Review Essay

Toward a Modern Economic History

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An Economic History of the Philippines. By OD Corpuz. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1997.

Back in the 1960s, when I first started studying the Philippines, Onofre D Corpuz already had a considerable reputation. His concise history *The Philippines* (Prentice-Hall, 1965) was the best single introduction to the country; his monograph *The Bureaucracy in the Philippines* (UP, 1957), based on his Harvard dissertation, was a classic; and his 'Notes on Philippine Economic History' in Gerardo Sicat's *Economics and Development: An Introduction* (UP Press, 1965) helped frame the discourse in that field. Dr Corpuz went on to a long and distinguished career in both academic and public office, which reduced his scholarly output for some years, but he recently returned with a two-volume history of the pre-Hispanic and Spanish eras, *The Roots of the Filipino Nation* (Aklahi Foundation, 1989).

Thus hopes were high for his new book, *An Economic History of the Philippines* (UP Press, 1997). At first glance it looks impressive, in spite of the fact that it does not cover the period since 1940 and—a much more serious shortcoming—does not have footnotes, which greatly reduces its value for scholars. If it had come out thirty-five years ago, it might have inspired a whole generation of economic historians, as did Benito Legarda's dissertation on trade and entrepreneurship in 19th century Philippines (Harvard University, 1955). Unfortunately, although published in 1997, this book might almost have been written in 1962, since it ignores virtually all the significant scholarship of the intervening decades.

The scholars whose works do not appear in the lists of 'Principal Sources' at the end of each chapter (there is no bibliography) constitute a breach in Philippine socioeconomic historiography: Leslie Bauzon, Ma Luisa Camagay, Michael Connolly, Rosario Mendoza Cortes, Bruce Cruikshank, Nicholas Cushner, Ken De Bevoise, Maria Lourdes Díaz-Trechuelo, Daniel Doeppers, Bruce Fenner, Lewis Gleeck,

Frank Golay, Milagros Guerrero, John Larkin, Violeta Lopez-Gonzaga, Angel Martínez Cuesta, Glenn Anthony May, Alfred McCoy, Marshall McLennan, Rene Ofreneo, Elias Ramos, Robert Reed, Eliodoro Robles, Dennis Roth, William Henry Scott, Peter [Xenos] Smith, Peter Stanley, Laurence David Stifel, Melinda Tria Kerkvliet, James Francis Warren, and Edgar Wickberg, to name but the most prominent.

Corpuz has done his best to use primary sources, but he cannot compensate for missing the research and insights of a generation of historians. He relies heavily on well-known Spanish accounts and the indispensable collection by Blair and Robertson, as well as a few documents from the *Archivo General de Indias* in Seville. But he does not use the National Archives of the Philippines or the United States, to say nothing of scores of other collections of primary material scattered around the world, from the *Archivo Franciscano Ibero-Oriental* in Madrid to the Lopez Museum in Metro Manila to the Lilly Library in Bloomington, Indiana.

CONVENTIONAL SURVEY

The result is a survey rather conventional in what it presents, not terribly different from his own 1965 'Notes' nor from Valdepeñas and Bautista (1977) and from Fast and Richardson (1979), making allowances for the latter's leftist interpretation. This volume does offer more detail, specially statistical, than any previous study, for which we should be grateful. But in most cases the raw data remain undigested, while the absence of footnotes makes it impossible to check the context or accuracy of the figures presented. Thus so much of the real work of analysis still remains to be done.

Like its predecessors, this study centers on decision-making and record-keeping in Madrid, Washington, and Manila—with little evidence from the provinces where the consequences of those decisions were felt, evidence of the sort that other scholars have learned how to glean from the archives. It is a book that provides a good analysis of the economic aims of public administration, specially under Spain and the 'Filipino Republic', but provides less on its implementation.

Although Corpuz acknowledges that laws drafted in Madrid were often not enforced in the colonies, he cites the *Recopilación de Leyes dos Reynos de las Indias* as if it mattered to Filipinos. We are told, for example, about the legal fiction that the Spanish crown 'owned' all the land in the Philippines, but this scarcely inhibited de facto Filipino control and transfer of their fields. The distinction between the 'royal hacienda' and the colonial treasury is carefully explained, but not what difference, if any, it actually made to Filipino taxpayers. To his credit Corpuz does his best to assess how economic changes affected ordinary Filipinos, but he is unable to transcend the outdated and Manila-centric sources he uses. Many of the officials and observers he cites made few, if any, forays of more than a few days' journey from the capital.

Even on population, to which he pays particular attention, his analysis

cannot be considered 'state of the art' because it does not incorporate recent scholarship. Historical demographers have begun to analyze the dynamics of change by utilizing parish records as well as archival materials, but Corpuz seems unaware of this fact (cf. Smith 1975, 1978, 1981; Smith & Ng 1982; May 1985; Cruikshank 1985; De Bevoise 1995; Xenos & Doeppers, in press).

We are left, then, to wait for a modern economic history of the Philippines, and can only speculate or suggest what that might include. If Corpuz or some other historian did in fact read the secondary literature and attempt to adapt and respond to it, what might such a study look like?

MODERN METHODS

For a start, it would undoubtedly emphasize the diversity of experience, even in the areas nominally under Manila's control, (to say nothing of the Muslim south, (cf. Warren 1981). Ilocos was not like Negros (Martínez Cuesta 1980; Lopez-Gonzaga 1989), neither did it resemble Central Luzon with its friar estates (Roth 1977) while the more isolated provinces like Samar were fifty to one hundred years behind in economic development (Cruikshank 1985). By the same token, the structure and organization of the abaca industry (which is virtually ignored here) was not like that of either tobacco or sugar. Starting with the pioneering work of Larkin (1972), historians have spent a quarter of a century trying to sort out just what happened in the provinces; we still await a convincing synthesis of their work (but see McCoy & de Jesus 1982; Larkin 1982).

A modern history should also acknowledge the global dimensions of economic change in the Philippines, and show how the growth of the export economy is not just a local phenomenon, but represents the incorporation of the islands into a capitalist world system, for better or worse (cf. Chaunu 1960). The general expansion of world trade in the 19th century and the collapse of that system between the two World Wars explain as much or more about prosperity and poverty in the Philippines as do the policies of colonial rulers (Resnick 1970; McCoy & de Jesus 1982; Doeppers 1984; Brown 1989; cf. Lewis 1970, 1978; Birnberg & Resnick 1975; Reynolds 1985).

The discrepancy between policy and reality is another fruitful area for exploration. Filipino farmers did not theoretically 'own' their lands, but they bought, sold, and mortgaged them nevertheless. They were nominally restricted from traveling or trading without special permission, but the constant mobility of the indios—for trade, seasonal labor, migration to nearby or distant frontiers, or escape from Spanish exactions—is a recurrent theme in the colonial records (cf. McLennan 1980; Smith 1981; Larkin 1982). It might even be argued that the economic development which occurred from the 16th to the early 19th century took place in spite of Spanish policies, rather than because of them.

SOCIOECONOMIC INQUIRY

A modern economic history should also

address, even if it cannot resolve, the major questions that have engaged socioeconomic historians of the Philippines for years. What were the various entrepreneurial roles played at different times by the Chinese (Wickberg 1965; Díaz-Trechuelo 1969), Chinese mestizos (Wickberg 1964; Larkin 1972), Westerners (Legarda 1955) and indigenous principales? To what extent does economic change explain the rise of a Filipino 'middle class' in the 19th century, or can this class be defined by economic criteria (cf. Lynch 1965; Majul 1977; Turner 1978; Borromeo-Buehler 1985; Lopez-Gonzaga 1991)? What were the characteristics of Philippine urbanism over time (Reed 1967, 1978; McCoy & de Jesus 1982; Doeppers 1984; Huetz de Lemps 1994)? Did American rule foster dependency and a 'colonial drain' by its penetration of the economy (Golay 1976; Schirmer & Shalom 1987) or did it in fact not do enough, fail to invest adequately, even tax the Filipinos too little (Birnberg & Resnick 1975)?

An ambitious modern economic history might also try to open up virtually new areas of inquiry, e.g. the role of women in the economy (cf. Szanton 1982; Eviota 1992; Camagay 1995) or the long-term effects of forest-clearing on the ecology of the islands (cf. Roth 1983; Lewis 1992). We might even hope for some attempt to calculate the real income of Filipinos over time, along the lines suggested by Hooley (1968) and Doeppers (1984). The most fundamental question in economic history has to do with the rise and fall of material welfare, not just trade or government revenues. We know that most Filipinos were poor throughout the period of colonial rule, but we have difficulty in measuring whether their situation was improving or deteriorating in response to the growth of population, production, trade, and bureaucracy, which are relatively easy to document. It would take a heroic effort to simplify and smooth the recalcitrant data and create plausible time series for income and cost of living (including taxation), but even a qualified success would amply repay such an effort.

I do not mean to suggest that Corpuz neglected all of these questions. It is just that since there is no dialogue with existing scholarship, his answers are inevitably disappointing and, since there are no footnotes, readers are unable to make useful comparisons themselves. We can only hope that some other scholar will respond to the challenge and write the kind of modern economic history the Philippines deserves.

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