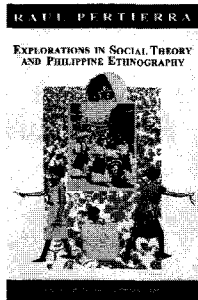


Review Essay

Illuminations of the Ordinary

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Explorations in Social Theory



and Philippine

Ethnography. By

RAUL PERTIERRA.

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Three routes have been taken to establish Filipino social science as a legitimate discourse of academic life. The first distanced scientific work from western-based social thought and dwelt almost exclusively on local phenomena, seeking to discover the principles governing Filipino social life through the cracks and bumps of local language and practice. The second route was kinder to western-based sociological thought which social scientists applied, whenever appropriate, to understand and help alleviate Philippine social problems, among them poverty, political corruption, and overpopulation. The third route, a road

less taken, at least when the first two were in their heydeys, was similar to the second except that it swerved away from the narrow path of social problems and pursued topics along the wider lane of everyday social practices — a dancing ritual in Cebu, slave trade in Mindanao, the rise of malls in Dagupan, a cottage industry in Iloilo, flyovers in Metro Manila, or friendships in a Tagalog town, among others — and showed how these practices validated, qualified or contested existing models of social science thought.

Raul Pertierra's work on the *aswang* phenomenon, written in the late 1980s, falls into this third category. So do his previous books — *Religion, Politics and Rationality in a Philippine Community* (1988), *Cultures and Texts: Representations of Philippine Society* (1994), and *Philippine Localities and Global Perspectives: Essays in Society and Culture* (1995). This latest work, *Explorations in Social Theory and Philippine Ethnography*, is a continuation of a journey he has set out in these

previous works: to make sense of the ordinary, everyday practices in the rural town of Zamora, Ilocos Sur, in the light of the larger and global project of modernity.

It is a sumptuous feast of insights. In each of the four long essays that comprise the body of the text, Pertierra deftly weaves ideas from philosophy, history, social anthropology and sociology, and then sees how local experiences are situated within the larger map of modern life. His declared aim, as stated in the introduction, is 'to provide the reader with a conceptual and perspectival framework within which to assess and understand particular perceptions of Philippine society and culture'. Or, to borrow one of the many elegant phrases that mine the book, to deconstruct the sphere of the social 'in order to reveal its interests and explore its silences'.

THE SCIENCE OF THE SOCIAL

The general framework is set forth in the book's first and longest essay, 'The Conditions of Possibility for a Science of the Social'. The science of the social, the essay argues, arose from processes that unleashed the modern condition, three chief ones being the achievements of science, the emergence of a global market, and the rise of the nation state. These forces — fueled by the synchronization of time, the internalization of measurements, and the decontextualization of space — transformed disparate communities into an autonomous culture (a national culture) with its own set of meanings, representations or

signifying practices. This process, no doubt, continues to date, charged among others by advanced communications technology.

These new representations draw largely from lived experience (traditional culture), but are appropriated and disembedded — in short, overhauled — from that experience. Local cultures are thus welded into the structures of the global or modern order, and their ontological security threatened by this transformation. But while cultures are no longer boundedly local, they continue nevertheless to be located and expressed within local structures of experience, influenced as these structures are by wider contexts. It is precisely the need to apprehend this cultural condition that led to the rise, and eventual empowerment, of social science. As a distinct gaze or mode of understanding, the science of the social anchors itself on a view of society as 'artifactual', i.e. not pre-given or immutable, one that is subject to scientific study, one capable of building new models of self and society, and one helpful as a tool for governing the nation state. Anthropology's task, in keeping with this agenda, is to articulate this cultural condition and, in Pertierra's words, 'account for the global ecumene as well as for its differently located variations'.

RELIGION AND MORAL EXPRESSION

The rest of the book is an attempt to meet this task. Chapter Two, entitled 'Religion and the Moral Expression of Everyday Life', charts the religious

rituals of Zamora according to the liturgical calendar. From a description of the fiesta, the Flores de Mayo, the Holy Week rites, the Block Rosary devotions, visits to the cemetery on All Soul's Day, as well as the Christmas and New Year celebrations (many of the details will be familiar to Filipino readers) comes two conclusions. First, echoing Durkheim, is that religious rituals are sources of community solidarity (and that community in Philippine society also includes supernatural beings, deceased kin and strangers who have been accepted into one's network). Second is that rituals are also spaces for the assertion and maintenance of status, or the playing out of 'strategies of prowess', as well as a venue for mediating contests between or among rival claims to status.

This rivalry is underscored in Zamora as it has two centers, Luna and Bato, each one vying for community allegiance. However, despite outside influences or because of the lack of it (allusion here to the weak state), religion remains the idiom of everyday life among Zamorans, effectively distinguishing Zamoran habitus (the periphery) from national life (the center). Nevertheless, the larger word has intruded into traditional practice. For a growing number of Zamorans, especially among those who have emigrated or worked overseas, religion has increasingly become a personal and private affair. Likewise, through the influence of alternative religious groups, principally the *Iglesia ni Cristo* and the Methodists, some conventional

religious practices (e.g. the fiesta, the notions of sin and thanksgiving) are either ignored or their significance altered. Within local cultures, it appears, are sub-local variations which needs further articulation in social analysis.

THE ILOCANO KOMEDYA

The penetration of the global into the local, or of the center into the periphery, anchors the discussion of the *komedya* in Chapter III. The *komedya*, introduced into the Philippines in the 17th century by Spanish priests as part of their missionary work, is a prime example of traditional Ilocano drama. Its plot centers on the conflict between Christians and Moors, and its characters are drawn from a wide spectrum of historical periods and geographical settings. In performance, the *komedya* is slow-paced and lengthy (a show can last for days); as well, its language and movement are, for modern audiences, archaic. Once very popular in rural areas, its performance is now on the decline, thanks in part to the mass media and the ascendancy of the youth whose preference for sports, beauty pageants and discos in the town plaza have replaced the *komedya* as entertainment fare during fiestas and other special occasions.

What concerns Pertierra, however, is not so much the decline of the *komedya* but the way national agencies and culturalists attempt to preserve it as part of the cultural heritage. This act of preservation, however, necessarily entails a mistranslation of text and

performance. To make the *komedya* accessible to modern audiences, and to legitimize it as an art form, the original text is shortened, its pace quickened, and its performances professionalized. Thus, by relocating and reshaping the *komedya*, national culture has managed to disarticulate traditional drama from lived experience, disembed it from its traditional habitus, and construct a new set of meanings deemed more appropriate to the national good. To imagine a nation is thus to forget some things and fabricate others.

TIME AND TRUST

The relocation and reshaping of the *komedya* show that cultural meanings are constituted in space. But these meanings are also constituted in time. And in Chapter IV, entitled 'Time and Trust in a Philippine Village', it is the experience of duration and temporality which receives theoretical attention. Three points are salient. First is the notion that time is a dimension for ordering expectations and actions involving sequence and invariance. Zamoran females, for example, are ruled by a different set of expectations before and after marriage, as well as before and after pregnancy, while males are less subject to similar varying expectations throughout most of their life cycle. Second is the notion that the experience of duration and temporality is rooted in rituals, or in the routines and constraints of everyday life; these rituals also reflect relationships found in the local economy and polity as well as those between genders and genera-

tions. Witness, for instance, the taboo imposed on sexual relations between husbands and wives for forty days after the wife has given birth. Observe, as well, the traditional healing rites of the *banyos* and *koskosip* which summon the aid of ancestors, thus bringing the past to the present and denying the passage of time. Third is the notion that these sets of expectations are based on 'structures of trust' which give ritual (and the temporalities associated with it) the stability and coherence for the maintenance and reproduction of social life. Men, for example, can be counted upon to be more self-assured and predictable, while women are seen as more sensitive to the needs of others; women are also more likely than men to perceive new initiatives or suggest practical compromises. But this is village life, where structures of trust are built on close, direct and personal relationships, mainly with kith and kin. In modern societies, by contrast, structures of trust are forged largely by civil relationships with strangers who, though unrelated by blood or marriage, are seen to share fundamental affinities, ones suited for modern life.

Scores of Zamorans have worked or resided abroad and have also experienced alternative structures of trust and, with them, varying conceptions of time. But life in a foreign land contains its own disenchantment which upsets the cosmic balance they acquired before migration as members of a small rural town. But then, Zamorans who return home do not experience a cognitive breakdown

because their participation in local rituals enables them to regain their balance and links them once more to the familiar world of genders and generations, past and present. Rituals thus serve to re-synchronize trust and time and help Zamorans to tune-up, so to speak, for everyday rural life. This ability to accommodate to different contexts suggests that, as anthropological subjects, Zamorans are neither trapped in an ethnographic present nor suspended in time. They are part of a global society and have adapted themselves to it the best way they know how. In detailing how these global forces intrude into village life and how in turn village life shapes larger worlds, conceptions of temporality and duration, Pertierra argues, should assume greater significance in social analysis than it has before.

SOCIAL THEORY AND FILIPINO EXPERIENCE

Many readers will find the book a tough read, and once read, even tougher to simplify. All four essays, and particularly the first and the fourth, are dense with concepts and terms that assume familiarity with contemporary social theory, most especially the critical, constructionist, and poststructuralist schools. An index would have helped, allowing the reader easy access to an idea or topic which surfaced earlier in the text. Without an index, all the reader can do, aside from recalling the desired page, is to refer to the introduction every now and then to refocus on the main argument of an

essay. But then again, much of the writing in contemporary social science books and journals appears, at first reading, to be just as inaccessible, even arcane. Much time is also needed to assimilate their ideas and apply them to an understanding of social practice.

Only when that's done can one appreciate the value of works like Pertierra's. In all four essays, and in books that preceded this one, Raul Pertierra has continued to illumine the ordinary life of Filipinos. His works refine and deepen understanding of what earlier social scientists have discovered about Filipino society and culture (though these are not always stated), demonstrate a sensitivity to the duality between the Filipinos' private and public worlds, offer insights that can be extended to other facets of Filipino life, and perhaps more important to the globalization of academic life, link the Filipino experience to an international body of social thought. One wishes though an elaboration of the power relations accompanying the process of disarticulation or colonization, and more effort in connecting observations about Zamoran life to previous studies of Philippine society and culture. But these can be done in later works. The present book is impressive enough. If Filipino social science is to more strongly break into the global scene — contesting, validating or reinforcing dominant theoretical schemes through data provided by the Filipino experience — the works of Raul Pertierra, and others like him, will help accelerate the drive.