

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

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Philippine Studies vol. 23, no. 4 (1975) 465–480

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REVIEW ARTICLE

Re-reading Philippine History:
Constantino's *A Past Revisited*

JOHN N. SCHUMACHER

During the past several years, Professor Renato Constantino has been an articulate advocate of the importance of a correct understanding of the Filipino past in order to have insight into the problems of the present. Following in the tradition of Rizal, who attempted in his annotations to Morga's *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas* to re-read through Filipino eyes the Spanish accounts of the Filipino past, he has pointed to the possibility of getting "historical truths from biased sources," as he aptly put it in his introduction to John R. M. Taylor's *The Philippine Insurrection against the United States*. Hitherto Constantino has directed his attention principally to the colonial historiography of the American period in Philippine history. In his biography of Claro M. Recto, in his "Miseducation of the Filipino," and numerous other essays and pamphlets, he has expounded on the pernicious role that the official view of the Filipino past inculcated by colonial historiography and the American educational system has had in disfiguring in the minds of Filipinos the true story of their past. Hence, ignorant of the roots of the present, they have failed to perceive the true cause of contemporary society's ills.

Constantino, like Rizal, views history as a means of liberation for the Filipino people. Continuing the effort begun in his earlier writings, in his latest book, *The Philippines: A Past Revisited*,* Constantino takes a new look at the entire Filipino past prior to World War II. Rejecting the views of Philippine history proposed either by the colonial powers or by Filipino

*Quezon City: Tala Publishing Services, 1975.

historians under the influence of colonial ideas, he proposes to reexamine the historical record, and to seek the unifying thread which gives meaning to the national evolution of the Filipino people. This thread is "Filipino resistance to colonial oppression" (p. 9), and more specifically, the struggles of the people, of the masses. The book is then a "people's history", whose purpose is succinctly stated:

In the history of these struggles, we find certain laws of development which give us a better understanding of reality and which can guide us to higher forms of struggle for the people's cause. A people's history thus unifies past with present experience.

HISTORICAL THEORY AND METHOD

It is not difficult to agree with a number of Constantino's comments on previous Philippine historiography and the methods it used. His analysis of the miseducation of the Filipino by the American-created educational system, which inculcated the benevolence of the colonial master, has indeed been in many respects a liberating analysis. There is a great deal of validity too in his critique of historians who have directed their attention exclusively to the "great men," acknowledged heroes, whose real role in the history of the Filipino people has not often been critically examined. One can agree too with some of his strictures on a so-called "objective history," which contents itself with retailing a series of "facts," thinking thus to preserve historical objectivity. Each historian undoubtedly has a point of view from which he looks at past events, and which influences to a certain extent the emphasis he gives to one fact rather than another. If he is to be more than a mere chronicler of data, he must attempt to analyze the facts, and to demonstrate the pattern or patterns that are to be found in them. However, most historians would wish to add at this point that a point of view cannot be such as to omit totally those facts which do not suit it, or to force the facts into a pattern not taking its origin from the events themselves.

Unfortunately, here is where Professor Constantino's effort

fails. As his framework of analysis he has chosen a rigid Marxist historical theory. As he explains his position in the opening chapter, it is the material development of society which makes possible the growth of consciousness in the collective body; institutions, laws, customs, and prejudices are nothing more than superstructures deriving from the economic structures of society. Hence, the history of the Filipino people is a history of its economic struggles against oppression, even though these struggles may often have taken a political or intellectual form. Since material developments give rise to the formation of consciousness, the different economic levels give rise to different ideas in the different classes. From the clash between these, brought about by the sharpening of the economic contradictions they represent, comes a new level of consciousness. The revolts down the centuries each added a quantitative increase in national consciousness, which finally resulted in a qualitative change — the birth of the Filipino nation. Hence the contributions of successive generations to the tradition of struggle has widened the people's consciousness of its own powers and capacities. By studying these struggles the laws governing development of consciousness will be manifest, so that guidance will be afforded to the present generation in its move toward a higher form of struggle for the people's cause.

OUTLINE OF A PEOPLE'S HISTORY

In accordance with this mechanistic concept, the early resistance of the people to Spanish rule is seen as a blind instinctive force (p. 384—385). By the repetition of these acts of resistance, gradually there emerged a class leadership which directed the resistance. Though these leaders themselves became exploiters of the people, they helped the inarticulate masses to articulate their aspirations for freedom. When "objective conditions" were ready, that is, an economic basis for national identity, the Filipino people was born. The aspirations of the people for liberation gave birth to the Revolution, which, how-

ever, fell into the hands of the *ilustrado* elite, who compromised the struggle by yielding to the Americans. Nonetheless, the resistance of the people continued, even after elite capitulation and collaboration. But due to the miseducation of the Filipino people under the American colonial regime, Filipinos were gradually trained to look on the American colonizers as their benefactors, and to allow themselves to be subjected to American economic exploitation. The exploitation of the masses in its turn led to a new resistance, which has widened the consciousness of the people to the source of their misery, namely, the colonial relationship. The elite, on the other hand, have entered into partnership with the colonial exploiters, thus making themselves the betrayers of the people.

This view of Philippine history has the obvious virtue of providing a thread of continuity for the facts of the development of the Filipino nation. Unfortunately, like all systematizations imposed on the facts from the outside, it is highly selective as to which facts it chooses to bring into its synthesis. One can well agree with Constantino that it is the historian's task to trace the pattern which gives meaning to the disparate events of the historical record, if it were one emerging from the events themselves. This, however, his determinist historical theory will not allow. It is ironic that in Constantino's effort to look at Philippine history through Filipino eyes, he adopts for himself a framework borrowed from a Western, non-Filipino tradition. No less than the simplistic views of the clerical historians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which viewed Spanish penetration into the Philippines simply as a liberation of Filipinos from the power of the devil, the Marxist version too fails to give their due value to all the multiple factors which have contributed to the development of the Filipino people.

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The limitations which Constantino's theoretical framework place on him are many, only a few of which can be explored here.

The treatment of the twentieth century suffers less than earlier periods in this respect, at least with regard to its presentation of the true motivating forces behind American colonialism, primarily economic in nature, and of the efforts by the colonial regime to create for itself a benevolent image in the minds of Filipinos, aided by the alliance of the Filipino elite in the exploitation of the masses. Within this framework, the book does present a factual and detailed account, widely based on the studies of competent Filipino and American historians published in the last decade on the dynamics of American colonial rule. There are few, if any, works of importance which Constantino has neglected, and it cannot be gainsaid that he provides an enlightening view of the roots of much that is wrong with contemporary society. Though valid as a picture of the policy and operation of the colonial regime and its elite allies, unfortunately it falls into the very fault that Constantino has decried in earlier historians — it is not really a history of the Filipino people, but of the elite and the colonial masters. Even the two chapters which deal in large part with the people's resistance to the Americans and the agrarian revolts make no attempt to understand the people themselves, to seek their motivation, to understand their ideology, or to investigate the idiom in which they expressed their aspirations, and the significance this had. Nor is it clear who really represent "the people" — is it the revolutionary *Katipunan* or the counter-revolutionary *Guardia de Honor*? Is the victory of Quezon in 1923 an example of "the people's" anti-Americanism (p. 330), when we have earlier been correctly informed (p. 315) that the qualifications laid down for voting effectively excluded the masses from the electorate? I do not wish to imply that there was no people's resistance, or that there are no answers to these questions, but the framework used in the book does not provide very satisfactory answers, because it does not attempt to explore the whole of the Philippine reality. Hence though its picture of the twentieth-century contains a factual account of part of that reality, it remains essentially a one-dimensional picture.

THE SPANISH PERIOD

Constantino is far less successful in his treatment of Spanish colonial society and of the Revolution. It is true that under many respects this period has been less thoroughly investigated than has the twentieth century. It is likewise true, however, that Constantino has chosen to ignore such basic works for this period as Horacio de la Costa's *Jesuits in the Philippines* and some important essays edited by Gerald Anderson in his *Studies in Philippine Church History*. Though he does mention in a footnote Cesar Majul's *Muslims in the Philippines* and William H. Scott's *Discovery of the Igorots*, and acknowledges verbally the importance of including the history of all groups of Filipinos, as a matter of fact no account is taken of them in the book. This surely is a serious defect, above all in a history professing to find its unifying thread in the people's anticolonial struggle, particularly when both these books have as a major theme the anticolonial struggle of these respective groups of Filipinos. Other works, though cited in the footnotes, are used only for tangential points, ignoring the main conclusions of the works cited, apparently because their conclusions do not fit into the preconceived framework of the development of a Filipino nation. Such, for example, are my own books on Father Jose Burgos, the native clergy, and the Propaganda Movement. Their conclusions may be unacceptable to Constantino, but their evidence deserves to be explained or refuted rather than ignored.

The limitations to a serious analysis of the development of the Philippines under Spanish domination which the rigidity of the Marxist framework places on Constantino are numerous, and not all can be taken up here. The distortions, however, may be seen most clearly in three inter-related questions which may be considered in turn in some detail: (1) the evolution of class structure during the Spanish period and the relation of this class structure to the Revolution; (2) the role of "the people" in the evolution of Filipino nationhood; and (3) the role of religion in the development of the Filipino people.

PRE-HISPANIC CLASS STRUCTURE

The discussion of pre-Hispanic society, largely based on that of John L. Phelan, rightly emphasizes the absence of private property in the Western sense before the coming of the Spaniards. However, the argumentation used to demonstrate that feudalism did not exist in the Philippines and that classes had not yet emerged in Filipino society will strike most historians as extremely tortuous and tortured reasoning. It is true that there are numerous obscurities in the early accounts, which make difficult a clear delineation of the precise organization of classes in the sixteenth century. But to deny the existence of a class differentiation even between the *datus* and the non-chiefly class is difficult to square with any interpretation of the evidence. Though it is generally agreed that what the Spaniards referred to as slavery among the Filipinos was quite unlike European chattel-slavery, it is clear in all the sources that the non-chiefly class or classes, whether *aliping sagigilid*, *aliping namamahay*, or *timawa*, were all obliged to varying degrees of service to the chiefly class. To say that "control of the means of production and labor was exercised by the producers themselves and was an exchange of labor and its products" (p. 37) disguises rather than explains the widespread practice of debt-peonage which all the sources point out as a key element in pre-Hispanic society. Constantino explains this complex system of dependence and compulsory services as a rendering of services primarily to the community, with the chief receiving them only as a symbol of the community (p. 36), which seems to me rather a verbal subterfuge than a real explanation, and no supporting evidence is offered for such a conceptualization. Though no doubt the basic organization of the *barangay* had been familial in its origin, it seems clear that by the sixteenth century these barangays had not remained solely within the framework of familial or kinship structures. No doubt the Spanish conquest accentuated under certain aspects the differentiation of classes by legalizing it, and even made it in some ways more oppressive, but it did not create it.

CLASS STRUCTURE AND THE REVOLUTION

Even more tortuous is the discussion of the development of classes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Constantino does not repeat the attempt of some earlier writers to make Bonifacio a member of the proletariat; he was of the lower middle class, like his companions, but they "instinctively identified with the masses" (p. 163). At the same time there is discussion of "a fairly broad petty bourgeois stratum which occupied a social and economic position between the *peninsulares* and the masses. Included therein were landowners, *inquilinos*, shopkeepers, merchants, employees, and professionals." (p. 155). Evidently, the lower middle class differs from the petty bourgeoisie in this definition. Moreover, "they were joined by some who by Philippine standards were already considered affluent, and by others who though quite poor, had economic and social aspirations akin to those of their better situated countrymen because of the nature of their employment, their education and their urbanization. Many ilustrados belonged to this stratum . . ." So defined, it is hard to see who among the ilustrados could be excluded from that stratum, including everyone from the poor to the affluent. The ilustrados are therefore defined as ". . . this broad stratum with uneven consciousness" (p. 155). Hence they ". . . were both reformist and revolutionary . . ." At this point, one is led to wonder how revolutionary consciousness is connected with economic class. But it is added that ". . . barring individual exceptions, we may say that the higher the economic status, the stronger the tendency toward assimilation and reformism . . ." (p. 156; italics mine). In spite of all these careful distinctions and reservations, in later parts of the book, ilustrado is continually used as synonymous with elite and wealthy. Yet surely Bonifacio's closest associate, Emilio Jacinto, university-educated, was ilustrado by education, though of poor family. The phrase "barring individual exceptions" leaves room later for intransigent anti-American leaders like Antonio Luna and Jose Alejandrino, despite their background of affluence. But in the end, one wonders what the utility of so

many distinctions of classes may be, if there are so many exceptions. And in what sense was the Revolution of 1896 a revolution of the masses?

The heritage of the Revolution from the Propaganda Movement of the ilustrados, educated in Spain for the most part, is largely ignored. The movement is dismissed as reformist because of the class interests of its protagonists. No doubt many of the Propagandists were nothing more than reformists until the Revolution became a fact. But others like Rizal, Del Pilar, Alejandrino, Antonio Luna, were separatists long before 1896, even if not members of the Katipunan. The overwhelming evidence from Rizal's confidential letters and other corroboration presented in my *Propaganda Movement* that Rizal was a radical separatist, whose purpose it was to arouse a united national sentiment of resistance in preparation for eventual revolution, is not mentioned. Nor is there any allusion to the fact that Bonifacio considered himself to be the disciple of Rizal, even to the extent of copying out the latter's letters to his correspondents in Manila and invoking Rizal's name together with the cheers for liberty at the Katipunan meetings. Constantino can dismiss the Propaganda Movement as reformist by citing as representative of Rizal's sentiments his public statements in articles in *La Solidaridad* and elsewhere. Naturally, neither Rizal nor Del Pilar expressed their separatist and anticolonial feelings with all clarity in the public forum, any more than did Bonifacio in Manila. To have done so would have meant, of course, immediate imprisonment, perhaps execution, not only in the Philippines, but most probably even in Spain.

Not only is the clear line of development from the incipient nationalism of Burgos through the determined separatism of Rizal to the people's revolt of the Katipunan ignored. Even worse, the development is seen ultimately as the fruit of blind forces operating anonymously. The historic initiative of the masses which Bonifacio harnessed in the Katipunan is described in terms at once wholly material and totally abstract, in which the struggles against Spanish rule in the previous three centuries are seen merely as

... instinctual reactions of a people that could not as yet articulate its thoughts and its goals on a national scale. But this spontaneity flowed into the voids and the gaps of society, giving rise to an initiative which though negative in nature already delineated, if vaguely, the positive reconstruction of the body politic . . . When the material basis for a national consciousness emerged, it became possible to work on a national scale for an alternative to the colonial tradition (pp. 163-164).

In such a framework not only is the Revolution not the heir of earlier nationalistic thinking. It appears not even to be the product of thinking at all, but simply a blind and abstract material force flowing through a material body politic.

ROLE OF THE PEOPLE

This abstract view of the people points to what is ironically the most serious defect in this "people's history." For "the people" remain merely an abstraction. The people are acted upon, are subject to material and economic exploitative forces. But the people do not do anything, the people do not really act. Rarely is there any effort to find out what the people felt, or what they thought, or how they reacted as individuals. They exist only as an abstract collectivity. We are told of leaders of revolts which purport to be expressions of the people's resistance to colonialism, but almost never see the people themselves, or hear their idiom, or receive any insight into their motivation beyond the blind forces of economic determinism relentlessly pushing them on unconsciously — "the objective conditions of society."

It is perhaps this failure to come to grips with the people themselves and their way of thinking that explains the almost total ignoring of religious and cultural developments. If we are to believe that religion and culture are only superstructures of the economic conditions of society that actually determine events, of course religion and culture are largely irrelevant to a people's history or any history. But if we understand the people as living individuals, thinking and feeling, and not simply an abstract collectivity of automatons, we will have a different picture.

ROLE OF CHRISTIANITY

One can dispute whether the coming of Christianity to the Philippines has been beneficial or detrimental. It would seem that Constantino takes the latter position. But to ignore the role of religion in forming ideas and values, in determining attitudes, even attitudes of anticolonial revolt, is to fly in the face of an overwhelming mass of evidence and to take refuge in a dogmatism which cannot allow for anything but material causality. The role of religion in the formation of the nationalist tradition is quickly and somewhat embarrassedly put aside by Constantino. One would never imagine from this account the role played by Burgos in the articulation of a Filipino consciousness of national identity, nor have any idea of the influence of the thinking of the generation of Filipino priests of 1872 on the ideas of the leaders of the Propaganda Movement. One could scarcely suspect that Revolutionary leaders like Aguinaldo and Mabini were deeply concerned to have the support of the Filipino clergy in 1898 so as to keep loyal to the Revolution the masses who had been alienated in many places by the imprisonment of their friar parish priests. The efforts of Mabini on behalf of a national church under Aglipay become unintelligible. Most of the leaders of the Propaganda Movement and the Revolution were antifriar, some were anticlerical, and a few were anti-Catholic, but almost all were aware of the importance of religion in Filipino society.

No doubt the dissertation of Reynaldo Ileto on the Tagalog popular revolutionary movements from Apolinario de la Cruz in the nineteenth century to Macario Sakay and Felipe Salvador in the twentieth appeared too late for Constantino to have read it. But Ileto has demonstrated convincingly the dominant role that the popular religious tradition, particularly as formed by the *Pasion*, played in motivating and inspiring the revolutionary masses. One wonders how the evidence presented by Ileto could be fitted into the deterministic framework of Constantino's people's revolution. For he is evidently disturbed by the fact that so many of the people's revolutionary movements were marked by what he calls mystical characteristics. To him, this

"mysticism," which reappears not only throughout the late Spanish period, but well into the twentieth century, is clearly an aberration, a disturbing element in the people's struggle for liberation. He cannot accept the possibility that there is something real behind the religious terms in which the revolutionary ideal is so often couched. To face this problem would be to have to admit at least the possibility that the people had not merely been, as he says, subjected to proselytization over the centuries, but had actually embraced Catholicism in a personal commitment and made it something indigenous; even that it was often these religious ideals — to be sure against the intention of the Spanish missionaries who had taught them — which impelled them to resist oppression.

TREATMENT OF RELIGIOUS HISTORY

Perhaps it is the perception of this contradiction between "the people" of Constantino's historiographical scheme and the real people that explains the treatment which is accorded the religious history of the Filipino people. While the rest of the book is characterized by its admirably complete and up-to-date knowledge of the latest bibliography in Philippine history, both local and foreign, the brief chapter devoted to religion under the tendentious title "Monastic Supremacy" is characterized by the superficiality, paucity, bias, and poor quality of its sources. The history of the development of friar influence on the Filipino people is taken not from primary documents nor from the studies of recognized historians, but in large part from such a journalistic early twentieth-century book by one C. H. Forbes-Lindsay, unknown except for another journalistic work on the Caribbean islands gathered in by American imperialism of the beginning of the century. The work of the Spanish missionaries is reduced to their acquisition of vast lands and wealth. No indication appears of how this wealth may have been used for the material and cultural development of the Filipino people, as well as to support the work of evangelization, nor of what may have

motivated the missionaries who worked in the evangelization in the centuries before that wealth became a reality. Christianization itself, to the extent it is mentioned, is seen merely in terms of the Filipino masses surrendering to the supposed effects of continued proselytization, thus once again being portrayed as the passive objects acted upon by the missionaries rather than as intelligent human agents. Scarcely better than automatons, they are, in this view, by some mysterious process absorbed into Christianity, almost, one might say, in spite of themselves.

Moreover, though no honest historian would wish to defend all that was done by friars individually or corporately over the three centuries of Spanish rule, nor for that matter all that is done by the Church as an institution or by individual priests today, the handling of sources in dealing with the Church is to say the least, careless and tendentious. Ignoring a considerable amount of serious work on the origin and development of friar estates, the antifriar propaganda pamphlets of such professed enemies of the friars as Antonio Regidor and Isabelo de los Reyes, neither of them known for their care for facts, are cited as the sources for the development of friar haciendas. For other supposed facts, not even a source is given, as when, for example, agrarian uprisings against the Jesuits are said to have taken place in 1888 (p. 158), at a time when there was not a single Jesuit hacienda in the Philippines, much less any agrarian uprisings. The friars are said to have sold in 1903 mostly "the less arable and sparsely populated of their properties" (p. 348), when it is known that the friars sold *all* of their haciendas. If much or most of the land sold was sparsely populated and less arable, that is because a large part of the total area of the friar haciendas, particularly the very large ones in Isabela and Mindoro, were in fact less arable and sparsely populated. The silences concerning the role of the Filipino clergy in the development of nationalism, and the efforts to dismiss or ignore the role of religion, in the life of the Filipino masses above all, have already been mentioned. A sounder historical methodology would be interested in investigating and understanding why it has been so, not from the opinions of Spanish government authorities or embarrassed

ilustrado politicians seeking to assuage the fears of American colonial authorities, but from what the people themselves said and did. Finally, one might remark it as strange that in a history which sees all development of national consciousness as the result of economic development, no attention is given to the role of the missionaries in developing Philippine agriculture, by the introduction of new crops, by teaching the use of the iron plow, even by the very presence of the haciendas themselves.

IMPORTANCE OF THE BOOK

This has been a very lengthy and largely negative critique of Professor Constantino's book for several reasons. On a very basic level, one reason is that the book will be, and is already being read rather widely. Secondly, as I have noted, it is the first attempt at a synthesis of the whole history of the Filipino people till reasonably recent times, to have made use of the specialized works that have been written in recent years both inside and outside the Philippines, many of which often seem to escape the notice even of reputable historians. More important than these, the author has a serious point of view and a coherent historical methodology which he has attempted to apply consistently. As should be clear, I believe this methodology to be one which is erroneous and actually self-destructive in terms of its professed purpose of writing a people's history. But as a serious attempt it deserves a serious reply.

The most important reason, however, why I have dealt with Professor Constantino's history so lengthily and critically is that I believe he has made a number of important points, or at least raised important questions, which I would not wish to see ignored just because they form part of what is to me an unacceptably deterministic synthesis built on a rigid framework, and hence not respecting the complexity of the historical experience of the Filipino people. I too believe, for example, that far too little attention has been given to the economic factors in the social and cultural and even religious development of the

Filipino people. Most especially is this true of the multiple economic causes of the Revolution, some of which do not even receive mention here, much less development — monetary instability, the new land-title law, the effects of the practical monopoly of Tabacalera on the tobacco trade, rising taxes, stultifying government economic policy, etc. Though I cannot believe nationalism to be the product of these and other economic factors, neither can it be fully understood without them.

A second point is the role of participation in mass actions or revolts in raising the level of national consciousness. I do not believe either in a mechanistic growth, or in a necessarily rectilinear progress in such consciousness. But more attention deserves to be given to the real causes of revolts prior to the Revolution, and to the popular resistance to the Americans and their Filipino allies and the methods by which it was quieted.

A third point of importance is the role of classes in the Revolution and the war against the Americans. That a large majority of the wealthy and educated classes opposed the Revolution when it took place, that various groups or classes tried to turn it in different directions for their own ends, that most of the more affluent and educated submitted to the Americans more or less willingly, some immediately, some only much later, that there was a determined and long-lasting resistance on the part of some sectors of the masses — all this is fairly clear. What is needed is to determine why some acted "according to their class interests" and others did not, and how many; to clarify the relationships between ilustrados and wealthy, between Manila elite and provincial elite, the differences between the Tagalog provinces, or all of Luzon, and the rest of the country, both as to leadership of the Revolution and participation of the masses. These and other largely unexplored areas of the history of the Revolution will not be answered by historical theories proceeding from a determinism of economic classes.

Finally, I too believe that what is needed is a people's history, one written from the viewpoint of the masses of the Filipino people, one which will explain the origin of the unjust structures of society today, one which will give insight into the dynamisms

of colonialism in the past and neocolonialism today. But if a people's history is really to be of value to the people, it must be a history of the people as they were and thought and acted, of their values, attitudes, traditions, for better or worse, whether or not all of these fit into a neat framework. Only by revisiting the past that really was, with all its complexities and without presuppositions that will not yield to the facts, can the past give insight into the present and light for the future.