

Book Review

Twentieth-Century Philippine Political Thinkers: Selected Readings, edited by Jorge V. Tigno. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2018. Pp. 588. ISBN 9789715428699.

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In his 2016 inaugural speech, President Rodrigo Duterte vowed to wage an “unrelenting” and “unconventional” antidrug campaign and warned the Commission on Human Rights to get off his way. It was an illiberal speech from an illiberal president, hinting at the murderous measures that he would soon implement. Listeners might have failed to notice, however, that Duterte issued his authoritarian warning alongside liberal platitudes: quotes from icons of liberal democracy, Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Philippine political rhetoric in the twentieth century has often grappled with the liberal democratic ideals enshrined in its laws and the desires of strongmen and their allies to upend them. The result has been political writing that nestles dictatorial ideas within democratic platitudes. Historian Eric Hobsbawm (1962) once claimed that, since the “age of revolution,” even the most authoritarian regimes have called themselves democratic or have claimed to represent “the people.” Yet Filipino politicians should be praised for the deftness with which they have euphemized attempts at strongman rule, as wonderful linguistic and theoretical somersaults abound in our political history: from Manuel Quezon’s “partyless democracy,” Ferdinand Marcos’s “democratic revolution from the center,” Jose Maria Sison’s “national democratic movement,” to Duterte’s anodyne declamation of quotes from a 1950s civics class.

Jorge V. Tigno, editor of the book, *Twentieth-Century Philippine Political Thinkers*—a selection of readings from prominent thinkers with essay-length introductions written by Tigno and his colleagues

mostly from the University of the Philippines Department of Political Science—views the tension between fantasies of a centralized state and the rhetoric of an American-style liberal democracy as a result of the unique attributes of the Philippine postcolonial state. Twentieth-century Filipino political thinkers, Tigno argues, were “largely Western and liberal in their values but deeply aware of the peculiarities of the country of their birth” (p. 555).

One of the “peculiarities,” of course, has been the penchant for strong leaders that we have already noted. And the volume’s most interesting chapters are those that detail the tensions between the country’s liberal democratic ideals and attempts of court theoreticians to justify the centralizing visions of their masters. The most crucial and also the best-written chapter in the volume is Miriam Coronel-Ferrer’s introduction to the work of Remigio Agpalo—possibly the most consequential political scientist of the century who constructed an indigenous model of Philippine politics to justify the regime of Ferdinand E. Marcos. Agpalo, explains Coronel-Ferrer, thought of himself as a liberal democrat, even as he argued for a strong executive. She explains that while Agpalo “was liberal in intellect and by academic training, he was at heart the typical Filipino that he described in his works, deeply attached to the cultural milieu that gravitated toward a strong leader” (p. 149).

Whether or not one subscribes to Agpalo’s essentialist notion of an ideal “Filipino” leader is beside the point. The chapters on Agpalo, Marcos’s education minister Onofre D. Corpuz, and Ricardo Pascual (the thinker who defended Quezon’s “partyless democracy”) show that Filipino political thinkers themselves believed in the reality of this Filipino mentality. It was a belief about the Filipino political psyche that these thinkers helped reify, and a belief that possibly haunts us until today. The relevance of this volume toward understanding the populist/authoritarian present is therefore obvious.

Yet the book also covers much larger ground, and Tigno’s deft curation affords us glimpses into various other themes in twentieth-century politics, from early Filipino feminism (see chapter on Pura Villanueva Kalaw) and Filipino conceptions of Southeast Asia (Estrella D. Solidum), to economic nationalism (Claro M. Recto).

I have only minor quibbles with the volume. First, it is strewn with grammatical errors. In particular, there are many errors and inconsistencies in verb tense, for example: “He has been lionized as a passionate intellectual and student leader during his younger

years” (p. 46). A book this important deserves better editing, especially if we wish to raise the quality of publishing in the Philippines.

Second and more crucially, the book’s secular orientation leads it to neglect the importance of Christianity in Philippine political thought. The volume, for lack of a better term, is a very “UP” book, and it would have benefited from engaging thinkers from Christian backgrounds, like those from the Jesuit university down the road. Why not consider the midcentury Christian humanism writers like Leon Ma. Guerrero or Salvador Araneta? Moreover, any account of resistance during the Marcos period must account for the liberation theology-inspired “social democracy” that animated a significant portion of the anti-Marcos Left. Why social democracy in the Philippines, in contrast to Europe, took on a distinctly religious flavor remains a crucial question. To answer it, accounts of political thought in the twentieth century must consider thinkers like Romeo Intengan, S.J.

Tigno’s project, however, is a start and not an end. My hope is that this book goes through multiple editions, or that other similar projects get to be published. Tigno is correct to note that scholarly interest in the nationalist political thinkers of the nineteenth century has led us to neglect those of the twentieth. His book is therefore a necessary intervention.

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Reference

Hobsbawm, Eric. 1962. *The Age of Revolution: 1789-1848*. Cleveland: World Publishing.