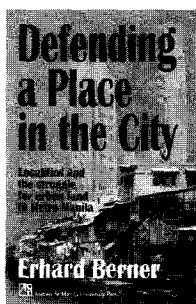# Review Essay

Changing Contexts of Urban Poor Struggles

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Defending a Place in the City: Localities and the Struggle for Urban Land in Metro Manila. By ERHARD BERNER. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1997. 263 pp. ISBN 971-550-270-9

With the publication of Erhard Berner's book, *Defending a Place in the City*, readers will come to realize that the field of urban studies has come a long way from the 'culture of poverty' paradigms of the 1960s and is now refreshingly attentive to the strategic and transformational value of urban struggles. The 'culture of poverty' perspective, a major influence on urban scholars and policymakers for decades, underscored and lamented what were seen as the characteristic dependence, fatalism and apathy of the urban poor. Alternatively, it patronized the poor by rationalizing their behavior as a logical response to and consequence of poverty.

Such a view has spawned a host of stereotypes and misconceptions about squatters and slum dwellers. Images of urban poor communities as rural villages transplanted in urban space have bred not a few myths about the slum dwellers' rootlessness and their cultural and social alienation from urban society. They have also been pictured as culturally trapped in clientelist modes of social behavior in their dealings with government authorities, politicians and rich people. The media have also portrayed them as opportunists in every way, occupying land which is not theirs, terrorizing landowners, stealing water and electricity, selling the homelots that are given to them by the government, and trading their votes for money or favors from politicians every election time.

URBAN POLITICS

Thanks to Berner's *Defending a Place in the City* we are presented with a different appreciation of the social

organization of urban poor communities, not from a culturally patronizing standpoint but from the perspective of groups engaged in strategic collective action. In doing so, the author manages to indirectly demolish some widely-held myths about the urban poor. Far from being rootless and alienated, the urban poor's collective struggles are very much about defending their rootedness in the spaces they have carved out in the city. Their skill and experience in building and maintaining organizations of increasing complexity from neighborhood associations to city-wide federations and even national coalitions attest to their having found alternatives to traditional patronage-based sources of power.

As a student of social movements, I consider Berner's account of the struggles of five urban poor communities as opening up a new way of understanding urban politics in Philippine society. Current understanding of urban politics has been rendered sterile by two prevailing paradigms — one which assumes that patron-client bonds continue to be the dominant principle integrating the poor with the elitist political system and the other which dismisses collective mobilizations by the poor as ineffectual in themselves because of their failure to challenge prevailing structures of subordination found in the state and in the market.

In Berner's work, we come to see that characterizations of urban poor communities as governed by systems of political patronage do not encompass the whole reality of how these commu-

nities relate to the elite-dominated political system. At the moment, however, we know practically little about the specific dynamics of Philippine urban politics under a globalized economic milieu where competition for land has become tighter, where political machines have become less important to electoral victory compared to media-induced popularity, where local governments are increasingly becoming a focus of negotiation and popular mobilization. This changing political milieu invites a serious reexamination of overly simplistic and reductionist conceptions of urban politics based on patron-client explanations. Organized urban poor communities play a particularly key role in this new understanding of urban politics and Berner's accounts show us emergent modes of action and social relationships that break away from the traditional molds. Berner's work is an important first step toward documenting and analyzing urban local politics from a non-traditional perspective.

NEW POLITICAL PRACTICES
What then do we make of these modes of collective action which Berner describes? Do they mean that we are finally witnessing a new kind of politics among the underclasses, one that redefines power no longer in terms of dyadic patron-client relations but in terms of horizontal bonds of solidarity?

Berner introduces the notion of locality as a conceptual tool to explain the process of identity and group formation among the urban poor and

their transformation into political actors. The locality, he says, is a socially defined spatial entity which provides the 'multiple relations and interdependencies that can be the basis of group building and collective action'. Localities provide as well the social context where the collective learning of new political practices can take place.

It is too early to say that these collective efforts that Berner describes would amount to a significant change in political culture. Berner himself suggests no such thing. I would contend, however, that they constitute significantly new political practices that add to the poor's repertoire of political action. But whether and how these new practices would solidify into a social movement or into a transformation of political culture is a subject that must wait some years for an answer.

While Berner dismisses as too restrictive class-based theories of urban social movements which tend to give historical significance only to movements oriented toward transforming capitalist urban structures, he nevertheless echoes the pessimism of urban scholars about the urban poor's ability to develop into a movement or a self-conscious political class capable of confronting the power structures of urban society and transforming the urban way of life. An eminent scholar on this topic, Manuel Castells, regards as a genuine urban social movement only those that are able to effect changes in urban, political and cultural practices. He submits that a necessary

condition for a genuine urban social movement to emerge is the forging of stable ties between urban poor organizations and political organizations engaged in 'the broader process of class struggle' (Castells, *The City and the Grassroots,* 1983).

For me, the intriguing question is whether despite the poor's inability to directly confront power structures, they are in fact evolving political practices that can potentially redefine urban politics. My bold contention is that they are. Their continuing efforts at community organizing, securing tenure rights either through self-help methods or by accessing government programs, negotiating with government authorities, lobbying with City Hall or with Congress — all these are new practices that are slowly changing the poor's understanding of the sources and instruments of political power. These elements of political culture are slowly changing, perhaps in limited places, but who knows how far-reaching these changes can go in time.

Although these practices coexist with the old practices associated with the patronage-based political culture, there is no denying the fact that these practices were not there 30 or 20 years ago. I have been around long enough to see how government's way of dealing with urban poor communities has changed over the years because of the way organized communities have metamorphosed from being simply agents of resistance to being strategic collective actors searching for solutions to their problems. Relocation practices

are gradually changing, albeit with much difficulty and with far from satisfactory results. These changes have come about not so much because a new law has been passed requiring govern-ment agencies to observe more humane procedures in evicting and relocating squatters but more because communi-ties are now demanding that honest-to-goodness negotiations take place in which they can participate in develop-ing alternatives to government plans.

COLLECTIVE LEARNING

Berner of course points out that behind many of these initiatives are the non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Berner devotes an important section of his concluding chapter assessing the role of NGOs as advocates of poor people's causes. That NGOs are very much behind the successful efforts of urban poor communities to defend their spaces or to exact concessions from the state does not diminish the fact that new political practices are being achieved by the poor themselves. They are the ones engaged in these actions and a critical process of collec-tive and social learning is taking place. The political significance of this collective learning process is an open question. But it is a question worth asking.

What Berner has judged as the poor's failure to develop 'supralocal structures of communication under their own steam, not to mention alliances, loyalty and solidarity' is, I think, a premature and static assess-ment. If localities have provided the

social context for the development of struggles over land and territorially-based interests, there are similar socially defined spaces in which the urban poor are able to carry on struggles beyond territorial boundaries.

The successive experiences in legislative lobbying, and more recently, the urban poor's participation in the party list elections held last May, have produced new contexts for collective learning. These may not be the 'every-day life' practices experienced in the spatial context of the community, but they have become 'everyday life' practices for members and leaders of urban poor coalitions who must often leave their communities to attend to coalition-building tasks and activities. Supra-local solidarity is engendered through these practices. More and more urban poor leaders spend their time attending meetings in government offices, appearing in public hearings, writing position papers, conducting the planning and evaluation session of one coalition project or other. The social contexts of collective learning on the possibilities of political action have expanded beyond the locality.

How government responds to the collective efforts of the urban poor will either facilitate the collective learning of new political practices or hinder it. It will either erode or reinforce the poor's faith in clientelist modes of action. Will government policy put a premium on organization by develop-ing programs that reward organized effort or will it encourage people to queue up in front of some government

office to ask for a job, a house or money for burying someone? Will government opt to deal with community organizations and negotiate with them to arrive at some mutually acceptable relocation package or take the simple solution of paying off squatters to vacate lands needed for government infrastructure? While state responses continue to constrain the poor's ability to negotiate effectively for more advantageous policies, the challenge will always be how to turn the constraints into opportunities for crafting new modes of political action.