

Class Struggle

ANTONIO A. HIDALGO



It can no longer be denied that the classes are locked in desperate struggles in our country. Rich versus poor. Well-bathed against grimy. Fair skinned contra dark complexioned. Chinoy and Pinoy. Male and female. Gay and straight. Urban and *promdi*. Muslim and Christian. Mustachioed and clean-cut. Gloria and Erap.

I no longer remember when it all started. But I seem to recall that our country was more peaceful and orderly in my youth. My friends and I would go to the cockpits then and we would never quarrel about politics though there were rich and poor among us, handsome and ugly, mestizo and native.

I mentioned this to Nestor Divinagracia when we were drinking. But he informed me that I had been misled by my selective recollection. He said that, in fact, our society began to brim over with class conflicts when the Spaniards arrived in 1521, when the barangays were split between those who sided with the foreigners and those who fought them. The social divisions deepened when the Americans conquered us because some Filipinos sided with Aguinaldo's revolutionary forces and others collaborated with the new imperialists. A look at our history will show that it is shot through with uprisings of the poor and oppressed, like the Colorum and the Hukbalahap.

I was unable to answer my talented friend that night. He is much more intelligent than I and he is better educated and better-read. I kept quiet out of respect for his knowledge. I didn't insist on my simple views for fear of being shown up.

But what had been bothering me reared its head again during our Ateneo High School class reunion. We graduated in 1971, the time of the First Quarter Storm, followed by the bombing of Plaza Miranda, the suspension of the Writ of Habeas Corpus, and the declaration of Martial Law by the late dictator Marcos. In a way, we are the children of upheavals. It was our thirtieth anniversary, so we celebrated it in grand style, even if

it hurt our pockets. We took a function room at the Manila Pen where we squeezed in the fifty or so classmates who came.

Nilo Garchitorena, our treasurer, made the elegant preparations for our reunion. The tables and chairs were neatly arranged and there were decorative flowers all over. He placed name cards in front of each seat so that close friends could be together. Naturally, Nestor and I were at the same table. We even arrived together because he fetched me in a Mercedes that was driven by a uniformed driver with a cap.

It was not a buffet dinner; the waiters served our food at the tables. I had some difficulty with this as I don't come from a rich family and I'm not used to eating with so many plates, glasses and silverware. There were two forks, knives and spoons beside my three plates. There were also three drinking glasses of different heights. I couldn't figure out what to use each time the waiters brought me food or drinks. So I just observed Nestor and copied what he did.

The menu was French. We started with a thick French Onion Soup with melted cheese and soaked little squares of toasted bread. Then we had smoked salmon with sliced onions and sour little vegetable seeds. This was followed by a tasteless white ice cream. Nestor said it was a sherbet that was supposed to clean our palates for the main courses, which were Duck Breast a l'Orange and Filet of Sole Meniuere. There was no rice, only several kinds of bread. I enjoyed the dessert—Flaming Cherries Jubilee. It was great because of the blazing cognac.

There were white and red French wines. After the dessert, we had a thick and strong espresso. When the waiters had cleared the tables of the many plates, silverware, glasses and cups, the serious drinking started. Each table was provided with a bottle of Johnny Walker Blue and Remy Martin X.O. Cognac.

Potpot Alcasid, the class comic, stood up and announced the start of the program over the mike. He said that we were all to speak for two minutes in order to fill the class in on our lives since graduation. He stressed that each one should talk for only two minutes so that we wouldn't have to stay there all night. He would cut the mike after two minutes.

Potpot started the program. He had us in stitches, since he is a well-known comedian on stage and TV. After he had spoken, he called on Nestor, the class valedictorian. I don't remember everything that Nestor said, but we all admired his brains and his skill in public speaking. He didn't try to make us laugh, because he had followed Potpot. He was a bit serious.

"If I were to encapsulate my entire life in two minutes, I would say that I have ceaselessly rummaged through the world in a desperate search for the truth that would shed meaning on our lives. Scientists call this the fundamental principle that governs the universe. Others call it God or religion.

"You may be surprised that I didn't look for this meaning in business or politics. Neither did I seek it in the arms of my first wife or the love of my children. You all know that I was divorced and married again.

"Believe it or not, I sought the meaning of life through breeding fighting cocks. I chose this life path because only through this avocation could I approximate God's powers. I, and I alone, decide which genes shall endure, and which shall be expunged, in my breeding farm. Whatever be the ultimate result of my breeding, my fighting cocks would not exist at all, were it not for me.

"I have also discovered that fighting cocks are infinitely more admirable than people. Courage is the fighting cock's sole beacon in life. He has no other light. He cannot be bribed with money, power, or other pleasures of the flesh when he is fighting for his life with another. He can always be relied upon to die without hesitation in the pit, such is his devotion to his sacred principle in life.

"Though I have not yet found the truth that motivates my whole being, nevertheless, I have learned much from traveling the world of cockfighting. I have harvested myriad little truths—scientific and magical—on the path that I have chosen. I will share them with you on another occasion, because Potpot is about to cut the mike. Just think of this short talk as the soup that starts a grand banquet."

I clapped loudly at Nestor's speech. Many laughed and Iking Madrigal smiled at me as he drew little circles with his index finger pointed at the side of his head to indicate that Nestor is a bit crazy. I gave him the finger.

Rey Berberabe, the class activist, spoke next. He used to join communist demos and often got beaten up by the police.

"I am grateful to Nilo and the other organizers of our reunion tonight. This hotel is really luxurious and the food and drinks are in fine taste. But the contrast between the elegance of our celebration and the hunger of our masses depresses me. Perhaps this dinner is an insult to our countrymen in these difficult times?

"Forgive me, my friends, for dousing cold water on our reunion.

You all know that even during our high school days I had already dedicated my life to the poor and oppressed. Let us not forget them, even as we enjoy ourselves tonight.

"The class struggle in the country is erupting. The downtrodden are awakening. I trust that we shall all be together again, on the right side, when the gathering revolution explodes."

Pinggoy de Guzman suddenly stood up and grabbed the mike from Potpot. He eventually became a police colonel after graduating from the PMA after high school.

"I really admire our reunion tonight. The food is great and the whiskey and cognac are first class. This is as it should be, for it is our thirtieth anniversary. Thirty years is just the right age. In a woman, twenty is too young, for she is still incapable of experiencing pleasure or giving it. Forty is too old, for her knees are already weak, though she may be skilled in bed. Thirty is best—her mind and body are ripe and she is still strong!

"I don't know, but I think that we should all simply enjoy ourselves on our anniversary. There is no place here for politicking, especially subversive agitation. Why do we have to talk about the blasted masses while we are celebrating? None of us are priests, saints or really poor and oppressed. Let's stop pretending. Let's not ruin our celebration.

"Subversive agitation is forbidden by our Constitution. But I am here as a classmate and not as a police official, so I will just ignore what I heard, as long as it doesn't happen again."

Rey suddenly stood up and interrupted Pinggoy.

"The Constitution forbids threats that prevent us from exercising our right to express our political views! I could file a case against you with the Human Rights Commission for what you just said!"

"You're really hardheaded. Let's discuss this outside!"

"Why not? You're not the only macho here!"

"Wait a minute!" Nestor suddenly shouted. "No one can leave the room. Let's all sing. Potpot, play 'My Way.'"

The karaoke started playing and we all sang 'My Way.'" With different pitches, tones and styles. Some were baritones, some tenors, some followed the beat, others were off-beat, some affected a heroic manner and belted it out, others sang in a soft kundiman style, but we were all able to complete the song, for all of us knew by heart the ditty that is often called the national anthem in the karaoke bars.

Nestor took charge again after the singing. "Let's stop talking over the mike. It just wrecks our camaraderie because of the deep divisions in our society. Let's just sing, drink and converse."

We all agreed with Nestor, for the quarrel between Rey and Pinggoy had made us all uneasy. Nestor hovered over the two protagonists as we enjoyed ourselves. He sat with Pinggoy and talked with him for a long time. Then he moved to Rey and engaged him in a serious discussion. He also talked to Jobo del Castillo, a classmate who owns a cockpit in Plaridel, Bulacan.

Before we all parted, Nestor talked to me. He explained that he had convinced Pinggoy and Rey not to pursue their quarrel any further. He had offered them a way of letting off steam in a benign competition. They would square off in a 7-cock main at Jobo's cockpit.

Pinggoy is a cocker, so he would use his own Bacolod cocks. Because his cocks are good-looking—their hackle and tail feathers are long and shiny and they have extremely fine-boned heads, shanks and toes—Pinggoy's entry would be called "Elite." Rey is not a cocker, so he would use the Mitra cocks of Nestor. Because of the dingy looks of Nestor's orientals—their feathers are very short and they have really coarse heads, shanks and toes—Rey's entry would be called "Masses."

The winner's prize would be two hundred thousand pesos. It would be donated by Nestor and Jobo. The prize would be given to the Nationalist People's Party, if Rey won, and to the PNP Emergency Loan Fund, if Pinggoy won.

I had been appointed the promoter and *casador* of the main that was to take place next month. We all parted without further incident that night, thanks to Nestor's effective diplomacy.

I had never been to the Plaridel cockpit before. When I arrived for the main, I was pleasantly surprised to see that it was a modern one. Like some of the newest buildings in Makati and the Ortigas Center, it used steel extensively and not concrete. But it was comfortable inside, though it was stifling hot outside. The cockpit had an open design that allowed the wind from the surrounding rice paddies to freely flow into it to cool us down. There were cushioned seats, as in a movie theater, around the pit, and Jobo sat us all here. There were very few outsiders to watch the main, probably because it was held at noon and had not been advertised on the streamers at the entrance to the cockpit.

I had no difficulty matching the center bets for the first fight. Rey's

and Pinggoy's groups both bet one thousand one hundred. The size of the center bet didn't seem to matter to either group; they just wanted to win the competition and garner the championship prize. The two contending groups sat on opposite sides of the pit. Pinggoy was with other policemen; some were in uniform, though all were unarmed, because Jobo had made it a point to forbid firearms in his cockpit. Rey's companions were deeply sun burnt and Jobo suspected that they were NPA regulars from Barangay Lambakin in San Miguel, Bulacan, which is in the hands of the communist revolutionaries because of its proximity to the Sierra Madre. Jobo assured me that Rey's group was not armed either.

Rey's cock was a blue. His pea comb had not been dubbed and this made him look like a stag. Nestor's handler made the blue walk around the pit and he strutted around arrogantly. He didn't seem to know that his tail was as short as a shrimp's and that he cut an ugly figure because of his big head and thick shanks and toes. He even crowed in a low, low voice, like that of a backyard rooster.

Pinggoy's Bacolod cock was a light red that was so good-looking it could have been entered in a beauty contest. His tail streamers were of such a length that they nearly reached the pit floor. His head and face were very refined, especially since his comb, ears and wattles had been dubbed very closely and the fine feathers on his face had been shaved. He marched, like a soldier, around the pit and crowed in an extremely high-pitched voice, like that of a song bird.

The betting was even when the cocks were pitted, for we all knew that the ugly fighter had been bred by Nestor. The red flew immediately, but the blue refused to join him in the air. The red carefully measured the blue before he unleashed a powerful ground shuffle. The red's legs crackled with the force of their blows, but the blue calmly avoided the punches by sidestepping. The red slowly approached the blue. The blue slowly backed away. The red suddenly lunged at the blue's chest. The blue wheeled and ran! The red, driven by a killer instinct, instantly went after his opponent that had quit. But when the blue reached the glass wall at the edge of the pit, he suddenly turned to face the red and flew over him. The red couldn't stop his momentum and crashed into the glass wall. The blue flicked his knife at the red's back. The red collapsed on the pit floor in a dying convulsion. The blue won unscathed.

The Masses had scored the first point.

The second cock of the Masses was a white oriental. The Elite put up

another light red. The white met the red squarely on the first three flies. He stabbed the red on each fly because he was faster. We shouted in a frenzy, for the red started to cough up blood. The white rushed in to finish off his opponent and the red managed to get a billhold. The red exploded in an endless shuffle and hit the white with numerous murderous blows. The red finally let go of his billhold and stopped shuffling. He staggered around and looked like he would collapse. But the white lay lifeless on the pit floor. The tough red managed to peck twice during the careo, even though he kept coughing up a lot of blood from a lung shot.

The Elite had tied the score at a point each.

The next fights followed the same pattern. The gray oriental of the Masses won handily. Then the dark red of the Elite won by the skin of his teeth. The dom of the Masses won in one fly. Then the gray of the Elite won a drag fight.

The score was tied at three points each when the fourth pair of cocks entered the pit. The Masses had a dirty white oriental, while the Elite had an elegant black Bacolod. The odds favored the dirty white, for the Masses were due for a win, according to the pattern of the previous fights. Both cocks were cautious and excellent defensive fighters, hence neither one managed to score a hit in three full minutes of fighting. Both were panting heavily when the black accidentally stepped on his long tail streamers while backing away. He momentarily lost his balance and the dirty white immediately took advantage of this by swarming all over the black with a devastating shuffle. The dirty white's knife got stuck on a thigh bone and he, too, lost his balance. Both cocks rolled all over the pit while shuffling at each other. The black's knife got stuck, too, and both cocks stopped shuffling. The referee pulled out the knives to careo the cocks. Both still looked strong during the careo, but both had been crippled in their left knife legs.

A drag fight developed because the dirty white and the black were both punching with their unarmed right legs. The odds quickly shifted to ten-six for the Bacolod black, for we all assumed that the American texas breeding of the Bacolod could take much more punishment than the oriental breeding of the dirty white. But the cock of the Masses showed no sign of quitting and, in fact, always pecked first during the successive careos. However, neither cock could prevail during the repeated careos. In the ninth minute, we stopped calling out bets because it seemed

almost certain that the fight would end in a draw.

The referee was in the middle of a careo when the buzzer sounded to signify that ten minutes had elapsed and, hence, the fight should be declared an automatic draw. But the cocking rules also stipulate that an ongoing careo must first be completed before the fight can be drawn. Both cocks had been distracted by the loud buzzer and neither pecked when they were raised face-to-face by the referee. On the second face-off, the dirty white's head moved very quickly, but we couldn't ascertain if he had pecked. The referee raised two fingers to signal that the dirty white had pecked twice. He raised and lowered the two cocks thrice more, according to the rule requiring three face-offs before a winner is declared. Neither cock moved on the final three face-offs. The referee lowered the black to the ground and raised the dirty white in the air to indicate that the Masses had won.

The Masses were ahead again.

Heated discussions immediately broke out among our classmates and the few outsiders in the cockpit, because it wasn't at all obvious that the dirty white had, indeed, pecked twice. No bets were paid while we were discussing the fight animatedly. Pinggoy entered the pit and loudly cursed the referee. He accused him of having been bribed by the Masses. Jobo sent off his referee to prevent Pinggoy from beating him up. Nestor approached Jobo and Pinggoy and the three of them huddled together.

"I refuse to accept the referee's crooked verdict!" Pinggoy shouted.

"He's my best referee," Jobo answered, "there's absolutely no blotch on his record here. Just accept your defeat. Anyway, there are still three more fights remaining. You can still win the main."

"This happens sometimes," Nestor said, "cocks move very quickly and only the referee is close enough to see what really happens during a cockfight. We simply have to trust his decision."

Pinggoy became quiet. He hung his head for a while to think. Then he looked Jobo and Nestor in the eye and smiled. "I respect both of you a lot. I know that neither of you would do anything illegal. But I'm afraid that I can't go on with this main. I will leave to avoid any violence. The referee was wrong. He could be a member, with Rey, of one of the revolutionary organizations. I really would have punished them all, if the two of you hadn't been here. But I will leave, so as not to embarrass both of you. Just tell Rey and his friends that they had better be careful from now on."

I announced to everyone that the owner of the cockpit had stopped the main to avoid bloodshed. I also informed them that the cockpit owner had reversed the referee's decision and had declared the last fight a draw. Therefore, no bets on this fight should be paid.

Nestor and I were silent for a long while at the back of his Mercedes on our way home to Manila. When I couldn't stand it anymore, I asked Nestor: "It's such a pity that the noble sport of cockfighting has been stained by the escalating conflicts in the larger society. Can't we shield our beloved sport from the violence of life?"

Nestor laughed. "You're hilarious! What could possibly be more savage than fighting to the death with knives in a cockfight? There's no difference between life and cockfighting. Cockfighting is my life."

"Aren't you bothered by what is happening?"

"Not really. We are finally coming to terms with emotions that we had to bury for centuries while we were dominated by the colonizers. In the long run, conflicts based on honest emotions can lead to enduring peace."

"You mean that all these conflicts will lead to the development of our country?"

"I really don't know if the country, as we know it, will survive these struggles. We have gone back to being many barangays. As if we wanted to redo our history without the Spaniards and Americans."

"What? The country will fall apart? We'll be reduced to separate provinces and barangays?"

"Not all barangays are founded on territory. There's Barangay Ginebra. And Rey and Pinggoy each have their own barangays."

I didn't understand everything that Nestor said. I've often thought about it since then and I still don't. ☹