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## The Left's Ventriloquist Act

*Armando Malay Jr*

Mutually beneficial moments occur in the parallel evolution of Philippine nationalism and the Left. These have taken place notably in the political, economic and cultural domains. Yet Marxist ideology stands in the way of a fuller entente, and in the end nationalism remains as the more applicable — because easier — doctrine. EDSA and the Contemplacion case illustrate the various uses of nationalism, with consequences which — depending on the context — are either good or bad for the Left.

**A**LL SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT IN THE PHILIPPINE LEFT HAVE APPROPRIATED, to varying degrees, the nationalist grammar to facilitate the transmission of its Marxist message (capitalist exploitation, class struggle, etc). This constitutes implicit recognition of the fact that, left to its own devices, the leftist gospel would have little chance of obtaining an audience. It also implies that whatever success the Left has encountered in its debate with the Right is due to its recourse to nationalist sentiments. In any event a hard-line nationalist, fascist Right

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does not exist in the Philippine political arena: the Left does not have to exert great efforts to 'reclaim' the banner of nationalism from its antagonist on the other end of the political spectrum.

Fortunately for the Philippine Left, its affinity with nationalism has never been put to the test as was the nationalism of the communist regimes of China and Vietnam. (I

refer to the disintegration of the ideological nexus which bonded China to the former USSR, and Vietnam in its turn to both the Soviet Union and China — all three regimes sharing the same forward-looking ideology but coming to realize that 'proletarian internationalism' was a utopian proposition in the 20<sup>th</sup> century context.) Contradictions between the two doctrines have always remained just below the point of rupture. At several points in modern Philippine history the spokesmen of the one seem to be the ventriloquists of the other, making it possible for Marxists to perpetuate the notion that they remain well-integrated in mainstream society. The immutability of Marxist arguments — especially against the backdrop of contemporary globalization — assures the constancy of the Left, but it will always be in competition against a more strongly-entrenched tradition. Three themes dominate the nationalist-leftist meeting of the minds: national sovereignty, the so-called national bourgeoisie, and cultural nationalism.

#### NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY

THE Marxist-Leninist critique of imperialism has quite naturally meshed with the Recto-Tañada-Diokno school of thought, which considered un-

equal treaties, the presence of the United States military bases, and perceived State Department dictation of Philippine foreign policy as so many manifestations of the curtailment of Philippine national sovereignty. To be sure, the critique was not initiated by Claro Mayo Recto; opposition to foreign intervention and dictation goes back several centuries. But the difference in post-independence polemics was the *leitmotif* of 'betrayal', by the political elite, of the struggle for independence. (Trinidad Pardo de Tavera and Pedro Paterno were thus designated as traitors, an accusation seemingly ratified by their *ilustrado* origins; this is clearly a class-specific link to the other side of the coin, i.e. the promotion of Andres Bonifacio as proletarian hero.)

Collaboration with the colonizer and compromise with freedom, the battle cry raised by the nationalists against their pro-American compatriots, resonated from the late 1940s through the final dismantling of Subic Naval Base in 1991. But a certain nuance is worth noting in the overall chorus. As an extreme example, Amado Guerrero's influential work, *Philippine Society and Revolution* (1971) made a blanket condemnation of all presidential regimes of the Philippine Republic, from that of Manuel Roxas down to Ferdinand Marcos, as 'puppet regimes'. This approach was in keeping with the extremist politics of the pro-Chinese Left of the time. It also contrasted with the willingness of the pro-Soviet *Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas* (PKP) to view Ferdinand Marcos as a Third World 'national bourgeois' who played hardball with the US on such issues as the western monopoly of information networks, unequal trade treaties and even the military bases. The wisdom of the Maoists' maximalist approach may be questioned in retrospect, but it was an extremely rare student movement of the late 1960s-early 1970s anywhere in the world which bothered to appear conciliatory with bourgeois regimes in power.

#### THE NATIONAL BOURGEOISIE

THE mainstream Left has tended to characterize Claro Recto, Lorenzo Tañada, Jose Diokno and other champions of economic nationalism like Alejandro Lichauco and Hilarion Henares Jr, as representatives of the 'national bourgeois'. In practice, this epithet refers more to their outspoken espousal of nationalist causes in the political or media arena than to their status as a member of the entrepreneurial, industrial or commercial class

(although they may indeed be entrepreneurs, industrialists or businessmen in their individual capacities). Consequently 'national bourgeois' arguments attract more attention when they are articulated by legislators or columnists than when they are by, say, the National Economic Protectionist Association (NEPA), an organization with an ephemeral reputation in post-war years.

The hardline Left's early identification with Recto was, in a sense, inevitable. The senator's uncompromising attacks on US postcolonial meddling, even his anti-Magsaysay posture which went against the grain of the postwar mood of gratitude towards the American liberators, endeared him to a generation of Marxists in search of a spiritual father. But as the mainstream Communist movement took an increasingly extremist stance in the

late 1960s, Recto was posthumously projected as an old-school reformist who, of all things, 'failed to see the necessity of agrarian revolution as the basis of a movement towards the achievement of a self-reliant economy which is in turn the basis of genuine political independence' (Sison 1971). Had the *ilustrado* Recto survived to see the Maoist generation which was 'politicized' in

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his name, he would have been amused; in his anti-imperialist heyday he had himself been branded a Communist-coddler, if not an outright Communist.

In the early 1970s, a consciously anti-national bourgeois stance emerged from a small coterie of self-proclaimed socialists. This group was anxious to demarcate its purer (i.e. no compromise with capitalism) line from that of the established 'national-democratic' tradition which, positing the semifeudal status of the Philippine socioeconomic formation, even today still denies the possibility of an *immediate* struggle for socialism. The ultra-radical tenor of this novel discourse (i.e. for the Philippines) certainly contrasted with the 'national-democratic' formula of either the pro-Soviet or the pro-Chinese Left. But any prospects for a truly revolutionary project that it offered were compromised by its crypto-Trotskyist adherents' enthusiastic collaboration with the abhorred bourgeoisie at EDSA in 1986. It is a

moot point, however, whether the nationalist united front gained anything out of such moderation.

Radicalism is one — but not the only — solution to the problem of encroaching foreign interests. For example, the proposal to open the local retail trade to foreign monopolist store chains has revived the nationalist spirit of store owners; yet a united front with the National Democratic Front, much less with the Alex Boncayao Brigade, is out of the question. Why indeed would Shoemart or Robinson risk acquiring reputations as 'communist stores' all for the sake of having allies against the giants Wal-Mart or JC Penney? In this, the local bourgeoisie is acting in character: it would sooner team up with foreign monopoly capital than risk losing its business altogether, or winding up under the thumb of the Communists.

#### CULTURAL NATIONALISM

POPULAR representations of *Inang Bayan* as a violated, humiliated (because colonized) person-nation feed the emotional impulses which continue to be shared by patriots, even conservative ones, and the Left. A rear-guard battle mode best suits this category of nationalism. But given the circumstances, it could not have been otherwise.

The phenomenal Americanization, over most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of mainstream (urban, Christian) Philippine society and its cultural superstructure was done in an acquiescent and definitely non-coercive way. The elite's previous conversion to Christianity, their willing surrender and colonization overdetermined this acceptance, confirming the class content of the leftist critique of bourgeois culture. But it is clear, in the Philippines as elsewhere, that the so-called lower classes also commune in the universal church that is Western, specifically American mass culture (rock or pop music, junk food, 'rebellious' youth fashions, sports or recreational activities). The leftist critique either tends to dismiss this trend-driven culture as being essentially bourgeois, in the service of the ruling classes; or else recuperates it in so-called protest literature, songs, street theater and the like. But it is doubtful if these have indeed 'subverted' the hegemonic culture. On the other hand, the number of pure nationalists, i.e. those Filipinos who claim to practice a nationalism devoid of class considerations and are content to speak the national language or wear native costumes to show their

patriotic spirit, is statistically insignificant. Incidentally, so are those intellectuals (e.g. Nick Joaquin or Carmen Guerrero-Nakpil) who, preferring the Hispanized mores of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, profess disdain for the uncouth *sajonista* culture.

A PRO-AMERICAN NATIONALISM?

MODERN Philippine nationalism is not only in an objectively defensive position, it must also negotiate its rightful place in the national discourse against a dominant school of thought which valorizes so-called Filipino-ness as being a 'unique blend of East and West' — an amalgam whose balance must not be disturbed, and hence refuses to consider western influences as deleterious. In the global-village context, nationalistic considerations matter little for the C, D and E classes when weighed against the economic opportunities made possible by proficiency in English, or even Spanish (not to mention Nippongo or Mandarin). Familiarity with west-

ern, or Japanese, or Chinese management practices is also a plus. All these, of course, would be moot if the 'national bourgeoisie' were strong enough to absorb all the local work force, or morally ascendant enough to inhibit Filipinos from leaving their motherland. But it is not, and the attractiveness of the western ideal remains unchallenged

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among ordinary Filipinos. This much can be gathered from the socio-economic profile of the Filipinos who line up for immigrant visas at the US, Canadian, British and Australian consulates.

Of all the western nations it is the US which has always exerted the strongest magnetic pull on Filipinos. The most impassioned anti-imperialist diatribes of the Left always flounder on the altar of mainstream Filipino society's imagined communion with the American dream, its values and its beliefs. (And yet, what would the Left be without its diatribes?) It was the largely pro-American temperament of the postwar Filipinos that emboldened George Taylor, an American political observer, to suggest that US policy towards its ex-colony take Filipino nationalism seriously and positively, since it could even be harnessed in the service of anti-commu-

nism. The undifferentiated nationalism that Taylor (1964) saw had no class content, but perhaps a racial one:

It came to terms with American imperialism some years ago in a peaceful manner, and it is remarkably free from vulgar Marxism. While it is not inflamed by xenophobia, there is always the possibility that it could quite easily turn against the Chinese in the Philippines.

It is perhaps only in the Philippines that 'pro-American nationalism', an oxymoron in the leftist vocabulary, could be envisaged as a distinct possibility for the mainstream.

The Left must, to use a fashionable term, reinvent its revolutionary project to keep up with the pace of the real world. This is as much as saying that the Left has based its construct on an unreal world. But will this necessary process of reinvention entail a decentering of its class targets and, by extension, its foreign targets? The late 20<sup>th</sup> century global conjuncture is not likely to offer a clear-cut answer. Marxists of all stripes can still identify American and other First World capital as ruthless exploiters of the Philippine labor force; but another, a lateral, danger has opened up in the form of foreign labor that is even cheaper than the local one. As a consequence both of intensified globalization and unequal development, today's Chinese, Vietnamese, Indonesian and Bangladeshi workers accept what would, by Philippine standards, amount to as starvation wages. In the process they are endangering the competitive advantage of unskilled Filipino workers in the global market. The blame must lie somewhere, but it should not be laid upon Chinese, Vietnamese, etc. governments and employers just because they have such huge labor surpluses or because they use these to their own or their national advantage. On the other hand, it is unrealistic to expect the Philippine labor movement to look kindly upon foreign competition. The inability of Marxist theory to give satisfactory answers to the problems brought about by rapidly-evolving methods of 'exploitation', as Marxists define the latter, contrasts with the ease with which nationalist nostrums explain these problems away.

In effect, nationalism is the simplest of all *isms* to put into practice: 'just do it'. It is politically correct in most Third World settings; it has no codified theory; its basic principles require no strenuous mental effort to un-

derstand; and extremely few Filipinos are on record as being violently against it. In the anti-Marcos period it provided the lowest common denominator for the struggle, even as it ultimately failed the Left.

EDSA: 'BAYAN KO' PATRIOTISM

THE anti-Marcos movement in its 1983 to 1986 phase saw a massive outpouring of sentiment: shock, indignation, anger over the Aquino assassination and other abuses committed by the Marcos regime; concern for the deteriorating fabric of Philippine society; and hope for the new moral order that was expected to rise from the ashes of the *ancien regime*. For lack of a better concept, a vaguely nationalist subtext wove these different sentiments together, and it is not fortuitous that in this turbulent period 'Bayan Ko', the dirge-like hymn of the anti-US resistance at the turn of the century, became as popular among moderates and conservatives of the A and B classes as it previously was among the leftist youth and student militants.

But what was the nationalist essence being expressed in the protest rallies, masses, and vigils of the urban upper and middle classes and in the columns of the 'mosquito press'? Was this thought lurking at the back of their minds — that Ferdinand Marcos was a US puppet, therefore the traitor long denounced by the Left? A skeptic would have argued that the mixture of plain civic spirit and moral outrage which came to a head in February 1986 was being misrepresented as nationalism: but such hair-splitting was irrelevant at the time. Even the boycott declared against San Miguel products hardly qualified as economic nationalism, since only Coca-Cola, guilty by association, was affected (and how many Filipinos actually carried out the boycott to the letter?). The common perception that the US government (mainly Ronald Reagan) had supported Marcos until the last minute — and even beyond — did not translate into an anti-US movement among the Corystas. Unlike Cuba in 1959, South Vietnam in 1975, Iran and Nicaragua in 1979, where US backing for the anticommunist autocrat in power meant an American debacle and retreat as soon as the 'puppet' fell, the US remained secure, if not more so, in its hegemonic niche in the Philippines after 25 February 1986.

At the EDSA standoff, an appeal to humanitarian sentiment was elided into nationalist bathos: 'Don't shoot! We are all Filipinos!', a heartfelt cry



that unintentionally implied acquiescence to a massacre, provided that the targets were aliens. Indeed not a single shot was fired, sparing the country from a civil war which would have benefited only the New People's Army. But the success of this non-violent solution can surely be imputed less to the soldiers' nationalism (as conventionally defined) than to the urgent orders from the US government's emissaries to all parties concerned, and above all to the Marcos side, that they refrain from shooting even as the US subtly shifted its full support to the 'rebels'.

Should they be declassified one day, secret US government documents on the four-day uprising may give evidence that Cory Aquino was prevailed upon to change her mind about the US bases issue in exchange for the shift of American support away from Marcos and towards her camp. Up to EDSA, the widow of Ninoy Aquino, was still a signatory to the Convenors Statement of 1984, which notably included a pledge to phase out Clark and Subic. Her change of heart after EDSA may be interpreted from various perspectives, but one fruitful approach would be an appreciation of the danger which an anti-bases successor to Marcos would have represented for US interests in the Philippines and in the region at the time.

Yet all this begs the question: Why did the anti-Marcos signatories of the 1984 pact have to take an anti-bases position? Had they become hostile to the presence of the bases because of the denigration of national sovereignty these represented, and/or because of the prostitution and other social problems they brought in? Or was it simply because an oppositionist would appear less credible as an alternative to Marcos if he/she were as pro-bases as Marcos was perceived to be? In any event, February 1986 was a litmus test for Cory Aquino's convictions. Much like the ultra-radicals who saw the advantage of making their peace with the bourgeoisie at EDSA, she made her accommodation with the bases treaty, lapsing into a position of keeping her options open after she had succeeded Marcos.

#### THE CONTEMPLACION CASE

INTENSE pride in being Filipino marked the post-EDSA period, even if the sense of booting out an alien enemy, as in the Cuban or Vietnamese revolutions, was not quite there. It was generally felt that the insulting definition of the Philippines as 'a country with 40 million cowards and one SOB' had

been forever erased from the national consciousness. Henceforth the reputation of the imagined national community was one that served as a model for the still-enslaved peoples of the world. But this shining reputation took a beating in 1995 with the Flor Contemplacion case. Once again the nation appeared weak and inept; nationalism took on the face of *Inang Bayan*, the battered heroine. And this time the Left fared a little better in the ensuing polemics.

A Filipina servant, protesting her innocence to the end, was meted the death penalty by a Chinese-dominated Singapore judicial system: this was an unusual conflation of ethnic, class and even gender causes. A negative ideological construct named 'Singapore' loomed large in the Philippine imagination in the pre- and post-execution period. The city-State of the Peoples Action Party was represented in the Philippine media as an efficient, clean but 'heartless' place, almost by reason of its very efficiency and cleanliness. Lee Kwan Yew was remembered in Manila as the dispenser of this unsolicited advice: that Filipinos needed less democracy and more discipline, the Marcosian connotations of which needed little underlining.

The martyrdom of Flor Contemplacion — a mother of three, spouse of an underachieving husband and who, like countless other Filipinas, was forced to seek a menial job abroad — read like a script expressly written for a leftist-cum-nationalist cause. Indeed, two full-length movies were made about her tragic life, one of which featured the leader of the leftist non-government organization (NGO) Migrant in a prominent cameo role. Editorials and columnists of the mainstream media excoriated the Singaporean and the Philippine governments — the former for its ruthlessness; the latter for its policy of encouraging its citizens to sell their labor power abroad, even in unrewarding and hostile environments. The Foreign Affairs and the Labor Secretaries were forced to resign from the Ramos cabinet; diplomatic relations were suspended. The Singaporean flag and Singaporean books were burned by angry Filipinos. The Singaporean, no longer the American, embassy was the venue of emotional demonstrations organized by leftists and nationalists. (This was the kind of nationalism favored by George Taylor.) Last but not least, the ad

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hoc commission ordered to review the Contemplacion case saw fit to characterize Singapore as a police state and gave its 'sudden wealth' as the reason for its having become one. Philippine national honor was thus kept intact. In cultural terms even Filipino Marxists would readily understand, the country's poverty preserved it from losing its soul.

POSTSCRIPT: ESTRADA'S NATIONALISM

A SILVER-SCREEN idol who once starred in an anti-bases movie and, as senator, cast his vote in 1991 for the termination of the US military bases treaty is now president of the Republic. The leftist profile of some of his advisers and cabinet appointees seems to blend, rather than clash, with his own nationalist stance. In fact, some of these leftists just might attempt to give a populist-Marxist interpretation to Joseph Estrada's presidency. But this won't fool Erap, nor the majority of his advisers, nor the so-called masses. Cultural nationalism is as far as the national consensus will go in this centennial year of the Malolos Republic.

The Estrada administration is the site of several conflicting world-views, ranging from the *trapo* (traditional politician) to the technocratic to the Thatcherite to the ex-Leninist. Any attempt to synthesize them all other than in a nebulous concept of 'nationalism' is bound to fail. However, as with the EDSA coalition, the litmus test is the courage of one's ideological convictions: the populist factor finds its true value here. Is nationalism an ideological matter where the so-called masses are concerned? Would they mind it terribly if the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) and the denationalization of the retail trade, for example, were ratified? Congress and Estrada's brain trust could very well find it expedient, one day, to cite the imperatives of globalization as a pretext for opening the national economy to foreign manufacturers, investors and retailers. Nationalism's significance can be rearranged. Thus national interest is being defined as 'forcing our overprotected industries to come up to global standards'; in the process doing the consumers, and in the final analysis the whole country, a big favor. There is no nationalist lobby strong enough to overturn this new conventional wisdom.

If Estrada makes good on his word to continue the Ramos administration's liberalization, denationalization and deregulation policies, the national economy will go very far down the road of Thatcherism. A new na-

tionalist-leftist generation will then find its own reason for being. But it is not farfetched to imagine that Estrada's basic patriotic essence, especially his cultural nationalism, will serve to inhibit his critics from the nationalist Left. His decisions to hold his inaugural ceremony at Barasoain and to deliver his first presidential speech in Filipino are inspired gestures which ought to consolidate the populist consensus around his persona.

The problem is that cultural nationalism is not everything. If Estrada wishes to live up to his preferential-option-for-the-poor act, he will have to create jobs first or, failing that, create the climate which stimulates job opportunities. The question may be asked: How did his idol Ronald Reagan do it? But the more pertinent question is: Are Estrada's economic advisers Reaganites in the first place? The more knowledgeable among these advisers will surely recall that Reagan was also a rabid nationalist in his own way. And that its best proof was his fierce protectionism.

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