

*A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte's Early Presidency*, edited by Nicole Curato. Quezon City: Bughaw/Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017, 338pp.

What Nicole Curato and the other authors of the Duterte Reader achieved through this book is nothing short of remarkable, indeed commendable, given the utmost urgency of the matter at hand. For sure there are many theoretical questions that can keep scholars busy and immersed in intellectual curiosities for a very long time, as joint authors Lisandro E. Claudio and Patricio N. Abinales rightly predict.

But among the most urgent issues concerning Duterte is not something that is purely theoretical at all, for here we are dealing with concrete human lives, thousands of whom had already been lost—killed in the most horrible and despicable manner—in what is clearly the centerpiece of Duterte's administration, namely, the drug war, and, given the absence of any sign of letting up, thousands more expected to be killed from hereon and for as long as Duterte remains the president.

Thus, this is not a case of merely indulging in the luxury of theorizing, as intellectuals and academics are often charged as being guilty of (and not seldom without justification). Rather, this is the case of intellectuals and experts in various fields coming together and responding to an urgent call, namely, to talk about and thereby come to grips with Duterte. Curato expresses the call simply by

saying that “We need to talk about Rody,” which is, aptly, also the title of her opening essay.

In ordinary language, one says, “We need to talk about X . . .” when confronted with something that at once is of grave concern, but also something that at the moment one cannot do anything to stop or overcome, as in the case of parents having to deal with what appears to be deviant behavior of one of their children, or leaders of an organization forced to reckon with a problematic member.

The need to talk also presupposes that, while we recognize that something cannot be simply ignored and that it is something that we need to discuss, we are at the same time not quite sure how to make sense of it. It is a recognition of something that clearly affects us in different ways, but that at the same time is not itself something that is immediately clear. What is clear, for instance, is that Duterte has caused unprecedented division among the Filipino people. But what exactly it is that divides us, is itself not that clear. Or at least we are not in an agreement over what that exactly is.

What is remarkable about this book is not only that it got people to talk about Duterte, but also that they come from diverse backgrounds and do not all share the same convictions about the strongman. The sixteen essays in this book (excluding the editor’s epilogue) cover a whole range of perspectives and represent different interpretations of what has now come to be known as *Dutertismo*, some

openly condemnatory, others quite sympathetic, but in every case critically so. And even those among the authors who may share the same stance in relation to Duterte in general do not necessarily share the same reason for doing so, or look at the same aspect or problematic of the issue. For this reason, the book will for sure prove to be invaluable in furthering the discourse on Duterte, even as it lays no claim to being complete or exhaustive, as Curato herself readily admits in her preface. If anything, it got us to start talking about Duterte, and gets the conversation going.

It is a good thing that three of the sixteen essays deal directly with the drug war and the spate of killings. That is, no doubt, the most urgent problem that needs to be addressed. But the rest of the essays that deal with the broader aspects of Dutertismo, both in looking back in history and coming up with expectations of the future, may not be as urgent, but no less important and crucial. For we know that the most pressing problems always have deep historical roots and long-term effects in the future. The collection of essays in this book thus helps us deal with both, and only rightly so.

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