansion of multiple "contact zones" to address the gap and misrepresentations

¹⁵ Kusaka, *Moral Politics in the Philippines*, 256.

between the social classes. The intense and intimate contact of people from different social classes can dissolve prejudices, disturb hierarchies, and destroy solid dichotomies to encourage fluidity of interactions.

Given that Kusaka only listed general prescriptions, this issue leads to more challenges for both scholars and those who are involved in the practice of politics. There should be a clear articulation of how we are to achieve agreements amid conflicting ideals. Without this, the demagogues, authoritarians, different pundits, and unqualified experts would do the task for Filipinos. To start with, if there is a need to expand more “contact zones,” then it is important to clear the issue regarding which of the social classes are capable and even responsible to accomplish such a task. Should the masses climb up, or should the middle class reach out? If the task at hand is to create mutual understanding among classes and revive moral solidarity that was previously experienced during the first EDSA uprising, who are in a position to sacrifice some of their comforts, extend their arms, and take initiative to understand the other social classes?

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