

Reply

On Norman G Owen's 'Toward a Modern Economic History'

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THE review portion in Norman G Owen's review essay critiques my recent *An Economic History of the Philippines* (UP Press, 1997). By itself the review is conventional: it proffers some faint praise for the book, and then specifies inadequacies and shortcomings, from his point of view.

What lifts the review from the conventional is that Owen piggybacks it onto the essay portion of his piece. This latter portion is brief, although its ideas are interlaced with those in the review. It is the more venturesome part of Owen's piece. Here he speculates and suggests what a 'modern economic history of the Philippines.... might include'.

In knowledgeable and disciplined hands, the review essay tandem can be a powerful vehicle for criticism on the one hand, as well as for constructive suggestions for the progress of scholarship, on the other. For the review specially, the standards of criticism are enhanced and elevated.

Owen should have stuck to a straightforward review, in which the intelligence of the reviewer-critic simply pinpoints shortcomings and errors as

well as expresses relevant opinions about the work under review.

Instead, Owen opts for the more ambitious and complex review essay. For this expanded approach, he enumerates 32 writers of 'significant' works on Philippine socioeconomic history since 1962. Then, in the references at the end of his piece, Owen lists 45 writers and their works. Owen utilizes this dazzling array of authorities in two ways: first as ammunition in his review to show up shortcomings in my book; and second, as material in what he says ought to be a 'modern Philippine economic history'.

COMPARABILITY

With his lists of significant authors and their works arrayed against my book, Owen early on employs the analytical approach. He states that my book has 'more detail, specially statistical, than any previous study'.

This is obvious, but comparison hangs on the rule of comparability—that the works compared be comparable. The items on Owen's lists make up an uneven stew. Those that are relevant to comparison with my book on the issue of amount

of detail and data are similarly uneven. And they are all special studies, mostly papers on special topics. They are nice pieces, but none is an economic history of the Philippines.

Further on, Owen rejects all standards of criticism by comparison, when he likens my book to 'its predecessors'. He does not name any: I know he cannot, because my book is the first economic history of the Philippines.

My book is a narrative and analytical history of economic activity in the Philippines, from the eve of the late 16th century Spanish conquest to the 1940s. It attempts to portray the economy of the archipelago during their period, in its large compass. Economic history is part of the discipline of economics; the discipline analyzes economic activity and phenomena through the techniques of economic history, economic statistics and economic theory.

FRUGALITY

True to its nature, the discipline of economics is frugal: economic history is based on facts; statistics and econometrics on the quantitative data; and economic theory on specified assumptions and logic. There is no room in economic history, for instance, for Owen's assertion of 'the economic development which occurred from the 16th to the early 19th century'. This assertion is belied by the facts. The official population estimates for the territory under the Spanish regime during the period of the 1580s to the 1680s show a protracted population loss during that difficult period—despite the expansion of the territory under the

regime's control. (See my *An Economic History of the Philippines*, pp. 45-47, 55). How, then, could Owen say that there was development since the 16th century?

I now turn to the issue of citations of sources, footnotes and bibliography. I wrote my 'Notes on Philippine History', a chapter in Gerardo Sicat's compilation *Economics and Development: An Introduction* (UP Press, 1965) when I was teaching political science. The piece was heavily footnoted: 74 pages, 132 footnotes. I wrote it to provoke and to guide others into writing an economic history of the Philippines. Nobody did during the next 25 years; in 1990, in my second year as lecturer in Philippine economic history at the School of Economics, University of the Philippines, I decided to write the big one.

Accordingly, I organized my lecture along the lines of chapters. I distributed voluminous material to my students, including synopses, tables, non-tabulated data, and my sources. In my book, most of the sources appear as Principal Sources at the end of each chapter.

I was niggardly in including an author, document, or other document in my principal sources. I included those of superior historiographical importance on the one hand, and with information or data, unavailable elsewhere, on the other. Owen says I relied heavily on 'well-known Spanish accounts'. In fact I also included little-known Spanish accounts, but I will not quibble. I used Spanish accounts because they are relevant and are generally un-read, even by many who know them by title.

SOURCES

I enhanced my perspective and insights on my subject by reading virtually all the 18th century material on the Philippines in the library of the British Museum—the Blair and Robertson collection is weak for the 18th century. I researched at the *Archivo General de Indias* in Sevilla. Owen says that I used a ‘few documents’ from these archives.

In this brief comment Owen may have betrayed ignorance or unfamiliarity with the material in the Sevilla archives. I listed eight documents from these archives in the *Principal Sources* to Chapter Four of my book. Three of these are of extraordinary historiographical importance and contain more socioeconomic information and insight on actual life in the provinces of Filipinas than the items in Owen’s list of references.

The first of the three is Doc. No. 162 (see the entry in the *Principal Sources*); it contains the Ordinances of Good Government issued in 1758 by Governor General Pedro Manuel de Arandia, to regulate the administration of the provinces. Blair and Robertson states that ‘no copy of it is known to exist’. This set of ordinances introduced a landmark policy in Filipinas: the promotion of cash agriculture.

Doc. No. 244 (1739, 1740) and Doc. No. 250-251 (1743) (see the entries in the *Principal Sources* to Chapter Four) are records of inspections by two members of the Audencia in Manila, of the Tagalog provinces and of the northern Luzon province of Cagayan, respectively. Doc. No. 244 deals with the protests of the natives against usurpation of their

lands by the haciendas of the Spanish friar orders. It is an authentic record of the agrarian unrest that led to the Hukbalahap movement of the 20th century. Doc. No. 250-251 portrays the actual conditions of life of the people of Cagayan on the one hand, and the irregularities in the implementation of the Ordinances of Good Government (1642), on the other. For Owen’s information, Doc. No. 244 has several hundred pages; Doc. No. 250-251 consists of more than 1,000 pages. I repeat that none of the socioeconomic history items in Owen’s list can compare with the foregoing three documents in historiographical importance and volume of information.

But I cite, in the *Principal Sources* to my Chapter Six, two authentic economic history authors in Owen’s List. These are Ed C de Jesus, *The Tobacco Monopoly in the Philippines* (1980) and Benito Legarda Jr, *American Entrepreneurs in the 19th Century Philippines, Explorations in Entrepreneurial History* (1965).

CHOSEN FOCUS

The main substantive criticism of my book in Owen’s review essay is that my economic history does not contain enough socioeconomic history. This is legitimate comment. But the economic historian must decide on what is enough, in order to preserve the core of his or her subject. Otherwise, religious, political, scientific, architectural, engineering histories will all have to be revised to accommodate the varied foci of special-interest writers of socioeconomic papers and books.

For instance, Owen states that a 'modern Philippine socioeconomic history' should include the role of women in the economy. Well, economists and economic historians are gender-neutral. They deal with the entire population as producers, service-providers, and as consumers. I therefore do not respond to all of Owen's specific criticisms. Stitching together all of Owen's local socioeconomic histories and special-topic papers will not produce an economic history of

the Philippines in its large compass.

What I plead guilty to is that I did not put in footnotes. I explain that my book is a textbook for students and material for general readers. I did not write it as a scholarly treatise. In my text I cite the major source I used for each important topic. There is no rule that says that authors must write only for scholars; I believe that students and general readers are a worthy audience.