

Book Review

Liberalism and the Postcolony: Thinking the State in 20th-Century Philippines, by Lisandro E. Claudio. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017. Pp. 227. ISBN 9789715507806.

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Lisandro Claudio's work, *Liberalism and the Postcolony*, explores "liberalism in action," so to speak, in an attempt to come up with an *a posteriori* definition of postcolonial liberalism useful to both the Philippines and the rest of the world. The book is written amidst the current political climate—arguably global, but particularly felt in the Philippines—characterized by populist and authoritarian forces, which have undermined and, to an extent, sought to discredit liberalism and a number of its basic tenets. This makes the book timely and relevant.

In the introductory chapter, Claudio points out that, despite the liberal character of the Philippine nation-building project, which was initiated in the late nineteenth century by the *ilustrados* of the Propaganda Movement and continued by Filipino statesmen and government bureaucrats during and after the American colonial period, liberalism's link to Philippine nationalism "has been largely excluded from the historical record" (p. 13). This, he argues, was because of the nationalism espoused by what he calls the "Diliman Consensus" (p. 13), which portrayed liberalism and the nation-building project it inspired as Western, elitist, and anti-Filipino. To help overcome this exclusion and obscuring of Philippine liberalism and its influence on contemporary Philippine political, social, and economic realities, as well as to find a liberal path out of current illiberal conditions in the country, Claudio proposes and carries out an exposition of liberalism as espoused by four prominent twentieth-century Filipino liberals, namely: Camillo Osias, Salvador Araneta, Carlos P. Romulo, and Salvador P. Lopez.

Each of these intellectuals is taken as a representative of “a key tenet of liberalism in the postcolony” (p. 19). Using a biographical approach, Claudio shows how these four liberals actively engaged in and contributed to the nation-building project initiated in the nineteenth century and continued through the American colonial and immediate postcolonial periods, imbuing it with their liberal ideas and practices.

In the first chapter, Camillo Osias is identified as “one of the most influential proponents of Filipinism”—a movement that sought to define what it meant to be Filipino (p.28). Such a definition is undoubtedly a crucial component of the nation-building project. Osias, argues Claudio, was a major contributor via the educational system and, more specifically, through his seven-volume textbook, *The Philippine Readers* (1932). This was the first textbook to be written by a Filipino for Filipinos, and was Osias’s tool to imbue generations of students with the sense of nationalism needed for independent national existence.

Nevertheless, Claudio argues, Osias’s Filipinism was not one that was rigid and exclusivist. Rather, it was a “dynamic Filipinism,” one that sought to “forge a fluid, contingent, deliberative, and inclusive national identity” (p. 35) and in which due recognition was given to “the inherent cosmopolitanism of Filipino culture” (p. 33). This led Osias to seek to construct a nationalism that was outward-looking and internationalist in character, one that would produce a nation with a clear identity, capable of self-governance, and aware of its rights and duties as a member of an international community. For Claudio, the “nationalist internationalism” and “dynamic Filipinism” that characterized Osias’s thought clearly marks him as a postcolonial liberal.

In the second chapter, Salvador Araneta is presented as the unsuccessful champion of Keynesianism and New Deal liberalism in the Philippines in the 1950s, “a period of economic and political decolonization, a time when the Philippines was first attempting to formulate industrial policy” (p. 47). As an advocate for the devaluation of the peso to increase exports and for deficit spending to boost agricultural and industrial production, as well as to achieve full employment, Araneta clashed with the reigning economic orthodoxy of sound public finance, a “strong peso” pegged to the US dollar, and low inflation—an orthodoxy backed by his main rival in the so-called “Great Debate” on economic policy, Miguel Cuaderno, the Central Bank governor.

Claudio determines that Araneta’s ideas and advocacies, despite their successful implementation in the developed world, were foiled

due to his reputation as “a member of the oligarchic, landowning ‘cacique’ class” (p. 50) who, according to his critics, while professing dedication to the goal of national development and prosperity, was simply angling for public investment in agriculture and a cheap currency to increase agricultural exports, thereby benefitting his own class. Over and above this hurdle to the realization of his economic proposals was Cuaderno’s fearmongering about the evils of inflation that Araneta’s proposals would unleash, coupled with a populist dismissal of Keynesianism “as a Western trend inapplicable to the conditions of developing countries” (p. 62).

Despite Araneta’s failure to influence the direction of Philippine economic policy, Claudio sees the value in revisiting his ideas about a liberal economy with room for state intervention in pursuit of a more equitable distribution of the social product—something more akin to social democracy as practiced in many parts of the developed world.

In the third chapter, Carlos P. Romulo is portrayed as the purveyor of an original and liberal view of the Third World free not only from the imperialist control of its former colonial masters in the First World, but equally from the imperialist maneuverings of the Communist Second World. Claudio focuses on the Bandung Conference of 1955 as the venue in which Romulo’s anticolonial and anti-Communist Third Worldism is best articulated. He considers Romulo’s Third Worldism as anti-Communist in that it rejected Communism’s imperialist and totalitarian ambitions and praxis, though accepting in a progressive spirit “certain principles of socialism such as economic planning” (p. 83). Moreover, Claudio sees Romulo’s anti-Communism as forming “part of an Asianist worldview... that saw in Asian solidarity a way to transcend the aggressive international posturing of international Communism and the more established Western imperialism” (p. 83). Claudio, therefore, sees it as “an integral element of a coherent, liberal worldview that opposed various forms of domination” (p. 84).

Claudio posits that such an Asianist, anti-imperialist, and anti-Communist liberal worldview was destined to flounder, however, amidst the intensification of the Cold War between the US and the USSR. “States had to choose” (p. 104) a side, making Romulo’s neutral “third way” (p. 104) more and more untenable. The Philippines chose to side with the US, which, in its zealous pursuit of “a paranoid policy of anti-Communist containment” (p. 105), supported the Marcos regime even after its imposition of martial law, which inaugurated the Marcos dictatorship. For Claudio, that Romulo continued to serve under a clearly undemocratic and illiberal dictatorship meant

that “his reputation as a liberal would forever be questioned” (p. 109). Nevertheless, he also shows how the choices Romulo made, in the midst of the circumstances he faced, do not diminish his contributions to the shaping of a postcolonial liberal ideal.

In the fourth and final biographical chapter, liberalism as “*modus vivendi*”—that is, a liberalism that “concerns itself with creating and recreating democratic space” (p. 113) in the midst of conflict—is examined in the life of Salvador P. Lopez. Lopez’s tenure as president of the University of the Philippines during the political turmoil of the early 1970s is the focal point of the examination of this form of liberalism. Claudio narrates how Lopez situated himself between two extremes—the radical student movement and the increasingly authoritarian Marcos regime it opposed—holding back each so as to maintain “a space of democratic liberty” (p. 113) where political ideas and proposals could be articulated and questioned freely. It was when he could no longer hold back the stronger of the two forces, argues Claudio, that his liberalism was transformed from one that sought a “*modus vivendi*” between competing positions to one squarely on the side of freedom and democracy against authoritarianism.

Drawing from the narratives presented in the previous chapters, Claudio proposes an a posteriori definition of postcolonial liberalism with the following features: (1) it favors a civic rather than an ethnic form of nationalism; (2) it is unapologetic about and accepts its Western and Enlightenment origins; (3) it seeks to mediate conflicting positions rather than impose one of its own; (4) it seeks power in order to democratize it; (5) it is willing to “risk getting things done” (p. 152) and be held accountable; (6) it seeks to address the inequality spawned by free market liberalism; and (7) it rejects “quick fixes” in favor of reforms that are products of inclusive, albeit slow and oftentimes cumbersome, deliberation.

As Claudio states in his introductory chapter, liberalism needs to reinvent itself amidst the reputational crisis it is currently suffering. Claudio tries to show, through a well-researched narration of the careers of four prominent Filipino liberals of the twentieth century, that liberalism has the capacity to do just that. By providing us with concrete cases of “liberalism in action,” Claudio draws attention to the flexibility, the potentialities, and the limitations of the liberal project, thereby offering possible starting points from which the case for liberalism could proceed.

Nevertheless, in discussing certain key tenets of liberalism independently from one another in four different narratives, the reader is left with a vague and somewhat disjointed image of liberalism. In fact, if one agrees that liberalism comprises a range of sometimes competing visions, it is necessary to differentiate among these visions and show where they contradict one another and why. These are tasks not quite achieved in the book. What is offered as an *a posteriori* definition of postcolonial liberalism seems more like an enumeration of certain characteristics of the liberal visions and praxis of four different people dealing with four distinct aspects of the nation-building project.

Moreover, some of the ideas and values ascribed to liberalism, such as support for judicious state intervention in the market and a nationalism that is perhaps better described as patriotism, cannot be said to be distinctively liberal, since they can also be found in other doctrines of political order and organization. The reader is left to decide whether these ideas and values are to be considered part of postcolonial liberalism, or merely attitudes possessed by the liberals discussed in the book as they sought to give life to their liberal vision.

Be that as it may, there is a lot to be learned from the historical narratives presented in the book and, more importantly, the insights its author draws from them. Understanding the past is always a necessary ingredient in the effort to forge a desired future. If that future is to be a more liberal one, then the more we know about the successes and failures of past liberals, the less obscure the path toward it becomes.

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