

SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

<http://englishkyoto-seas.org/>

<Book Review>

Rizal G. Buendia

Wataru Kusaka. *Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality, Democracy and the Urban Poor*. Singapore: NUS Press in association with Kyoto University Press, 2017.

Southeast Asian Studies, Vol. 7, No. 3, December 2018, pp. 517-521.

How to Cite:

Buendia, Rizal G. Review of *Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality, Democracy and the Urban Poor* by Wataru Kusaka. *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3, December 2018, pp. 517-521.

Link to this book review:

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/2018/12/vol-7-no-3-book-reviews-rizal-g-buendia/>

View the table of contents for this issue:

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/2018/12/vol-7-no-3-of-southeast-asian-studies/>

Subscriptions: <http://englishkyoto-seas.org/mailling-list/>

For permissions, please send an e-mail to:

english-editorial@cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp



Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University

to maintain the monopolistic status of the state alcohol are examined in relation to: local people's shared experiences of colonialism (Chapters 7 and 8); complex and overlapping ways identities were articulated and shaped in colonial Indochina (Chapters 2, 4, and 5); and individuals and institutions involved in the emergence of anti-colonial nationalist movements in Indochina (Chapters 6 and 7). Impressively, treating alcohol production and consumption in Indochina as an institution in the colonial rule and as a moment in political processes in that region suggests a historical explanation for sentiments about alcohol pervading national Vietnamese literature, where alcohol is a symbol of both the exploitative and the brutal reality of French rule and cultural identity—a means in national struggles to end the colonial rule.

Chi P. Pham

Institute of Literature, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences

Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality, Democracy and the Urban Poor

WATARU KUSAKA

Singapore: NUS Press in association with Kyoto University Press, 2017.

In *Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality, Democracy and the Urban Poor*, author and Japanese scholar Wataru Kusaka eruditely examines Philippine politics and contemporary democracy. Divided into seven chapters apart from the Introduction and an Addendum (on Duterte's initial year as President), this book focuses on social movements and struggles of an assortment of civil society (CS) with and against the state on the one hand, and hegemonic contestation between and among varying types of CSs associated with moral politics, on the other. He defines moral politics as "politics that creates groups that are seen either 'good' or 'evil' and draw a demarcation line between the two" (p. 1).

Aimed at exploring the dynamics of social movements against the backdrop of the "hegemony of the elite" as "contested by various counter-hegemonies of CSs," the volume offers an alternative explanation on the weakness of Philippine democracy and prevalent social inequalities, contrary to the dominant view of "interest politics" which is simply centered on the uneven distribution and control of resources (pp. 5–6). Likewise, Kusaka challenges a number of conventional theories that analyze Filipino politics—notably "patron-clientelism" of Carl Lande and Remigio Agpalo; "neo-colonial dependency" of Renato Constantino and Gary Hawes; "elite democracy" or "patrimonialism" of Nathan Quimpo; "rent-capitalism" of Paul Hutchcroft; "bossism" of John Sidel; and "machine politics" of Tekeshi Kawanaka, among others—as inadequate and inappropriate to explain and capture the dynamics of Philippine politics and democracy.

The author argues—through ethnographic research (participant-observation) at an urban poor

community in Pechayan, Barangay Old Capital Site, Quezon City covering the period of April 2002 to April 2003, and key informant interviews conducted between 2008 and 2010, and using his “hegemonic struggle in the dual public spheres” as the analytical framework (Chap 2, pp. 21–49) and constructivist approach—that Philippine society and politics are fundamentally divided between two public spheres. These are: the civic or middle-class sphere; and masses or impoverished class sphere. The spheres are in constant struggle for hegemony and characterized by antagonistic “we–they” relationship. They are drawn between classes based on the distribution of economic, occupational, and educational differences as well as cultural variances, and moralities (divergent concepts of “good” and “evil” which is fluid and changing, contingent on the relationship between social groups constructed through hegemonic struggles).

Kusaka claims that an antagonistic relationship created between these spheres are of two types. The first is the “moral division of the nation” which occurs when the class and moral lines overlap, hence transforming class antagonism into moral antagonism, i.e., conflict “between ‘citizens’ or middle class and ‘masses’ in the civic sphere; and between ‘rich’ and ‘poor’ in the mass sphere” (p. 6). In discursive practice, this type of antagonism results in “civic exclusivism” (dispute between “good” citizens and “bad” masses) and “populism” (divergence between “good” masses and “evil” rich) seeking hegemony over each other in the civic and mass spheres respectively (p. 48). The second type is the “moral solidarity of the nation” which refers to the subdued antagonism between “bad politicians and good ‘people’” united against cronyism, corruption, and traditional politicians (p. 6). The unification of the nation, transcending differences between classes, extends the hegemony of “civic inclusiveness” into the civic and mass spheres. This is what Kusaka contends as “moral nationalism.” Although national unity is aspired, it fails to resolve the issue of inequality and powerlessness of the poor (p. 47).

The author further argues that a “contact zone” intersects between the mass and civic spheres which provides “the medium for discourse.” The “interactions” are said to blur the moral demarcation line and facilitate attempts to mediate the division between spheres (p. 6). It is the area where members of the civic and mass spheres converge and “discourses one another, giving rise to diverse power relationship” (p. 35). It is also the zone where power between spheres is deliberated and shared “to pursue social reform through social movements” (p. 44).

Applying his analytical framework through the three “People Power” revolution cases—February 1986 (deposing of President Marcos); January 2001 (ousting of President Estrada); and April 2001 (attempt to re-install Estrada) (Chapter 3)—the electoral politics (Chapter 4), and the case of urban governance (Chapter 5), Kusaka demonstrates the deleterious effects of “moral division” to Philippine democracy. Chapter 6 investigates how elite rule was restored and preserved with the re-emergence of the “moral nationalism” during the 2010 presidential elections with Benigno Aquino III as the President. Kusaka wraps up and summarizes his arguments on moral politics in his final chapter. In it, he concludes that the deficiency of democracy, perpetuation of

elitism, and inequality in the Philippines is insufficiently elucidated by “interest politics” but better clarified by the moralization of politics. He states:

. . . the moralization of politics threatens democracy either by intensifying antagonistic “we/they” relations to the extent that it advocates the exclusion and eradication of the other as “enemy,” or by depoliticizing socioeconomic inequality to perpetuate elite rule in the name of the people’s moral solidarity. (pp. 237–238)

He adds that “when multiple publics formulate moral antagonism against their respective ‘others’, opposition by counter publics may not only fail to ameliorate inequalities, but also exacerbate the moral division of the nation and pose a threat to democracy” (p. 254).

Finally, the book proposes “an expansion of the contact zones between multiple public spheres that enables diverse people to interact with one another,” deferment of “conclusive definitions of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’,” and the construction of “an order of mutual life-support, a ‘soft’ mutuality nurtured through care-based relationships and spontaneous compassion for the vulnerabilities of life” (p. 259). While Kusaka admits that these prescriptions are simply suggestions hence their effectiveness remains to be tested through further cases studies, he believes that they constitute a worthy undertaking for future research.

The book’s Addendum on Duterte (pp. 260–264) employs a discourse on moral nationalism. It characterizes President Duterte as a “social bandit” whose administration intends to rejig the existing system of elitism and inequality into a more plural and equitable society through the power of the state exercising authority beyond what the law or constitution provides. The support of the masses to Duterte’s approach in governance reflects the frustration of the marginalized sectors of society over the inability of previous leaders to address their age-long socio-economic problems. Duterte’s populism is predicated on the notion that “people” are morally good and the “elite” are morally corrupt. The author thus conjectures that people prefer to stake their future on the hands of a strong leader rather than on the politicized and weak institutions.

Kusaka’s book is instructive not only for offering a new perspective in analyzing the state of Philippine democracy and widespread inequalities, but also for challenging the dominant neoliberal worldview perceived to promote economic growth and democracy, and the role of the middle class adjudged to uphold social equality, freedom, and democracy. The use and application of the “hegemonic struggle in the dual public sphere” as the study’s framework in examining the dynamics and nature of interactions of social movements with the state on the one hand, and between and among CSs on the other hand, is basically a rejection of oft-cited theoretical lens in explaining Philippine politics, i.e., patron-clientelism and patrimonialism, elite democracy, rent-capitalism, bossism, and machine politics. Although Kusaka’s study focused on Philippine context, his theoretical proposition and empirical findings have implications in rethinking the tenets of liberal democracy which promise economic development but brought underdevelopment and inequalities to the world. The

middle class were thought to lead the masses to empowerment and enlightenment, but instead connived with and joined the ranks of the elite to defend and advance their interests, and abandoned the masses to take care of their own welfare.

One weakness of this book is its inability to link and relate the dynamics of social movements to Philippine political culture. Indeed, the antagonistic “we–they” relations between public spheres (mass and civic) are defined by and contingent on the country’s colonial history whose national culture has been shaped by a series of colonial rule—Spanish, American, and Japanese foreign powers for less than 400 years. The hybrid cultures formed through colonialism have greatly influenced how the country is presently governed, how the elite and masses interact with the institutions of governance as well as extra-institutional political processes, and how social movements associate with the state based on their respective ideology and political persuasions. Similarly, such cultures are bifurcated between what is sensed as “good” and “evil,” or “right” or “wrong.”

For instance, corruption in government is an historic malfeasance committed by current political leaders and bureaucrats whose behavior has been shaped by the culture of state corporatism from previous colonial masters; a frame of mind which considers the state and bureaucracy as personal instrumentalities, institutionally incorporating them into the ruling mechanism to enrich themselves. The indifference of the elite and current governors over the welfare and plight of the people is a carryover of the colonial government’s apathetic attitude that regards colonized people as feudal subjects who ought to serve the needs and demands of the former. The system of election, bequeathed by the Americans, remains to be a routine and ceremonial political exercise with minimal national and local significance. Election results are oftentimes rigged and seldom reflect people’s sovereign rule over their leaders. They are customarily viewed as a period of legally, rather than legitimately, maintaining power or transferring the power to rule from one elite class to another. For the masses, elections are payback times—to retrieve monetary and material benefits from affluent candidates. This is a way of redistributing wealth, i.e., from the “rich” to the “poor.” These political cultures and traditional behaviors, to name a few, continue to be manifested in contemporary Philippine politics.

The Philippine hybrid political cultures, correlated with long-standing concepts and fundamental values of people, have fashioned both the elite and mass political orientations as well as the leaders and citizens political behaviors. It is characterized by a critical and contemptuous view of present-day political practices but likewise shaded by a strong faith that reform can ultimately resolve the existing socio-economic and political reality. Thus, cynicism is balanced by the expectation that reforms are worth seeking. The same dynamics are at work in the Philippines (Grossholtz 1964). Although no culture is static and all are subject to change, there are dynamic processes operating within and outside of the national socio-economic and political system that either encourage or discourage the acceptance of new ideas which can contribute to the trans-

formation or perpetuation of the national culture. It is likely, however, that social, political, and psychological chaos would result if there were conservative forces strong enough to resist change. In the case of the Philippines, the progressive forces have not gained substantial strength to transmute the country's political culture.

Kusaka could have tied political culture with his concept of moral politics to strengthen his argument on the deficiency of democracy and continuing inequality not only in the Philippines, but also in the world. Integrating the question of political culture into his framework would definitely show the bigger picture in the quest of comprehending moral politics. However, taken as a whole, *Moral Politics in the Philippines* is a worthy contribution to the wealth of knowledge in a range of disciplines—political science, psychology, and sociology. His work is highly relevant in rethinking the changing configurations in the developing world.

Rizal G. Buendia

Independent Consultant and Researcher, Southeast Asian Politics and Governance, Wales, UK

Reference

Grossholtz, Jean. 1964. *Politics in the Philippines: A Country Study*. Boston: Little, Brown.

Making a Living between Crises and Ceremonies in Tana Toraja: The Practice of Everyday Life of a South Sulawesi Highland Community in Indonesia

EDWIN DE JONG

Leiden: Brill, 2013.

Indonesia is well-known for its diversity of culture, languages, and 300 different ethnic groups (Geertz 1963). The Torajan are located in Tana Toraja, a mountainous region in the Indonesian province of South Sulawesi and known for beautiful scenery and spectacular funeral ceremonies (de Jong 2013). There are many books about Tana Toraja, but Edwin de Jong's *Making a Living between Crises and Ceremonies in Tana Toraja* has taken a specific socio-economic approach when describing in detail the living situation of Torajans, who continue to engage in costly ceremonies even in times of economic struggle.

The book starts with the scene of a loudly extravagant funeral ceremony in Tana Toraja, with tens of buffalo being slaughtered. In this chapter, the author questioned how the Torajans can maintain the expenses for such costly ritual ceremonies after the economic and political crisis in Indonesia during in the late 1990s. Subsequent chapters of the book then offer answers to this central question.