

Book Review

Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality, Democracy and the Urban Poor, by Wataru Kusaka. Singapore: NUS Press, 2017. Pp. 358. ISBN 9789814722384.

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Wataru Kusaka's *Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality, Democracy and the Urban Poor* attempts to describe the landscape of counter-hegemonic struggle as a bifurcated space characterized by conflicting, albeit at times, converging interests, visions, and moralities. In what he calls the "dual public sphere," Kusaka describes a civil society divided between the "civic" and "mass" spheres. The formation of these two distinct, although contiguous, spheres produced inclusionary and exclusionary (we versus they) categories that laid the foundation for antagonistic relationships. And, while the two spheres occasionally converge as demonstrated in the popular uprising in 1986, known as EDSA I, or People Power I, the distance between the two has arguably widened despite possessing common aspirations of changing the rotten political system in the Philippines.

According to Kusaka, the formation of the "dual public sphere" was a result of historical processes initiated during the colonial period and perpetuated in contemporary times. These historical processes, or rather continuities, have produced palpable linguistic divides, differences in terms of access and consumption of various forms of media, and the gentrification of the urban landscape. This, for Kusaka, was a manifestation of the bifurcation of civil society that created antagonisms and resentments rather than solidarity. However, while this division between the "civic" and the "mass" spheres has been perpetuated since the colonial period and has become entrenched in contemporary times, certain watershed moments have led to the convergence of the otherwise distant spheres. According to Kusaka,

People Power I is a notable example of contact between the “civic” and “mass” spheres.

Yet, inasmuch as the People Power I exuded a sense of nationalism, pride, and solidarity, which arguably cuts across class divides, later iterations of the popular uprising seem to demonstrate the opposite. According to Kusaka, People Power II was a middle class-led uprising that resulted in the ouster of President Joseph Ejercito Estrada and, in turn, the ascension of Vice President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo to the presidency. While People Power II was an attempt to restore decency and morality to the presidency—the antithesis of President Estrada—the *masa* (people) saw the ouster as an injustice and an affront to their dignity as their “chosen” leader was deposed without due process. Consequently, protests were mounted in support of the now ex-detainee and former President Estrada. With the alleged instigation of opportunistic politicians, the number of protesters swelled, who took hold of EDSA and then marched toward Malacañang. Unlike the so-called peaceful and civil uprising that was People Power II, the third and now *masa*-led People Power III was characterized as no more than an angry mob, its members *dugyot* (dirty) and *mabaho* (smelly). The Arroyo administration, in response, did not shy away from the use of violence to quell the so-called mob.

The intrinsic differences between the “civic” and “mass” spheres were not only limited to episodic moments in contemporary history such as the trifecta of People Power uprisings. Kusaka also demonstrated the deep-seated divide by examining voting behavior and how the urban landscape was organized and kept. In terms of voting behavior, members of the “civic” sphere resent, if not dread, the *masa* vote as the latter is viewed as vulnerable to clientelist relationships with politicians, vote buying and, in general, lack the acumen to vote responsibly. However, Kusaka also describes the *masa*, not as necessarily beholden to political patrons, but as selective and rational in vetting prospective officials. Turning to the urban landscape, Kusaka described how the “civic” sphere, subscribed in neoliberal ideology, adopts a rather exclusivist perspective that effectively rejects the “mass” sphere and their right to the metropolis. “Civic” sphere support to rid the metropolis of so-called blights, eyesores, and undisciplined elements justified the callous and often violent demolition campaigns against informal settlers, vendors, and street hawkers. This perspective antagonizes the *masa*’s struggle for livelihood and dignity in an increasingly shrinking and gentrified urban landscape.

According to Kusaka, antagonisms between the “civic” and “mass” spheres further exacerbated the bifurcation within the public sphere, leading to the resonance of mutually exclusivist categories of “we” against “them.” This situation is, for Kusaka, paradoxical since both desired political change, albeit using different languages and drawing from different moralities. As Kusaka notes,

In the mass sphere, the resonance of populism and morality in support of livelihood and dignity led to the emergence of a moral antagonism between righteous, oppressed “poor people” and the heartless, self-serving “rich”. In the civic sphere on the other hand, the hegemony of civic exclusivism produced moral antagonism between law-abiding “citizens” who participated in politics “correctly” and “masses” who support “bad” leaders and damage the rule of law due to lack in civic morals. (pp. 195–96)

Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality, Democracy and the Urban Poor provides a fresh reading of Philippine politics and democracy. The book presents critical reactions to conventional explanatory frameworks used to explain the inner machinations of Philippine society. For one, it veers away from exclusively reading the maladies of Philippine democracy in terms of the pervasive elite rule. Instead, it sheds on counterhegemonic struggles beyond the elite and the “people” and manages to provide a rather nuanced perspective on differentiated conflicts between other strata within society. Likewise, Kusaka’s reading of the public sphere veers away from an idealized reading of civil society as the moral center and the locus of politicization and socialization of society’s members. Instead, Kusaka’s treatise on Philippine society depicts a fragmented civil society to which each stratum possesses its own imperative, moralities, and language.

However, the arguments made by Kusaka are not without its limits. For one, his dual public sphere concept seems to simplify, for lack of a better term, intraclass relations and conflict. This is evident in his treatment of “civic” and “mass” spheres, which seems to portray a certain character without considering that within and among the masa antagonisms, moralities and exclusivist attitudes are likewise present. In other words, the “mass” sphere is not necessarily an entity in itself but a heterogenous amalgamation of the poor together with their aspirations and struggles. The same may be said of the members

of the “civic” sphere, the middle class. Nonetheless, the attempt to bring to fore the voices of the urban poor and, up to some extent the middle class, is a welcome contribution to the growing attempt to understanding politics from below.

Ultimately, I believe that the most significant contribution of Kusaka’s work lies in his nascent theory on how to go about societal change. Kusaka implicitly rejects a combative trajectory, that is, to depose incumbent power holders and putting others in their place. Instead, Kusaka suggests a conscious attempt to examine one’s morality and inclusionary or exclusionary categories, to widen contact zones or, at the very least, intersections with the “other.” That is, Kusaka urges his readers to reflect on deep-seated reservations, resentment, and contempt against the “other” in order to transform antagonistic relations to less combative and genuine engagements. Kusaka’s books reminds us of the deep-seated divide within our society and prescribes a pathway for change that promotes understanding, tolerance, and compassion.

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