But I imagine the makers must have been haunted by the inattentive reader, who might think: *We know these pictures, we know what they mean; it was a tragedy, but at least the nation was saved from communism*.

For the latter, I would recommend seeking out some of the book's many hidden gems. One shows the novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer in detention on Buru Island, listening to a foreign journalist permitted to visit (Figure 300, p. 250). He looks unbeaten. At that very moment he was clandestinely composing his great novel *This Earth of Mankind*, in which the central character Minke is told by his muse, Nyai Ontosoroh: "Write, Nyo, always about humanity, humanity's life, not humanity's death. Yes … there's nothing more difficult" (p. 111).

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The Profligate Colonial: How the US Exported Austerity to the Philippines. By Lisandro E. Claudio. Cornell University Press, 2025. viii+219 pp.

Lisandro Claudio's *Profligate Colonial* places American rule in the Philippines within the historical pattern of imperial powers imposing on their subjects policies that primarily served metropolitan interests. Thus, American monetary and fiscal policies—anchored on gold, fixed peso-dollar exchange rates and preferential trade arrangements—favoured export agriculture, imports of American manufactured goods, and foreign capital over Filipino labour and domestic industrial development. Tight fiscal controls enforced balanced budgets, enabling the United States to enjoy the benefits of empire while limiting its financial burden on American taxpayers.

Claudio's contribution lies in the analysis of what he found surprising and regrettable—the enduring legacy of colonial economic policies. Despite its colonial origins and intent, the restrictive fiscal strategy of hard money and the accompanying austerity mindset persisted beyond independence in 1946 and America's own flight from the gold standard in 1971. It became the republic's reflex response to the management of macroeconomic stress, gaining rare agreement among ideologically opposed left- and right-wing political factions. Different political administrations, reluctant to use public debt for strategic initiatives or social protection, effectively constrained long-term economic development.

Claudio argues that the colonial regime contaminated the Filipino leadership with the virus of hard money and austerity policies by conflating self-serving colonial concerns with the righteous mission to prepare Filipinos for self-government. Tutelage included inculcating virtuous habits of fiscal discipline and debt-avoidance, framed as necessary to protect the state from imprudent economic policies and profligate, corrupt leaders.

The diagnosis suggests further examination. Monetary orthodoxy and fiscal conservatism guided the metropolitan power itself. Believing that balanced budgets and stable currencies promoted long-term growth, the United States had embraced the gold standard in 1900. In keeping with traditional American cultural norms, indebtedness was seen as a sign of moral failing. Borrowing became respectable only in the 1920s, when General Motors and Sears Roebuck started selling cars and appliances on credit terms.

Racial bias probably contributed to assumptions that colonials were more prone than colonizers to profligacy and corruption. But aversion to debt, which could lead to slavery, was a pre-colonial principle in the moral economy of the peasant communities that constituted most of the country for the better part of the twentieth century. Traditional Catholic teaching against being borrower or lender further affirmed indigenous ethical values that served to support colonial fiscal policy.

The exposure in 1920 of dubious and illegal loans made by the Philippine National Bank (PNB) to the sugar and coconut industries, as well as a loan to the then Filipino president's wife, unfortunately fuelled key American colonial administrators' concerns about indigenous trustworthiness. Claudio concedes the existence of corruption but cites the extenuating factor of the post–World War I deflationary crisis that made servicing debt difficult for exporters. He contends that PNB losses were less severe than projected by American overseers, who were thus shielded from what Claudio suggests was their arguably heavier responsibility for PNB's institutional failure.

Claudio rightly rejects fiscal retrenchment and austerity regimes as the standard approach to economic distress. Welfare analysts would agree that government should have more than belt-tightening measures in its tool kit. But many still consider inflation control as the proper and primary goal of government—to protect the poor in a society with nearly half the population at or below the poverty line.

More provocative is Claudio's suggestion that punishing austerity programmes and the failure to deploy debt for development or social protection caused the country deeper damage than corrupt politicians. The proposition disputes the dominant "good governance" discourse among academics, such as Alfred McCoy, Paul Hutchcroft, Emmanuel de Dios and Ronald Mendoza, which views the institutional failure to control elite rent-seeking as the root cause of Philippine underdevelopment.

The provocation reopens the 1960s debate on whether corruption might serve functional purposes. The debate was muted in the 1990s, with research identifying the conditions that allowed economic growth despite high corruption levels. Corruption can yield beneficial outcomes when predictable, "equitable" and used for strategic national goals. But this required, as Peter B. Evans (1995) noted, a set of state capacities: competence, autonomy and power to prevent a contest among elite political families to privatize the rewards of corruption.

The ongoing investigation of massive official corruption, dating back decades, underlines the chronic deficiency of the Philippine state in precisely these capacities.

Recent events question Claudio's more benign view of corruption. The 2025 trillion-peso flood control scams, enabled by executive and legislative corruption of the budget process, have provoked public outrage at elite capture of state power and resources. The view that the Philippine state must first become rich and strong before it can become honest appears illusory, an implausible scenario—until voter "good governance" pressure can loosen the dynastic grip on the state.

Informed by Claudio's solid credentials as academic and activist, the book broadens our understanding of the complex interplay between macroeconomic policy, state capacity and corruption. His views will invite controversy. But this questioning of entrenched governance narratives is welcome and necessary to promote continuing discussion on alternative pathways to Philippine development.

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Bangkok Transformed: An Economic History, 1820–1950. By Porphant Ouyyanont, edited by Chris Baker. NUS Press, 2026. xvi+276 pp.

This book is both a memorial and a useful textbook on the economic foundations of modern Bangkok. A memorial because it is the last and, at his death, uncompleted work of the foremost economic historian of Thailand, Porphant Ouyyanont. Like an unfinished symphony, it has been creatively completed by the masterful and