

***Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality, Democracy and the Urban Poor.* By Wataru Kusaka. Singapore: NUS Press, 2017. Hardcover: 341pp.**

Problematizing the tendency towards the moralization of politics to the exclusion of interest politics that questions inequalities in resource distribution in the Philippines is the central theme of this book. As such, it offers a fresh theoretical perspective and analytical approach to the study of democratization in the Philippines and presents a credible explanation for the instability of Philippine democracy in recent times. While most analyses would focus on the relationship between political elites and the lower classes, Wataru Kusaka focuses on interclass relationships and the antagonisms between the middle and lower social classes created by differences in language and media, among others, factors whose influence on class relations is often overlooked.

Kusaka's analysis rejects the all too facile and widely accepted interpretation of democracy in the Philippines as shaped by the persistence of elite democracy. Instead, he shifts the focus on the middle class and its ambiguous role in the deepening of democracy, particularly its exclusionary tendencies towards the masses. It can be located within the tradition of critical sociology as it interrogates and problematizes the role of the middle class as an agent of democratization. The dual spheres introduced by the author also bring attention to the importance of understanding the lifeworld and the discursive space of the masses and the middle class. The finding that the failure to effect real redistribution is at the root of the instability of democracy in the Philippines is nothing new. However, the focus on the antagonistic relations involving the middle class and the masses is fairly original.

Kusaka introduces a typology of “hegemonic practices that create antagonistic relations” (p. 46) and the typology is used to explain actual political developments in the post-1986 period following the so-called restoration of democracy under President Corazon Aquino, as well as to construct scenarios for the future. The organization of the chapters is logical, starting with the presentation of the problematic the book intends to engage and the analytical framework in the first chapter. This is followed by an analysis of the factors that created the “dual public spheres” (p. 50), presenting supporting evidences of the existence of and dynamics between these dual spheres in popular mobilizations,

electoral politics and urban governance that transpired after 1986. The final chapter summarizes the main assertions, presents the impasse in the Philippines' journey in democracy and suggests ways of breaking the impasse.

The absence of a substantial discussion of the interaction between the organized segments of the urban poor and the unorganized urban poor "masses" is a major gap in this book. This theme could have been accorded some discussion in the chapter on urban governance which mentions important policies such as the Urban Development and Housing Act and the Community Mortgage Program, glossing over the fact that these policies were products of the efforts of social movements which incorporated the organized urban poor working with the middle class. These are examples of what the author refers to as contact zones. A deeper discussion of the dynamics of what goes on in the contact zones, particularly in terms of the relations between the organized and the unorganized poor would lend more depth to the analysis of the contact zones and sharper directions for breaking the impasse in democratic consolidation.

Such a discussion would be particularly relevant, and even essential, especially since the author picks up the theme of contact zones as possible mediators for bridging class disparities. It would have been instructive to show the effects, if any, of the actions of the organized poor on the "mass sphere" via their interactions with the unorganized segments of the urban poor. Examining the interactions between the activist, organized urban poor and the unorganized urban poor in the "mass sphere" would have deepened and nuanced the discussion of contact zones. This is especially important since two of the author's prescriptions for breaking through the impasse of democracy are the "expansion of the contact zones between multiple public spheres that enable diverse people to interact with one another" (p. 259) and avoiding moralization of politics and maintaining politics at the level of interests. A more in-depth treatment of the contact zones could bring out more practical insights relevant to the work of social organizing being done by social movements and activists in the Philippines which are the actors that practise interest politics and articulate in the public discourse a critique of the inequitable distribution of resources in Philippine society.

A nagging question that is left with the reader is whether social organizing among the poor has in fact done more harm than good for democracy, given the analysis put forward by the author.

The Philippines has one of the most active civil society and NGO sectors in the world, and Kusaka's analysis presents a compelling reason to question the impact of their work on Philippine democracy. This question is not presented in this stark fashion but it is a question that social movements and activists must be concerned with. The prescriptions outlined by Kusaka lack the sharpness in indicating directions for political action by the social actors that are in a position to enlarge the "contact zones" and engage in interest politics in the public sphere.

The book is a welcome scholarly contribution to the study of the urban poor and the middle class in relation to the contradictions of democracy under neoliberalism in the Philippines.

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