

***Notes from the Philippine Underground.* By Francisco Nemenzo. Quezon City, The Philippines: The University of the Philippines Press, 2025. Softcover: 344pp.**

Francisco “Dodong” Nemenzo’s much-awaited book, *Notes from the Philippine Underground*, is a collection of essays and speeches on the Philippine revolutionary movement. It covers over half a century of analysis and engagement from one of the country’s foremost Marxist academics and activists, and a former president of the University of the Philippines (UP), the nation’s premier academic institution. Sadly, he passed away in December 2024, a couple of months before the release of the book and a day before what would have been his ninetieth birthday. Therefore, this is more than a collection of writings; it is Nemenzo’s final gift to a nation whose history and struggles he helped shape, and a reminder of a history that continues to define us.

For many who had the privilege of being Nemenzo’s student, the book is a poignant reminder of the man himself, and what he taught in the classroom flows into the prose of this collection. This reviewer vividly remembers his Political Science classes in the mid-1990s. He was an amazing professor who would enter the classroom and masterfully navigate difficult texts foundational to economic, political and social analyses, and eventually to political action.

This collection of 13 chapters is a testament to a life lived for a greater cause. It spans decades of intellectual reflection and offers a personal account of the history and challenges of the Philippine Left. According to Randy David, in his foreword, it is “not just a compilation of Dodong’s work; it is a call to engage with the questions that defined his life and work” (p. ix). These questions—on the role of the scholar in an unequal society, the contribution of intellectual work to the oppressed and the future of the Philippine Left—are not merely historical analyses but a challenge to move from reflection to action.

The book is organized into three main sections: “Histories”, “Political Conjunctures” and “Perspectives”. The first six chapters cover Nemenzo’s political education, the student movement and the evolution of Filipino Marxism, including a critical examination of the old *Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas* and its displacement by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), led by Jose Maria Sison, a long-time friend of Nemenzo.

The second section, Chapters Seven to Nine, analyses the political left during the Marcos regime and its fragmentation and failure to lead during the post-1986 transition. Nemenzo's sadness seeps through as he recounts how the *caciques* (entrenched landowning elites) proved more deeply rooted in the Philippine political system than the revolutionaries had expected.

The final section reflects on the ideological crises within the political left, its failure to shape the country's agenda and its eventual marginalization. Despite this, Nemenzo continued to call for pragmatic Marxism, strategic unity and critical engagement to revitalize the socialist movement. His analysis of the Left's failures is unsparing, yet it is born of a deep and abiding commitment to its social goals. In his Introduction, Patricio Abinales brilliantly captures this tension, quoting Nemenzo's own candid reflection after his time in the underground: "I had to admit that I was ineffective as an organizer and a failure as a military tactician... UP is where I truly belong" (p. xx). Such profound self-awareness makes his intellectual work so powerful.

At a time when Marxism is often dismissed as unfashionable, Nemenzo emphasizes its importance in connecting theory to the lived realities of Filipino society. He critically examined the failures of the CPP and other leftist groups, particularly their marginalization following the 1986 People's Power revolution that ended the Marcos regime. Yet his approach was not one of rigid dogmatism but of continuous critical reflection. As Abinales notes, Nemenzo's work stands in stark contrast to the incomprehensible Marxism of self-indulgent "dandies, belletrists, and idealist philosophers" of today (p. xviii). His prose is clear and meant to agitate, to move readers to action.

One of the most enjoyable chapters is the first one, in which Nemenzo details his journey from a devout seminarian to a Marxist, grappling with how to reconcile Christianity and Marxism before "liberation theology" was formally established. He tells the story of how he learned Marxism not in a classroom but from the bookshops of Manchester and by walking the same British streets that inspired Friedrich Engels. This chapter offers a syllabus of classics that shaped his worldview, from Karl Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* and Engels' *Conditions of the Working Class in England* to Bertrand Russell's *Unpopular Essays*, a reading list to be savoured at an age where reading is becoming a lost art.

For scholars of Southeast Asia, the collection also provides fascinating threads of connectivity between revolutionaries in the

Philippines and Indonesia, with passing mentions of the role of Tan Malaka, an Indonesian statesman who lived in the country between 1925 and 1927, and Ilyas Bakri, an Indonesian postgraduate student who helped form a Marxist study circle at UP in the 1960s. This points to the connectivity among revolutionaries in the region before the Association of Southeast Asian Nations was even established.

Notes from the Philippine Underground is more than a collection of essays. For scholars of the Philippines and Southeast Asia, it offers a rare, insider's perspective on the complexities of the Philippine Left, tracing its trajectory from the student movements of the 1960s through the dark years of the Marcos dictatorship and afterwards. Nemenzo's critique is not limited to the state but also of the Left, providing an honest look at the internal schisms, ideological debates and strategic errors that have defined the Philippine revolutionary movement. By connecting the Philippine experience to broader regional and global intellectual currents, his work transcends national boundaries, offering vital insights into the nature of post-colonial nation-building, the challenges of revolutionary change and the enduring quest for social justice.

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