

philippine studies: historical and ethnographic viewpoints

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Editor's Introduction

Filomeno V. Aguilar, Jr.

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Editor's Introduction

At no other time in Philippine history than now have social divisions in Philippine society been so toxic, with the political polarization unravelling in all sordidness in social media. A key bone of contention concerns interpretations of the past, particularly of the Philippines under the rule of Ferdinand Marcos, with the contending sides transforming public history into a major arena of political ideational struggle. The professorial address that begins this issue, based on a keynote address I gave at the Fourth Philippine Studies Conference in Japan held in November 2018, tries to map out a response by the academic community to this current conjuncture. The address offers reflections on the academic community's inability to make a dent on public discourse concerning Marcos's rule because, even after his downfall, there has been a lack of scholarly studies on that period; textbook production has been insulated from the anti-Marcos movement, sometimes abetted by the personal idiosyncrasies of some established scholars; the sluggishness and imperfections of the Philippine justice system have not affirmed academic assertions about the Marcos plunder; and academic perspectives on the Marcos regime have lacked traction as Marcos's downfall has not reduced the pervasiveness of corruption, resulting in People Power's loss of its "charter status."

In this context, social scientists can seek to bridge social divides by seeking to understand the perspectives of those with whom they differ on fundamental issues about Philippine society, including social fantasies that many academics find odd but which adherents find completely plausible. It also behooves social scientists to produce nuanced but comprehensive narratives about the Marcos past based on solid research and dispassionate analysis. Eschewing simplistic demonization or glorification, social scientists, we hope, can finally make a mark on public history and overcome the currently fissiparous nationalisms. Another important task, the address contends, is to understand the conditions specific to the Philippines that breed authoritarianism as well as those that nurture democratic ideals.

During the years of Marcos's rule in the Philippines, Filipinos in Winnipeg, Canada, established *Silangan*, a newspaper that saw print from 1977 to 1982. Jon Malek analyzes how contributors to the paper grappled with what it meant

to be a Filipino in Canada as they discussed issues of cultural maintenance, Filipino heritage, and political engagement in Canada—but with little said about political engagement with the homeland. Malek states that the paper’s editor was staunchly against Marcos and martial law, but his stance was hardly evident on the pages of *Silangan*—a curious compartmentalization. The sort of public history taken up in the paper was the colonial past, which was seen as bequeathing ostentatious cultural practices and other “indigenous evils” that overseas Filipinos must shed in the diaspora. Writers debated the delicate balance between assimilation into Canadian society and retention of Filipino identity, which meant overcoming some but also retaining other aspects of the colonial past. Tellingly, the paper’s closure came in the wake of disputes over the 1980 election of officers of the Philippine Association of Manitoba—an event that manifested the intransigence of political “evils” imported from the homeland, where these practices have remained in full bloom.

The contentiousness of public history as embedded in political campaign discourse came to the fore in the 2016 national elections, particularly in the contest for the vice presidency between Maria Leonor “Leni” Robredo, the eventual winner, and Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr., who has disputed the outcome. Oscar Serquiña Jr. analyzes the digital images deployed by both camps, which deliberately linked Robredo to Corazon “Cory” Aquino and Marcos Jr. to Ferdinand Marcos Sr.—thus hooking the living candidates to two dead political figures who many frame as the arch enemies in the People Power narrative. In this manner, the dead have maintained a lingering presence and potency (not unlike old beliefs about the dead) to influence elections even as social networking sites have allowed voters new ways of engaging with politics. As Serquiña argues, the “hyperactive production and consumption” of these digital images can be seen as a form of creative politics that eventually influenced voting behavior. The narrow electoral gap between Robredo and Marcos Jr. is a materialization of the continuing rivalry between Cory Aquino and Ferdinand Marcos, which has heightened in toxicity after the elections given Pres. Rodrigo Duterte’s championing of the cause of Marcos.

This issue also features a research note by Francis Gealogo on Masonry and Mabini’s classic texts; this journal’s interview with Aileen Baviera on Philippines–China relations and maritime disputes; and two review essays, one by Christoffer Mitch Cerda on two books of Soledad Reyes and another by Michael Pante on five works in urban history.

Filomeno V. Aguilar Jr.
Ateneo de Manila University