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Toward a Filipino-Language Philippine Studies Project

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Symposium on Philippine Studies

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Toward a Filipino-Language Philippine Studies Project

This short paper advances the thesis that the main currents of the so-called indigenization movement in Philippine Studies such as Pantayong Pananaw and Sikolohiyang Pilipino were closely related to the rise of the nationalist and militant mass movements of the crucial decades of the 1960s to the 1980s. It argues that the disengagement of these tendencies from the social and mass movements that gave them their original impetus deprives them of the real basis of their strength and continuing relevance.

KEYWORDS: PHILIPPINE STUDIES · INDIGENIZATION · SOCIAL MOVEMENTS · PANTAYONG PANANAW · SIKOLOHIYANG PILIPINO

The militant nationalist upheavals of the 1960s marked the era that gave birth to two of the most important indigenization tendencies in Philippine Studies, namely, the Pantayong Pananaw (PP) trend founded by the historian Zeus A. Salazar, and Sikolohiyang Pilipino (SP) established by the psychologist Virgilio Enriquez. Both these trends came to maturity in the 1980s and both are deeply marked in their history and discursive evolution by the national democratic movement and the mass struggles against the Marcos dictatorship. Like the mass movements of the time, these tendencies also took part in the broad nationalist effort at propagating and developing the national language. Given the keenly felt alienation experienced by the English-speaking activists, who were at that time trying to integrate themselves among the toiling masses, one of the original goals of establishing a genuinely national language was the development of an emancipatory social and pedagogical practice in which both the masses and progressive or militant intellectuals could join together and actively take part in shaping the future of the nation.

One such national language movement, known as Manguyay Pilipino, was closely allied with the pre-martial law organization Movement for the Advancement of Nationalism (cf. M.A.N. 1969; Del Rosario 1973). It took its name from the word *ugnay*, which means to “relate” or “connect” or “be connected.” Manguyay Pilipino, due to various reasons, ultimately failed to bridge the gap between the formalized discourses of scientific work and the languages of daily life. For their part, the radical labor and peasant movements did and still do exhibit no small degree of internal linguistic complexity, but a cursory analysis of vertical and horizontal communication structures within them would show the de facto use of Filipino as the dominant national language of communication both on the pragmatic and symbolic levels.

However, some major representatives of the indigenization approaches in Philippine Studies considered themselves as moving beyond simply using Filipino in expressing themselves as academics toward developing what they understood to be a genuinely Filipino perspective on Philippine phenomena. They opposed this to what they viewed as the uncritical and rampant adoption of “foreign” modes of analysis. For example, the discipline of political economy was taken to be an alien discourse that imposed an inappropriate and completely “Western” or foreign conceptual grid on Philippine

reality; it therefore had to be opposed with a more rigorously emic approach. The lesser known indigenization tendency known as Pilipinolohiya, advocated by Prospero Covar, is an example of this kind of thinking.

In contrast to the writings of nationalists, such as Jose Maria Sison (1971), Renato Constantino (1979), and Alejandro Lichauco (1988)—who all presented more or less comprehensive programs in the political, economic, and cultural spheres and whose writings on industrialization and agrarian reform still form the programmatic backbone of many activist and grassroots organizations—the indigenization tendencies of the post-1986 era appear to have withdrawn almost completely from addressing pressing economic questions and generally demur any actual engagement with mass movements. The failure of the agrarian reform and industrialization projects in the Philippines probably led some disillusioned proponents of indigenization to completely turn their backs on the economic aspect of nationalist thought in order to concentrate on primarily “cultural” and “linguistic” topics. Or maybe they just felt the need to legitimize themselves within the academic domain, which required that they submit themselves to the narrow strictures of specialization and to the myth of depoliticized academic work.

The Disavowal of the Economy

The turn away from the economy toward an almost exclusive concern with cultural and linguistic matters (e.g., “culturalism”) and the inordinate focus on the rise of charismatic leaders in the political sphere (especially in the case of PP) dramatized the distance of the indigenizing tendencies in Philippine Studies from the social movements that initially gave them their impetus in the radical 1960s. This curious narrowness of perspective allowed these approaches to ignore issues of poverty and exploitation that are, from within their frameworks, probably considered to be ephemeral phenomena. By turning their backs on actually existing social movements and attempting to base themselves almost exclusively within academic and formal educational settings, many practitioners of the indigenization tendencies in Philippine Studies have given up one of the strongest bases for the growth and development of social scientific discourse in Filipino. In tandem with their lack of interest in socioeconomic issues, PP and Pilipinolohiya have been characterized by the rejection of Marxism, which was the major theoretical tool in the national liberation struggles of the twentieth century. Covar (1988, 30) has even denied the very existence of any kind of “capitalism” or

“capitalist relations” in the Philippines, rejecting these categories offhand as simply being inappropriate to describe Philippine realities.

Instead of putting an emphasis on the painstaking development and strengthening of mass movements, which can address the roots of poverty and economic exploitation, PP emphasizes the rise of leaders capable of capturing the imagination of the so-called *bayan* (people/nation) through their embodiment of what they take to be indigenous conceptions of power stretching back to the era of the *datu* (Salazar 2005). Such perspectives are not overly interested in looking at how an impoverished and oppressed people can take power in their own hands and assert their humanity and dignity against a society and social system that degrades them.

“Indigenization” in a Neoliberal Age

Ironically, the disavowal of the economy occurs precisely during a period of history in which processes of commodification and commercialization are penetrating deeper than ever into the fabric of Philippine existence. In fact, the educational institutions within which some of these “indigenizing” academics work are steadily undergoing drastic reforms toward greater liberalization and privatization (Lumbera et al. 2007). The imperatives of the contemporary neoliberal era continue to transform tertiary public educational institutions in the country into private corporate entities. In line with the pressures of globalization, English continues to be the most “pragmatic” language for teaching, research work, and publication in universities today.

The elitist composition of the University of the Philippines (UP), which overwhelmingly caters to privileged students from exclusive high schools, has been aggravated by a series of exclusionary acts like exorbitant tuition fee increases. This means that progressive teachers inclined to using Filipino in the classroom have actually lost or are at the point of losing even their token “mass audience” of *iskolar ng Bayan* (scholars of the people). Befitting UP’s colonial origins, Filipino language subjects have never been required at any period in its history. However, only recently in 2003, the so-called Revitalized General Education Program (RGEF) rendered Philippine history or *kasaysayan* subjects, which are generally taught in Filipino, optional for all UP students. The extremely marginal use of Filipino in college-level teaching has been a given for decades.

Even the modest gains in areas such as the publication of Filipino language academic journals are facing grave setbacks due, for example, to such

policies as the International Publication Awards in the UP that instantly grants P55,000.00 for each publication in an international, refereed, and ISI-listed journal. Promotions policies and tenure requirements are also heavily biased toward internationally recognized achievements and publications as opposed to the values of national relevance. The imposition of parameters for world-class universities patterned after European and Anglo-American models represents a massive reconsolidation of the stranglehold of Eurocentric modes of academic production among universities, like UP, which aspire for such recognition. Filipino language use in the universities today probably confronts one of the gravest crises in its history.

Language and Democracy

A project for the development of a Filipino-language Philippine Studies pertains to all efforts that can contribute to such a goal. It is much broader and includes within its scope all the so-called indigenization tendencies, aside from related work being done outside of the universities. It should not at all be opposed or placed in contradiction to the use of other Philippine languages in the social sciences and humanities. Those who accuse Filipino of stunting the development of other Philippine languages and destroying linguistic diversity are duty bound to work seriously to increase production in their own languages and to strive to gain a broader national audience. Any Philippine language capable of challenging the linguistic hegemony of English on a nationwide scale deserves the allegiance of all progressive Filipino intellectuals.

English is exclusionary and silencing and shows no signs of becoming any less so any time in the future. Because of the unrealistic and untenable language situation in the Philippines, discussions on important matters of national policy, which have life and death implications for the great majority, are limited to the technocratic elite who seriously believe that their English language education has granted them the privileged and exclusive role of prescribing solutions to all the problems of the nation. On an interpersonal level, any honest and well-meaning Filipino academic would know the automatic sense of alienation and distance that is produced by addressing people outside the universities and some work settings in English. Such a gesture would automatically generate a hierarchical relation, harking back to the crude and primitive racist power relations existing during the colonial era. Such a confrontation reduces a great many to helpless and miserable

silence, and gives rise to feelings of inadequacy in some and produces resentment in others. All these reactions are antithetical to genuinely human conversations situated within a pedagogical project of emancipation.

Antinativist and Social-Movement Based

The project of a Filipino-language Philippine Studies is not primarily interested in resolving tensions between “autonomous” and “nativist” tendencies as the Malaysian scholar Syed Farid Alatas (2006) defines them. According to him, a nativist social science is characterized by the following traits: (1) its propositions are mere negations of Orientalist assertions; (2) it represents the total or near total rejection of ideas based solely on their foreign provenance; (3) its propositions on indigenous culture and society gloss over internal diversities and contradictions. In contrast, an autonomous social science, which Alatas (*ibid.*, 112) champions, “Independently raises problems, creates concepts and creatively applies methodologies without being intellectually dominated by another tradition.” Although it is foreseeable that nativist tendencies, due to their fulfillment of certain deep-seated emotional needs, will not simply disappear, the definitive triumph of an autonomous tendency over the nativist would be a great advance.

PP is unique among the indigenization approaches in that it can generate within itself the tension or dialectic between autonomous and nativist tendencies. SP definitely leans toward an autonomous approach, while Pilipinolohiya is a thoroughly nativist perspective. Debates on methods and approaches involving these tendencies have helped greatly toward self-clarification among Filipino researchers and theorists. But some approaches like Pilipinolohiya and a dormant tendency in PP, which indiscriminately reject certain key aspects of the scientific method as being inherently Western, only serve to weaken the position and intelligibility of the whole Filipino-language Philippine Studies project as a whole. The narrow parameters that certain nativist and seminativist tendencies in Philippine Studies have sought to impose have proven counterproductive and unnecessarily limiting in the long run. These positions have ended up narrowing rather than broadening the scope of participation in the construction of a Filipino language Philippine Studies project.

The indigenization project must reflect upon its past gains, overcome its weaknesses, find its strengths, strive to combat nativist tendencies, and concentrate toward helping establish an autonomous Philippine Studies

in Filipino. “Indigenization” is only one path among many other possible ones in attaining an “autonomous” Philippine Studies. Scholars interested in contributing to the development of Philippine Studies in Filipino should work toward maintaining the centers of Filipino language academic production and continue their efforts to expand on them even within the hostile environment of the dominant neoliberal educational regime. Popular publications in Filipino for educational purposes on the social and natural sciences can also be pursued through Internet publications.

The reason why Alatas does not seem to give much attention to the problem of language in the construction of an autonomous social science seems to reside in his almost exclusively academic focus. A social science tradition, which is both autonomous and critical/transformational, has to be allied with existing social movements in order to have any real effect on society. Such an approach in Philippine Studies will find itself challenged to pursue both the democratization of scientific thought and the transformation of this scientific practice itself among the masses.

It should be said that the arrogance and feeling of superiority of some professional academics in relation to activist intellectuals is completely unwarranted. If the level of theoretical articulation among political activists is not as developed as it should be given the conditions in which they work, there is no inherent reason why that should be the case. Transformational political practice is just as capable, if not more so, of generating sophisticated knowledge of social phenomena as the more purely academic-oriented work. Advocates of a Filipino-language Philippine Studies therefore may find it more fulfilling and meaningful to involve themselves in helping to concretely address issues of literacy, readership, pedagogy, and social emancipation outside of the universities. For some this may mean a reengagement with the militant and progressive agenda of national and mass-based social movements and, therefore, something of a return to what has become an almost forgotten point of origin.

Note

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