

*Explorations in Social Theory and Philippine Ethnography*. By Raul Pertierra. Diliman, Quezon City: University of the Philippine Press, 1997. 262 pp.

This collection of essays is fascinating to read yet difficult to review. I will return to this issue in my concluding paragraph. In four chapters Pertierra proves to be a scholar whose learnedness about social sciences in general and compassion for his Philippines, Zamorans in northern Luzon in particular, seem to seep through every paragraph. The book is divided into four chapters, in which the following themes are expanded on: “The Conditions of Possibility for a Science of the Social”, “Religion and the Moral Expression of Everyday Life”, “Uses and Locations of Culture: The Transformation of the Ilocano Komedyá”, and “Trust and Time in a Philippine Village”. These essays are introduced by a 34-page Preface. This is an essay of considerable depth in its own right around the theme of social sciences and modernity that provides materials for an understanding of the development of social sciences in the Philippines.

The first chapter is an intellectual *tour de force* that weaves through the thickets of social science epistemology, sociology of knowledge, history of anthropology, (the history of) social theory, to name a few. Its central thesis is — with many captivating side discussions — that both the conduct and the objects of social research, including if not especially those outside the reach of the European centres, are produced under specific historical conditions. This genesis can only be understood by taking an evolutionary approach to the development of social sciences. In so doing, Pertierra relies heavily on authors and theoretical constructs of modern social systems theory, especially as it is represented by Niklas Luhmann. That approach allows Pertierra to advance the notion that a science of the social became possible only under certain historical conditions. The multifaceted elements of this complex social theory — or theory of social complexity — are taken as the guiding principle for Pertierra. In short, the social structure and the semantics to describe and analyse society are intimately linked and cannot be that easily separated into an object-describer relationship. On that basis, the craft of anthro-

pology and sociology was both constitutive for a self-description of modern society but equally part of the project of modernity of which self-description is a constitutive part. This 75-page essay differs considerably in terms of style, content, and self-imposed focus from the three remaining chapters in which Pertierra tries to exemplify if not expand on some of the issues portrayed. The remaining three chapters project against the theoretical canvass of the first chapter their empirical narratives.

The “Religion and the Moral Expression of Everyday Life” is a comprehensive overview of the Catholic calendric rites and the way in which Zamorans of the Ilocos region of northern Luzon perform them. It is a thick description in its best sense, interspersed with photographs (albeit very grainy) that pictorially exemplify the points made in the text. With an authoritative voice Pertierra unfolds the yearly cycle of ritual events, their social significance, and their underlying conflicts and resolution processes.

The two remaining chapters follow the example of the second essay. In taking the case of the Ilocano Komedyá, a folkloric rendering of a local, if stylized, performance of Christian themes in opposition to Moros (or Moors, that is, Muslims) with the predictable outcome of the victory of Christianity over Islam. This vanishing folk drama used to unfold over a period of several days and included all elements of folk drama from the burlesque to the stilted. Analysing the theme of local culture, Pertierra can expand his notion that “culture is increasingly being seen simply as forms of representation or as the domain of signifying practices instead of as a system of practical significations” (p. 197). About 20 pages of this essay are devoted to an analysis of various debates regarding contemporary understanding of culture. Additionally, this chapter is furnished with telling photographs of the main characters of the Ilocano Komedyá.

The final chapter tackles the concepts of trust and time (in a Philippine village). It is the expanded version of a previously published article, interwoven with discussions about rituals, the structure of expectations (in a local society), and reflections about the differences in time/trust perceptions of men and women. The social constitution of “tem-

porality and duration” (p. 257) as they relate to practical routines of everyday life are constituted through rituals. According to Pertierra, the advance of globally constituted concepts thus forces the social scientist, looking at the local forms of everyday life, to acknowledge the polyphony of time/trust conventions.

That the foregoing is but a shallow representation of what Pertierra attempts in this book of 261 pages can only in part be attributed to the reviewer’s likely inability to fully comprehend this often densely formulated text. I contend that convoluted style, idiosyncratic appropriation of social theories, and often sloppy editing simply do this author a disservice. It is likely that these observations are mutually interdependent. Many examples can be given, and as any selection they are, alas, selective. I take one, to illustrate my observation about the style and about the author’s relationship to social theories:

Having discovered the cultural basis of the categories of experience, post-conventional society proceeded to re-constitute itself autopoiesically, where members increasingly operate only within subjectively acceptable coordinates. Such a view of the social, as a system of autopesic actions, raises problems regarding its facticity. Culture becomes a category for understanding society as well as a principle for organizing it. (p. 81)

Pertierra is referring here to the advanced notions of social systems theory, yet in his formulations throws the tenets of its theoretical constructs but not its vocabulary over board. This is not the place to render a crash course in social systems theory, but a few issues need to be said. Social systems theory, among other things, posits that societies are constituted through the relationship of social systems whereby other social systems are environment. Thus, they cannot be handled by means of substantialist implications, looking at what “systems do” (as if social systems have agency) but they are defined as the unity of the difference of system/environment. One of the mechanisms of system maintenance of this unity of difference under changing circumstances (hotly debated) is that of autopoiesis. The latter is the ability of a social system to secure both its internal functioning in relationship to *its* environment. Society is thereby not *a* social system (for there is nothing social that can

be thought of beyond society) but the sum total of social systems. The vacillation between an agency-oriented and a system-oriented approach to social phenomena, as in the quote above, does leave the reader throughout the essays wondering which path of thoughts to follow, if one is not experiencing a feeling of being lost.

I also submit that with some editorial inputs, the author's ambitions would have been better served. There are too many repetitions of sentences if not paragraphs that distract from the content of the narratives. For example, in the last essay I counted four different intentions of what the chapter is going to be about (pp. 226, 228, 230, 233) each of which pursued fascinating topics of social theory of time and trust.

Thus, what one is left with is the mixture of a classical, very readable and lively ethnographic narrative in three chapters about how the author sees aspects of the world unfold in Zamora. Yet simultaneously, this narrative is broken at intermittent intervals with some glimpses of contemporary social theory that often deserve a more specific treatment than what the reader is left with. Because this review clearly sees the ethnographic segments as superior, I will recommend this book to the many who overlook and underrate the social complexity of the lowland Philippines to correct their views.

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