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Reynaldo Ileto at the Intersection of Philosophy and Politics: Appropriations and Mis-readings¹

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In their attempt to make philosophy relevant to contemporary Philippine politics, some academics borrowed concepts and analyses from the social sciences particularly political science and history. One of the scholars in Philippine Studies whose works have been used, cited, and appropriated in current debates on Philippine democracy is Reynaldo Ileto. Currently based in Australia, Ileto was Professor of Southeast Asian Studies in the National University of Singapore until his retirement in 2012. He wrote *Pasyon and Revolution* which won the Benda Prize Award of the Association for Asian Studies in 1985.²

Ileto is a scholar whose disciplinary domain cannot be classified easily. Although he is commonly identified as an historian because of his writings, his undergraduate training is in Humanities (B.A.) from the Ateneo de Manila University. His Ph.D. is in SE Asian Studies from Cornell. In his writings, he mimicked Foucault, Said, and Barthes and debated with Alfred McCoy, Michael Cullinane, Carl Lande, and John Sidel. Eventually, he would criticize renowned Benedict Anderson, author of *Imagined*

¹ Edited version as of August 2, 2023

² Reynaldo Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979 [2008]).

Communities. His works have been read by students and scholars across disciplines: history, political science, sociology, and even philosophy.³

My purpose in mentioning Iletto's background is to drive in the point that anyone who would like to use his thoughts should read him not in bits and pieces. Anyone who would simply cite a passage or two from any of his writings would surely end up short-circuiting his views.

This brings me back to those academics who tried to use Iletto in their philosophical analysis of Philippine politics. Their objective, as it appears to me, is simple: to explain why politics is the way it is in our country. This is noble, but one question remains: is the interpretation of Iletto especially his thoughts on the elite, correct?

"What is apparently consistent and central in Iletto's thought right from *Pasyon and Revolution* up to his writings on Orientalism is the attempt to allow histories from below and marginal discourses to come to the fore."⁴ Iletto is critical of "linear histories" which are for him "essentialist readings," and forms, no less, of "Orientalism." Iletto does not subscribe to the idea that there should be a grand narrative in history. His unpacking of Stanley Karnow's *In our Image* is the best proof no less, which ultimately led him to criticize the reductionist reading of Philippine politics and democracy as America's dark side, failed version, or doppelganger.⁵

³ See Reynaldo Iletto, "Scholarship, Society, and Politics in Three Worlds: Reflections of a Filipino Sojourner, 1965-95", Goh Beng-Lan, ed., *Decentering and Diversifying Southeast Asian Studies* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011), 106-109, 120-121.

⁴ See Reynaldo Iletto, "Orientalism and the Study of Philippine Politics", *Philippine Political Science Journal* vol. 22, no. 45 (2001): 1-32.

⁵ R. Iletto, "Scholarship, Society, and Politics in Three Worlds", 123. To cite Iletto himself: "The Filipino characters in Karnow's book are ruled by passions, kinship ties, debts of gratitude, personal loyalties, and so forth. In effect they are portrayed as a variant of America's classic image of their little, brown brothers whose persistent 'cultural lack' demanded and almost indefinite deferral of their independence" (pp. 124-125).

Giving importance to discourses outside the center and from below is Ileto's trademark. As he asserts in *Critical Questions on Nationalism: A Historian's View*:

From the moment the typical student begins to learn about himself, his society, history and culture in books, the mass-media and the classroom, he becomes immersed in ideas of development, emergence, linear time, scientific reason, humane pragmatism, governmental ordering, nation building, etc. He becomes so immersed in them that he takes them to be universal categories, part of the natural ordering of things. Little does he know—for rarely do his teachers tell him—that such categories are historical, that they were devised at a certain time in the past by men bound by their unique interests and environments [emphasis added].⁶

One can discern Foucauldian themes and anti-positivistic tones in Ileto. Examples are found in such writings as “Critical Issues in ‘Understanding Philippine Revolutionary Mentality’” (his response to Milagros C. Guerrero's criticism), “Outlines of Nonlinear Emplotment of Philippine History,” the three essays in *Knowing America's Colony*, and “On Sidel's Response and Bossism in the Philippines.”

The foregoing makes us understand why Ileto is an attractive scholar to those who would like to resist American readings of Philippine politics. I see clearly why those who believe that Duterte's politics is unique, see in Ileto a scholar of the masses. I see more clearly why those who are convinced of the need to ‘radicalize’ democracy consider Ileto's views as relevant if not timely a lens for a critical re-reading of Philippine democracy. After all, our scholar himself describes his approaches as a celebration of the contingent, the local, and the nonlinear.⁷

⁶ R. Ileto, *Critical Questions on Nationalism: A Historian's View* (Manila: DLSU Press, 1986), 3-4.

⁷ R. Ileto, “Scholarship, Society, and Politics in Three Worlds”, 121.

To an extent I agree that Iletto's views can be used as a justification for Duterte's brand of leadership. However, this interpretation is correct only and insofar as Iletto is critical of America's position in global politics.⁸

On the contrary **it is not correct to say that Iletto reads Philippine politics as a network of bossism, the local elites, patron-client, or booty capitalism.** This is where some interpreters of Iletto got him wrong. By mixing their readings of elitism, patron-client, and bossism with Iletto's views, they have missed the very point of Iletto: the need to read and re-read Philippine politics and/or democracy beyond what American-based scholarship in political science and political history tells us.

For Iletto, these 'isms' or 'brandings' of Philippine politics are, for the lack of a better term, American "essentialisms" of Philippine politics. Precisely, and this we need to repeat, Iletto is critical of essentialist readings of Philippine politics specific or concrete in such frames that have been mentioned.⁹

An analyst who would wish to follow Iletto should be cautious in not putting the blame on the elites for the problems of the country. In

⁸ See C. Alcuaz, "How Duterte inspired historian Rey Iletto to finish U.S. conquest book", in <https://www.rappler.com/nation/176260-duterte-historian-rey-ileto-us-conquest-book/> [available online].

⁹ In Iletto's own words: "The real problem to me, was not the journalist Karnow himself, but the array of esteemed academics whose works undergird the book and are generously cited in the footnotes. The intertextual signs were there of a discourse operation, and so in the years that followed I began a systematic deconstruction of these writings: from Glenn May's works on the Philippine American War, to Carl Lande's classic work on patrons, clients, and factions in party politics, to Al McCoy's various writings on factions and families in history and so forth". See R. Iletto, "Scholarship, Society, and Politics in Three Worlds", 124-125. Although it is a common interpretation that Iletto uses the frames and lenses of scholars who are anti-positivistic, such as Foucault, in his analysis of culture, politics, and society in the Philippines, however, and it is my argument, that he is 'in his own way' consistent in his method, i.e. reading texts, peoples, and events outside of big constructs or established interpretations. See for example his chapter titled History from Below in *Pasyon and Revolution* wherein he says that "Social scientists unable to view society in other than equilibrium terms are bound to conclude that these movements are aberrations or the handiwork of crazed minds, alienated individuals, or external agitators. On the other hand, many scholars, sympathetic to these movements tend to fit them into tight, evolutionary framework that leads to a disparagement altogether of cultural values and traditions as just a lot of baggage from our feudal and colonial past." See R. Iletto, *Pasyon and Revolution*, 10.

fact, the somewhat automatic conclusion that there is a link between the elites and the problematic Philippine politics – is, in light of Ileto’s thought, a suspicious metanarrative. The patron-client (clientelism) framework, for example, is for him a “Cold War discourse” while “bossism” accordingly “sits rather well with the global capitalist order.” Such readings are not neutral; they are not just methods in Comparative Politics (as Card Lande claims).¹⁰ For Ileto, essentialist readings of politics in developing and underdeveloped States, are part of the global superpower’s national imaginary and war agenda; it is the United States’ way of highlighting the Philippines as a “negative other” – always a colony or a post-colony, never perfect, and never fully democratic in ‘comparison’ to the US and other Western democracies.

Ileto does not view the elites as entirely negative and problematic. Not all dynasties are, for him, corrupt or anti-democratic. In fact, he highlights Resil Mojares’ remarkable and apparently different approach to local politics using the Osmeñas of Cebu as a case study. At the risk of oversimplification, Ileto is telling us that it is wrong to conclude hastily that all the so-called “elitism” in the Philippines is bad. If we may cite his commentary of Mojares’ essay *The Dream Goes On and On: Three Generations of the Osmeñas*: “For Mojares, the questions is not who to ‘blame’ but whether, in the first place, we can reduce the non-elites to ‘victims’ and politicians to predators.”¹¹ To support the soundness of my exegesis of Ileto’s take on elitism, let me cite his own words but this time from his critique of Stanley Karnow:

¹⁰ In *Pasyon and Revolution*, he mentions patron-client ties that link the lower and upper classes of society. However, one should not misinterpret him as describing Philippine politics, whether entirely or in part, as characterized by ‘patron-client relations.’ In fact, his explanation in the footnote (no. 11 of the 8th printing) argues that the mainstream interpretations of the revolution are unconscious inheritances of the nationalist and revolutionary language of the *ilustrados*. In other words, Ileto is saying that the participation of the revolutionaries of the Katipunan cannot just be reduced to the lower class’s plan and blind obedience of their leaders because of vertical patron-client ties. See R. Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution*, 79-80.

¹¹ Reynaldo Ileto, “On Sidel’s Response and Bossism in the Philippines”, *Philippine Political Science Journal* vol. 23, no. 46 (2002): 157.

Ultimately, the question I ask is whether elements of colonial discourse continue to inhabit, in suitably amended and updated terms, recent writing on Philippine politics. Mesmerized by the trappings of modern scholarship, have we failed to interrogate the conditions for positing what is “true” and “essential” about Filipino political behavior.¹²

On a personal note, I met Rey Ileto in NUS twice for an interview.¹³ One line that I cannot forget from the many brilliant ideas he shared is this: “we must study the Philippines in its own terms.”¹⁴ Those who sought to explain the failure of the Liberal Party in the past elections were close to getting it right in their analysis that the root of our current political woes is no less the system which the Americans transplanted in our country. They got it wrong in following what US-scholarship in political science and history criticized by Ileto say of who we are – a people victimized by our own elite, local bosses, etc. For Ileto, there is something in the assumptions underlying the usages of these terms that must be seriously examined; something that we may even need to reject for us to understand Philippine politics in its own terms.¹⁵

It is unfortunate that for all the attempts at radicalizing their analysis of Philippine democracy, some academics and emerging Filipino ‘philosophers’ have not gone beyond analytic frames that continue to categorize social-political phenomena into “binary oppositions” (e.g. patron – client, elite-masses, rich-poor). The problem with this is the

¹² Reynaldo Ileto, *Knowing America's Colony: A Hundred Years from Philippine War* (Honolulu: Center for Philippine Studies, 1999), 41.

¹³ See Rhoderick John S. Abellanosa, “System, Pasyon, and Conflict: Philippine Social Change in the Political Thought of Remigio Agpalo, Reynaldo Ileto, and Jose Maria Sison” (unpublished article submitted to the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore).

¹⁴ For more information on this, see Rhoderick John S. Abellanosa, “Local Discourse, Identity and the Search for a Filipino Philosophy: A Re-exploration through the Lens of Reynaldo Ileto”, in *Asian Perspectives in the Arts and Humanities*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2013): 35-59.

¹⁵ See R. Abellanosa, “Local Discourse, Identity, and the Search for a Filipino Philosophy...”, 52.

“assumption” that “personal identities ought ‘naturally’ to be fixed, bounded, and stable. What is missing then in current analyses is the overcoming of categories that sustain mutually exclusive oppositions.¹⁶

Through Ileto’s eyes, Duterte therefore is not the “end of history” but a re-emergence of what has long been suppressed by years of efforts to transplant an inorganic system in our country. One may read his essay titled “The Boss-Mayor and His Critics” which is chapter 12 of his book *Knowledge and Pacification*.

As a parenthetical remark: Ileto’s critics highlight his lack of proposal or alternative to the system he would like to deconstruct. Precisely why his method is described by Carl Lande as likable to a “parlor game” ... that uses “pretentious neologisms” that would turn off serious scholars (in political science).¹⁷ It would enrich the country’s academic discussions and scholarship on Philippine politics if they’d try to consider these criticisms as they internalize Ileto’s views as their own.

What I have done in this piece is to shed light on how to interpret Reynaldo Iletos’ social-political thought. It is not part of my objective to disclose whether my position is an agreement or disagreement to his views. To ‘fully’ and ‘genuinely’ agree or disagree with any thinker or philosopher, Ileto in this case, requires accurate interpretation of his texts and their contexts.

¹⁶ See R. Ileto, *Knowledge and Pacification: On the US Conquest and the Writing of Philippine History* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017), 287.

¹⁷ See Carl Lande, “Political Clientelism, Developmentalism and Postcolonial Theory”, *Philippines Political Science Journal*, vol. 23, no. 46 (2022): 126.