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The Split Society

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Review Articles

The Split Society *

THE Philippine society of the 1960's is plagued by schizophrenic seizures. This no longer bewilders the Filipino, who has somehow learned to live with the fact. It does, however, startle outsiders looking in from the baselines and the fringes. The Philippines is a masterpiece of tapestried contrasts. There are the palatial homes and the slums, the ramshackle huts that dot its cities. There are the allegedly "common people" with their professions of poverty and hard times and their exuberant love for extravagant fiestas and misleading displays of apparent wealth. There, too, is the avowed uprightness of Filipino candidates for political office and the stark nakedness of their questionable activities and tastes as public officials.

Any non-Filipino who writes on the Philippines faces two problems. First, must he project himself into the situation of the people whose country and society he is writing on, or should he act merely as an indifferent, hopefully impartial observer? Second, is he to consider the country he is writing on as a subject completely apart and detached from all other countries, or as an essential part of the world community? Frequently he compromises with himself. Frequently, too, he has no other choice if he wants to be fair.

* MASK OF ASIA: THE PHILIPPINES, by George Farwell. Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1966. 227 pp.

He thus makes it a point to understand the people he is writing about, taking care that he does not himself fall victim to their national malady. More important, he feels that he must study his subject both as an independent entity and as a part of the world community. He can do not less. Often, his compromise satisfies no one except himself. This is understandable. When his book comes out, he is subjected to a barrage of destructively critical commentary that castigates him no end precisely because he has chosen to compromise. This, too, is understandable.

George Farwell's study differs from all other books that have lately been capsizing the publishing market. Farwell's effort is more in the tradition of Feodor Jagor's *Travels in the Philippines* rather than George Taylor's *The Philippines and the United States: Problems in Partnership*, Jean Grossholtz's *Politics in the Philippines* or even Onofre Corpuz's *The Philippines*. These latter studies have dwelt on specific aspects of Philippine life; Farwell's effort is more comprehensive in its scope. Where others have seen fit to analyze the problems confronting today's political society, Farwell has chosen to plunge into the complex of the Philippine problem. Where his predecessors have used sociology to map out the stumbling blocks and pitfalls of socio-political behavior, Farwell has used it to draw his own word image of the national social malady.

Farwell appears to be concerned not so much with institutions as they have developed and the bureaucracy and pernicious practices they have spawned and fostered as with the present state of Philippine society. His book is written in the fashion, the punctuated if sometimes abbreviated and sensationalized style of a journalist, occasionally refined with the polish of literature.

A survey of its footnotes at once reveals that more than fifty per cent of its cited sources are periodicals. Popular magazines and newspapers are, it is commonly accepted, not always the best source of down-to-earth, unmisinterpreted facts. Even the most simple of incidents may unwittingly be blown up to mesmerizing proportions when the pangs of

the public hunger for news not only demand but necessitate it. More than twenty-five per cent of his footnotes has been derived from the pages of the *Philippines Free Press*, a weekly magazine noted both for its crusading zeal (on the occasions when it happily chooses to undertake a crusade) and the editorialized style and content of its reporting. When articles begin to editorialize and construe the facts, the writer who quotes from them finds himself swallowing their punch-lines lock, stock and barrel.

In Farwell's volume, black is always black, and white is haplessly always white. Facts are laid out for the reader's digestion one after the other. The reader finds that he must either swallow the tid-bits whole or throw up in the process. Farwell warns in his foreword: "What I have attempted is a candid as well as a sympathetic portrait of the Philippines Republic. If candour is a term that many sometimes be used against me, let it be said that I have written with equal frankness of my own country" (p. xi).

And it is candor and sympathy that he projects throughout. He writes critically of the attitudes of socialites: "Soon after visiting Tondo, I went to a late night party on the other side of town. There must have been more than a hundred guests, a hired Filipino band, decorated tables under Chinese lanterns in the garden, formal dress, the usual crowd of waiters. The hostess was wearing an elaborate Maria Clara, designed by the celebrated Pitoy Moreno. She said it had cost her ₱2,000. At the peak of this revelry, I noticed a group of the poor watching from the street, leaning over the garden wall. They appeared to be chatting with our security guards. To one of the women at our table my wife said, 'How can you bear to have them watching us? I feel too ashamed to eat all this food.' 'Oh, they enjoy it,' was the answer. 'I really think they like to see how we live.' Has no one heard of Marie Antoinette?" (pp. 25-26.) For the most part, his candor is that of a well-informed and sympathetic man. Once in a while, it is the candor of the *Philippines Free Press* which crowds the picture rather than the author's. Farwell perhaps feels justified in doing this: "The sharpest, most penetrating

criticisms of the Philippines have always been written by Filipinos themselves. These are healthy signs. Self-criticism is essential to self-knowledge" (p. 222).

The value of this book is to be found not in the sweeping expanse of its contents but in the boldness of its assertions. While detailed statements, qualified right and left by interpreters, are to be prized, bold utterances which spur to response and activity are equally to be prized. And it is remedial action that our present society requires. One is led to believe that four decades from now, when Filipinos begin to wonder about the remote society of the then fading generation, Farwell's book will provide a provocative, if not provoking glimpse of what took place in the 1950's and the 1960's (unless, of course, one chooses to look at old issues of the *Philippines Free Press* instead).

Farwell's hypothesis is simple enough: "The struggle for the Filipino soul has already begun. No longer is Catholicism enough to combat mass poverty. Crime waves, allied to a desperate materialism, are corroding the old stability. Communism, like the Philippine volcanoes, is still dormant, but now and again a tremor shakes the land. Which turn will the young, still immature Republic take: towards Asia, or back towards the West?" (p.2.)

It takes him a long, if literally engrossing, 222 pages to resolve this dilemma to his satisfaction. He sees present-day Philippine society as the battleground of a struggle between the old and the new, the established and the budding. Of the phrase "little brown Americans" so often derogatorily attributed to some segments of the Filipino elite, he writes: "It is not a phrase I care to use. Yet, in these colour-conscious times, it is used a great deal. Mainly by nationalistic Filipinos attacking those of their own kind who support American policies. Which suggests they may no longer be little Americans at all. Nationalism, in fact, is becoming a potent force..." (pp. 2-3).

This, then, constitutes Farwell's immediate picture of the Philippines: a land of turmoil seething within itself, not be-

cause of the onslaughts of disruptive outside forces but because of its smouldering innards.

There are two societies presented in Farwell's book: the past and the present. Farwell shows none of the almost obsessive concern of Nick Joaquin for the past. Joaquin's vision of the Philippines' past as the repository of all that was genteel and fine and exquisite is peculiarly cultural, literary and reminiscent (if not romantic), while Farwell's vision is stark and raw, perhaps too hard. For if there is any element which Farwell blames most for the present rupture of Philippine life, with its concomitant attitudes, values and norms, it is the devastating effect of colonial Spain. While he does occasionally extol American colonial policies, he does not in the least spare colonial Spain. He charges the Spaniards with having destroyed the "fluid, if well-integrated Malay society" (p. 37). He berates them further: "The European carried a curse around the world with him he rarely recognizes. His colour prejudices, his superior assumption make enemies of those who would willingly have been his friends. The Spaniard was an acute specimen of these afflictions. Not so much Legazpi, or his immediate followers. Not even the priests that came after him. The disease grew with the accretion of power, with security and affluence" (p. 36).

In his vision, power corrupts because of the comfort and security which it induces. He relates this alleged impact of the past on the present in the following terms: "It is not too much to say that the regional feuding in modern politics partially stems from the strife between tribes of that age. Nothing makes the Filipinos more arrogant than the arrogation of power, especially the Pampangueños, a people noted for their pride and extravagant love of display [sic]" (p. 41). On the other hand, he says of the American effort: "...these reluctant colonials were convinced of their own propaganda, that they were occupying the Philippines for its own people's good. As the twentieth century progressed, they proved this largely true" (p. 54). In these instances, Farwell (of course) attempts to draw conclusions. Whether or not these are justified is, however, another matter.

It is particularly after the first few chapters of this book that one begins to worry about the author's approach. Evidently, he tries to explain Philippine society from the eyes of both foreigner and Filipino. In this supreme effort at double vision, he spares no discipline within the social sciences. The extensive scope of his work is also responsible for his difficulties. Quite often, his observations are founded on solid, incontestable fact. On other occasions, his observations are undisguised exposés of Philippine society as he sees it, as his respondents see it, and as his "advisers" see it.

The obvious temptation of any reviewer of this volume is to assume a defensive stance. The picture is certainly not as gruesome as he paints it, one will be inclined to assert with no little measure of vehemence. One may even adopt the tactical pose of prosecuting the prosecution, pointing out his errors (and there are *errors*, especially historical ones, as well as gratuitous assertions) and thus downgrading the rest of the book on the basis of such errors and assertions. This writer has no desire to prosecute the prosecution. Farwell is far from being a prosecutor. One may not always appreciate the book every step of the way, but one will appreciate the author's integrity. If at all he must be the object of sympathy, it is for his attempt to be a jack-of-all-trades, becoming thereby a master-of-none. The book simply covers too much matter, so that his treatment tends to become too general and, at times, superficial. But this, one must interject in a spirit of fairness, is not the totality of the book. There is no way of meeting his candor except with respect and, perhaps, an equal overdose of candor. He is certainly quite right and accurate on many counts. The point is that some critics may be either too soft or too biased in their own opinions and observations to admit it.

Aside from the usual errors of historical fact and the misspellings of Filipino words that plague books on the Philippines written by non-Filipinos (sometimes by Filipinos, which is worse), which are both understandable oversights, Farwell's major setback is his obsession with the basic theme of his book, expressed in the title. The idea of a mask, the belief that the Filipino lies shrouded by the mask of his many "pasts",

that his culture is an amalgam of separate masks, all donned at the appropriate and practical historical epochs, all these appear to enthuse him profusely.

He ascribes too much to Adrian Cristobal's words, which are cited on the flyleaf: "The Filipino, more than any other Asian, suffers most acutely from *lata*. Where other Asians conducted a guerilla war to preserve their identity, the Filipino, as a tactical ruse, put on the mask of a foreigner. He did survive the latter's regime, but when the time came for taking off the mask, it had become part of his face. The greater irony is that he put on a number of masks...."

This idea of the "mask" predetermines the content of the book. This appears to be the basic assumption underlying the author's hypothesis. Unfortunately, it is also the conclusion that one must draw after finishing the book. One wonders: which came first, the conclusion or the analysis?

So deeply entranced is Farwell by this basic assumption that he spends the entire volume sustaining it, like a lawyer who must form his theory of a case at the very outset and commit himself to its defense and wholehearted advocacy, come hell, high water, or even disbarment. This is Farwell's basic defect in an otherwise well-written book. Farwell acts like a student who sets his mind to write a thesis on a given subject and then develops his research and observations to meet the demands raised by his initial position. There is nothing wrong with this, except that a writer must take care that all his ends meet. Farwell's ends do not always meet or, if they do, this is not evident. One is not certain whether the errors of fact and the misinterpretations occurring in his book are the result of his oversight or misinformation or the product of his interviews with too intellectually narrow a range of informants and his consultation of (at times) too average a choice of printed reference materials.

Nevertheless, Farwell has a capacity for acute observation. He calls the Philippines a society that "has yet to develop a national ethos...with no unity of purpose, no shared identity" (p. 87). Beneath all the pathos of Philippine politics lies the "silent tao" who is slowly beginning to make himself

felt, whether in the subversive dissension of the Hukbalahaps or in the pragmatic attitudes of the poverty-stricken slum dweller who said in a *Philippines Free Press* interview: "You've got to be smart to get somewhere nowadays....I'm not a thief. I am only taking back what society has deprived me of. If I do not take care of myself, who will? I want to get out of the slums. I will not hesitate to steal, or even to kill if that's the way to do it" (p. 88).

There is little else within the book that the Filipino does not know about: that politics and rice have always gone together, to the prejudice of the people; that our national minorities have been neglected; that the major philosophy of the Filipino politician (even if he is not always aware of it) is a reckless brand of pragmatism, a philosophy that has permeated the attitudes of the people he represents. Farwell, perhaps for reasons that are most clearly evident to him but not to this writer, appears to be so entranced with the story of Don Juan Alano that he takes time out to relate it. This writer does not see the relevance of his story to the hypothesis of the book. If at all one can draw a conclusion, it is this—that Farwell highly respects Alano's pioneering character. But the question one asks is—why didn't he just keep it to himself?

Farwell appears likewise preoccupied with Rizal's "On the Indolence of the Filipino". Its tenor appears to have influenced his attitudes towards colonial Spain. It must be remembered that Rizal's essay was written primarily for propaganda purposes and was published in a propaganda organ. And most, if not all, propaganda work is tilted or so arranged in its range of facts and sources as to sustain the writer's contention. Facts may be chosen depending on whether or not they help him in his effort. This is what Rizal does. He attributes the indolence of the Filipino to two factors: Spanish colonial policy, which activated the Filipino's admitted predisposition to indolence, and Filipino colonial mentality, which fostered and sustained it. Who, in the end, is responsible for the Filipino's characteristic malady? Was it Spain, which offered the temptation, or the Filipino, who succumbed to temptation and fell

into "sin". At the time the essay was written, it was easy and well enough to point to Spain. Today, however, one must ask himself whether he shares in the blame or not. This is not to inspire a guilt complex. The fact remains that today's Filipino has not exhibited the courage to pull himself out of the mess he has created for himself or in which he has somehow managed to enmesh himself.

Farwell's use of Rizal's ideas, however, leads to his desired point: "despite it all, you have the impression that few in public life hear Rizal anymore. His patriotism, his distinctively liberal ideas, his belief in the common man are lauded with emotion by every speaker. But his own national pride runs counter to the modern concept of nationalism. Today's mood is harsher, strident, less visionary than ruthlessly pragmatic. It is the difference of two ages" (p.9).

Farwell raises the question: will the Philippines turn towards Asia or back towards the West? He answers it himself: "The next stage must surely be to create an awareness that the Philippines is not Asia, not merely an appendage of the West. In the existing context of Asia, the West has need of an authentic ally in the region. Essentially, the Filipino needs to recover his Asian character, so long corrupted and diffused" (p.222).

I do not think that Farwell has exhausted the full range of alternatives. The Philippines is geographically Asian, culturally Western in its basic outlook. It has assimilated the culture of the West as a part of its own make-up, both external and internal. The point is not that the Filipino has put on a number of masks, as Cristobal asserts, and forgotten to take them off completely (or perhaps, could not, because "they had become part of his face"), but that he has fashioned these masks in his own image and likeness. There is nothing repugnant about the assimilation of ideas, attitudes, values and norms. What is repulsive is to lift one's own head, one's own image.

The present is not always determined by the past. What the Filipino has made of this country should not be blamed

on the past. That is too easy and comfortable a way out. If at all there is such a mask upon his face, let it be asserted that it is his own mask, just as his face is his own, and nobody else's.

If, therefore, the Philippines must turn towards anyone or anything, it must turn towards itself. And turn towards itself it must. Filipinos have often berated their administrators and officials for their lack of any clear concept of the national interest or the national identity. What is often forgotten is the fact that too often the Filipino has neglected to do his share of the task, lacking the "spirit of bayanihan" that is so essential to the progress of the community.

In the end, it is what Farwell calls "the difference of two ages" that is responsible for the schizophrenia that has made of the Philippines a split society, wracked by diverging traditions and conventions, hewed by the cleavage between ideas and action, pervaded by indifferentism and resignation. Yet Farwell sees a semblance of hope: "The fact that... the Philippines has retained its democratic status without falling to revolution... is a sign that its people have the necessary stability to order their own affairs. There are major difficulties yet to overcome: notably in establishing the rule of law, curbing criminality, gaining some political philosophy beyond self-interest. At least there are signs of a maturing in election practice, a shade less violence, a freer vote, candidates with a social consciousness or conscience" (p. 221).

In a nutshell, then, whether or not the Philippines remains a split society depends on its people, on their leaders, and on their visions of the future. While law, order and prosperity may be the desired goals of a democratic political community, the people themselves and their administrators must set the scene for the achievement of these goals.

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