

LIFEWORLD-SYSTEMS ANALYSIS OF PEOPLE POWER 2 AND 3

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Abstract

This paper is an application of the Habermasian distinction between the traditional “lifeworld” context of the plebeian public sphere, on the one hand, and the modern social systems of the bourgeoisie, on the other hand, to the political culture of Philippine society. The tragedy of the Estrada presidency is attributed to his failure to come to terms with the modern differentiated public sphere of the middle classes as mediated by the forces of Civil Society and the modern economic system of the Makati business class. His unorganized and inarticulate plebeian constituencies are basically marginalized from these modern social systems. Their marginalization, along with the emotional rhetoric and unorganized mass action initiated by their leaders, led to their violent attempt to seize Malacanang Palace in May 1, 2001.

Keywords

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While packing his belongings to leave Malacanang Palace at the height of People Power 2 in January 2001, former President Joseph Estrada reportedly (Villanueva) asked the following question to Mayor Jose “Lito” L. Atienza, Jr. [of Manila]: “Where have I failed the people?”

That one can be surprised by Mr. Estrada’s naiveté in even raising such a question is indicative of an alternative interpretation of Philippine politics that resides in the attitude of the one who is not impressed by the seriousness of Mr. Estrada’s innocent query. This paper will show that such an alternative interpretation stems from the duality of Philippine social reality: the traditional feudal forms of life represented by Mr. Estrada, on the one hand, and the modern social mindset held by the Philippine middle classes, on the other hand.

LIFEWORLDS AND SOCIAL SYSTEMS

We shall take as our initial model for analysis Alfred Schutz's theory of the lifeworld as "the unquestioned but always questionable background within which inquiry starts and within which it can be carried out" (57). The lifeworld is constituted by the taken-for-granted presuppositions that stabilize and predict the behavioral expectations of people in their social interactions. Like the Freudian notion of the unconscious, it lies "behind the back" of social actors as they go about in their daily interactions (Habermas *The Theory* 125). They remain unthematized unless they run into conflict with other social systems.

Lifeworlds, however, can be so pervasive to the extent that social systems are molded according to them. In the case of Mr. Estrada's paternalistic lifeworld, he labeled himself as "Ama ng Masa," the father of the poor, the ever-reliable provider of the family. He personally attended to his wards by giving them generous tips and spent precious official time to be and to share meals with them. He acted as if he lived the life of ordinary jeepney drivers and stevedores; he imagined himself as a worker, hanging a towel around his neck and sporting a sweatband with the seal of the President of the Republic on his wrist. He acted as if the lives of his wards depended on him. His clients likewise reciprocated as if their future aspirations depended on Mr. Estrada, their leader.

Mr. Estrada's traditional conception of the family as model of society, furthermore, is structurally embedded in Philippine social systems. As a matter of state policy, the Philippine Constitution considers the family "as a basic, autonomous social institution" (Art. II, Sec. 12). Even now, Philippine President Gloria Arroyo, Mr. Estrada's nemesis, attempted to package herself as "Ina ng Bayan" (mother of the nation) and "Ate Glo" (Older sister Glo). Our religious images are also replete with images of the Holy Family. Pope John Paul II, the Holy Father, had originally scheduled visiting the Philippines on the occasion of his proclamation of the year 2003 as the "Year of the Family."

A family centered-culture, however, is not a monopoly of Filipinos alone. It prevails among traditional cultures where social institutions such as the state and the economy are not yet differentiated from their tribal origins. Our politics are ruled by dynasties, beginning from our current President, who is the daughter of a former President, all the way down to the numerous political families that rule our provinces and even the Senate. Our economic system is likewise run by a few corporations dominated by a handful of families. This nepotism led Alfred McCoy to describe our form of governance as "An Anarchy of Families."

As a consequence of the dominance of the family as a model of social life, institutional power in traditional societies is distributed vertically rather than horizontally.

Subservience to authority is considered a social virtue while age and family connections, rather than talent and skill, serve as norms for social mobility. This could work well if the one in charge is benevolent, fair, and is running a small municipality like Mr. Estrada's town of San Juan. As town Mayor, Mr. Estrada is well remembered by his constituency. This personalistic approach, however, could prove disastrous when extended to the government of a whole country.

TRADITIONAL VS. MODERN LIFEWORLDS

Those who toppled Mr. Estrada from the office of the presidency are heirs of the great revolutionary tradition of the middle classes at the turn of the 20th century. It was then that the so-called *Ilustrados*, children of Filipino middle-class families, were emancipated from the anonymous masses by virtue of their social participation in the processes of European modernization that eventually reached the shores of colonial countries like the Philippines.

Mr. Estrada, in fact, considered himself as the contemporary version of Andres Bonifacio [the revolutionary hero of the masses] without realizing that by identifying himself with the great Plebeian, there could also be Emilio Aguinaldo [Aguinaldo being the *ilustrado* President of the First Philippine Republic] lurking around to take power from his inept and inefficient leadership. It should be noted, however, that historians have unearthed evidence showing that Mr. Bonifacio himself was not part of the masses by virtue of his facility in the Spanish language and his obvious *mestizo* and middle-class features.

In *The Roots of the Filipino Nation*, O.D. Corpuz reminds us that:

People who begin or support modern revolutions are often men who are moved not by the passions and urges aroused by actual and physical suffering or pain or injustice, but by consciences and emotions stirred by the knowledge of pain or injustice. All this is due to the role of ideas and their dissemination in modern society. (190)

Although the Philippine middle classes had a checkered history of collaboration with foreign domination, their revolutionary potentials can be discerned if we take a closer look at our recent history, especially the role they played in the so-called first quarter storm of student activism in 1970, EDSA 1 in 1986, and EDSA 2 in 2001. This stems from their

capacity to distinguish the demands of social justice and equity, on the one hand, from the personal acts of benevolence and charity directed towards the less fortunate sectors of society, on the other hand.

The middle classes during the turn of the century and our contemporary middle-class agents of social change are bound by a shared cultural capital that enabled them to elevate their discourse to a higher degree of abstraction required by democratic principles of due process and fair play. The dictum of modern social relationships, as formulated by Kant, could very well govern the political agenda of modern social institutions: “Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (Kant 52).

If we take into account the social functions of the so-called “civil society” – that core of Non-Government Organizations and People’s Organizations that have been working to alleviate the conditions of the poor since the days of Martial Law – we will realize that they are mostly composed of the middle classes. In an essay entitled “Development Work is Middle Class Oriented as much as it is Poverty Oriented,” Angelita Gregorio-Medel reports that “[m]ost of the founders, leaders and members of SDOs (Social Development Organizations) are graduates either of the state university or of respected, private educational institutions, most of which are run by religious groups” (66). A more recent study by Cynthia B. Bautista argued for “the middle classes as a natural constituency for democracy.” She claims that “because of their higher level of education, they are less dependent on systems of patronage and also show greater appreciation of the rule of law and ethical standards” (ABS-CBN 188).

In pitting the *Insulares* and *Peninsulares* [terms appropriated from colonial history] against the masses, Mr. Estrada’s rhetoric failed to take cognizance of the middle classes which eventually turned the tide against his feudal interpretation of society. In tandem with the Makati Business Club [an association of the top corporate executives in the country], civil society organizations had an easy time plucking Mr. Estrada from office. The people’s militant march to Mendiola [a main thoroughfare leading to the official home of the President] to pressure his resignation from the Presidency on January 20, 2001, was a classic pincer attack by civil society groups and the business sector against Mr. Estrada’s faltering grip on political power.

CIVIL SOCIETY AS A DETERMINING VARIABLE IN DOING SOCIAL ANALYSIS

The category of “civil society” emerged as a significant component of social analysis as a result of the uncoupling of modern social systems, such as the state and the economy, from the everyday life of ordinary citizens. Instead of deciding on issues that confront societies on the basis of reasons that can be communicated through the language of everyday life, modern social systems mediate social conflicts by means of bureaucratic power and financial considerations: “Money speaks” and “Might is right” govern modern decision-making processes. The lifeworld is “instrumentalized,” as it were, by the norms established by the state and the economy.

At this point, Habermas’ distinction between lifeworlds and social systems becomes a critical framework for social analysis. According to Habermas, social systems are uncoupled from the lifeworld as a consequence of modernity. Social systems, although initially arising from the lifeworld, eventually colonize the lifeworld by making use of its steering mechanisms, such as power and money, to dominate the norms of the latter. Modern social systems are then characterized by at least three differentiated sub-systems: the economy, politics, and cultural institutions, with the latter emerging as an alternative arena for struggle among civil society and civic-oriented groups (see *The Structural*).

Such a triadic differentiation, however, produces new arenas for political action. It puts a limit, for example, to the traditional notion of the state as the central embodiment of power in society. Modern economic and civil societies have taken autonomous positions from the state as alternative centers of power and influence. Mrs. Arroyo, for example, was able to justify her resignation from Mr. Estrada’s cabinet at the height of revelations about the latter’s corrupt practices, on the basis of a faltering economy. The struggle of progressive mass movements were likewise galvanized against Mr. Estrada because of their opposition against several socio-cultural issues such as his attempt to give former President Ferdinand Marcos a hero’s burial, his orchestrated advertising boycott against the nation’s largest circulating broadsheet, and his all-out war against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the southern island of Mindanao (ABS 193).

Mr. Estrada’s arbitrary decisions ran counter to the basic presuppositions of a modern conception of an autonomous civil society (Arato and Cohen 348). When Mr. Estrada abused his position of power, he did not consider its effects on other social actors as his equal and he failed to anticipate beforehand the consequences of his political actions to other sectors of the social system such as the retired members of the military. He was trapped, as it were, within a feudal mindset. He failed to abide by the basic principle that

governs modernized discourses as enunciated in the following formulation of Habermas:

For an act to be valid, the consequences and side effects that its *general* observance can be expected to have for the satisfaction of the particular interests of *each* person affected must be such that *all* affected can accept them freely. (*Moral Consciousness* 120)

He failed to realize that his political position, no matter how powerful, was only one among the many other potential centers of power and influence within the context of a highly differentiated modern society.

Unlike traditional feudal societies where the state reigns supreme over all other social systems, a modern differentiated society has alternative centers that can shake the state from its dogmatic slumber. The economy, for example, with its web of global networks, must abide by professional codes of conduct that are more or less standardized initially by the monetary system but eventually homogenized by a corporate culture. Such homogenization, however, runs across state boundaries by virtue of the multinational character of business corporations. Nation-states have actually changed their laws and policies in order to suit market forces that channel the flow of goods and services within a globalized context.

Although civil society can be fractured by its variety of sectors such as party list organizations, workers, urban poor, and the church, academic and youth sectors, EDSA 2 showed that they can get their act together on behalf of a perceived common good. Fr. John Carroll aptly defined civil society as “an organized citizenry to assert itself in pushing for land reform, health, environmental protection and the solutions to other problems which weigh heavily on the lives of the people” (4). After EDSA 2, we may now add “good governance” as one of the most important aspirations of an organized citizenry.

EDSA TRES

The violence that resulted from the so-called “EDSA Tres” in Malacanang Palace on May 1, 2001, was produced precisely by its lack of organization. Unlike the rallies sponsored by civil society organizations where marshals abound to police their ranks, EDSA Tres was precipitated by a mob that spontaneously gathered at EDSA as a reaction to the incarceration of their leader Estrada. Their commitment was not a product of deliberate processes of discourse and educational programs but by an emotional identification with a

folk hero who promised to emancipate them from their wretched situation.

A lesson to be gained from their uprising is to remind the bourgeois public that the plebeians exist, that they should be taken into account in the national agenda. Mr. Estrada at least paid attention to them even if his gestures were mere cinematic moments that covered up for his hedonistic lifestyle in mansions that supposedly housed alluring mistresses.

What differentiates the plebeian public sphere from its bourgeois counterpart is the illiterate and symbolic character of the former as opposed to the discursive literary form of the latter (Habermas *The Structural* xviii). Lacking in skills of articulation and argumentation, their legitimate demands for justice and equality were easily muted by clenched fists and bloody confrontations. Habermas also points out that this phenomenon is also prevalent in anarchist social movements in the European continent. We need not be surprised if they eventually become preyed upon by militaristic elements in our society whose habitual articulation of social issues springs from the threat of violence. They compensate for their lack of communicative competence with their grim and determined façade to achieve their avowed goals. It will not be surprising to find out that the constituencies of political figures that emerged from the military establishment will come from the camp of the inarticulate.

This dramatic contrast between the bourgeois and plebeian public spheres must remind us that the modern conception of civil society as formulated in its Hegelian form, was constituted as part and parcel of the *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, the bourgeois economic class whose primary interests lie in the economic sphere. It is not surprising that civil society forces easily collaborated with economic social actors such as the Makati Business Club in their common effort to topple the Estrada Presidency.

Mr. Estrada's constituency lies outside the modern differentiated public spheres of the economy, civil society, and the state. He drew his political strength from the marginalized, the poor, and the powerless. He offered them an imagined possibility of participating in the social mainstream by personalizing the image of the benevolent Godfather of the underprivileged sectors of society. The latter's frustration from actually having access to the opportunities of social participation, however, led to the violent uprising on that fateful May Day of 2001.

Such amok pathology is reminiscent of Benedict Kierkvliet's description of Aling Lita in his poignant introduction to *Everyday Politics in the Philippines*:

Screams broke the evening stillness in San Ricardo. Neighbors emerging from their houses to investigate found Lita Zamora ranting in the middle of the graveled highway that passes through the village. She was a dim figure, lit only by faint glows from the houses lining the road. In her long skirt and with her hair bouncing about her shoulders as she gesticulated and stomped up and down, sending up small clouds of dust, she appeared to be more like a spirit than a 34-year old mother of four. "I'll steal if I must support my family," she screeched. "Ok, kill me, I am not afraid. Who are they anyway? Just brazen and shameless, that's who. SHAMELESS!" She yelled as she threw up her arms. A few seconds of silence. From the shadows of trees and houses, perhaps seventy pairs of eyes followed her movements. No one spoke. Yet a consensus prevailed, conveyed perhaps by the relaxed but attentive posture of most, to let her vent her emotions. (1)

The immediate cause of Ms. Zamora's protestations was the confiscation of her gambling tools (perhaps bingo or more significant dramatically, *jueteng*, a numbers game of chance) by her barangay leader who was merely doing his job in conformity to the demands of the duly constituted laws of the land (2). But *jueteng*, like the underworld economy, will always belong to the plebeian public sphere unless the less privileged sectors of society are eventually emancipated from their current state of marginalization, poverty, and powerlessness. New forms of gambling and other vices will emerge as forms of livelihood since these are the only means of economic sustenance that are readily available to the majority of our people. Crimes against society may also be viewed, from the perspective of the traditional lifeworld, as a form of protest against the impersonal and oppressive conduct of social actors that represent modern social systems. Ms. Zamora could not personally identify her enemy. But she personified the social system as being "shameless" – faceless, and indifferent from the sufferings of ordinary people, like herself, in their everyday lives.

WHERE DID MR. ESTRADA GO WRONG?

Mr. Estrada won the Presidency in 1998 as a consequence of his pro-poor rhetoric. To this date, his plebeian followers claim that he is still the President of the Republic. After all, he won the Presidential election with a very wide margin from his closest rival. Had it not been for the middle classes and the elite who did not vote for him in the first place, Mr. Estrada claims that he could have fulfilled his electoral promises to the poor and

marginalized.

We live, however, in a modernizing age where political decisions, no matter how well intentioned, must be justified in terms of their public accountability before an educated public. The middle classes, with whom Mrs. Zamora's barangay leader identifies, live within a modernized social system and are merely playing their roles within that system. Traditional lifeworlds are usually not in harmony with modernity.

The lessons of EDSA 2 and EDSA Tres tell us that the key to democracy no longer depends on the heroism of our individual leaders but on the initiative of everyone who has been privileged to participate in our nation's modern political public sphere. Unlike the first EDSA uprising where individual leaders can be identified as heroes, EDSA 2 is a product of a concerted effort to modernize our political system. EDSA Tres serves as a reminder that there are many others who are being left behind by our march towards modernity. A collective future for our nation will require us to assist the many among us who are marginalized as mere spectators of the social mainstream. The middle classes, in their critical role as mediators between the elite and the poorest of the poor, are in a privileged position to help chart the future of our country. Without the mediation of the middle classes through the institutions of civil society, the tension between our traditional lifeworld and our modernizing social systems are bound to intensify in our daily lives. Our history of creative cultural adaptations, however, offers us hope that we shall eventually create new models of social arrangements that will support and facilitate our collective survival and social emancipation as a nation.

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