

Letter From Manila

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It's been one helluva week — a typhoon, floods, and the attempted launching by Congress to impeach the President. I touched down at Ninoy Aquino International Airport on All Saints Day; in keeping with the Catholic theme of the day, the airport — like most public buildings and monuments in the Philippines — commemorates the dead and indeed in this case marks the spot of Aquino's assassination. The calm was disquieting. Where were the crowds of taxi touts that usually badger one at the airport arrival lounge? On holiday it would seem. The trip from the airport to the *pensionne* where I stayed, although short, usually takes 50 minutes in the heavy Manila traffic. This day it was a breezy 10 minutes. I had forgotten to check the public holiday calendar. Australians hold a holiday for a horse race, the Melbourne Cup on the first Tuesday of November; Filipinos are more religious about their families than horses. On All Saints Day, families gather together at the cemetery and maintain an all night vigil for their departed kin. The streets were again empty the next day. All Souls Day and nary a soul around. I soon learned that President Joseph "Erap" Estrada had declared this to be another national public holiday. Was this a populist gesture to distract from the political crisis that had settled on his own person and office in recent weeks?

The quiet start to my week in Manila proved to be the eye of the storm. Typhoon "*Seniang*" scored a direct hit on the city at midnight. Australians call them cyclones, Americans hurricanes; whatever, the phenomenon is one and same. In this case, 150 km per hour winds and thunderous downpours over 10 hours in duration cleared the streets of people and cars for another day. In their place were swirling waters, collapsed building sites, fallen power lines and uprooted trees. Along the Manila Bay boats, trawlers and dredges had smashed onto the shore. The metropolis of Manila, covering 650 square kilometers and consisting of twelve cities of some 12 million souls and nearly as many auto-

motive vehicles, had ground to a halt. As always the poor in their self-made housing were the worst affected. What is an inconvenience to the rich visitor is an incalculable devastation to the poor. As they picked their way through the debris of what was just a few hours before a place called home, the calm faces portrayed a stoicism borne of experience of regular setbacks, natural and human. I had only to deal with the anxiety of getting from Malate to Manila Hotel, Rizal Park some three kilometers away. My purpose was to attend the inaugural conference of the Far Eastern University Center for the Studies of Urban Environment (FEU-SURE) on "Managing Megacities: Century Challenges and Opportunities." In view of the circumstances the topic was apt as it was ironic. Here we were smack bang in the middle of a twenty-first century megacity which has just had its infrastructure sorely tested by the natural environment. Arriving was my first achievement, for only 30 or so made it of an expected 150 people, presumably stranded by the floods. Not to be deterred, the President of the Far Eastern University, Professor Edilberto de Jesus, turned a problem into an immediate opportunity by inviting Congressman Heherson T. Alvarez to brief us on the current political crisis. Alvarez is a key player in the House of Representatives negotiations over the Presidential impeachment proceedings. According to James Hamilton-Paterson in *America's Boy: The Marcoses and the Philippines* (Granta, 1998, p. 273), he has been a leading left-liberal opposition figure since the early years of the Marcos regime in the late sixties.

The storm that had descended on Manila was not only a force of nature but a work of politics too. Three days after the typhoon had struck eighty to one hundred thousand people took part in an anti-Estrada rally. Among the leaders calling for the President's resignation and impeachment were the previous two Presidents, Cory Aquino and Fidel Ramos, and an ailing but ever hardy Cardinal Jaime Sin. All three played crucial parts in the downfall of Marcos. Aquino and Ramos can at least claim to have kept their own accounts clean even if their regimes were not spotless. Ramos has particularly good grounds for personal animosity toward Estrada. At the end of Ramos' Presidency, the Filipino economy was in its best shape since the sixties and had survived the worst of the Asian crisis of 1997-98. For Alvarez, the economic crisis is a direct outcome of the personal incompetence and corruption of Estrada himself. The removal of the President, therefore, is the first step

to economic recovery as well as a restatement of the need for the highest office in the land to be free of corruption. According to Peter Alford of *The Australian*, (November 11-12, 2000:17), there are at least three kinds of scandals linked directly to the President himself: rule bending of corporate law and market rigging for cronies of the government; the commercial cavortings of Estrada's family, mistresses and political appointees; and third but not least, Estrada's own notorious personal propensity for whisky, women and gambling. The galvanizing moment for public opposition last month was when Estrada's former crony, Luis Singson, Governor of Ilocos Sur, claimed that the President had creamed P530 million from illegal lotteries and tobacco franchise revenues. Both Singson and Estrada embody the old style *machismo* politics of Marcos (James Hookway, "In the Philippines, a Warlord takes on President Estrada," *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, November, 2000: 1). Estrada was a film star but neither Singson nor Estrada represent the future of Philippine politics, or the hope of the populace. This is not just a matter of moral indignation. Estrada's corruption has hurt the poor in both urban and rural regions as shown in the rapid decline of the standards and quantity of social services, public infrastructure and education provision.

On the same Monday of the mass rally the local stock exchange recorded a 13-year record boost and the Philippine Peso bounced back from its all time low. Hopes among investors that Estrada would go quickly and quietly were soon dashed and by the time I boarded a plane the next day the markets had contracted again. In the meanwhile we can expect an escalation of street protests, including a national day of protest on 17 November, and the continuation of labyrinthine court politics in the congress, senate and the backrooms, bars, cafes of the ruling elites.

Manila as the capital city of the nation is not only the theatre of national politics but of capital accumulation also. While somewhere between two-thirds and three-quarters of the urban population is poor, it is the rich who are restructuring the metropolis in their own image. In a wide arc surrounding the old city starting out from Manila Bay near the airport and following the EDSA highway right around to the nationalist city-beautiful design of Quezon City to the north, there are some five massive business districts containing skyscrapers, mega-malls, hotels and entertainment complexes: Cyber City, Makati (which in-

cludes a new real estate development of Rockwell), Fort Bonifacio, Ortigas and Cubao. Cyber City remains largely "virtual" and Fort Bonifacio is still in its infancy but the other developments are cities unto themselves. The title of Fort Bonifacio contains the central dialectic of twentieth century Filipino identity. The site of the new city was for most of the last century a key military camp base of the Americans. The Fort was named after one of the martyrs of the Filipino nationalist revolution of the late nineteenth century, whose aspirations the Americans first encouraged by fighting alongside them against the Spanish but then conspired against by buying the country from the Spanish and then quelling local nationalist aspirations. It cost the lives of 4,000 American and 16,000 Filipino soldiers as well as a million non-combatant Filipino civilians (Hamilton-Paterson, 1998, 37). Today, the face of Andres Bonifacio, the *great plebeian* revolutionary, is now to be seen once again on the marketing boards and pamphlets, this time to advertise the new "corporate global city." The first 42 storey twin towers of condominiums have already sold, starting at one million US dollars for each apartment. Down below the ridge and connecting these gleaming tower cities runs the EDSA highway. Running 30 metres above it is the newly completed light rail transit line (LRT). The LRT's foundations and stations largely consist of concrete and creating a grunge city version of Mad Max. Picture thundering trucks, buses, taxis, and jeepneys charging along in swirling diesel fumes. In your peripheral vision are the billboards of the mega-malls and the churches: "Jesus Saves," "Witness a Miracle," highway flyovers, and the steel and glass towers themselves. For the denizens of the megacities of this century, the sublime is to be sought at street level and not in nature.

The FEU-SURE conference was peopled mainly by architects, planners, realty developers, academics and their students. We heard stories and saw powerpoint displays of megacities from Calcutta to Beijing but for me the romancing of the urban environment was to be found outside the imperial orientalism of the American designed Manila Hotel (1912).

The future sustainability of the megacity depends as much on the ingenuity and vitality of its poorest citizens as it does on planners and developers, corporations and infrastructure. Urban romanticism is personified by jeepney and taxi drivers. The jeepneys themselves are probably the finest everyday examples of Filipino post-colonial cultural

innovation and technological adaptation, of culture as bricolage. The legendary genealogy is that the US army jeeps left behind after World War Two were converted and adapted for local use as taxis or buses. The thousands of small buses that dominate the streets of Manila today can each hold at least 25 people at a time, including passengers either side of the driver on the front seat. They are custom made at Sarao Motors in Las Pinas, a town just south of Manila. Each jeepney has its own distinctive markings; all are made of shiny chrome and carry colourful decorations and humorously kitsch titles such as "Teenager in Love." One shudders to think what the traffic conditions would be like if they did not exist and in their stead each citizen had his/her own automobile. The jeepney driver is like a one-man band (they are usually men): navigator, driver, fare collector rolled in one and under conditions not of any sane man's choosing. Travel insurance companies usually warn business travelers and tourists to avoid the transport of the urban poor. Too bad, for to ride in a jeepney is one of the true delights of Manila. Fare collection for example is an act of trust amongst strangers. You call out from the back your destination, pass your fare up the line of people and await the driver to throw the coins in the front till and then pick out the change for it to be returned back down the line. Tokyo subway trains might be more crowded but rarely is the crowd as friendly as that to be found in the back of jeepneys. At various times I have held bags, children and even a live chicken for fellow passengers.

Taxi drivers are the other great treasure of Manila. Bruce Chatwin once wrote a hymn in praise of the Australian Aborigines "The Songlines," in which he argued that these nations could sing their way across the vast continent. Taxi and jeepney drivers in Manila are the urban equivalent. Their collective oral knowledge of the city streets represents an unsung map of the city. I have never seen a street directory let alone a computer on board a taxi and rarely does the driver ask for more information about the nominated destination. The more skilful drivers evade the main thoroughfares that are more likely to jam and instead wind their way through the back streets of the *barangays*. The visitor has to take it on trust that s/he will be delivered to the requested destination by the fastest route.

The drive itself recalls a kind of cross between bumper cars at the sideshow and American rollerball only without the violence. Unlike parts of Bangkok, or the M-5 motorway near Birmingham, Manila's

traffic tends not to jam completely. Perpetual motion with a minimal concern for road rules combined with pragmatic cooperation ensure that every space on the road is consumed by vehicles but without collision (there are surprisingly few accidents and little evidence of road rage, the scourge of motoring in Australia). When one tires of admiring the swerving, deviating skills of the taxi driver, one can attend to the intricate semiotics of horn blowing. Brass bands and Gamelan orchestras have nothing on these guys. There is a whole range of variations in timbre, volume and inflection that can be drawn from the standard car horn. Each blow, blast and touch has its own message that is rarely misunderstood by its intended hearers. Chaos theory is probably not popularly understood on the streets of Manila but it is practised everyday in the cities of Asia. Such is the grunge city sublime of the megacities of the twenty-first century.

A week is a long time in Manila. As I write — after the deluge — I look out on an Aboriginal Art Gallery, from 40,000 feet. I'm home, back in the dreaming land. 