

Intervention From Inside the “Belly of the Beast”

Dr. Rainer Werning Interviews E. San Juan, Jr.

Ang di lumingon sa pinanggalingan ay di makararating sa paroroonan.

—*FOLK PROVERB*

“I’ve lived in the belly of the beast and I know it well....”

—*JOSE MARTI*

This interview (recorded in October-November 2021) was initiated by Dr. Rainer Werning, a widely-known political scientist and journalist based in Cologne, Germany. He is considered an authority on the history and culture of the Philippines, Korea, and the affairs of other Southeast and East Asian countries. He was – among others – a lecturer at the Department of Southeast Asian Studies, University of Bonn, and has been teaching since long at the Academy for International Cooperation (AIZ). One of his latest books is *Crown, Cross and Crusaders* (Essen: Verlag Neuer Weg, 2011). A part of the interview was published in the German newspaper *Junge Welt* No. 283 (December 4-5, 2021), and is slightly revised here, with concluding reflections.

E. San Juan, emeritus professor of English and Comparative Literature, was recently visiting professor at the University of the Philippines, and author of *Maelstrom Over the Killing Fields* (Pantax Press, 2021; and *Peirce’s Pragmaticism: A Radical Perspective* (Lexington Books, 2022).

1) Where and under what conditions did you grow up? What were the most formative experiences of your youth?

I was born in Manila, Philippines, the only U.S. colony in Asia at the end of 1938, and now an inveterate neo-colony. It was a month before Barcelona, Spain, fell to the Franco army aided by Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. Memories of the Japanese occupation (1942-45) — fleeing to air-raid shelters during Japanese bombing, evading Japanese brutality — gave me lessons about the horror of war. In 1946, the Philippines was granted nominal “independence” but only to become a neo-colony with U.S. military bases utilized in the vicious war against Korea, Vietnam, and indigenous (Moro; Huk) rebels. That subordination persists, with tawdry alibis such as the Visiting Forces Agreement and other secret diplomatic protocols.

My formative years (1946-58) occurred during the anti-Huk/Magsaysay/CIA witch-hunts and counterinsurgency bloodbaths at the height of the Cold War. I recall the newspaper headlines about the Korean War. My parents, alumni of the University of the Philippines (U.P.), were biology teachers reared in public schools. I was influenced by the secularist, progressive faculty in U.P. where I taught English literature in 1958-60. My exposure in local politics began with my

participation in the Recto-Tanada electoral campaign in 1957-58, and my association with the partisans (Ricardo Pascual, Alfredo Lagmay, Cesar Majul, Leopoldo Yabes) for academic freedom and nationalism against clerical obscurantism and U.S. imperial domination. As a staff member of the *Philippine Collegian*, I reported on the conflict between the religious sects in U.P. and the college fraternities in the 1950s. I collaborated with Armando Bonifacio and Rony Diaz in editing *Inquiry* and the *Literary Apprentice*. The most decisive turn came with my involvement in the anti-Marcos dictatorship movement here (1969-1986), working with the national-democratic group UGNAYAN, the Friends of the Filipino People, and other organizations.

2) *What prompted you to go to the United States?*

My generation had parents who were grateful to the U.S. for “saving” us from Japanese barbarism. Everyone thanked General Douglas MacArthur for liberating us; we all sang “God Bless America” in grade school. My uncles sheltered American journalists in the hills of Montalban, Rizal, during the war (see Doris Rubens, *Bread and Rice*, New York 1947). The U.S. was the fantasized utopia of freedom, prosperity, liberty. We marveled at EuroAmerican glamor and tragicomic ordeals via Hollywood cinema. My contemporaries all aspired to share in the blessings of that consumerist paradise. Indeed, I was a neocolonized subaltern, long before the postcolonial vogue. My situation (in Sartre’s sense) was engendered by the Others and the *habitus* imprinted by colonial State ideological apparatuses. Since I was already a creature of U.S.-designed institutions, the best way to ensure tenure then was to follow the mechanics of earning a higher degree from a U.S. university.

Incidentally, I recall that before this, I went to the German Embassy in Manila to apply for a scholarship to study Goethe and Hegel, but all they had were slots in forestry, farming, etc. So, I was lucky to receive a Smith-Mundt-Fulbright Award which enabled me to study at Harvard University in the historic period of the Civil Rights struggles (1961-65) and the accelerating opposition to the IndoChina carnage. Peace Corps veterans and KM (Kabataang Makabayan) militants fresh from MetroManila were influential in spreading news of the national-democratic struggle before and after the First Quarter Storm (January 1970).

3) *What were the most important stages of your political commitment and academic career there?*

We were moving toward the climax of the Cold War, with confrontations against China, the Soviet Union, Cuba, Vietnam, etc. While at Harvard, I was further indoctrinated in New Critical doxa with I.A. Richards, the venerable British sage. However, my other teachers were orthodox, traditional philologists like the Canadian Jerome Buckley, my adviser for my thesis on Oscar Wilde; Douglas Bush, the Renaissance scholar; and Howard Mumford Jones, the major liberal Americanist during that period. This was long before my 1972 edition of Georg Lukacs’ writings translated into English and my book on Carlos Bulosan.

While finishing my graduate work, I began a correspondence with the beleaguered poet Amado V. Hernandez and other reputedly subversive artists. This led to my contributing articles in Filipino (Tagalog) for Hernandez’s newspaper. I wrote on William James and the Anti-Imperialist movement against U.S. colonial aggression (I did not know then that C.S. Peirce, the

founder of pragmatism, was also involved; see my 2022 book). When I returned to the Philippines in 1966-67, I became involved with the ad-hoc Manila circle around Alejandro Abadilla, the bohemian poet, and helped edit his avantgarde review, *Panitikan*. My understanding of colonial subjugation sharpened—even before Marcos declared martial law — and impelled me to shift to writing in Filipino with a commitment to popular- democratic principles. A few years before the First Quarter Storm, the nationalist movement took off under Jose Maria Sison’s leadership, with the help of leftwing public intellectuals like Renato Constantino, Teodoro Agoncillo, Jose Lansang, Francisco Nemenzo, Nemesio Prudente, Dolores Feria, and others.

In the meantime, I finished *Carlos Bulosan and the Imagination of the Class Struggle* published in September 1972 (which narrowly escaped Marcos’ censorship), endorsed by Salvador Lopez. That was after a year of teaching (1965-66) at the University of California, Davis, where I made contact with “old-timer” Manongs for the first time and discovered the roots of the farmworkers’ “conscientization” (to borrow Freire’s term). Since then, the diasporic community has changed—no longer are our compatriots here farmworkers. Most professionals have assimilated by mimicking petty-bourgeois life-styles, while the proletarian majority continues to struggle to survive in the abysmal interstices of a violent racialized society in rapid decline after the 2008 crash and the rise of China as an industrial powerhouse.

In the period 1967-1986 I was involved in the project of educating/mobilizing our compatriots in the U.S. to help against U.S. imperialist war-crimes in IndoChina, and U.S.-guided counterinsurgency in the homeland. It was the period of urban rebellions still smoldering from the assassination of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. We helped initiate the anti-Marcos movement among migrants, and collaborated with the Friends of the Filipino People which engaged mainly in pedagogical and lobbying efforts.

Times have changed, however, so you find the majority of Filipinos here rallying to the white-supremacist program of Trump and his ilk. With the neoconservative ascendancy of Reagan and Thatcher, I became more involved with ethnic and racial studies, with left-wing comparative cultural studies, while participating in the debates on the National Question, party-building, ideology-critique, postcolonialism, etc. From 1993 up to the new millennium, I have focused on research into Philippine history, cultural politics, and the problem of “uneven and combined development,” including the interface between semiotic pragmatism and classic historical materialism.

4) Where were you during the overthrow of Marcos? How do you assess this event, which after all received a lot of attention worldwide?

I was then teaching at the University of Connecticut. From that base, we helped the natdem leadership to mobilize local communities to expose Marcos’ murderous violation of human rights. We collaborated with Filipino union activists to establish solidarity with U.S. counterparts. We were constantly in touch with our comrades in MetroManila and knew how the boycott tactic boomeranged, and how the unilateral focus on armed struggle in the countryside failed to actualize the concept of counter-hegemony. There seemed to be a delusive romanticization of guerilla war derived from the Chinese example which, I hope, has now been rectified. We are still in the juncture of a new-democratic revolution (anti-feudal, anti-

comprador, anti-imperialist)—the election of Duterte and then Bongbong Marcos testifies to the prevalent archaic, tributary mindset or habit-patterns of cacique/elite electoral “democracy,” the fragmented or coopted union movement, and the addiction to neoliberal beliefs/values inimical to the development of a nationalist sensibility rooted in our long durable history of anticolonial struggle. We are a long way to a full-fledged socialist reconstruction, as witnessed in Chile, Venezuela, Bolivia, and of course Cuba.

For some critics, the old Maoist dogma of protracted war of maneuver became a sectarian principle. It acquired an obsessive force that ultimately negated the war of position—the necessary political organizing and revolutionary praxis needed to win middle forces, isolate the diehard reactionaries, and affirm intellectual-moral leadership of the national-popular front. Of course, these two should be dialectically adjusted at every conjuncture. There was really no historical-materialist strategy of how to transform the neocolonial social relations — the received habits, mentalities, practices—even on the basis of a semi-feudal, dependent infrastructure. My contacts believed that dialectics was abandoned in favor of an empiricist-opportunist wager for easy sectoral victories. And for a quasi-religious cult of martyrdoms and hero-worship of so many young brilliant minds of at least two generations now.

And so the February event, while indeed a popular uprising in MetroManila catalyzed by years of leftist organizing, was captured by the Aquino camp of traditional, self-serving politicians. It led to the consolidation of oligarchic rule despite coups by disgruntled military elements. The Marcos cronies were out, the old technocrats and corporate-backed managers were in — a change in personnel. After Aquino, the Ramos presidency solidified the continuing dominance of those classes that once supported Marcos — the bloc of feudal landlords, compradors, religious fanatics (incited by U.S. evangelical agents patronized by the Aquino administration), and reactionary bureaucrat-capitalists. The gang of crooks and hustlers behind Estrada, Arroyo, Aquino III. and Duterte were financed by Marcos’ operatives, or obtained clandestine support from them, including the expertise of some who claimed to be veterans of Maoist guerrilla fronts and Marxist polemics — they are now accomplices of red-tagging mercenary technocrats. They are now lackeys/flunkeys of the Marcos-Duterte machine for plunder and violent repression.

Duterte himself is a Marcos wannabe but without the *faux* legalism of his idol—a gangster, pseudo-populist provincial “godfather” schooled in warlord violence, now subsidized by foreign agents and big drug lords. He is a transmogrification of the Filipino *jefe*. Lacking any genuine political program, Duterte relies on vigilante methods, bribery, threats, and manipulation of military/police operatives. It also relies on the passivity of the middle-strata and the opportunism of the old elite—the Ayala-Elizalde, Lopez, Araneta, Cojuangco clans, etc. But this is a very precarious mode of rule that, despite the alibi of pandemic exigencies, displays lunatic symptoms and nihilistic perversity so flagrant in the fixed agendas of social-media trolls and paid public relations impresarios.

One can hypothesize that Duterte’s regime—and its accomplice, Bongbong’s bloc of sycophants— may be the last gasp of neocolonial political shenanigans that the U.S. started when they coopted the ilustrado class in the early twentieth century. That method of “Benevolent Assimilation” climaxed in the Quezon- Osmena authoritarian partnership, and then maintained by U.S. puppets Roxas, Quirino, Magsaysay, Garcia, Macapagal, and Marcos. That genealogy

characterized the old school of political bargaining and *Realpolitik*. The sequence from Cory Aquino to Duterte, at the tail of the Cold War and the advent of neoliberal globalization signaled by 9/11, is now sputtering out with the bloody, vulgarian, expedient rule of thugs, criminals, and their hirelings. Their sole legitimacy is the Anti-Terrorism Act which justifies the provision of billions of tax money to the NTF-ELCAC (National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict) clique and their accessories in the Philippine National Police and the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

One can speculate that these are all symptomatic of the decline of U.S. imperial “democracy” and the onset of a multipolar world where China has become in fantasy the new enemy of the U.S.-led coalition of morbid corporate/finance capitalism. Or else it is a local phenomenon with quaint “Filipino” characteristics. A new world war is in the works (of which the U.S.-NATO proxy war in Ukraine against Russia is a symptom) — unless climate change and ecological disaster overtake us all.

5) In 2022 the next presidential elections will be held - with Bongbong Marcos as a promising candidate - and it also marks the 50th anniversary of the imposition of martial law by his father, Ferdinand E. Marcos. How do you explain this rather bizarre continuity?

Bizarre, yes, but also explicable as part of Filipino accommodationism, bargaining or ad-hoc utilitarianism. Filipinos today are either ignorant of what happened during the martial-law era, or have been taught that the Marcos regime accomplished wonderful things — Imelda’s Cultural Center, Green Revolution in rice-farming, etc. Marcos-appointed or patronized bureaucrats are still in government or in highly remunerative positions in business, elite cultural circles, etc. This is not a strange development because the 1986 February uprising did not change the class-polarized structure enabling neocolonial injustice and inequality. The form of rule — from Marcos’ authoritarianism to elite/cacique democracy—was a version of the old neocolonial pattern of client-patronage, compadre opportunism, equilibrating a profoundly conflicted system. It did not transform the mode of production and the associated social relations reproducing it.

After the EDSA revolt, the ideology of Marcos’ “New Society” was refurbished or retooled, while the country remained underdeveloped, lacking any viable big industry, reliant on the exploitation of human labor (chiefly the remittances of overseas Filipino workers) and natural resources by foreign and local elites. We remained a peripheral appendage of global finance capitalism. The school system and various religious agencies reinforced the petrified family and bilateral kinship as the primary conservative institution that sustains the neocolonial production of goods, services, and world-view (the complex of illusions, fantasies, wish-fulfillments), and its reproduction in everyday life.

But not everything looks stable and solid—in fact, precarity renders everything vulnerable to heterogenous forces, to contingent circumstances. A new element in the political economy, initiated by Marcos’ policy of labor export, began to calibrate domestic as well as transnational policies. I am referring to over twelve million Filipinos scattered across the planet. Dollar remittances from OFWs (Overseas Filipino Workers) — the “new heroes” celebrated by Cory Aquino — became crucial for relieving the foreign debt, population density, homelessness, unemployment misery, alienation, anomie, etc. But this new stratum of workers (feminized labor) harbors a potential for anti-oligarchic mobilization, that is why the Marcos-Duterte camp

is trying to control it. But with the deterioration of the economy in city and countryside, this sector might introduce an unpredictable tendency whose politics depends on subjective political agencies.

A note of cautionary advice is in order here. The decline of job opportunities in the Middle East and elsewhere also injects a worrisome element for Filipino oligarchs determined to hang on to power and their luxurious if abusive life-style. After all, the Philippines is a neocolonial outpost that claims no privileged status or drawing-rights. In fact, it is a pawn now in the China- U.S. jockeying for world hegemony. With China instead of the Soviet Union as the main enemy (with Iran and Muslim extremism as Pentagon/CIA alibis for continued drone warfare), a whole reservoir of Orientalist racism and geopolitical demonizing is opened up for a new Cold War and its horrendous consequences. Some pundits are speculating that the continued attacks on Asians (Filipinos being mistaken for Chinese) in New York, San Francisco, and other cities are symptoms of a virulent xenophobia concurrent with unemployment, urban decay, hostility to immigrants, natural disasters, breakdown of public utilities, persistent pandemics, etc. It may be the tip of the iceberg of a White Supremacist-initiated civil war in the aftermath of the January 6 Capitol riot.

Meanwhile, the United States has to reckon with Chinese support for Duterte and the Marcos-Duterte regime safeguarding him from the tentacles of the International Criminal Court. But so long as the extant mode of production remains basically feudal, with the rentier class tied to comprador/militarized allies, and with the social consensus pivoting around clan/family dynasties, the structure is there to support Marcos clones and his epigones — whether Duterte or some other populist surrogate. Despite cracks and fissures, the material base still supports the ideological structure and the State apparatus reproducing it. If electoral politics fails to normalize the political economy, then authoritarian rule/militarized administration might be the temporary remedy. Why not since Duterte's regime is de facto martial rule that Bongbong Marcos has inherited, absent the challenge of any other populist strongman supported by fractions of the ruling elite.

Meanwhile, of course, the Makabayan bloc and other progressive-nationalist forces are still around, not as strong as before, but formidable in the cultural and intellectual fields. Whether they can summon enough counterhegemonic efficacy, win more activists and marshal collective energies, remains to be seen. The future is still open — the class struggle grows sharper everyday. Sooner or later, either the people's representatives gain ascendancy and seize power, or the whole country edges toward intolerable misery, criminality, agonizing deprivations, depravities, and deaths under the reign of violent terrorist death-squads and warlords. It is easy to conjecture all sorts of dreadful scenarios, of course, since the conflicted reality resists the old Parsonian structural-functionalism or the neoclassic politics of Western modernization. Reality is more complex and rich than any theorizing, as Lenin said, so we need to continue inquiring and analyzing highly mutable variables, the balance of forces changing at every conjuncture, and try to adapt our thinking to the needs of social praxis for more sustainable emancipatory interventions.

6) *How would you categorize the Duterte administration and its performance?*

In 2016, there was severe dissatisfaction with Noynoy Aquino's laid-back style of governance culminating in the Mamasapano massacre as well as the collapse of social services during periodic natural disasters. So, the mood prior to Duterte's notoriety as Davao's action-oriented mayor was a demand for aggressive leadership. Filipinos tend to believe that a change in leadership personnel signifies a change in the whole system — a pattern cultivated since the period of U.S. tutelage.

Duterte inherited a structure of authoritarian rule inspired by the Marcos model of reliance on the State's coercive agencies (PNP, AFP, a corrupt bureaucracy; controlled legislature and court). Like all State operations, it is based on the client-patron model managed by a patrimonial coalition of big landlords, comprador, and financial bureaucrats. We still suffer from the effects of 300 years of Spanish colonialism and over a hundred years of U.S. tutelage. The term "postcolonial" is thus a misnomer or an alibi for continuing dependency and marginality.

The Marcos dynasty's money and crony support funded the polling surveys and social media that inflated Duterte's image as the awaited savior. His performance, misogynistic, vulgar and anti-intellectual, can only entertain but not produce substantive changes: the drug problem has considerably worsened. To aggravate nationalist sensitivity, China has claimed more territory in the West Philippine Sea despite Duterte's inutile bravura, and acquiescence to China's elite who will surely back his daughter's (Sara Duterte's) candidacy.

Contrary to the pundit's view that Duterte is a populist leader backed by grassroots farmers and petty-bourgeois stratum, Duterte's pseudo-charisma exploits the cinematic role of a neighborhood tough-guy who can do things quickly, ignoring customary proprieties. His campaign against drugs—the killing of more than 8,000 suspects (according to government records)—coupled with the pandemic crisis, has intensified corruption. Officials siphoned off the budget for health/medical services and anti-Covid vaccines. It has allowed the police-military to inflict abuses. After using the peace talks to uncover Communist Party networks and kill peace consultants, Duterte has resorted to red-tagging under the cover of the Anti-Terrorism Act to maintain peace and public order. The real situation is chaotic, with citizens making-do and coping with hunger, sickness, desperation all around.

Notwithstanding the arguments of Ernesto Laclau and Nicos Poulantzas, Duterte's ascribed populism is a tawdry mimicry of Peron or any tinpot Latin-American jefe. Duterte has no wide trade-union support or ideological party machinery. He appeals to alienated individuals and fear-stricken middle-strata. But it has a Filipino provenance, dating back to Quezon's "social justice" slogan to Magsaysay's anti-Huk campaigns and recently to Marcos' "New Society" agit-prop. Its hackneyed rhetoric glorifies Duterte's role as protector of the masses, so its personalism bears affinities with fascist authoritarianism rather than with Russian Narodism appealing to underprivileged, dislocated groups.

Neither does Duterte's regime resemble classic Bonapartism nor Caesarism. It's really an ad-hoc setup of mediocre, thuggish compadres to shore up the bankrupt cacique democracy we suffer under. Duterte is annoyed or challenged by the critical ethos of nationalist, progressive forces of radicalized youth, women, religious activists, immiserated peasantry, rural and urban workers, etc. But I suspect that he is more disturbed by the indignant grievances of middle-strata

professionals who are forced to become low-paid migrant workers whose remittances of over \$12 billion a year pays off the foreign debt and enables a tiny percentage of 110 million Filipinos to indulge in wasteful consumption.

7) *Why haven't the left had a real chance of doing reasonably well in elections so far? Do they lack mass appeal and/or won't a left-wing project - however well founded - fail because of the powerful bastion of Catholicism on the islands?*

There is a problem of implementing united-front policies or principles on the part of the national-democratic camp in the arena of electoral politics. This is an old stumbling-block since the Huk rebellion in the 1950s with its adventurism and sectarian dogmatism born of the complex alignments during the Pacific War. Especially in a predominantly Catholic country, Gramsci's dialectic of war of movement and war of position needs to be examined again and carefully adjusted to our unique social formation.

Religion or its manifestation in folk millenarianism, should not be a problem, as the theology of liberation has shown in the case of Latin America. Millenarianism is a symptom of the crisis of the system. We had a really flourishing native version of liberation theology in the seventies and eighties—until the Vatican stifled it, though Pope Francis seems to have revived it in his own unique way. But the conservative and even reactionary forms of cultish Bible-based sectarianism introduced by American evangelicals with the blessing of the CIA/Pentagon during Cory's time to counter the National Democratic Front's popularity may be a problem for Christians-for-National Liberation activists.

We have many progressive democratic partisans in the Church and other religious formations, including the Muslim and indigenous (Lumad) groups who have all responded productively to the appeal of Bayan Muna and national-democratic programs and objectives. A united front of diverse groups may be emerging in the wake of Duterte's terrorism and the Marcos ascendancy. I think the proven success and viability of the Bayan Muna (Gabriela, AnakPawis, etc) bloc testifies to the left's resourcefulness in electoral politics amid bribery of barangay officials by traditional politicians. Money may win votes, but loyalty and political allegiance defy pecuniary distractions. By any measure, Bayan Muna's performance in previous electoral exercises has been a phenomenal success, despite Neri Colmenares' failure to garner enough votes for a senate seat.

As you will recall, the People's Party in the 1990s initiated the first attempt to test if electoral politics can be utilized to promote a national-popular agenda. This resulted in the assassination of Roberto Olalia and murderous threats on all nationalist-democratic organizations. This symptom of Cold-War hysteria still infects the whole State apparatus, from the lower courts to the Supreme Court, Senate and Batasan. This fascist mode of conducting governance can lead only to the destruction of the unstable political economy of the country and the anarchistic war of oligarchic wolves.

8) *Would you agree with me that underneath the thin surface and facade of alleged democracy, electoral processes and macro-politics in the Philippines still remain essentially feudal?*

That is precisely what needs to be addressed: the mixed, conflicted modes of production that constitute the singular social formation of the Philippines in this current conjuncture. “Feudal,” of course, is a general term in the political-sociological discourse, so we need to contextualize it in Philippine history. One aspect of feudalism experienced in the Philippines is the lack of awareness of racism—the white-supremacist ideology and practice of U.S. colonialism which reinforced the Spanish/Eurocentric strategy of dividing groups according to ethnic/racial categories, and establishing hierarchies of power. The techniques of how U.S. white-supremacist ideology and practices were institutionalized among Filipinos need to be fully analyzed and evaluated, an imperative task for all Filipino activists so that we can begin to explain why a majority of Filipinos in the U.S. support Trump’s flagrant racism and demagoguery.

Most Filipinos, both at home and abroad, have been educated/trained to identify with the white-racial code of norms, so that most Filipinos in the U.S. continue to support Trump and his unconscionable racist politics. They do not see themselves as victims of U.S. imperial domination. They are grateful for being tolerated or accepted as part of the hegemonic consensus because they see themselves as individuals, not as an oppressed group, rewarded for trying hard to adapt or adjust. The threat of anomie is warded off by identifying with Statist authority. The lack of any sense of national/racial solidarity among the victims of imperialist-colonialist subjugation may be diagnosed as a symptom of the feudal mentality, the native’s colonized ethos of subordinating herself/himself to the lord-master’s will.

I submit that no amount of analyzing Hegel’s dialectic of lord and bondsman, or scrutinizing the intricacies of the class struggle portrayed in broad strokes in the Marx/Engels canon, can remedy the Filipino *habitus* (if I may use Bourdieu’s term) of subalternity. We have our own counterpart to Fanon’s discourse on racialized violence and resistance in the works of Rizal, Mabini, Agoncillo, Constantino, Sison, Lumbera, and vernacular artists such as Faustino Aguilar, Ramon Muzones, Amado V. Hernandez, Lualhati Bautista, etc. But Filipinos don’t really know these writers, nor the Rizal-Mabini genealogy of counter-hegemonic resistance. So, again, we need a new age of Enlightenment (with appropriate pedagogy) to purge the toxic legacy of feudalism and its postmodern variants—a virus worse than Covid-19—sustained by imperialist patronage and charity.

9) *In your opinion, what are the main weaknesses and strengths of your compatriots?*

Your question, provocative and perhaps redundant in the light of what I have already discussed earlier, invokes the permanent need for historical specificity and contextualization. If you inquire closely into the vicissitudes of our anti-colonial struggles, we suffered two defeats or reversals: the suppression of the revolutionary first Philippine Republic by the U.S., and the breakdown of the Huk rebellion in the fifties. One other defeat may be the failure of the EDSA rebellion to enact thorough land reform and eliminate political dynasties — the foremost being the Marcos-Arroyo-Duterte collusion. Lessons have not yet been fully extracted from those events, given the inadequacy of our history textbooks, our Westernized intelligentsia, and our amnesia-stricken national memory as a whole. We also lack a steady corps of fulltime organic intellectuals mediating between the middle-strata and the grassroots. We have no sustained public forums and genuinely free press to promote participatory democracy, given the terrorist government threats and rampant arrests, with hundreds of political activists jailed and tortured or

extra-judicially neutralized. We cannot dialogue with ourselves uninterrupted by arrest, death-threats, etc.

In my view, if I may be permitted a guess, we as a people have not completed the process undergone by the masses in the French Revolution, or the decades of Mao's intuitive but systematic mobilization of China's countryside. Our neocolonial situation does not permit it for now and the foreseeable future. Our "enlightenment" stage was cut off by the colonial imposition of U.S. individualist-utilitarian habits that continue to commodify bodies, souls, dreams, fantasies. Underlying it is the seemingly impregnable mould of feudal-dependent mores, customs, and sensibility that suppresses critical, reflexive reasoning and prevents any integral judgment of the totality of collective experience.

Our neocolonized belief-system has inculcated obedience and worship without questioning purpose, means, or ends. The *compradrazgo* mechanism functions under the umbrella of a comprador-middlemen way of conducting business that makes a mockery of the judicial-meritocratic paradigm of industrial capitalism. We are still a profoundly colonized formation without any heavy industry and an impoverished agricultural sector exporting cheap raw materials—lately, including our staple crop, rice. Our main exports now are OFWs (Filipino Overseas Workers), about 12 million worldwide, including Filipinos settled in North America. The market-oriented economy subsists on the hedonistic consumerism of people with relatives working abroad. Urban MetroManila, however, boasts of supporting a network of call centers and transnational corporate clearing-houses with sophisticated technological platforms required by inclusion in a neoliberal system of commerce and transnational communication.

As for strengths, they are part of our weaknesses. Our *sikolohiyang* Filipino experts usually cite the *bayanihan* and *pakikisama* modes of cooperation. We have some formidable trade unions and public associations engaged in scientific research and humanistic pedagogy. Nonetheless, our public sphere is dominated by clan/familial networks of *damayan* and *pakiramdaman*, barkada companionship and lugubrious sentimentalism. Witness to this is the nationwide sympathy for Flor Contemplacion, the Filipina migrant worker hanged by the Singapore government, that panicked the Ramos regime. And earlier, the country was shocked by the killing of Senator Aquino on the airport tarmac, a distant echo of the martyrdom of the three secular priests garroted by the Spanish tyrants that catalyzed Rizal and the Propagandista movement. This explains our predilection for martyrdom, the slave-penchant for *ressentiment*, vindictive *amor proprio*. Now, however, a form of inverted millenarianism has infected the academic milieu with the postmodern nihilism of Deleuze, Foucault, even Rorty and Butler, and other Western celebrities lauding the end of ideology, history, Marxism, etcetera. We are surely facing the end of Duterte's presidency, but can the International Criminal Court and Maria Ressa's Nobel Prize prevent the daughter from safeguarding the father's responsibility for his crimes?

10) So what is your prognosis of what's in store for the next decade or two?

Our American friends always remind me that Filipinos have one of the longest and most durable revolutionary traditions in the whole world, not just in Asia. And so I should perhaps allude here to a certain stubborn, hard-headed quality of patience learned in centuries of surviving colonial privations, and a more than Christian sense of hope that the Messiah, flying

the red flag and singing the “Internationale,” will intervene at any moment now. There is an emergency, particularly when we are plunged in the moment of danger and intolerable suffering, while Duterte’s trolls whip up the old anti-communist hysteria. This moment of peril is the emergence (in polling surveys and social-media advertisements) of Bongbong Marcos as a favored candidate for president in the 2022 elections. An ironic twist of events? Or a bad joke by the algorithms of Twitter, Facebook and paid opinion-fabricators?

Cultural commentators (as the present interviewee) should refrain from forecasting the outcome of elections, so hazardous is the enterprise of gazing into the crystal ball. Prophets are often cast out from their homeland, if not crucified. However, one can speculate about trends. The trend is often manipulated, but one can discern the public’s desire for some form of reasonable, well-managed, efficient governance, especially in controlling wild skyrocketing prices of electricity, gasoline, transportation, food and other basic necessities, and helping the disabled, the unemployed, and the many victims of natural disasters.

The shameful failure of Duterte’s militarized approach to the pandemic, which brought about the mushrooming of “community pantries” red-tagged by the police and military, is sure to spark opposition to the Marcos-Duterte collusion. In other countries, such a failed regime would have resigned, shamed widely, or booted out of power. Public figures like the mayors of Manila and Pasig are now highly acclaimed as honest, competent administrators, notwithstanding their links with traditional politicians. In this regard, the “pink” candidate Robredo is trailing behind the popularity of other candidates who are paid surrogates for shadow politicians, or just plain mediocre. In this climate of free-for-all jousting, even the boxer Manny Pacquiao has been tossed into the electoral ring. Senator Pacquiao scarcely attended the Senate sessions; he has absolutely no qualification for the job except, maybe, his physical prowess and stamina — which, not to underestimate these qualities, may be what is lacking in Duterte’s debilitated and narcotic if not wholly moribund, wasted physiognomy.

So, I think if money-driven propaganda and poll-surveys are discounted, I think there will be a change to another regime with personnel not completely beholden to the Marcos-Duterte collusion. In any case, Filipinos have not lost hope in a change for the better, although their choice of Duterte landed them from the frying pan into the fire, so to speak. It is time to say, “Enough! Basta!” Indeed, how long can one endure imprisonment, torture, unwarranted arrests, extra-judicial killings, rape, rampant abuse of authority, corruption, insult and injury to women and Lumads, and anyone who criticizes such atrocities? How long can one endure such brutal privations? How long can one suffer servitude without raising a cry of protest and vote one’s conscience (one act allowed by law) to transform the *status quo* into a more egalitarian and just society? There are, of course, collective means and ways other than elections to change the current situation. This is not just the usual display of “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.” We expect the conscientized citizenry in the Philippines to register their general will and elect a humane alternative to the bloody Duterte regime and its farcical replacement, the Bongbong mimicry of his father’s reign.

POSTSCRIPT: *Traversing the Purgatorial Fire*

The Vietnam, Iraq, Aghanistan wars exposed the first cracks in the edifice of Western moral superiority.... Samuel Huntington’s remark — “The West won the

world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion... but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence”— is important to bear in mind...

—CHANDRAN NAIR

Unrelenting revolutionary activity coupled with boundless humanity—that alone is the real life-giving force of socialism. A world must be overturned, but every tear that has flowed and might have been wiped away is an indictment...

—ROSA LUXEMBURG

As this century of wars and revolutions comes to a close, Mark Twain's "person sitting in darkness" is bound to experience a lightning shock of recognition. Those dark-skinned natives in southeast Asia, conquered by the brute force of "Manifest Destiny" soon after the occupation of the homelands of the American Indian nations, have now stood up by expelling US military bases from their sovereign territory in 1992.

The event may come as a surprise to western observers. But not to the countless martyrs from Macario Sakay, Salud Algabe, and Crisanto Evangelista to the nameless victims of Maliwalu, Escalante, Lupao and of other still undiscovered sites of anti-communist barbarism. And surely not to Maria Lorena Barros, Macli-ing Dulag, Rolando Olalia, Cherith Dayrit, and thousands more who have sacrificed their lives so that the Filipino masses can achieve a measure of autonomy, justice, and equality. Such, indeed, has been the destiny of the "White Men's Burden" in the Philippines after the 1896 revolution against Spain and the protracted resistance against the invading "White Supremacist" behemoth with its seductive offer of "Benevolent Assimilation."

It has taken almost a century for us to appreciate the visionary force of what our compatriot Jose Rizal prophesied in "The Philippines A Century Hence": the people's struggle for national liberation, though suppressed many times, will overcome in the end. Amid the triumphalism of a hierarchical "New World Order," one harks back to the enduring truth of Marx's statement in 1870 with reference to the British colonial subjugation of Ireland: "The people that oppresses another people forge their own chains." Qualified accordingly, Marx's insight applies to the United States where today an alleged social-democratic brand of nationalism is being propagated throughout the whole society at the expense of the peoples of Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and the "internal colonies" (inhabited by millions of African Americans, American Indian nations, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and Asian Americans) whose mass mobilizations constitute the cutting edge of modern emancipatory and life politics in late capitalism.

Is the postcolonial agenda of abrogation and appropriation of colonial discourse still valid and viable after 9/11? The emergence of a U.S. "Homeland" consensus or climate of thought (codified, for example, in the USA Patriot Act) seems to have rendered suspect the deconstructive project of postcolonial theory to repeat as a reflexive mantra the news about the death of the "nation-state," the self-identical subject, and all totalizing forms of rationality (including varieties of Marxism). Born of the Cold War reaction to the utopian critique of capital, postcolonial thought has so far invested its chief energies in the analysis of difference as manifest in the "fractured and ambivalent discourse of colonial power." It rejected the universalist claims of national-liberation struggles as forms of Eurocentric mimicry. It celebrated

the ideals of hybridity, in-between or borderland experience, and other fantasmatic performances of agency parasitic on the liberal market and the circulation of addictive, ever-varying commodities. Consequently, it found itself endorsing the war against Islamic fundamentalism (the “internal enemies” of the pluralist order). It unwittingly became complicit with the predatory program of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization. What needs attention today is the exposure of this complicity, together with a practical critique of U.S. hegemonic imperial discourse legitimized by the current “war on terrorism” (a euphemism of neoliberal predation) and “humanitarian” interventions, as in Ukraine, Syria, Haiti, and so on.

We need to elaborate on how anti-Orientalist criticism can renew its oppositional and emancipatory vision by addressing aspects of the “terrorism” *problematique*, among others: (1) the ethos and pragmatic schemes of the new American Century ideologues; (2) the globalizing strategy of finance capital as mediated through the WTO, IMF and World Bank; and (3) the intellectual apologetic and rationalization of the “clash of civilization” scholasticism that functions as the postmodern reincarnation of “Manifest Destiny” and the “civilizing mission” of the old-style colonialists. It would be useful to investigate more rigorously the problems of the Other (alterity), subaltern identity, the question of difference, materialist locality, performative bodies, and other phenomena of the present conjuncture.

Grappling with Alibis and Subterfuges

Today, in the periphery of the "New World Order," the domination of the human species by commodity fetishism and the alienating power of the cash-nexus encompasses all spheres of private and public life. Even the negative can be coopted if not neutralized. The celebration of Columbus's "discovery" of the New World by the northern centers of privilege is symptomatic of a new theoretical program to constitute the field of "the postcolonial" as a regulated mode of discourse, another disciplinary regime for elaborating theories of difference, alterity, and positional identity. The U.S. prison-military-industrial complex regurgitates its worn-out shibboleths of democracy and freedom via total control of information, cybermedia, and the banking/currency system.

The fashionable signs for this strategy of recuperation are "multiculturalism," pluralism, and consumerism. Commodity-fetishism prevails throughout. In Philippine Studies administered by American scholars, following the model of Frank Lynch whose Cold-War functionalism dominated local social-science practitioners since 1959 (May 1998). For example, this recolonizing move is exemplified by the ascription of responsibility for domination to the victims themselves, under the guise of liberal objectivity and the postmodern vogue of relativized power in a consensual normative order. Even paradigms like "Third World" or "underdevelopment" are stigmatized as totalizing and therefore totalitarian. Only a micropolitics of local utility and deconstructive cosmopolitanism (or self-serving opportunism?) seem tolerable to academic pundits and would-be public intellectuals. In brief, as Raymond Williams points out in *The Year 2000*, global transnationalism can articulate for its own interest the emancipatory politics of oppositional forces - the struggle for fully active social identities and for egalitarian self-governance. This is of course limited and surveilled within the market parameters of exchange value and profit that continue to inform the "rational" discourse of the social sciences and humanities in the Global North at this historical conjuncture.

Today the situation is overdetermined by emergent, residual and current trends. Within this ideological field constituted by the still pervasive authority of Western disciplinary norms, voices are exploding from the margins. They are traversing borders and boundaries, challenging this discourse of universal post-coloniality and trans-nationalist interdependency. This layered, heterogeneous zone of conflict is what Frederic Jameson calls "cultural revolution" after the Chinese experience of the sixties and seventies. But a more precise figuration of this dialectic of the new evolving from the old can be gleaned from C.L.R. James's homage to the Rastafari's subversive exuberance (quoted in Paul Buhle's excellent biography *C.L.F. James: The Artist as Revolutionary*): "Their world is just beginning The colossal stupidities, the insanities of the Rastafari are consciously motivated by their acute consciousness of the filth in which they live, their conscious refusal to accept the fictions that pour in upon them from every side. These passions and forces are the 'classic human virtues.' As long as they express themselves, the form may be absurd, but the life itself is not absurd" (1988, 160).

We confront the dialectics of form and content, the universal and the historically specific. What is fundamental here is the perception that form cannot be essentialized and valorized in itself. We need to stress the desideratum that forms of cultural expression as well as of political allegory and social representation need to be grounded in the complex of historical antagonism in a world system whose relational dynamics has determined the configuration of national, class, gender, and racial forces in our contemporary milieu. Totality demands recognition and judgment. What commands priority is the mode of production and the social relations in which culture, ideology, beliefs, and purposes are inscribed.

Again, we need the optic of historicizing events. In the triumphalist celebration of technocratic modernization through racial, gender and class divisions, it is important to note that the current ascendancy of the unregulated market together with the bureaucratic welfare-state has become vulnerable and precarious. We stress the view that this is only a moment in a world-historical process that began with the genocidal exploitation of the Indians in the Americas and the triangular slave trade. US imperial hegemony is thus built on the cadavers and skulls of its victims.

One moment of that process is of course the Spanish-American War of 1898 which led to the US colonization of Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Philippines. But how long can the oppression and exploitation of people of color go on? Almost everyone anticipates massive problems reproducing and intensifying the crisis of global capitalism. We have space here to cite a few: unemployment, homelessness, rural exodus, corruption, inflation, worsening social inequalities, decline in health care and other social services, aggravated racial and ethnic conflicts, rampant criminality, subordination of national economies to the multinational banks, unmitigated exploitation of migrant labor (particularly, women of color), heightened sexist violence, moral decay and general decadence. Amid this turbulence, the collective response is (to echo George Floyd), "We can't breathe!"

In this context, Henri Lefebvre, the great philosopher of *la quotidienne*, reminds us that the all-inclusive agenda of Marxism, that of changing life itself, remains unsurpassed: "Marx envisaged a total person of the future, being deployed as a body, as a relation between the senses, as thought. What remains to be thought now? Marx certainly thought the world in which he lived, but the modern world has not yet begun to think Marxism." As Sartre and others have reminded us, Marxism is still the unsurpassable philosophy of our time.

Prophesying Exorcism

The restoration of oligarchic rule in the Philippines in 1986 ushered a new stage of retrogression. Duterte's bloody drug-war heralded the return of the Marcos dynasty to Malacanang in 2022. We confront the retooling of the neocolonial apparatuses of domination which today are mediated through the World Bank/International Monetary Fund, various financial credit agencies and instrumentalities, including fundamentalist sects. The myth of the United States' redemptive mission in the Philippines, its almost unlimited potential for self-aggrandizement, has been given a new lease on life with the use of hired social media and manipulated ballot-counting computers for preserving inequities in all sectors.

The "labor of the negative," however, continues to animate the egalitarian specter. While authoritarian, elitist values saturating the mass media persist, a praxis of national liberation in art and literature has emerged on the face of Pentagon-sponsored "low intensity warfare" and virulent Cold-War red-tagging. "Terrorism" functions as the convenient device of stigmatization, ostracism, death-sentence. Ideas, styles, conventions of feeling and conduct, artistic forms—all have become sites of ethical, political, and ideological contestation that implicates authors, texts and audiences alike. What is at stake? Not so much the fate of reading or writing as such, but rather the material and spiritual life chances of over 110 million Filipinos—the abject subaltern who dare not speak, people of color whose voices have been silenced for a long time, but whose labor has virtually enabled artists and writers (including their Western counterparts) to survive and fulfill themselves in manifold styles of opposition and resistance.

Grounded in the struggles of women, tribal and ethnic nationalities, workers and peasants, youth, and people of the church, a culture of resistance has emerged to interrogate the status quo, forge new subjectivities as collective agents of empowerment, and unfold possibilities of alliances among various groups sharing common memories of being victims and of participants of multiple modes of resistance. New initiatives for intervention by the marginalized, the excluded and subordinated, have sparked creative acts speaking truth to power. Within the space demarcated by the erosion of traditional client-patron politics and the bankruptcy of oligarchic-comprador revival of election rituals, one can discern new structures of self-governing communal life particularly among women's collectives and in peasant villages of the liberated zones. We can hear again Andres Bonifacio's call sounded on the eve of the 1896 uprising against Spanish colonialism: "It is now time for the light of truth to shine...O my countrymen, let us open the eyes of our minds and voluntarily consecrate our strength to what is good in the true and full faith that the prosperity of the land of our birth...will come to pass" (Agoncillo 1974, 199).

Praxis of Mass Mobilization

It is no longer heretical to assert that hermeneutics—glossing and interpreting—is thus political in its grounding and effects. The process of "reading" western hegemony generates its complementary act of "writing" by the subjugated natives as creative reappropriation, a reorientation of old forms given new content or substance by this catastrophe of bondage, and by being witness to transgression and deliverance. These two dimensions of cultural interaction are integral parts of the "third world" experience, polarities of one historical event. When Filipino writers begin to "read" the culture and ideological practices of US power, imperial authority is bound to reveal the limits of its legitimacy, its transcendently mystified but ultimately historical immanence, its transitoriness.

In a recent discourse on power propaganda, John Pilger reminded us of the universal carnage that U.S. imperialism has inflicted on over a hundred countries, suppressing liberation movements in twenty nations and destroying untold populations (as in Iraq, Yemen, Libya, etc.). He cites Nobel-prize awardee Harold Pinter's critique: "The crimes of the United States have been systematic, constant, vicious, remorseless, but very few people have actually talked about them. You have to hand it to America. It has exercised a quite clinical manipulation of power worldwide while masquerading as a force for universal good. It's a brilliant, even witty, highly successful act of hypnosis" (2022). The subalterns are beginning to awake from abject hypnosis to construct a new genuinely plural, post-Western world order (Nair 2022).

Before the abyss of rampant ecological disaster wrought by capitalist profitmaking, there is no alternative but refusal and defiance. A phenomenology of master and slave is necessarily inscribed in North-South confrontations, given the unequal and uneven development of the world-system. In such an inquiry, the "critique of weapons" can yield the weapons of criticism for those already convinced that what is needed is not merely to interpret but also to transform the social texts/praxis of our everyday reality. "Change your lives!" — such is the calling, the vocation, of the Filipino artist in her embattled situation.

The resurgence of revolutionary nationalism in the Philippines in the last two decades can be viewed as a response to this necessity. In the genealogy of subaltern intransigence, even the writing and career of a diehard aestheticist like Jose Garcia Villa can be interpreted as a mode of dissonant and sublimated articulation of refusal. The cunning of Caliban's protest/dissidence against the Ariels of capital - art's goal of metamorphosing the real - is as protean and resourceful as the ruses of imperial pacification. Every artistic work is ideological and utopian at the same time; every poem is both a document of culture as well as of barbarism (to repeat Benjamin's aphorism). We confront the imperative of choosing which side to join, which principles and ideals to fight for.

In the variations of this transition from past to future, what this critique of symbolic exchange hopes to convey is that Marxism is (in Lenin's phrase, "concrete analysis of concrete conditions," "concrete" meaning multideterminant) the permanent principle of hope in action. Hope equals collective praxis, popular mobilization. It is a sense of the beginning of a long-range journey of socialist reconstruction; the play of utopian energies investing the counterhegemonic art of the everyday life with value. This process becomes actualized by Filipino activists in cities and countryside where the crisis of neocolonial dependency, indeed the claims of "Manifest Destiny" recycled today by the apologists of transnational capital, will be finally resolved.

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