

Disease and Disparities: Structural Violence in the Time of Our Covidized Lives

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Abstract

The paper argues that when a country's social structures—political, economic, and cultural—are arranged such that the arrangement results in a dichotomy between the class of the privileged and the class of the less privileged, any act of addressing a pandemic such as the COVID-19 will always end up in another pandemic: the pandemic of government neglect and ineptitude. There is only one way out in ensuring that this double pandemic can be addressed: a return to the foundations of a good life for all—a democracy that secures that the good of collective life is for all.

Keywords: *COVID-19, democratic deficit disease, disparities, flawed democracy, pandemic, social structures, structural violence*

(Con)Texts

In these dark times of our Covidized lives to die is most difficult. Once the virus has taken over the body of the infected, there are only a few possibilities left: (a) death; (b) debilitation; or (c) recovery. Death's finality comes to those who are afflicted the most. Cremation, now a code word to mean a method to contain the spread of the virus, has become so "normalized" in the handling of the dead's remains. If cremation is not possible or is prohibited for religious reasons, a quick internment process is resorted to. For those who can get past the infection, recovery could be a traumatic process especially when the infection is severe. Those with mild infections have a better chance of going back to what could be called acceptably normal. Reinfection can happen to some.

There are no closures in these deaths. In many cases, there are no final goodbyes. If the dying person is a bit luckier, he ceremonially expresses his final words, which is sometimes rendered into some incomprehensible guttural sounds with the animal in the person taking over. The ritual of goodbyes is distanced, mediated by technology and thus, lacking in physical intimacy. Walkie-talkies or cellphones make parting words become distant with only a faint familiarity of cadence in the dying person's voice, becoming

a mere form of identification.¹ This tragic human story is repeated all over the world. The Philippines has a fair share of stories like these, stories that make us sit up and ask, “How and why has this happened?”

Images of those infected by COVID-19 dying alone will forever be a haunting legacy of the global pandemic. In today’s neoliberalist arrangement of societal structures, even the final act of dying alone is tragically class oriented. Death is not a leveler in places where the structures of collective life are so skewed that these favor the already privileged people.

The poor dying alone is marked by an imagery of rows and rows of beds divided by flimsy plastic curtains providing a semblance of privacy and protection. For the underprivileged, there is this almost clinical aloneness on a bed cordoned off by plastic sheets. For the better off, there is the shared room; and for the moneyed that can afford to spend millions of pesos, there is the private room.

¹ Elyse Wanshel, “Single Mom of 6 who Died of COVID-19 had to Say Goodbye to Family on Walkie-Talkie,” *Huff Post*, March 31, 2020, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/single-mom-6-cancer-survivor-died-covid-19-coronavirus-walkie-talkie-sundee-rutter_n_5e834e33c5b6d38d98a52d59. Kadia Goba gives us details of Sundee Sutter’s last moments in a hospital ward: “Due to the need to social distance in order [to] help quell the spread of the virus, Rutter’s mother, sister and all of her children gathered around a small window looking into her hospital room and said goodbye to her through a walkie-talkie.” For the post from *BuzzFeed News* see “Their Mom Died of the Coronavirus. They Had to Say Goodbye Via Walkie-Talkie,” March 30, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/kadiagoba/coronavirus-victim-sundee-rutter-washington-walkie-talkie>.

The moneyed are composed of economic elites and the political class. As in life, the manners of dying are unequal in these diabolical and desperate days of the pandemic. With the entrenched privileges of the moneyed, the social divide is magnified. The hospital or the COVID-19 clinic becomes the site of this class division that the Philippines has become famous for. The poor die poor; the rich die in style.

Whoever said that death is a great leveler must not have foreseen what has happened and continues to happen in the country. We have seen these contrasting images in the country's blighted cities where the divide is clear: the middle class, if there is one, seems to exist only in the minds of the educated who sell their knowledge, skill, and abilities to the highest bidder. We have seen the same in most of the world's countries, countries that are divided by how much money or resources the dying or their families have.

In these cases, several things have remained with me as I witnessed the Philippines go down the route of epic failure in its response to the pandemic. Our otherwise productive people, poor people that were able to fend for themselves prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, are now reduced to mendicancy. Like many others, residents of my small village in the outskirts of a city at the foot of the Sierra Madre mountains decided to help when otherwise respectable and productive "working class people" came knocking on our gates. Some of these people came from other towns and had to use the mountain trails to get away from the many

checkpoints manned by soldiers with long guns—checkpoints that, in the mind of the government, could help in containing the spread of the virus. During the most intense days of the first lockdown, hunger came knocking on the doors of those who live from day-to-day. The stories of the working class could be a fodder for a television drama that the masses love to watch in the early evening hours to rest their tired bodies. These bodies that repeatedly go through the daily grind of working for the callous capitalists whose only contribution to economic production is their wherewithal to put up a business.

Almost always, the working-class now reduced to beggarmdom premise their asking for help by telling their stories of being unable to get to work and having no daily wage as a result. These stories have the same plotline: help was promised but did not come; now, they are hungry.² The disparities in the face of this pandemic have become so clear.

The systemic structural violence of Philippine life has been going on for centuries, and the pandemic has made this more direct, a case of *prima facie* evidence of calculated neglect by the political class. This violence brings about “physical and psychological harm that results from

² I went through the same experience of the Philippine lockdown the country called “community quarantine” with all its many confusing, almost illiterate forms. The play of words of the government’s “communication experts” failed miserably, with community quarantine evolving into four forms. For clarity, this could have just been one cover term assigned with a variety of levels to code the severity of the community transmission of the virus.

exploitative and unjust social, political and economic systems.”³ It has produced people that have believed in the illusions of a political promise by the political class: the promise of a good society, the promise of the common good, and the promise of a just, fair, and equitable life for all. I tried to grapple with these things from the last days of January until I was able to leave the country in the middle of June 2020.

One question that has remained with me is this connection between forms of disparity and this disease that has mostly affected the disadvantaged. Some other facts have haunted me: for instance, the case of the resurgence of COVID-19 infections in Singapore. This country has been touted as one of the better Southeast Asian countries that had initially come to fully control its share of the infections. The city-state, like some Greek sense of the polis, reported that 95 percent of its weekend cases around April 20, 2020

³ Robert Gilman, “Structural Violence: Can We Find Genuine Peace in a World with Inequitable Distribution of Wealth among Nations?,” *In Context* 4, no. 4 (Autumn 1983): 8, <https://www.context.org/iclib/ic04/gilman1/>. See also <https://web.archive.org/web/19970624070916/http://www.context.org/>.

Joe Holland and Peter Henriott, SJ, offers us a version of the same approach to understanding the problem of structural violence. Their reading of a society is that it is based on three fundamental structures: the political, the economic, and the cultural. See *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Social Justice* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993).

In this essay, the terms political, economic, and cultural are used to account a society’s fundamental structures; I hold on to the view that Gilman’s sense of the “social” could be substituted by the “cultural” in the version of Holland and Henriott.

were alien workers from Bangladesh and India, among other poor countries of Southeast and East Asia. Working in shipyards, they live in dormitories with 10 workers per room, the arrangement becoming a time bomb for virus clusters.⁴ Quoting human rights groups, Iwamoto demonstrates that “[l]ow-paid migrant workers remain acutely vulnerable to human rights abuses that increase their risk of infection from COVID-19.”⁵ He leads us to an understanding that in many countries “virus clusters” appear in the same areas where low-cost labor is found. For example, Japan’s industrial-manufacturing sector employs “technical intern trainees” who do low-cost labor and come from Vietnam and China, and in Thailand over a million workers come from Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar.

In the United States, the understanding of the zip code or the postal code tells us more about communities that would most likely be infected by the virus.⁶

⁴ Kentaro Iwamoto, “Singapore’s Coronavirus Spike Sends World a Wake-Up Call,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, April 20, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Coronavirus/Singapore-s-coronavirus-spike-sends-world-a-wake-up-call>. Iwamoto describes Singapore’s experience this way: “The migrants come from lower-income countries like Bangladesh and India to work on the construction sites and shipyards that keep Singapore’s wealthy economy going. Some of their work sites, such as local conglomerate Keppel’s shipyard, have virus clusters as well.”

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Liz Szabo and Hannah Recht, “The Other COVID-19 Risk Factors: How Race, Income, ZIP Code can Influence Life and Death,” *USA Today*, April 25, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/health/2020/04/22/how-coronavirus-impacts-certain-races-income-brackets-neighborhoods/3004136001/>.

“Most epidemics are guided missiles attacking those who are poor, disenfranchised and have underlying health problems,” said Dr. Thomas Frieden, a former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.⁷

Frieden echoes the findings of two American health experts.

Despite the heroic efforts of health care professionals across the country [United States], the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged [the United States] health care system like never before. It has also made clearer problems that [the United States] health care system has been facing for many years, including disparities in potentially deadly conditions based on people’s race and ethnicity.⁸

When Democratic Life is Flawed

In a country marked by “flawed democracy”⁹ like the Philippines, it has taken this pandemic to make us realize the

⁷ Dr. Thomas Frieden, as cited in Kaiser Health News, “How Race, Income, ZIP Code Influence Who Lives or Dies From COVID-19,” *US News*, April 23, 2020, <https://www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/articles/2020-04-23/how-race-income-zip-code-influence-who-lives-or-dies-from-covid-19>.

⁸ Garth Graham, M.D. and Oliver T. Brooks, M.D., “It’s No Surprise That COVID-19 is Exposing Health Disparities,” *US News*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/articles/2020-04-20/its-no-surprise-coronavirus-is-hitting-african-americans-harder>.

⁹ Economist Intelligence Unit, “Democracy Index 2019,” <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>. Accessed April 11, 2020. Hereinafter referred to as DI-2019.

government's epic shortcomings in protecting the health of its people. Even prior to the first report of the presence of COVID-19 infections on January 20, 2020, the conditions for the virus to spread and for the pandemic to take its toll on the poor and working class of the country have been set, the conditions prepared for the pandemic to happen.¹⁰ This failure is structural: It is rooted in the disarrangement of the political, economic, and cultural institutions of the country; in the faulty processes of public service management implemented by its elected leaders and appointed bureaucrats; and in the execution of mechanisms aimed to address the well-being of the citizens.

In this paper, I will argue that the Philippine government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been structurally violent and more than ever has unraveled generations of neglect and lack of vision on how to deliver the goods of a just and fair life for the many that have been left in the fringes of social life. This structural violence has been translated into an incoherent approach to responding

¹⁰ Xave Gregorio, "First Novel Coronavirus Death outside China Reported in Philippines," *CNN Philippines*, February 2, 2020, <http://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/2/2/novel-coronavirus-cases-death-Philippines.html>; Daryll John Esguerra, "Palace Debunks DOH: PH Still in First Wave of Pandemic," *Inquirer.net*, May 21, 2020, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1278681/palace-contradicts-doh-philippines-still-in-first-wave-of-covid-19-infections>.

The announcement reported by Gregorio talked of a man from Wuhan who traveled with a female partner to the Philippines via Hong Kong. In Esguerra's report, the official Philippine government account speaks of the first three Chinese tourists from Wuhan that started the first wave of the pandemic.

to the problem, with so many loose ends in need of tying. For instance, it is instructive to look at how the Department of Health responded with uncertainty from a policy perspective during the first three months of the pandemic (January to March).¹¹ For the most part, the government's response to the pandemic was to control the population of the depressed areas, hotspots of the viral infection. In the growing hunger and anger—or anger because of hunger—of the “poorest of the poor,” the government responded with force and threats. Unlike Vietnam, the ability to respond proactively was clearly absent in the Philippine government's handling of the pandemic. Vietnam proactively did the following: (a) closed its border with China; (b) suspended all flights to and from China; (c) educated the people on what the virus is all about and what they can do; and (d) conducted mass testing.¹² Meanwhile, the Philippines did not suspend flights to and from China on time and have yet to conduct real honest-to-goodness mass testing. The country is still waiting.

¹¹ Mara Cepeda, “Even with coronavirus scare, no mainland Chinese travel ban for now – Duque,” <https://rappler.com/nation/coronavirus-scare-travel-ban-mainland-chinese-not-for-now-duque>, January 29, 2020. The policy position of Secretary of Health, Francisco Duque III, was that there was no need to ban the travelers (or tourists) from China as this would be unfair to other travelers (or tourists). With the spread of virus, Duque eventually changed that position.

¹² Raffaella Circcarelli, “Vietnam has Recorded No Deaths Four Months into the Pandemic,” *9 News*, April 30, 2020, <https://www.9news.com.au/world/coronavirus-vietnam-has-recorded-no-deaths-four-months-into-the-pandemic/1ee595b-97d3-4d5a-82e9-99cdca626924>.

Romanticizing the “Poorest of the Poor”

The deployment of a romanticized view of the already-disenfranchised working class—the “poorest of the poor”—became a code word for a misplaced patriarchy since the beginning. In his April 6 address to the country, Duterte said: “I am reiterating that our most vulnerable citizens, especially the *poorest of the poor*, must receive the government’s assistance immediately.”¹³ We soon realize that in the administration of what the government termed as the first wave of the Social Amelioration Program (SAP), it would take weeks before the hungry and starving could get the funds to buy much needed food.¹⁴ The President was right in identifying who needed the help first and most; the problem is how the agencies of the government implemented the presidential directive in delivering assistance to the hungry masses.

In an editorial by *Manila Standard*, the newspaper sent out the message to the Philippine government to address first the needs of the people who do not have “the wherewithal to buy their daily meals” and that “[t]he state and local government units must also devise creative ways to bring relief to the majority of the population. Authorities must

¹³Admin, “DSWD activates Social Amelioration Program SAP Hotline Numbers,” April 19, 2020, <https://www.thesummitexpress.com/2020/04/dswd-social-amelioration-program-sap-hotline-numbers.html>; emphasis added.

¹⁴Franco Luna, “Easy to Overlook?: Social Amelioration Lapses Weigh doubly on PWDs, Advocates Say,” *Philippine Star*, May 20, 2020, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2020/05/20/2015086/easy-overlook-social-amelioration-lapses-weigh-doubly-pwds-advocates-say>.

respond to the real needs of the population to remain relevant in these trying times. They should start with the poorest of the poor.”¹⁵

Six years prior to the government’s deployment of the “poorest of the poor” phrase, Wigel wrote in 2014 about the structurally peripheralized poor of many of the world’s countries. He argued that there are two kinds of people who are deemed “poor”: (a) those who have remained in the “peripheries” and (b) those who have become participants of the neoliberalist global system, those who are “getting not-poor.”

The poor who are getting not-poor have, in the main, been incorporated into global systems of production and exchange: sometimes roughly, to be sure, and often unevenly, but where economic growth lifts large numbers of people out of poverty, that growth comes from being part of a global market, not from any other source. By contrast, the poorest of the poor, the outliers of the “bottom billion,” are disconnected: disconnected from the global economy and disconnected from the skills and

¹⁵ *Manila Standard*, “The Poorest of the Poor,” March 27, 2020, <https://www.manilastandard.net/index.php/opinion/editorial/320486/the-poorest-of-the-poor.html>.

habits necessary to participate in what has become a world market.¹⁶

In the time of the pandemic, with many of the “centers” and “institutions” of the global systems of production and exchange also on a lockdown, the distinction has collapsed. All we have are the “bottom billions”¹⁷ of the world, many of them relying on the almost absent “tender mercies” and calculated flatteries of their authoritarian leaders. In the case of the Philippines, the bottom millions was initially counted to be 18 million families and then adjusted to 23 million.¹⁸ At the average of 5 members per family, this translates to 90 million and over 100 million people, respectively.

The phrase “poorest of the poor” has its uses in propaganda. It is clearly a rephrasing of some Biblical references and comes from articulations of the demonized “liberation theology” of progressive mainline Catholic and Protestant churches working for justice and fairness, and for community empowerment. Philosophers of liberation theology have come up with a clear resolve to do things right in a country divided by access to social and economic

¹⁶ George Wigel, “The Poorest of the Poor,” January 8, 2014, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2014/01/the-poorest-of-the-poor>.

¹⁷ Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done About It* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁸ Catherine S. Valente, “Duterte Wants 23M Poor Families in Second Wave of Cash Aid,” *Manila Times*, May 16, 2020, <https://www.manilatimes.net/2020/05/16/news/national/duterte-wants-23m-poor-families-in-second-wave-of-cash-aid>.

resources: “a preferential option for the poor.”¹⁹ There have been other metaphors for the poor in the past, to wit, “the bottom billions” or the “peripheries,” with an understanding that some of those who have become poor have become not-poor, and yet, many have remained poor.²⁰

Restating the “preferential option for the poor” of progressive thinkers from faith communities and development workers, the government responded with force and fear. For the hungry San Roque residents, the police came to tell them to stop testing the patience of government officials. The optics in incidents like this one suggests a broader social problem.²¹

San Roque, as a geography, is not simply a depressed area but a political semiotics of all depressed areas that have been locked down—the locking down a calculated response to ferret out the “unseen virus” (that is at the same time an unseen enemy) and to discipline those who would not follow orders, the “*pasaway*.”²² Rambo Talabong’s *Rappler*

¹⁹ Pedro Arrupe, a Jesuit priest, formulated this term in his letter to his Jesuit brethren of Latin America in 1968, fifty-two years after Duterte’s deployment of his poorest of the poor in 2020. A Dominican priest, Gustavo Gutierrez, picked this up in his formulation of what he called “theology of liberation.” See *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988).

²⁰ Wigel, “The Poorest of the Poor.”

²¹ Rambo Talabong, “Quezon City Residents Demanding Help Amid Lockdown Arrested by Police,” *Rappler*, March 31, 2020, <https://rappler.com/nation/residents-quezon-city-protesting-help-coronavirus-lockdown-arrested-by-police-april-1-2020>.

²² Literally, it refers to a person that does not listen or obey rules.

report of the arrest tells us of the repeated arrests that would happen to Duterte’s “poorest of the poor” after April 1.

Some 21 Quezon City residents were arrested by cops from the Quezon City Police District (QCPD) on Wednesday, April 1, after staging a protest to demand help amid the government’s lockdown that attempts to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus but has disenfranchised millions of Filipinos.²³

The facts of the San Roque case are simple enough: the Duterte government (a) imposed a total lockdown to contain the COVID-19 virus; (b) it promised cash aid to the 18 million families affected by the lockdown; but (c) the cash aid did not come in time. The residents of San Roque protested to call the government’s attention to the hunger their families were going through weeks after the imposition of that lockdown. Twenty-one were arrested by the police and then jailed at the height of the pandemic and in crowded jails.

The *Rappler* report included a statement from a labor group, Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino (BMP, freely translated as Association of Pilipino Workers), protesting the arrest of the San Roque protesters:

“These [San Roque] households already belonged to the poor and near-poor economic

²³ Talabong, “Quezon City Residents Demanding Help.”

brackets even before the COVID-19 outbreak; the administration of President Duterte should have placed these communities on the top of their priorities and should [have] heavily considered their plight when they decided to implement the ECQ.”²⁴

The use of police force in addressing the protest staged by a hungry people in an area dominated by informal settlers does not suggest a correct reading of the real issue at hand. At that time, the problem was the widespread hunger in that community and many other communities in the Metropolitan Manila area and its suburbs.

The protest was a logical and legitimate act with a government that was good at inventing a phrase to tickle the imagination of the poor but failing big time in delivering the goods that would have prevented the prolonged hunger of the “poorest of the poor.” However, the government interpreted this differently, calling it a case of hard-headedness (being pasaway) and interpreting the protest as a peace-and-order problem, hence the arrest and then the incarceration of twenty-one of the protesters. In a statement condemning the arrest, BMP said:

“To arrest hungry and desperate people is a new low for this administration. Not only did they dilly-dally in addressing the crisis in late February,

²⁴ Talabong, “Quezon City Residents Demanding Help.”

[but] the government treated the health crisis as a peace and order issue and deployed security forces instead of medical practitioners.”²⁵

The *Pasaway* and the Demonization of the “Poorest of the Poor”

Political leaders, bureaucrats, the police, and the military use “pasaway” as a code for everyone disobeying the order to stay home and follow the community quarantine rules. Largely used as an attack against the “poorest of the poor,” it conveys a people able to stand a government with a president surrounded by retired and active generals, military officers, and technocrats who are unaware of what is happening in depressed communities of informal settlers. These communities do not have running water, enough space for the family to spend the days of the lockdown, and sufficient food to bolster their immunity to combat the virus.

The “pasaway” is a syndrome. It tells us of two facts: (a) that the political, economic, and cultural institutions of the country have remained in the hands of the privileged and all three are outside the reach of the masses, and (b) that these same privileged people are directing the way people are controlled and restrained, how communities are locked down, and how neighborhoods and other places are being sanitized to guarantee the survival of the privileged under

²⁵ Talabong, “Quezon City Residents Demanding Help.”

the guise of public health and the health of every citizen of the country. With everything at the tip of their fingers, the privileged can always easily shield themselves from the disease. They have the poor at their disposal, who will be manning their businesses and serving them in their daily needs. These are the poor that at first instance have been trained well to go unnoticed—to become invisible.

In a country divided by the logic of wealth and access to the country's resources, death is not the same for the poor. The poor die incognito, listed as a mere number in the government's statistics. The privileged, on the other hand, are recalled on social media, remembered on the radio, their good deeds memorialized, and their identity published in the obituary. In this country, there are no obituaries for the poor: their COVID-19 patient numbers are assigned, but we never know who they are. Privacy protection is used as a reason; it could also be used to avoid discrimination among the poor. Meanwhile, among the rich and powerful being infected and surviving it has become a badge of honor. You are rich and you do not make it; you are remembered by a grateful nation. You survive the virus, you become a hero of some sort, a trope of invincibility. The "famous" have even taken to announcing their having been infected to condition the mind of the "poorest of the poor" to believe in the false narrative that the wealthy and powerful people could be infected and that this pandemic truly affects and infects all.

Rampant Disparities and Flawed Democracy

The issue of rampant disparities in the country is rooted in the historically unjust arrangements of social institutions. The pandemic only made these disparities more apparent, more recognizable. No matter the consoling words of the government, on the day of the final count of the dead, the poor are the unwitting collateral damage in the fight against this pandemic.

These shortcomings of the government have deep roots in the more remote social history of the country even beginning with the Commonwealth President Manuel Luis Quezon. This is a history of public administration for the privileged and never for the underprivileged even if the latter are always mentioned in public pronouncements. Official flattery can go so far in winning the approval of the suffering masses in regimes marked by nominal democracy, ineptitude, and the lack of vision.

For the last 14 years since 2006 and with yearly “state of democracy” analyses from that year on (with the exception of 2007 and 2009), the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) has analyzed 167 countries comprising 165 independent states and 2 territories. With 60 scoring units spread out in 5 categories, EIU came up with 4 indices to account such a state of democracy for these countries: (a) full democracy, (b) flawed democracy; (c) hybrid regime; and (d) authoritarian regime. The 5 categories they deployed to measure the state of democracy were: (a) electoral process and pluralism; (b) the

functioning of government; (c) political participation; (d) political culture; and (e) civil liberties.²⁶

There were only 22 countries that achieved “full democracy” in the 2019 results. The remaining 145 countries were either indexed as having a flawed democracy (54), hybrid regime (37), or authoritarian regime (54). Both the Philippines and the United States were under a flawed democracy. Norway, Iceland, Sweden, New Zealand, and Finland topped the list under full democracy, the list representing only 13.2 percent of the total and benefitting only 5.7 percent of the world’s population.²⁷

From a global perspective, democracy remains a dream for many countries—something they write in their constitutions and laws, something that their leaders talk about for public consumption—but this democracy as an ideal has been so elusive for their ordinary people. Its end—a life of prosperity and full human and social developments—is nowhere to be found. The most current test is this COVID-19 pandemic. This test has been global in character, with the Philippines being no exception to how the world addressed the problem.²⁸ All over the world there

²⁶ DI-2019, 3 (see footnote 9).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Maria Cepeda, “Even with Coronavirus Scare, No Mainland Chinese Travel Ban for Now – Duque,” *Rappler*, January 28, 2020, <https://rappler.com/nation/coronavirus-scare-travel-ban-mainland-chinese-not-for-now-duque>.

was confusion, and for some countries, the confusion remains until today.

Those categorized under a flawed democracy benefitted 42.7 percent of the world's population while those under an authoritarian regime had 35.6 percent of the world's people. The hybrid regime, with 37 countries falling under it, constituted 16 percent of all the people of the world. In order, the worst “democratic” countries ranked were North Korea, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, Syria, and Chad.

If full democracy were aspirational—the ideal worth the pursuit for all countries and all peoples of the world—about 87 percent are still dreaming of becoming genuinely democratic in practice.²⁹ There is so much to be done here, in the Philippines and elsewhere in these 167 countries and in those not included in the EIU list.

Given this COVID-19 pandemic, questions about social inequity must be asked. Health is a public good, and access to resources related to health is the right of every citizen. In the Philippines as in other countries where there is no universal health coverage, there remains two kinds of health care as demonstrated by the two kinds of hospital rooms: (a) the private room for the moneyed and (b) the public ward for the less moneyed, for those living from paycheck to paycheck or those eking out a life as workers of the informal

²⁹ DI-2019, 14.

sector. There is a kind of an in-between here, the trope of the “middle class” who can opt to go to the in-between ward: the semi-private. But even this semi-private room can result in indebtedness or worse, financial ruin.

The Pandemic Problematique and the Covidized Lives of the Poor

Today’s master narrative talks of COVID-19 affecting everyone and knowing no social class. This romanticized line does not tell of the real condition of the Philippine poor and the world’s poor. While it is true that viruses do not have countries, nationalities, and citizenship, they affect the most vulnerable. These are the poor, the very people at the base of the social inequity pyramid. It is this same base that makes it possible for that pyramid to exist. This base is comprised of ordinary people, the suffering masses, the government’s “poorest of the poor” now numbering 23 million. These 23 million are the same millions that have received the government subsidy between 5,000 and 8,000 pesos, depending on which region of the country they come from.

The COVID-19 pandemic is simply an occasion that increasingly highlights the institutionalized disparities in the country, disparities that in the face of this disease will result in more diseased, debilitated, and deprived poor. When these disparities are left unaddressed the next pandemic will see the extinction of the poor who have no connections to

hospitals, to those who dispense the goods and services of health care, and to the powerful who have the resources to get the best health services. At the start of the pandemic when the test kits were still limited, the tests were first given to the privileged and the powerful: the political leaders, the senators, and those who have connections to government organizations running or administering the testing. The poor in the slums were an afterthought, remembered only when they began showing up in hospitals or clinics with severe COVID-19 infections. When the poor are found to be positive for the virus they are assigned to COVID-19 wards while the rich have their own private room. The Department of Health mass testing target of 30,000 daily remains at 8,000. Now morphed into “target testing,” these tests do not reflect the need of the people from Metro Manila’s hotspots and other urban areas including those in prisons.³⁰

Evidence tells of the time bombs of infection mostly affecting the poor and the less privileged and the communities they live in. Initially, some of the privileged were infected with the virus. Toward the latter part of the epidemic, increasing numbers of the less privileged are becoming infected.³¹ The slums and squatters’ areas are easy

³⁰ Sofia Tomacruz, “PH’s Actual Coronavirus Tests Far behind ‘Estimated Capacity’ of 32,000,” *Rappler*, May 25, 2020, <https://rappler.com/nation/philippines-actual-coronavirus-tests-far-behind-estimated-capacity>.

³¹ Melissa Sou-Jie Van Brunnersum, “Coronavirus: Vulnerable Filipinos Fight for Survival during Lockdown,” *DW*, April 27, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-vulnerable-filipinos-fight-for-survival->

targets as has been proven in many of the country's bigger cities. It wouldn't be farfetched that prisons with overloaded prison cells are possible COVID-19 hotspots.³² The country's prison system reflects the condition of housing in the country: the better cells are for the rich prisoners; the less ventilated and less maintained ones bursting through the roof are for the poor.

The narrative of senators and even a cabinet secretary contracting the disease is a fact but is not indicative of the inequality of power, privilege, and access to health care and health care services that are otherwise not easily available to the poor. The privileged can have the best hospitals, but the poor are forced to leave their dead in the morgue far longer than they should because of their dearly departed's unpaid hospital bills.³³ Clearly, the scales have been tipped against the poor having no money for an ambulance, for testing, and for buying badly needed medicine for their sick

during-lockdown/a-53258915; Menchani Tilendo, "The Poor are the Narrowest Targets of COVID-19," *Bulatlat*, March 11, 2020, accessed May 2, 2020, <https://www.bulatlat.com/2020/03/11/the-poor-are-the-narrowest-targets>; Prinz Magtulis, "Told to Stay Home, Filipino Poor Go out to Work Absent Government Aid, March 16, 2020, <https://www.philstar.com/business/2020/03/16/2001324/told-stay-home>.

³² "Philippine Prisons could become Major Coronavirus Hotspots," *Asia News*, April 23, 2020, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Philippine-prisons-could-become-major-coronavirus-hotspots-49900.html>.

³³ CNN Philippines Staff, "Quezon City to Manage Unclaimed COVID-19 Dead at East Avenue Medical Center," *CNN Philippines*, April 12, 2020, https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/4/12/Quezon-City-East-Avenue-Medical-Center-remains.html?fbclid=IwAR0vTO7Euc2Wbpl2YRXe8BQCTf2MebEJ-OwnW3v_mLrkH16UtIXOi2b_AMQ.

family members. These disparities that must be eradicated are well entrenched in the day-to-day life of a country professing democracy for the people. This same country has only successfully “democratized” poverty, deprivation, and more inequity.

The rich can have the best food available in the entire country to strengthen their immunity and not simply to fill their bellies.³⁴ The food ordered online is delivered by poor motorcycle-driving couriers who risk infection to feed the wealthy. These rich customers stay in their own rooms and wait for the virus to be won over in that metaphor of war that has contaminated our understanding of a heavily medicalized and Western health care system. The poor in impoverished places and shanties the size of a pig pen wait out for death to come knocking on their doors.³⁵

In the meantime, the rich can watch all the movies available on cable TV, enjoy the blessings of unhampered access to anything on the internet, and endlessly trifle through piles of reading materials. In the summer heat with

³⁴ The Department of Health advises everyone to “eat nutritious food” as one of the many ways to avoid contracting the COVID-19 virus. Consuelo Marques, “DOH to Public: Regularly Wash Hands, Hydrate, Eat Healthy Food,” *Inquirer.net*, January 30, 2020, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1221857/doh-to-public-regularly-wash-hands-hydrate-eat-healthy-food>.

³⁵ Nick Aspinwall, “Coronavirus Lockdown Strikes Fear among Manila’s Poor,” *Al Jazeera*, March 14, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/coronavirus-lockdown-strikes-fear-manila-poor-200313133102404.html>.

a heat index that can run up to 47 degrees,³⁶ the rich can turn on their air-conditioning units; open the windows to welcome the breeze; or switch on the exhaust fan to flush out bad air, toxins, and noxious smells. In the summer heat of April 2020, PAGASA, the government's weather agency, classified the heat index of 41 to 54 degrees Celsius as "dangerous." At that level, anyone could suffer heat cramps, heat exhaustion, or heat stroke.³⁷ This is the kind of experience those living in the depressed areas go through. The same experience the SAP queue people go through, the people who start to line up three hours before the cash aid distributors come in for work.

These are not hyperboles in the country with a marked social divide—the chasm getting wider as the pandemic rages on. The rich have cars to go on grocery runs to procure nutritious food (meat, fish, fruits, and vegetables) in keeping with the directive of the country's Department of Health. With every possible mode of public transportation suspended in the general community quarantine, the poor have to walk distances to get whatever food they can find in the market. With not much in their pocket, the illusion of "eating nutritious food" as defined by the Department of Health remains an illusion that the poor simply cannot afford.

³⁶ Helen Flores, "Metro Heat Index Hits 42 °C," *PhilStar*, April 23, 2020, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2020/04/23/2009176/metro-heat-index>.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

In the meantime, the government’s health insurance provider, PhilHealth, promised to shoulder the medical bills of former Senator Heherzon Alvarez and Mrs. Cecilia Alvarez. Both contracted COVID-19 with a joint medical bill amounting to about P5 million. PhilHealth argued that the dates of their hospitalization were within the dates included in the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act.³⁸

In many parts of the world, this COVID-19 pandemic has been called a “rich man’s disease” for one reason: it has been spread by people who could afford to travel, go to other places, and then go home with the virus in them, contaminating the poor who were romanticized to be immune to this disease of the moneyed.

The “romanticization” began this way:

When it arrived in the unforgiving industrial towns of central Mexico, the sand-swept sprawl of northern Nigeria and the mazes of metal shanties in India’s commercial capital, Mumbai, COVID-19 went by another name. People called it a “rich man’s disease.”³⁹

³⁸ *ABS-CBN News*, “Late Sen. Heherzon Alvarez’s Hospital Bill Reached almost P5 Million: Daughter,” April 22, 2020, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/04/21/20/heherzon-alvarez-hospital-bill-8-million-pesos-coronavirus-covid-19-death>.

³⁹ Shashank Bengali, Kate Linthicum, and Victoria Kim, “How Coronavirus—a ‘Rich Man’s Disease’—Infected the Poor,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-05-08/how-the-coronavirus-began-as-a-disease-of-the-rich>.

In this account, we have here the story of the first case of a poor 68-year old woman “likely infected by her employer, who had tested positive after returning from the U.S.”⁴⁰ This has become a pattern in other places, with the wealthy vacationing in other places and bringing home the virus. In Russia, the infection has been traced to Russians coming from a vacation or a trip in Italy including the Italian Alps.⁴¹ The four new cases reported in Russia on March 13, 2020 tell of the movement of people, the geography of the infection, and the vector of transmission with Russians traveling in Italy (and other places with many infected people) required to go on a fourteen-day quarantine.

The surveillance of travelers was put in place through facial recognition cameras monitoring the people’s adherence to the quarantine rules.⁴² In Mexico, three prominent business leaders succumbed to the virus after going on a skiing vacation in Colorado, United States. Despite traveling in a private jet, one of these leaders died of the virus.⁴³ Nigeria had its share of the same with top political leaders getting

⁴⁰ Bengali, Linthicum, and Kim, “How Coronavirus—a ‘Rich Man’s Disease’—Infected the Poor.”

⁴¹ Agence France-Presse, “Moscow Confirms First Case of Covid 19,” *Deccan Chronicle*, March 2, 2020, <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/world/europe/020320/moscow-confirms> (site discontinued); Sofia Sandurskaya, “Russia Confirms 4 New Coronavirus Cases,” *The Moscow Times*, March 13, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/03/07/russia-confirms-4-new-coronavirus-cases-a69557>.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Bengali, Linthicum, and Kim, “How Coronavirus—a ‘Rich Man’s Disease’—Infected the Poor.”

the virus first after taking foreign trips.⁴⁴ Travel seems to be the primary mode of transmission with a set origin: Wuhan. Where exactly in that city will be a subject for contestation in the years ahead, with the official Chinese government position telling of the wildlife market and another position pointing to a scientific laboratory of virology studies.

Poor Person's Disease

At a certain point, the poor perceived COVID-19 infections to be the “big man’s disease”—the man with the power, the money, the prestige, and the entitlement. The poor people’s perception of being low risk became a salving but tentative piece of knowledge, a form of poetic justice in the broader social drama of avarice and opportunism on the one hand, and deprivation and want on the other. This gave them a provisional, even if unfounded, invulnerability. A broader narrative of “sweet revenge”—a kind of leveler against the opportunistic powerful oligarchic class—became mantric, with some of them saying:

“Maybe all of our leaders will get sick and we’ll get a new government.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Bengali, Linthicum, and Kim, “How Coronavirus—a ‘Rich Man’s Disease’—Infected the Poor.”

⁴⁵ Ibid. The poor Nigerians’ initial perception of COVID-19 as articulated by Kingsley Ndoh, “an assistant professor of global health, University of Washington.”

In India, it is acknowledged that the poor are more vulnerable.⁴⁶ In the United States, the poor are hit the hardest by the pandemic. The estimated “140 million poor and low-wealth people” of the country will not have the wherewithal to go on lockdown, to provide for themselves, or to have an extended unemployment status. With that number, it could mean that about half of all Americans would not be able to prepare as they should even with an exhortation about remaining calm: “Do not panic, but be prepared.”⁴⁷ It seems the real United States is a chasm of those who serve the rich, with the “vast majority of the [American] people working for less than a living wage” in “service industry jobs.” These low-paying jobs are regarded in this pandemic as “essential services” as they clean health care facilities, hospitals, and medical centers; do the laundry for health care workers; take food orders online; and deliver everybody else’s daily needs including support care for the vulnerable in the homes for the elderly and the dying.⁴⁸

The 140 million Americans at the receiving end of this pandemic is 50 million more than the initial estimate of the

⁴⁶ Arshad Zargar, “India’s Poor Hit Hardest as Coronavirus Spreads and Lockdown is Extended,” April 14, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/india-coronavirus-covid19-poor-hit-hardest-lockdown-extended-narendra-modi-today-2020-04-14/>.

⁴⁷ William J. Barber, II and Mitch Landrieu, “Poverty is the Virus that Puts Us at COVID-19 Risk,” *USA Today*, March 23, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2020/03/23/coronavirus-spread-poverty-covid-19-stimulus-column/2899411001/>.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Philippine government of its “poorest of the poor” of 18 million at 5 members per household. The United States estimate is based on an audit conducted by the Poor People’s Campaign and the Institute for Policy Studies: 140 million Americans, which is 43 percent of the entire American population, would not be able to afford an emergency costing \$400.⁴⁹

Even with a corrected estimate at 23 million in the Philippines at 5 members per household, the poor working class of the wealthy United States remains 25 million more than that of the Philippines. Clearly, there are social equity issues in both countries. The Philippine health care system is an imitation of the US health care system: it is heavily capitalist, the better health centers are profit-oriented, and the crumbs are left for the poor. Even with a touted “universal health coverage” program, such a program remains to be universal only in name and never in substance.⁵⁰ The nominalist claim leaves the “poor sick” with an empty bag. You are poor; you will always end up in the poor man’s ward of hospitals. There remains a divide: a room for those entitled to an “essential health benefit

⁴⁹ Barber and Landrieu, “Poverty is the Virus.”

⁵⁰ Official Gazette, “Republic Act 11223: An Act Instituting Universal Health Care for All Filipinos, Prescribing Reforms in The Health Care System, And Appropriating Funds Therefor” (signed February 20, 2019), <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2019/02/20/republic-act-no-11223/>;

Sofia Tomacruz, “What Filipinos can Expect from the Universal Health Care Law,” *Rappler*, April 1, 2019, <https://rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/explanation-what-filipinos-can-expect-universal-health-care-law>.

package” and another room for those who can afford to pay. The room for the wealthy has its own television, its own bathroom, and its own phone. The occupant can also choose his own meal.

In this kind of “universal health coverage” set up as defined by the Philippines, there are clearly two ways in the health care services delivery. There is one for the wealthy who can pay for the pluses, and there is one for the poor whose health care package comprises only the essentials. The closest we can use for comparison is air travel: (a) the business class for the moneyed and (b) the economy class for those with less resources. The destination is the same for both, but the care, concern, and the fawning of the crew are never the same, even if we trust that the same crew would show care and concern for the economy travelers. The fawning is a bonus: it starts with one’s choice of wine and selected meal, and all the perks in between like better snacks and desserts.

In the Philippine definition of “universal health coverage” as attested by the World Health Organization and the government’s Department of Health, the destination is the same: health and health care for the Filipino. Included here are the preventive, the curative, and the palliative. But excluded are those things that happen in between the point of departure and the point of arrival. Many of these are the incalculable “health care events.” These are incalculable because they provide the environment for the healing

process to come about: your own room, television, phone, and bathroom. Included in this are the most experienced, possibly foreign-trained medical experts who will care for you. These are the same medical experts who will, perhaps, distrust generic drugs and prescribe branded ones to soothe your nerves. Like traveling on a plane, a heavy curtain divides the business class and the economy class. In the plane's economy class, as in the hospital's PhilHealth ward, the room is shared, each other's misery included.

Rightly so, it is a type of universal health coverage meant to make the poor believe that there is already a government that takes care of them from birth to death, as is the case for other universal health care systems. The symbolisms in this health care coverage are not only iniquitous but deceptive, inadequate, and wanting in substance. There is a term for this: "gaps in accessing health care services."⁵¹ Like the United States' existing health care programs, the sick are made to pay fees uncovered by insurance, with co-payments running in the hundreds if not thousands depending on the health issue. The principle is the same with the Philippine universal health care coverage: You still need to pay for the pluses. The caveat is this: Filipinos will be enrolled in the "universal health coverage program," and will be afforded

⁵¹ Gundo Weller, World Health Organization country representative, in Sofia Tomacruz, "WHO to PH: 'Real Investment' in Universal Health Care 'Needs to Happen'," *Rappler*, November 6, 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/216032-world-health-organization-investment-universal-health-care-needed>.

“free essential services” or “basic services accommodations” and the “essential health benefit package,” but not everything they need for hospitalization and recovery.

In this COVID-19 pandemic, the case of universal health care takes center stage in the entire world. The World Health Organization has univocally defined what this aspired-for universal health care (or what it refers to as UHC) is all about:

UHC means that all individuals and communities receive the health services they need without suffering financial hardship. It includes the full spectrum of essential, quality health services, from health promotion to prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, and palliative care.⁵²

The definition of the World Health Organization is clear about one thing regarding the goal of universal health care: the protection of the sick person and their family from financial ruin.

Protecting people from the financial consequences of paying for health services out of their own pockets reduces the risk that people will be pushed into poverty because unexpected illness requires them to use up their life savings, sell assets, or

⁵² “Universal Health Coverage (UHC),” January 24, 2019, accessed May 1, 2020, [https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/universal-health-coverage-\(uhc\)](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/universal-health-coverage-(uhc)).

borrow—destroying their futures and often those of their children.⁵³

With this pandemic increasingly affecting the poor all over the world, there is something that leads us to conclude about the lot of those who cannot afford to be sick, who do not have the luxury of staying in a hospital room to recuperate. In the case of the Philippines, even with a PhilHealth package of benefits for pneumonia cases as a cover for COVID-19, there remains this iniquitous arrangement in health care delivery that commodifies the sickness and assigns a peso-value to the severity of the disease—the most severe getting the highest possible payment that will never go to the patient but to all those that contributed to the delivery of the essential health benefit package.

Public Health Safety Coming in too Late

The Philippine government's response came in late, with the Department of Health oblivious of what to do while other Southeast Asian countries were proactively coming up with preventive measures to ensure their people's safety. We hear a parade of motherhood statements from a number of officials; all of them always resorting to lame excuses until it was too late. While Vietnam closed its border with China, the Philippines continued to bring in people from

⁵³ “Universal Health Coverage (UHC).”

everywhere including Wuhan.⁵⁴ One problem was the conflation of foreign relations with the gravity of the pandemic.⁵⁵ On March 9, President Duterte finally declared a “State of Public Health Emergency.” Around that time, the number of infected cases was almost reaching 100. A stimulus package of \$535 million came about with half earmarked to boost tourism and 11.4 percent to acquire materials, machines, and supplies to address the viral infection.⁵⁶ The almost frenzied preparations for the stimulus package of millions prove that like many other countries, the government was also caught off guard by COVID-19. By April 14, the government started mass testing and aimed to test 8,000 people per day but failed to meet its target. The ideal target of testing 30,000 people per day by late May was still way off with only about 8,000 tests or about 22,000 tests below the ideal.⁵⁷

This structural violence that has suffused all institutions of the government is clearly seen in the way government

⁵⁴ Yuichi Funabashi, “‘China literacy’: Vietnam’s Key to Combating COVID-19,” *The Japan Times*, August 10, 2020, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2020/08/10/commentary/china-literacy-vietnam-coronavirus/>.

⁵⁵ Janine Peralta, “Duterte not Keen on Banning Travel to China Amid Coronavirus Scare,” *CNN Philippines*, January 29, 2020, <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/1/29/duterte-on-china-travel-ban.html>.

⁵⁶ Michael Beltran, “The Philippines’ Pandemic Response: A Tragedy of Errors,” *The Diplomat*, May 12, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/the-philippines-pandemic-response-a-tragedy-of-errors/>.

⁵⁷ Julia Mari Ornedo, “Philippines Still off Target of 30k COVID-19 Tests Daily, Says Expert,” *MSN News*, May 25, 2020, <https://www.msn.com/en-ph/news/national/philippines-still-off-target-of-30k-covid-19-tests-daily-says-expert/ar-BB14znTy>.

assistance to the “poorest of the poor”—the “common *tao*”—was delivered.

The Office of the President understood the magnitude of the problem, with 200 billion pesos earmarked by President Rodrigo Duterte as a supplemental budget for the “common *tao*.”⁵⁸ The allocation for those qualified to receive the cash aid or assistance was between 5,000 and 8,000 pesos per household of 5 members. Other emergency assistance came from the local government unit funds and consisted of food packs of rice in meager plastic bags, sardines in small cans, packs of noodles, and sachets of instant coffee. In some other places, the rice, usually in a 5-kilogram plastic bag, would be gone after a couple of days for a family of 5, but the next food packs would come weeks later. Where I stayed during the pandemic until the middle of June, the food assistance came 3 times, and each time there was this constant: a plastic bag of rice weighing 5 kilograms, 3 cans of small sardines, and 3 packs of noodles. A congressperson donated one 100 milliliter plastic bottle of alcohol and disinfectant placed in a small empty plastic soda bottle. The congressperson’s name was plastered on all these donations.

⁵⁸ Department of Finance, “DOF Says COVID-19 Emergency Subsidy Largest Social Protection Program in PHL History,” March 31, 2020, <https://www.dof.gov.ph/dof-says-covid-19-emergency-subsidy-largest-social-protection-program-in-phl-history/>. See also Republic Act 11469, “Bayanihan To Heal as One Act,” <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2020/03mar/20200324-RA-11469-RRD.pdf>. The act was passed by the House of Representatives and the Senate on March 23, 2020 and approved on March 24, 2020.

Even as the COVID-19 pandemic went on a rampage and four forms of community quarantine ⁵⁹ were implemented by the Philippine government, the “poorest of the poor” have begun complaining. A post from Facebook was shared many times over despite the veiled threats of the authorities that those who will say something against the leaders would be pursued. The same complaint was bravely echoed by radio stations, which sometimes elicited nervous laughter from commentators. The complaint and its variations ran like this: “We [the poor people] may not die because of the virus but we will die of hunger.”⁶⁰

As the days wore on in the Philippines and with the community quarantine now morphing into four models depending on the severity of the viral infection, every local government unit must abide by the stipulated restrictions. The country chose to use a more “neutral” general term, one not laden with a lot of experiential baggage from some other countries: “community quarantine.” While the phrase is suspect for those who underwent the various forms of

⁵⁹ The Interagency Task Force put together by President Rodrigo Duterte has drawn up four forms of community quarantine: (a) modified enhanced community quarantine, (b) enhanced community quarantine, (c) enhanced general community quarantine, and (d) general community quarantine. Cumbersome and confusing, IATF failed to put together just one form with degrees of severity. With just one term, it could have a better capacity to inform the public.

⁶⁰ Magtulis, “Told to Stay Home.” See also Michelle Abad and Bonz Magsambol, “3 Months after Lockdown, Poor Filipinos still Hungry Waiting for Cash Aid,” *Rappler*, July 15, 2020, <https://rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/filipinos-still-hungry-waiting-for-cash-aid-july-2020>.

militarization and “hamletting”⁶¹ in the country in its fight against the insurgents during the Marcos dictatorial regime and the early days of Cory Aquino’s presidency, the idea of quarantine evoked some form of cleaning up, a purgation, a removal of filth—an image that is not strange to rural folks who know when to put their livestock and poultry into quarantine before they slaughter these for food or for the market. The film, *Orapronobis*, provides a visual rendering of the case of Santa Filomena, an allusion to many cases of displacement, militarization, village zoning operations, hamletting, and all other forms of what is termed as a low-intensity conflict—a counter-insurgency approach that pitted the people against each other.⁶²

Duterte’s “Common Tao” and the SAP Queu

The assumption of equal opportunities for its less privileged citizens to have a full life is palpably absent in all these government responses to the pandemic. There is no coherence of a “national plan”: The Inter-Agency Task Force is given the reigns to decide on what makes sense. The health sector is reduced to simply being “heroes” in the fight against COVID-19 and in putting in the needed service

⁶¹ Walden Bello, *U.S. Sponsored Low Intensity Conflict in the Philippines*, Food First Development Report No. 2 (San Francisco, CA: Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1987), <https://foodfirst.org/publication/us-sponsored-low-intensity-conflict-in-the-philippines/>.

⁶² Directed by Lino Brocka (USA: Cannon Film Distributors, 1989).

to those infected with the virus.⁶³ As the pandemic rages on until today, there is now a word that has gained currency, the word borrowed from the colonizers but exemplifying the dire condition of the working class most in need of the *ayuda* the government or other people can give.

There is one *prima facie* evidence in this blatant shortcoming of the Philippines: the SAP queue. Long lines of the “poorest of the poor” are the picture of misery: They are given a coded form from the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) to weed out those deemed “not qualified” based on a set of criteria. Those qualified were asked to go to a distribution center in the barangay; in coordination with representatives of the DSWD, some other barangays distributed the cash aid by going from house to house. But stories of people going to the distribution center several times as in the case of a 53-year-old carpenter, Teodoro Omandam from Taytay, Rizal, tells us of the real condition of the government’s “poorest of the poor.” Omandam queued three times to claim his SAP, his “ayuda.” At that third time, he died. The town mayor later said that Omandam was not on the master list.⁶⁴

⁶³ Robert Dahl has proposed ten features of a real democracy. Of these, “prosperity” and the “fostering of human development” are most apt in this discussion. See his three works on the practice of a democratic way of life: *On Democracy* (published in 1998), *Democracy and Its Critics* (published in 1989); and *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (published in 1972).

⁶⁴ See for instance Emil Sumangil, “Man Dies of Heart Attack while Queuing for Cash Aid; Wife Pleads to Duterte for Help,” *GMA News*, May 11,

Akin to the dole queue in the UK and the breadlines elsewhere, the SAP queue is a picture of human misery in the Philippines, one marked by the frank recognition of the government of the huge number of peripheralized persons—at 18 million based on 2015 data. But that forthright act of the government is simultaneously a symptom of the continuing structure of disparity that has been going on for generations despite the government’s claim about freedom, democracy, and the good life enjoyed by the people. The seven-week SAP, which resulted in the SAP queues and officially ended on May 10, 2020, was meant to help the “poorest of the poor.”⁶⁵ By the end of the first tranche of the cash aid earmarked for 18 million households (some others call this families), President Duterte had instructed the appropriate government agencies to expand the beneficiaries of 18 million poor families to include 5 million more, totaling 23 million poor families.⁶⁶ Certainly, the government’s financial resources are not infinite. For now, most of the assistance to the “poorest of the poor” comes from loans.

2020, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/regions/737759/man-dies-of-heart-attack-while-queuing>.

⁶⁵ DSWD Social Marketing, DSWD, “DSWD Readies Aid for Vulnerable Sectors Affected by COVID-19 Crisis,” March 29, 2020, <https://www.dswd.gov.ph/dswd-readies-aid-for-vulnerable-sectors-affected-by-covid-19-crisis/>. See also “DILG to LGUs, barangays: Move fast to come up with master list of target beneficiaries of Social Amelioration Program vs COVID-19,” March 31, 2020, accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.dilg.gov.ph/news/DILG-to-LGUs-barangays-Move-fast-to-come-up-with-master-list-of-target-beneficiaries-of-Social-Amelioration-Program-vs-COVID-19/NC-2020-1076>.

⁶⁶ Valente, “Duterte Wants 23M poor families.”

Up a Stump and the Promise of the Future

Leaders have come and gone and these democratic deficits⁶⁷ directly resulting from structural violence have been normalized. To think otherwise is to challenge the government, the dispenser of goods, services, and grace. Two weeks after the community quarantines in the country, with imposed enhanced community quarantines in places where there were more infections and general community quarantines for those with less and who presumably had the infections under control, two incidents foretell of the capacity of the government to use its force against its citizens.

Instead of listening to the “cries” of what it calls the “poorest of the poor,” it used force against a teacher⁶⁸ and against a community.⁶⁹ The SAP queue is antithetical to the

⁶⁷ A situation in which there is “an insufficient level of democracy in political institutions and procedures in comparison with a theoretical ideal of a democratic government.” See Natalia Letki, “Democratic Deficit,” May 17, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/democratic-deficit>.

In the case of the Philippines, see Clarita Carlos et al., *Democratic Deficits in the Philippines: What is To Be Done?* (Quezon City: Center for Political and Democratic Reform, Inc., 2010).

⁶⁸ Rappler.com, “Teacher, Son Arrested without Warrant in GenSan over Facebook Post,” *Rappler*, March 28, 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/256157-teacher-son-arrested-without-warrant-general-santos-city-facebook-post-coronavirus>. Juliet Espinosa, 55 and a teacher, posted on Facebook what authorities said as “inciting to sedition”:

“Many people will die if we don’t report to the President that our mayor is incompetent. I call on those who have nothing to eat to raid the Lagao Gym. The food packs meant for you are piled up there.”

⁶⁹ CNN Philippines Staff, “21 Protesters Demanding Food Aid Arrested in Quezon City,” *CNN Philippines*, April 1, 2020, <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/4/1/quezon-city-protesters-arrested.html>.

very essence of the good life that was dreamed to be the beginning of the Commonwealth even if we can root this back to the earlier struggles of the various ethnolinguistic groups of the country, struggles that would culminate in the 1896 Revolution.⁷⁰

The SAP queue only reached about 91 percent of the 18 million estimated “poorest of the poor” households, until the end of the twice extended distribution.⁷¹ The government realized that the 18 million does not represent the number of those who needed the aid. For the second tranche of the SAP, the government added 5 million more, bringing the estimated SAP beneficiaries to 23 million.⁷² This translates to a longer SAP queue. Government incompetence in giving aid to the “poorest of the poor” was

⁷⁰ It starts with the Commonwealth with that dream of independent Philippines—free and completely independent from the colonizing Americans. It was the response of the Commonwealth President Manuel Luis Quezon to those who wanted to delay the independence of the country from the United States; the colonizing Americans and their Filipino surrogates argued that the country and its leaders “needed more time to learn the fundamentals of democracy and the basics of running a free government.” Quezon responded: “I prefer a government run like hell by Filipinos than a government run like heaven by Americans.” See Josephus Jimenez, “Quezon’s ‘A Government Run Like Hell by Filipinos,’” *PhilStar*, August 18, 2017, <https://www.philstar.com/the-freeman/opinion/2017/08/18/1730534/quezons-a-government-run-hell-filipinos>.

⁷¹ From a 2015 government data. See Rachel Perez, “Social Amelioration Program: How to Qualify and How Much Can You Receive,” *MSN*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.msn.com/en-ph/money/personalfinance/social-amelioration-program-how-to-qualify-and-how-much-can-you-receive/ar-BB12EtA5>.

⁷² Adjustment made to the first tranche of the SAP. See Catherine Valente, “Palace: Duterte wants 23M families in 2nd tranche of SAP,” <https://www.manilatimes.net/2020/05/15/news/latest-stories/palace-duterte-wants-23m-families-in-2nd-tranche-of-sap/724932/>, 15 May 2020.

clearly demonstrated in the DSWD's use of the 2015 census that does not reflect the reality of the barangays and the depressed areas in them.⁷³

Structural Violence and Our Covidized Lives

A scanning of the time the Philippines began to be serious with democratic aspirations could be pinned with the Marcos promise of greatness in 1965 at his first inaugural address. He said: "This nation can be great again. This I have said over and over. It is my articles of faith, and Divine Providence has willed that you and I can now translate this faith into deeds."⁷⁴

Of course, that Marcos promise was just an illusion, a pathology of someone with a delusion of grandeur. The political, economic, and cultural structures of the Philippines have been invaded, usurped, and distorted. The People Power I that installed Cory Aquino as president did not lead us to the light, with oligarchs and big landowners cutting corners to gain back the power they lost during the brutal Marcos rule. It was grace, true, but her regime was a grace misused, squandered.

Fidel Ramos stabilized it a bit, but his Mang Pandoy allegory did not go anywhere; with his favorite privatization

⁷³ Beltran, "The Philippines' Pandemic Response."

⁷⁴ Originally published as "Inaugural Address of His Excellency Ferdinand E. Marcos, President of the Republic of the Philippines," December 30, 1965, taken from gov.ph. Reprinted in *Inquirer.net*, "Inauguration Speech of President Ferdinand Marcos in 1965," June 13, 2016, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/790484/inauguration-speech-president-ferdinand-marcos-1965>.

program, neoliberalistic avarice got more and more entrenched in these social structures that have favored the elites, the ruling class, and the dynasts. Erap Estrada made such structural violence denser with the same opportunist classes flattering him while he further enriched himself, plundering the monies that were otherwise allocated to better the life of the “common tao,” the masses of our country’s suffering people.

Gloria Arroyo paraded three young boys with their paper boats, but her blunders were more than her gains. The poor have remained poor. The entry of Benigno Aquino III is a repeat of the same structural violence we have seen for generations, with land reform becoming now a thing of the past. This structural violence has not been addressed; and with this pandemic, it predetermines how the government has responded and how it will continue to respond to the problem.

In the months ahead, there will be a protracted, incoherent attempt to make things better for the masses of the people. With these forms of structural violence playing out each day in these dark days of the COVID-19 pandemic, there will be weeks of bracing up until the pandemic shall have come to pass. Until then, the suffering masses of the people of the country will have to wait and hope, and hope and wait.

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