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# Enabling Truths on the Verge of Pedagogy

*Ramon G. Guillermo*

**Necessary Fictions: Philippine Literature and the Nation, 1946–1980.** By Caroline S. Hau. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000. xi, 319 pages.

Caroline Hau's *Necessary Fictions* is an extremely difficult text to consider in its entirety. Any short treatment of it would necessarily be incomplete, thereby risking the exclusion of certain equally important aspects of the text as seeming "heterogeneous excesses." But there is nothing but to undertake writing about such a text, if only because it demands to be written about by all serious students of Philippine culture and intellectual history.

Only one major theme of Hau's work can be treated in this review, even as it is hoped that this single theme and the complex of ideas associated with it can lead the way to a more comprehensive assessment of the work in the future. In the book, Hau embarks upon an extended treatment of the crucial distinction between the notion that all action ought to be premised on a knowledge of the whole truth, and the contradictory idea that the impossibility of total knowledge does not prevent or forestall action, but serves rather as its enabling condition. Hau poses the question,

whether one ought to subscribe to the dominant conception of political action whereby the subject acts only after obtaining the "whole" truth. Should one not rather interrogate such an idealized view of the conditions of knowledge (in which the subject first ascertains the truth before acting on it)—which view can only end up perpetually deferring political action—and posit, instead, a more dynamic and complex conception of the relationship between consciousness and action? (40)

Her analysis of the problem posed is notable in its depth and rigorousness from a conceptual point of view. However, one notable weakness in the overall exposition is that Hau does not go into a sufficiently detailed historical treatment of the nature and development of this perceived conflict within Philippine intellectual history between the purported "dominant conception

of political action whereby the subject acts only after obtaining the 'whole' truth," and the alternative which had arisen from the "Marxist-inspired nationalist interrogation." The lack is especially evident regarding the exposition of the first pole of the conflict, which represents the dominant conception.

One ought not to assume that this criticism demands of Hau that she adopt a hermeneutically innocent procedure in which direct and explicit statements of such a conflict ought to be sought and exhibited to the reader in the manner of positivist historians demanding explicit and unambiguous textual or historical proof for every interpretation.<sup>1</sup> The interpretative and theoretical dimension of intellectual historiography has in the past made productive use of classifications and ideational orderings which may not have been consciously employed by the intellectual milieu of their object of study.

In our view, however, such broad strokes ought to be based ideally on a careful unpacking of what may have been thickly compressed ideas, or based upon a suggestive elaboration of vague articulations.

For example, the following quotations from Rizal may reveal to a certain limited extent his views regarding the central theme in Hau's book; the relation between knowledge and political action:

If I could only be a professor in my country, I would stimulate these native studies which are like the *nosce te ipsum* that gives the true estimation of the self and drives nations to do great things. . . . Our youth should not devote themselves to love or to the static speculative sciences as do the youth of fortunate nations. All of us have to sacrifice something on the altar of politics though we might not wish to do so.<sup>2</sup>

Wenn ich nur ein Professor in meiner Heimat werden, so will ich diese heimatlichen Studien aufwecken, dieser *nosce te ipsum*, welches das ware Selbstgefhl giebt und zu den grossen Thaten die Nationen bezwingt. . . . Unsere Jugend darf nicht der Liebe, noch der stillen Wissenschaft sich widmen, wie die Jugend der glcklichen Nationen, wir mssen alle der Politik etwas opfern, wenn auch wir keine Lust daran haben. (13 April 1887, letter to Blumentritt)

The quotation above referring to the national "true estimation of the self" (*ware* [sic] *Selbstgefhl*), relates this to the knowledge of oneself produced by "native studies" (*heimatlichen Studien*) of one's own culture, history and society. Far from being the exclusive domain of narrow specialists, Rizal doesn't hesitate in connecting such knowledges to the people's esteem of the self which gives rise to the possibility of accomplishing great acts on the part of the nation.

In the second part of the quotation above, Rizal observes that the Filipino youth do not have the luxury of devoting (*widmen*) themselves to the static sciences (perhaps as contraposed to the historical sciences devoted to the study of human phenomena) unlike those in more fortunate countries. The

Filipino youth are obliged by the circumstances in which they find themselves, despite their own possible aversion to politics, to act and contribute whatever they can in the arena of political action. This anticipates the argument in *El Filibusterismo* between Simoun and Basilio regarding the relative values of political action and scientific progress. In that chapter, Basilio's aversion to ephemeral politics and plan to devote himself to the more eternal sciences is countered by Simoun's insistence that science ought to serve the goals of social liberation and happiness and should not become an end in itself (Rizal 1997, 63–64). Rizal thus seems constantly to interrogate the notions of science and knowledge in terms of their relation to political practice with an unremitting stress on the relative urgency of action in relation to the no less pressing task of developing enabling knowledges.

Another nationalist intellectual, who had voiced similar opinions regarding the indispensability of a knowledge of a usable past for contemporary political mobilization more than a half-century after Rizal, would also admit in a somewhat apologetic tone that political exigencies unavoidably interfere with the radical intellectual's capacity to probe the scientific depths of her/his subject matter:

When intellectual decolonization shall have been accomplished, a historical account can be produced which will present a more balanced picture of reality. . . . But since such a history will surely take decades of study, it must be postponed to a period when social conditions will afford scholars the luxury of spending years on this investigation.<sup>3</sup>

What is involved here is not just the existential limitation of human beings, but for both Rizal and Constantino, the real constraints and dangers confronted by subversive intellectuals in the conditions of production of radical/liberative knowledge.

A preliminary survey of Rizal's writing on the subject thus seems to indicate that Rizal's inability to throw in his lot with the revolution at the decisive moment was not the result of any foiled demand for total knowledge as a precondition for political action, but more the consequence of his demand for adequate preparation in the launching of a revolution in order to ensure a relative certainty of success. Rizal, who possessed a generally skeptical world outlook, would probably have never explicitly demanded absolute certitude, but only certain prior conditions which would give the Filipino a probable chance of military victory over the Spaniards. Rizal therefore wrote Blumentritt:

I assure you that I have no desire to take part in conspiracies which seem to me too premature and risky. But if the government drives us to them, that is to say, when no other hope remains to us but seek our destruction in war, when the Filipinos would prefer to die rather than endure longer their misery, then I will also share in the fate of my countrymen. (The Rizal Blumentritt Correspondence 1992, 105)

Was den Verschwörungen anbetrifft, so kann ich Ihnen versichern, dass ich keine Lust dazu habe, denn ich finde es allzu früh und gewagt. Doch, wenn uns die Regierung dazu nöthigt, das heisst, wenn uns keine Hoffnung auf der Erde mehr bleibt als unseres Verderben auf den Krieg zu suchen, wenn die Philippinen es vorziehen, lieber sterben als das Elend zu ertragen, dann theile auch das Schicksal meiner Landsleute. (19 June 1887)

The constant refrain of the vacillating *ilustrados*, including Rizal, was that even though the only realistic option left may be an armed uprising, the time was not as yet opportune for the Philippine revolutionaries to face the superior strength of Spanish arms. Rizal abhorred the premature and risky (*allzu früh und gewagt*) campaign. "Premature" here becomes almost synonymous with "risky." The risk of failure increases all the more when all the factors Rizal considered necessary for military success had not yet appeared, or been made to appear, on the horizon. In Rizal's manifesto of 1896, however, this prematurity is redefined, not any longer in terms of military capability, but in terms of making education the prior condition for the attainment of freedom.

Constantino, in his essay on Rizal's status as an "American-sponsored hero," had noted the convergence between the American notion of "preparing the Filipinos for eventual self-government" and that aspect of Rizal's thought which hinged on making the education of the people the "prior condition" for the attainment of "liberties for the country" (Rizal 1962, 348). According to Constantino, "[Rizal's] name was invoked whenever the incapacity of the masses for self-government was pointed out as a justification for American tutelage." Rizal was projected by the Americans as the "model of an *educated* citizen" (Constantino 1970, 140). Austin Craig's book (1913) on Rizal even christened him "America's forerunner," and looked upon him as a sort of mediating element between the American colonial regime and the Filipino people because of his apparent acceptability to both sides. Indeed, Rizal's manifesto of 1896, having been suppressed by the Spanish authorities at the time of its writing, may have had one of its first published appearances in the Philippines through Craig's book, where the passages in question had been heavily italicized. Looking over Rizal's life work, Craig (1913, 19) observed that,

It was fortunate for the Philippines that after the war of misunderstanding with the United States there existed a character that commanded the admiration of both sides. Rizal's writings revealed to the Americans aspirations that appealed to them and conditions that called forth their sympathy, while the Filipinos felt confidence, for that reason, in the otherwise incomprehensible new government which honored their hero.

Education was one of Rizal's aspirations and desires for his people, Craig emphasized, which the Filipinos were at long last receiving under American

rule. According to US propaganda this education was supposed to pave the way for the granting of eventual self-government by the US to the Philippines. In Craig's view, the fact that this education had been forced upon the Filipino people by a rapacious and brutal American colonialism was just an "unimportant detail" that had nevertheless sparked an exasperating "war of misunderstanding." Craig (1913, 20) was convinced that not one of the nationalists fighting against American rule had the knowledge of history which Rizal possessed, since this was a knowledge that would have allowed them the vantage point to skip over the unimportant details and finally understand and reconcile themselves to the benefits of American rule.

In contrast to this, a later textbook (1923) on Rizal's life and works expressed the authors' bewilderment regarding Rizal's views on the prematureness and lack of preparation of the Philippine Revolution, and further expounded on the rightness of Bonifacio's decisive intervention. The authors wrote: "Bonifacio, at least, had no idea of waiting until the Philippines should be populated with university graduates able to demonstrate in scholarly phrases the philosophical sweetness of liberty" (Russell and Rodriguez 1923, 278). Rizal's earlier preconditions for the success of the revolution, primarily based on the perceived conditions necessary for engaging in a military campaign with some degree of success, eventually becomes identified and submerges under his later pronouncement that made education the prior condition for the attainment of independence.

This drastic truncation of Rizal's chain of reasoning had arisen from the efforts of Americans like Craig to rehabilitate him for colonial purposes and soften his subversive edge. Some decades after Craig's book and some two years before the publication of Agoncillo's book on Bonifacio, Conrado Benitez's textbook on *Philippine Social Life and Progress* (1937, 454) laid the blame for the occasional uprising on the ignorance and lack of education of the people: "Undoubtedly ignorance has been to blame for the occasional uprisings against our government in the Philippines . . . only ignorance and lies told to them by false leaders may explain their willingness to revolt and use violence against the government." Manifestations of social unrest in the fifties were viewed by the academic establishment simply as "wars of misunderstanding" which could be overcome by stamping out ignorance among the masses by means of education.

Revolution had by this time become almost synonymous with "ignorance." Agoncillo gives his own extended treatment of this problem (though with an inverted system of valuations) in the classic book *The Revolt of the Masses* (1956). There he dwells not on the inevitable limitations introduced into the production of enabling knowledges by the necessity of acting upon political demands and facing the risks involved, but on the fact that, according to his view, a comprehensive and many-faceted grasp of social reality obviated any disposition to revolutionary action. Agoncillo explicitly uses the polarity of Bonifacio and Rizal to underline his point:

Because [Bonifacio] was *one-sided in outlook*, he never bothered to imagine or invent pitfalls, alternative plans and possibilities such as would serve to confuse the mind and weaken one's resolutions and will-power. It was perhaps to his advantage that he did not have the culture of Rizal, whose *many-faceted mind* generated doubt and fear as to the ability of his people to stand on their own feet. (Agoncillo 1956, 285)

The [masses], victims of subtle or overt exploitation, are not accustomed to the intricacies of the rational processes and are moved by the impact of feeling and passion and refuse to see, if reminded by their intellectual betters, the probable effects of their planned action. (Agoncillo 1956, 99)

According to Agoncillo, the masses' capacity for revolution lies not in any deeper grasp of their situation and historical task, which both Rizal and Constantino emphasize as a precondition for effective revolutionary action, but actually resides in their being unaccustomed to "the intricacies of the rational processes" and in their being ignorant of the probable effects of their own planned action. Bonifacio's simple worldview and one-sided outlook, it is alleged, never allowed him even to consider the possibility of error and failure, while Rizal's overly complex and many-faceted mind, for its part, "generated doubt and fear." It is thus depth and comprehensiveness of knowledge and rationality itself that exposes one's thoughts to contingency and danger.

This unbridgeable schism between action and intellection was further elaborated upon in Ricardo Pascual's essay on Rizal (1961). Pascual (1991, 314) wrote: "Rizal was able to get into the inquirer's position of making prediction on the basis of epistemic analysis without descending into the plane of advocacy." Whatever Pascual (1991, 313) meant by his puzzling terminology of "epistemic analysis" and "cognoscitive view of social phenomena" it seemed, according to him, that such analyses and the "dictate of scientific methodology that demands rationalism" prevented Rizal from adopting any kind of "extra-rational advocacy" and from involving himself in any "emotional exhortation to rebellion." Pascual (1991, 317) further cites as proof of his own unbelievably naive and blinkered view of Rizal's work, the latter's call upon the people "to lay down their arms and return home" even in the midst of their battle engagements with the Spaniards" because of the non-fulfillment of his "education as prior condition" clause which held up "enlightenment" as the prerequisite for "freedom." Hau writes that such a point of view leads naturally to the "reflex statement about the quixoticism of revolutionary struggle." Knowledge and rationality themselves, instead of serving as bases for action, cause the intellectual to lapse into what Constantino had termed "intellectual immobilism."

This somewhat lengthy exposition on the relationship of education and its emergent twin, rationality, to revolutionary political action merely tries to investigate the intellectual origins in Philippine intellectual history of Hau's

massive and substantial polemic. Without having done an exhaustive survey of the texts concerned, one can only arrive at a provisional observation, and the conclusion that the few texts that have been analyzed have not so far brought up any sources within Philippine intellectual history articulating the “dominant conception of political action whereby the subject acts only after obtaining the ‘whole’ truth.”<sup>4</sup> If the stated purpose of Hau’s work was to produce a critique of “such an idealized view of the conditions of knowledge (in which the subject first ascertains the truth before acting on it),” the demand for elaborating upon the history and evolution of such a view in the Philippine context ought to be addressed as the first requirement of such an interrogation.

Again, this doesn’t necessarily have to dredge up explicit articulations of such ideas, but can be based upon the careful explicitation of historical sources. As we have seen above, this may not necessarily be an impossible undertaking. The great strength of Hau’s work, consequently lies not in this type of investigation, but in her rigorous and valuable exploration of the alternative to the “dominant conception” which aims to produce “a more dynamic and complex conception of the relationship between consciousness and action” from the texts she reads creatively and with great perception.

The recuperative dynamics of this book focuses upon educational institutions or “ethical technologies” for the “formation of the subject of action,” which have been much-maligned as plain and simple tools for “elitist indoctrination of ideological justifications” for colonial and neo-colonial relations with America. The positive implications of the rise of a “Marxist-inspired nationalist interrogation” for the interpretation of these “ethical technologies for subject formation” is not that the undeniable ideological and hegemonic role of the existent educational institutions is thereby diminished, but that it is able to point the way towards a refunctioning of these ethical technologies, within the alternative project of revolutionary education, towards the objective of national and class liberation. Hau asserts that “this same technology, and the pedagogical imperative that suffuses it, cannot be characterized as necessarily repressive or ‘ideological’ because the educational apparatus does not only concern itself with producing citizens, but with producing ‘knowledge’ as well” (41).<sup>5</sup> Here she seems to treat citizenship and knowledge as dialectical correlates, with the pole of citizenship serving as some kind of force of concentration and knowledge as some kind of force of diffusion, each facing the other in a kind of delicately balanced corrective relation. The point seems to be that no matter how these “ethical technologies” seem always to contain within themselves the *logics of exclusion* inherent in any project of national subject formation, they are likewise always bound to reproduce within themselves, even in spite of themselves, the corrective *logics of inclusion* produced by the imperative to knowledge.

This, however, does not spare these dominant ethical technologies and their conceptions regarding the relation of theory and practice from stringent

criticism. The demand that revolutionary movements “obtain reliable knowledge about the world, and accurately and effectively register, articulate, and generalize the people’s visions and aspirations” precisely and even in the midst of political action allows this revolutionary practice of knowledge production to serve as the basis for the critique of idealized conceptions of knowledge production in which practice and theory are seen as distinct acts following each other in an ideal sequence. The need for concretizing revolutionary methods of learning and teaching opposed to the “pedagogical logic of state-sponsored decolonization” which can therefore conceive of “political agency in nonidealized and context-specific ways” is underscored by Hau’s criticism of the truly problematic way in which the pedagogical relation between intellectuals and peasants was portrayed in the novel *Mga Ibong Mandaragit*:

The novel sometimes depicts the interaction between the educated vanguard and the “masses” as a one-way pedagogical enterprise, with Mando and Professor Sabio “lecturing” farmers and workers on the “correct” way of interpreting Philippine society. The novel does not adequately show how interaction with the masses in turn influences or enriches Mando and Dr. Sabio’s intellectual and ethical development. This top-down pedagogical approach, which highlights only the mediation of the “educated” individual but not of “the people” in the transformation of collective consciousness, may account for the “reformist” strain of *Ibong Mandaragit*. (46)

The criticism of such a “one-way pedagogical enterprise” and “top-down pedagogical approach” is well taken. And even here, Hau’s reproach is much too mild. But there seems to be a gap in reasoning between recognizing the necessity for a more balanced conception of the ethical technology of subject formation and the increasingly perceived need to develop *new* technologies more capable of breaking the grip of the exclusionary logic of elitist pedagogy.

We can deal with this theme in some detail here. This exclusionary logic of the dominant method of pedagogy, combined with its intellectualistic separation of theory from practice, necessitates going beyond the mere manifest and inescapable commitment to the production of knowledge of such dominant ethical technologies to the problem of praxis. Hau stresses, along this vein, that since the process of arriving at a decision for action cannot claim any kind of absolute effectivity, the element of historical contingency involved in any action means that the responsibility for making such decisions ought not to rest on a few but ought to be the collective free decision of the many who are involved in the struggle.

The wager of truth is the burden of all who would participate in the transformation of society. The fact that any truth cannot be univocal, ahistorical, disinterested and beyond error means that the question ought to be asked whose voice or voices are in fact being heard in the practice of struggle. In

some complex and difficult passages, Hau therefore seeks to re-ground the sense of truth and the meaning of knowledge in the collective purpose of social transformation. The implication of this is that truth and knowledge cease to derive their fundamental grounding in the fiction of a monological consciousness and thereby become transformed as meaningful only within a new context of dialogical, collective truths and knowledges, which ultimately derive their inherent purposiveness from the praxis of social liberation.

Hau writes: "The importance of "truth" cannot be accounted for by the mere fact of the correspondence of thought to "reality," but by the fact that truth *matters*. To the extent that the beliefs and views that one holds are true, one gains a better chance of fulfilling her needs, hopes, and expectations. In effect, the real issue at the heart of Philippine nationalism concerns the imperative of maximizing truth *and* transformation" (47).

The concrete articulation of these goals in social praxis serves Hau well as the criterion both for meaningfulness and truthfulness. The conception of knowledge as the product of the mental labors of a few (even if it is labeled "revolutionary" knowledge) is nothing but a relapse into the errors of an intellectualistic rationalism which, perhaps even unwittingly, effectively dislocates the responsibility to truth from the commitment to change. The "transformation of collective consciousness" must therefore of necessity be mediated both by the revolutionary leaders and the people and not by the leaders alone.

Hau asserts once again that "The theoretical and practical task of thinking through and making the revolution becomes an imperative reaching beyond the narrow specialization of "intellectual" work to claim the efforts and activities of all the movement's members. This democratized notion of revolutionary praxis suggests that the calculus of thought and action cannot be exhausted or completed by only a few of the people involved in the struggle since contingency, the incompleteness of the revolution, makes it all the more important to ask the question of *which* judgment and *which* course of action have to be made, and to embark on radical action" (242).

Charlie S. Veric's reservations regarding Hau's apparent concentration on Rizal the *ilustrado* as the alleged author of the master-text of Philippine nationalism, and his unease at the way in which she reads Rizal "into" the texts of the Philippine revolutionary movement, thereby risking the "error of perpetuating the dominance of *Ilustrado* narratives of nationalism" and of "leaving out the masses" may be legitimate criticisms for other such similar attempts, but it is our view that this would apply to this work only if the whole problematic of knowledge production and revolutionary praxis dealt with in *Necessary Fictions* were set aside as Veric seems to do. The inescapable incompleteness and limitations of this book notwithstanding, one could even venture that Veric's exceedingly valid concerns compose in reality the central themes and major underlying motivations of Hau's work.

Furthermore, while not unduly emphasizing it, one ought not to deny the extent by which the narratives of the Philippine revolutionary movements themselves are actually implicated in a kind of complicated half-way fashion in these very same ilustrado narratives. The activists of the 1960s, coming mostly from the universities, in fact envisioned themselves as forming part of the "Second Propaganda Movement," continuing and moving beyond the first. For some scholars, the "radicalism" of Filipino revolutionary movements is vitiated precisely by their undeniable participation in, and complex relation with this elite tradition (cf. Salazar 2002). Such criticisms can only be effectively countered, not by denying the facts of history, nor by a resolute act of forgetting, but by treating this as a theoretical and practical problem requiring a real and sustained effort towards viable resolution. Hau's pathbreaking book confronts this issue with an intensity and intellectual refinement unequalled by any other recent writer on Philippine culture and society.

## Notes

1. Cf. Reynaldo C. Ileto's very interesting discussion of such issues in the essay "History and Criticism: The Invention of Heroes" (1999, 203–37). Ileto however, oversimplifies and deals only with one aspect of Mila Guerrero's stringent and in many ways valid critique of *Pasyon and Revolution*.

2. *The Rizal Blumentritt Correspondence* 1992, 71–72. Translation modified.

3. Renato Constantino 1978, 6. Compare this with Rizal's statement in his attack on the journalist Vicente Barrantes, "We shall make thorough study of matters like Tagalog art and Philippine literature *when brighter days reign*" (Italics mine; *La Solidaridad* 1967, 359).

4. This problem is certainly much easier to locate in 20th century Western thought. For example, Karl R. Popper and Friedrich A. Hayek both launched a sustained polemic against such claims to knowledge of the "whole." The rightwing theorist Hayek polemicized against what he called "constructivist rationalism" in the following manner: "Since for Descartes reason was defined as logical deduction from explicit premises, rational action also came to mean only such action as was determined entirely by known and demonstrable truth. It is almost an inevitable step from this to the conclusion that only what is true in this sense can lead to successful action, and that therefore everything to which man owes his achievements is a product of his reasoning thus conceived...Sometimes the delusion is expressed with a touching naivete by the enthusiasts for a deliberately planned society." From similar attacks on "idealized conceptions" of knowledge production, Hayek and Hau derive opposite conclusions! One can almost sense that Hau's main adversaries in her book are not the proponents of the knowledge of the "whole" but precisely those like Popper and Hayek, who derive politically quietistic and reactionary conclusions from their critiques of such notions.

Cf. Hayek 1979. Also chapter 3 of Karl R. Popper 1997 (1957).

5. Such a statement can only be read as an indirect allusion to the current fashion among Western intellectuals of indiscriminate denigration of all "official nationalisms" whether of the right or the left as essentially "mythologizing" and "essentialist" as

opposed to the more lively “popular nationalisms”. A crude compendium of such notions, probably gaining their ultimate provenance from Hau’s adviser in Cornell, Benedict Anderson, can be glimpsed at in Eva-Lotta E. Hedman and John T. Sidel’s *Philippine Politics and Society in the Twentieth Century* (2000). The exasperating thing about these writers (not excluding Anderson) is that they tend to speak with such self assuredness about societies they have hardly even begun to study with any depth. Their “white mythologies” thereby attain the status of unimpeachable truths among their ill-informed readers in the West. They mirror, at the very least, the radically unequal relations of intellectual production between the so-called center and its peripheries.

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