

The Philippines and Australia: Between Asia and The Pacific

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This paper began with the intention of addressing two themes: what is the possibility for a common intellectual project which might engage intellectuals and scholars in the two countries, and how do we discuss the relationship between the political, the economic and the social in an era of economic and cultural globalization. In practice it has become much more of a personal reflection, out of which others might distill themes for future speculation and intellectual collaboration.

A Personal Prelude

I first visited the Philippines in 1976, four years after Marcos cancelled Presidential elections and declared his “New Society.” I had been in touch with Joel Rocamora, a friend from Cornell, who had returned to the Philippines, been held in detention and was then under a loose form of house arrest. I sat with him and his American-born wife, their marriage disintegrating from its own stresses, and heard stories of the gradual shut down of all centers of independent thought as President Marcos tightened his hold over what had once been the most open democracy in Asia. Marcos claimed to be restoring “law and order,” but during his reign the enormous inequalities of the country escalated.

Ten years later, as the poet Danton Remoto (an Ateneo faculty member) wrote:

More than a million faces
awash in the early summer sun.
The widow in yellow raises
her hands in the defiant sign...

The streets of Manila were filled with yellow-clad protestors, and the Marcos regime crumbled before the television cameras in one of the most striking examples of a genuine popular revolt in recent history. The downfall of Marcos had a considerable effect upon me. It was one of those moments — others are the release from prison of Nelson Mandela and the destruction of the Berlin Wall — which restore faith in the political, the capacity of collective action to overcome injustice and create something better.

I have revisited Manila five times in the years after Marcos's downfall and the election of Cory Aquino, but while the forms of democracy have returned, the poverty and inequality seemed untouched. Manila both attracts and appalls foreigners (my own images of the city merge with the depictions of the city in books such as James Hamilton Paterson's *Ghosts of Manila*, Alex Garland's *The Tesseract*, and Timothy Mo's *Renegade* or *Halo 2*.) On one visit I stayed in a small guest house in a part of Manila which was destroyed in the Japanese invasion of the city fifty years before, an area stretching along Manila Bay, close to both the American Embassy and the posh Manila Yacht Club. Outside the hotel roosters tethered to small poles scratched the ground, and small dogs and cats ran in and out of cramped hovels. Nearby is the Zoo, a metaphor for the city, just as the immaculate Singapore Zoo represents the extent of that country's wealth and sophisticated surveillance. A small number of seemingly bored and unhappy animals — lions, giraffes, monkeys, a crocodile, even a donkey — live in small, dank, concrete enclosures, too dispirited even to complain. The Zoo is surrounded by squatters, and even within its walls one sees neat lines of washing hung out to dry. Zoos have their own particular smells, but in Manila the stench of unsewered water overwhelms that of the animals.

Here are all the contradictions of a developing country, with huge disparities in wealth and a ruling class more at ease in English than their indigenous languages. For the elite aspire to be part of global culture, in all its forms, as suggested by this quote from an anthology of Filipino gay writing:

“I met someone in a bar last Saturday ... He's a bank executive. He's *mestizo* (your type) and ... loves Barbara Streisand, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Dame Margot Fonteyn, Pat Conroy, Isabel Allende, John Williams, Meryl Streep, Armistead Maupin, K. D. Laing, Jim Chappell, Margaret Atwood and Luciano Pavorotti.”

For most people cultural life is the streets and the power of the streets was used to overthrow Marcos and, more recently, Estrada. But the streets are also home for hundreds of thousands of people: teenage girls, already mothers, squat with two or three toddlers in cardboard shelters; women, already old at thirty, wash themselves and their clothes in sewer-stinking streams. Meanwhile, the elite squat elsewhere, in private compounds guarded by men with rifles half their height, and move effortlessly from business to government whatever the regime.

Despite the influence of the Church there is a huge sex industry, fuelled both by tourists and local demand. One sees the ugliest side of “globalization” in the tourist areas of Manila, the large numbers of single men from rich countries, both western and Asian, there to buy the services of women and children for derisory sums. Visit Rosie’s *Cantina*, a twenty four hour gathering spot for sex workers and customers alike, an imitation American diner fronting on one of the more notorious pick up streets of Manila. The thick menu, a small book in fact, relates the story of Rosie, a “typical happy Visayan girl from Cebu [who] came to Manila with stars in her eyes dreaming of becoming a model. But things didn’t work out exactly as Rosie hoped and she became a cultural dancer in the Ermita area,” traveled to the States on a “fiancee visa” and ended up working as counter girl at “the Night Owl Diner in downtown Hoboken near the New Jersey turnpike.” Homesick, and with support from her family, Rosie returned to the Philippines and opened a diner where “she promised herself she’d never serve instant coffee, whipped cream out of those spray cans or sugar in little paper packets.” Rosie’s menu is a document of the mix which is Filipino culture, from the breakfasts combining rice, bananas, scrambled eggs and “funlink” (sausages), to the year round Christmas Dinner special. It also becomes a document of commercial sex, as customers scrawl autographs, calls for pen pals, phone numbers and personal notes: “Hi! Hello! Just call me Liza. I’m 21 years old. My name is Liza and I do not like 69 or blow jobs.”

This introduction is necessary to explain my own interest in the Philippines, which was developed through a number of AIDS-related meetings in Manila in the 1990s. The Philippines was one of the first countries in Asia to adopt a strong set of policies to deal with the looming epidemic; it was also the center for a great deal of NGO activity and networking around HIV/AIDS, and out of those networks I have forged lasting friendships and collegial relationships. These

interests were central to my persuading LaTrobe University to establish the ties with Ateneo University which have now produced two research conferences and lasting collaborations.

Australia and the Philippines

I have been relatively unusual among Australians in having greater exposure to the Philippines than to practically any other country in Asia. Traditionally, the ties between the Philippines and Australia have been thin, and often mediated through the United States. From one perspective this is odd: there are cultural and intellectual similarities which should make links far richer, and there is of course a growing Filipino population in Australia. The first Filipinos came as pearlers or seamen, but the White Australia Policy blocked the growth of immigration until 1960s though we were linked by the War; Gen. Macarthur fled from Manila to Brisbane. Filipino immigration has grown particularly since 1980s, with many women coming as spouses (but the gender imbalance is now decreasing). Sydney is the largest Filipino center, but Melbourne also has a significant population. There are over 100,000 Australian-Filipinos (the Embassy claims almost twice as many, but they include the Australian born children of Filipino immigrants). But it is not a very visible population: while the Melbourne phonebook lists Nepalese and Mongolian restaurants, no Filipino ones are identified. Only 8 students are taking Filipino in Victorian Schools, fewer than are studying Tamil or Dutch.

Of all major South East Asian nations the Philippines is least known in Australia, and rarely studied, even in our Universities. The material and historical difference between the two countries seems to have blinded us to the elements we might define as common. Ironically the role of US is central to keeping us apart: we tended to see Philippines as part of an American zone of influence and hence linked to the north of Asia, rather than connected to our region. Neither did we support the Philippine independence war (as was the case for Indonesia) nor oppose it (as with Vietnam). Nonetheless both countries were part of SEATO and supported US involvement in Indo-China. Within ASEAN the Philippines has often been the country most sympathetic to greater links with Australia, and the Philippines is regarded as a high priority country for development assistance by *AusAid*.

Those material differences have grown rather than diminished over the past half century, as the Philippines, once one of the richest countries of southeast Asia, has declined in relation to its neighbors, and Australian attention has increasingly focused on countries in the region which seem to offer greater trading opportunities or are more significant in strategic terms. Indeed, the much vaunted Australian desire to be "part of Asia," which has declined somewhat since the election of the Howard government in 1997, too often defines Asia in terms of tiger economies and new markets. Yet the two countries share a marginality to Asia, and complex ties to US and to Europe through religion and settlement. Of course, the history of colonial settlement and nation building is very different in the two cases, and each has something to offer the other: from Australia the egalitarian and union tradition; from Philippines the battle for independence and, more recently, for social justice and democracy through a strong civil society

The material differences between the standards of living in the two countries might make it difficult to find a common element to a discussion of poverty and health in Australia and the Philippines. The reality is that there are few Universities in the region where we could so easily find partners to talk in the same language, a language informed by critical inquiry and a certain concept of social justice. Without real changes in regime, the universities of Malaysia and Singapore, historically much closer to Australia's, are far less likely to speak in this language. We are united by a common commitment to certain principles of democracy and social justice which is shared by significant elements in both societies. I know of nowhere else in Asia where it is as easy to enter into frank and intellectually challenging discussions across a range of topics as the Philippines.

There are a number of intellectual points around which we might promote an Australian-Filipino dialogue, and what follows is a very superficial and personal selection, all of which might be the basis for future collaborative research:

a. Marginality: Being In and Not in Asia

Neither Australia nor the Philippines fits comfortably into the schematic view of "Asian values" propounded by a number of governments in the region. A few years ago I met with a very senior Singapore gov-

ernment official, who dismissed the Philippines as too “Americanized” to fully meet her criterion of “Asian-ness.” (This meeting came just as relations between the Philippines and Singapore were rapidly declining after a Filipino maid was executed in Singapore for murder, an incident that provoked considerable tension between Singapore and the Philippines.) There seems to be a tendency among many East Asians to dismiss the Philippines as *not really* part of the region, both because of its American ties and its Catholicism. In recent years both Australia and the Philippines have re-oriented themselves to the region, the Philippines far more easily because of ethnic, linguistic and historical ties. For Australians, who have at times been too prone to worry about the alleged imperialism of supporting human rights, the Philippines is an important ally in establishing a sense of regional identity which allows for both diversity and universality.

b. Governance

On the surface, the issues of governance faced by our two countries seem very different. While Filipinos were being betrayed by the United States and denied their independence after the war against Spain, the six Australian colonies were federating under the benign if condescending blessing of the British government. Both systems are marked by US influence. We took over US style federalism and the names of its two legislative chambers, but Australia’s has been a smooth if boring liberal democratic itinerary while the Philippines’ has been much more checkered, marked by invasion, independence, dictatorship and, more recently, the overthrow of two Presidents by popular pressure backed by Church and army.

What is important for Australians in the Filipino experience is the strength of civil society but also the lessons of what limits exist within global economy for a country that has a weak economy and a gross misallocation of resources. There are a number of possible connections one might trace between at least some activists in the two countries; Australians, for example, were active in a number of support groups for those Filipinos working to overthrow the Marcos dictatorship (without, one must acknowledge, much support from either of Australia’s major political parties). In both countries there is a need to deal with the gains and losses of globalization, and both economies are extra-

ordinarily vulnerable to decisions made in boardrooms and finance ministries in New York, Tokyo and Hong Kong.

Thus, marginality extends to central questions of governance, namely the role of the nation state in a world increasingly dominated by multinational corporations and international movement of goods and capital (and often in heartbreaking ways for the Philippines, of people). The gap between the apparently suburban comforts of Melbourne and the gross inequalities of Metro Manila may become less extreme than they now appear as both our countries become less and less able to exert meaningful control over our role in a globalized economy.

c. The HIV/AIDS Pandemic

My knowledge of the Philippines draws heavily on my own experiences of the Filipino response to HIV/AIDS, both because it is the lens through which I have come to know something of the Philippines and because it is increasingly a powerful means of understanding some of the ambivalences and contradictions of "globalization."

At our last meeting there was some discussion about the comparatively low rate of infection in the Philippines, and some claims this was because Filipino sexual behavior was more restrained than, say, that of Thais. I doubted this at the time and sent round an inquiry to my own Filipino reference group. Most interesting was the response of Dr. Ofelia Monzon, the most senior medical authority on HIV in the Philippines, who argued that at least in urban Philippines, religion had very little impact on sexual behavior. Like Australia the Philippines was helped partly by luck, but also by early interventions: education began in Metro Manila in 1985 and there was a national AIDS program by 1987. There has been ongoing co-operation between our two countries in the region, based around common commitment to civil society and participation in government decision making.

I was in Bangkok recently, where I spent time with a Filipino friend of mine who currently works for the Australian Red Cross in Laos. He had just returned from escorting a group of Lao women to a conference on reproductive health in Manila, and reported that the Lao women were shocked by the open disagreement and debate at the conference. The debates would not come as a surprise to Filipinos, who are accus-

tomed to the bitter divisions between Catholic doctrine and feminist and public health advocates on issues such as contraception, HIV prevention and abortion. In most countries of Asia outside India and perhaps Japan such discussions are not possible with the frankness and willingness to confront official policy that characterizes the Philippines.

So I end where I began, on a very personal note. I am deeply suspicious of religion, and regard the role of most organized churches as deeply oppressive and destructive of human equality and potential. Yet through our connections with Ateneo I have found myself working closely and with great pleasure with people who are committed to the teachings of the Church, even though I fully sympathized with one of my La Trobe colleagues who felt extremely uncomfortable having to sleep in a room in Ateneo surrounded by pictures of Catholic martyrs and saints. For me, as for him, this is perhaps the greatest challenge posed by our developing relationship with the Ateneo de Manila University. How do we reconcile the secular and the religious commitment to social justice which seem too often in direct conflict? In a world where conflict between religions and between the religious and the secular seems ever increasing might this not be the major intellectual project that we can embark upon together? ↪