

Private Transitory Ownership of Public Property: one key to understanding public behavior: I-the driving game*

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In a series of articles and two books, the anthropologist Hall (1959, 1963, 1964, 1966) has developed a theory of cultural use of space which he terms *proxemics*. Basically, Hall's theory is this: man has a uniform way of handling distance from his fellows. Furthermore, man's sense of space and distance is not static, but instead, is dynamic because it is related to action—that is, what can be done in a given space—rather than what is seen by passing-viewing. Hall (1966:107-8) feels that we should

think of man as surrounded by a series of expanding and contracting fields which provide information of many kinds. . . . We can then begin to learn about human behavior, including personality types. Not only are there extroverts and introverts, authoritarian and egalitarian, Apollonian and Dionysian types and all the other shades and grades of personalities, but each one of us has a number of learned situational personalities. The simplest form of the situational personality is that associated with responses to intimate personal, social, and public transactions.

Most of us are unaware of our structuring of space because it is an unconscious pattern of behavior—undoubtedly deuterolearned throughout our socialization process. Yet as we come into contact with different cultures, we find ourselves annoyed,

* The research on which this paper is based was part of the Ateneo-Penn State Basic Research Program, sponsored by the United States Office of Naval Research, with The Pennsylvania State University as prime contractor (Nonr-656[37]).

A slightly modified version of this paper was presented at the 5th Annual Visayas-Mindanao Convention of the Philippine Sociological Society held May 1, 1967, at Victorias, Negros Occidental.

irritated, and oftentimes appalled by some aspect of behavior which is somehow different from our own. Being by and large ethnocentered, we gape in amazement at the stupidity with which other cultures handle certain nearly universal situations.

Let us consider an American arriving in the Philippines. One of the major areas of immediately perceived conflict and irritation is that which relates to public and private ownership and use of property — property for purposes of this paper simply being considered as bounded space. A situation exists in the Philippines, which may be termed, for want of a better description, the *private, transitory possession (or ownership) of public property*. In the West, and embodied in Western law, the concept of public property carries with it a set of attitudes: a sharing of public property; ownership by the public and a concomitant responsibility for upkeep. In the Philippines, the Civil Code and the municipal ordinances are similar in content to those of the United States. But behavior of the public with regard to public property suggests that public property belongs to no one. Rather the user of public property — public sidewalks, public highways, public lands, and perhaps even public political office or position — appears to regard that particular piece of public property, that particular office at the time of use, as his own personal property.

Following are some examples where this conflict occurs.

Use of Private and Public Lands

(1) A squatter, particularly in an urban or suburban area, builds a shanty on a vacant private or public lot which is unfenced and unused. After some months, he is asked to evacuate the premises, either by the owner or by court order. Quite often, he is reluctant to do so, apparently feeling that he has certain rights in the land. It is hypothesized that he sees such a requirement or request as an infringement of his rights, and as an act of cruel injustice.

(2) A sidewalk vendor, despite ordinances to the contrary, sets up his shop on the sidewalk of the main thoroughfare in downtown Manila. When either through citizen complaint (rare) or city government-inspired activity, he is forced to close shop

and evacuate his spot on the sidewalk, his reaction is a muttered "very oppressive, the police." It is hypothesized that he, like the squatter, sees himself as being deprived of his rights, a victim of cruel injustice, by those who have more and could share.

Personal Use of Public Office

(1) If public political or appointive office can be considered in the same frame of reference, one may cite the case of the politician who, once in power, uses political office for private gain. In response to criticism, his answer is "Well, what are we in power for?" indicating clearly that he considers himself (and his group) the owner(s) of the public office at the time.

(2) The concept of public service in government becomes lost as positions on virtually all levels become personal property of the office holders, and where public service as such is rendered only through the use of bribery (commonly known in the Philippines as *lagáy*).

Pedestrian and Vehicle Behavior

(1) Manila is the only modern city where it is prohibited to park on the side of the road but not in the middle of the busiest streets to change a tire or repair a car. It is only in Manila where you see a bus blocking traffic while it is being repaired by a gang of mechanics from the bus terminal. If they are going to haul parked cars in the wrong place by pulling them to the impounding lot of the MPD why can't they push the stalled cars to the side of the road? (Valencia 1967).

(2) "Nothing short of intensive mass education will suffice to improve the conduct of our drivers," Traffic head Col. Querubin Mabutag said. "I cannot question their ability, for they are one of the world's best. What they simply need is a fundamental education in road courtesy, and the rules and regulations for safe driving. . . . The driver, however, remains the X-factor in the traffic geometry. What sort of person he is and what he will do once behind the wheel remains a question of utmost importance to the passenger and pedestrian" (Macatuno 1967).

Driving Behavior

For purposes of this paper, let us concentrate on driving behavior, and the use of space by drivers and pedestrians. To the

freeway-oriented Westerner, particularly the American, Manila traffic is utter chaos, and driving behavior verges on the maniacal. The query "what do you think of our traffic?" elicits such responses as "no courtesy at all"; "absolute maniacs"; "why don't they stay in their own lane?"; "there are no rules; people simply drive where they want to, and pay no attention to anyone else"; and inevitably, "why do they leave their cars parked in the middle of the street?"

All of these responses illustrate the Westerner's perplexity in the face of Manila traffic, but they also indicate a basic misunderstanding of the Filipino driver's use of public space, structuring of distance, and his public personality with regard to public transactions. Manila traffic may appear chaotic, but I maintain there are rules, there is order, and once the Westerner isolates the rules, he can sit back and relax (if he has a driver) or sit up and enjoy the game if he drives himself.

Let us assume, for purposes of illustration, a composite case history, based on three key informants and supplemented by cross-checking with 12 others.

Pablo Sasakyan is 31 years old, a taxi driver in Manila and the suburbs. He drives for a large company which operates about 400 cars, with offices in one of the suburbs north of Manila. Pablo, who is called Lito by his family and friends, has been driving cab for the same company for six years, although he has been a driver for 12 years, serving his apprenticeship in jeepneys, with time in large trucks and also as a private driver. He earns approximately ₱250-300 a month, his 25 per cent share of the total earnings of his cab during his occupancy of the driver's seat. He drives about 10-1/2 hours daily except Sunday—from about 4:30 p.m. to 4:30 a.m. Lito's take-home pay supports a wife and a family of five children at subsistence level in one room in Tondo. Most of his earnings goes for the bare necessities of life—rent, food, medical expenses—and for education of two of his five children. He must also surrender a portion of his earnings to the Social Security System, to his union, to the company for carrier insurance, and his company charges him ₱15 per month to have his cab washed daily.

He must set aside another portion of his earnings for *lagáy*—a means of fixing any kind of traffic violation (real or imagined) for which he might be stopped in Manila or the surrounding suburbs. Lito does not like *lagáy*, but he knows that it is an integral part of the driving game—a necessary evil if he is to operate successfully in his line of work.

If Lito is typical of his socio-economic class and his occupational group, he will probably reflect the values of the lowland Filipino to a very great extent. Bulatao (1964), Hollnsteiner (1963, 1965), and Lynch (1959, 1962), among others, have discussed the values of the typical lowland Filipino. While there has been a traditional tendency to make a split between the values of the so-called urbanite and the rural Filipino, indications are that many of the traditional values of the rural lowland Filipino still exist in the urban setting.

Lito's first allegiance is to his family, both his immediate family of procreation and surviving members of his family of orientation. He sees himself as a member of specific different segments within the society. As Hollnsteiner (1963: 23) notes:

The Filipino sees himself as a member of a group and channels his behavior in terms of that group. If he is to remain part of it, he cannot exhibit independence of it. His first membership is in his kin group, more specifically, his nuclear family. As he grows older, he begins to align himself with members of his peer group, who see themselves as a unit against all other groups of that nature. The price of membership is intense loyalty to that group and its interests, while the benefits are support from other group members. One's interests are the group's interests and vice versa. Hence, if a co-member has been insulted by an outgroup member, it is the in-group's responsibility to revenge that collective insult.

Loyalty to groups which are further in social distance from the family—the neighborhood, total community, province, linguistic group, nation—decreases in intensity, it appears, in inverse proportion to the size of the group. I would posit that Lito does not really consider himself a member of the Filipino equivalent of "John Q. Public," although he may identify himself as being one of the common *tao*, a member of the little people ("I am only a poor taxi driver who didn't finish his high school"), as

opposed to the more affluent and powerful, the *malalaking tao* (big people). Lito is acquainted with and utilizes all the techniques for getting along with people, particularly his group—*pakikisama*, the go-between, the use of euphemism.

One must add to this sketch two other facets, overlooked by social scientists in the past. First, Lito possesses a bawdy *joie de vivre* and a true sense of the ridiculous. Lito is able to laugh at himself and members of his group with impunity. He does not like to be made the butt of a joke by an outsider—indeed, this could well lead to violence—but he is genuinely able to find humor, almost serendipitously, in day-to-day situations, and this may well allow him to relieve some of the tension of his economic and social situation through a humorous view of life—albeit sometimes cynical, sometimes bitter.

The second point is that Lito's view of life, I am becoming more and more convinced, is a conscious view of life as a series of contests (even games) sometimes pleasant, sometimes tedious, more often serious. The important point here is that Lito consciously articulates this view: he is aware that he is involved in many series of contests with other individuals, and approaches these situations as one would approach any game or contest situation—the final result hopefully being to beat the opponent.

His socialization process (see Guthrie and Jacobs 1966) has equipped him with many of the ground rules for the games of later life—predictable patterns for behavior—which undergo modification in some instances, but more frequently remain the same rules operating in different situations.

At this point in the research, we concern ourselves only with the rules of Lito's occupational game—driving a taxi in Manila. Involved within this larger contest are a series of lesser contests (in terms of importance and duration) but together they form the larger game of taxi-driving.

There are a number of set rules which may be applied to the game of taxi-driving. First, the basic set of official rules (the legal rules) is contained in Republic Act No. 4136 which defines the way in which Lito must drive his taxi while on the highways of the city. Second, there are the rules which his company insists he follow so that his company will not lose money

or even its franchise through his violation of the rules. Third, there are those unwritten but nevertheless necessary rules which come into conflict with the statutory, the real versus the ideal. In many instances, Lito will be unable to follow the rules of the first and second sets because the agents of law enforcement, who are in charge of seeing that he complies with the rules of Republic Act No. 4136, have devised rules of their own which run counter to the rules which theoretically, ideally, standardize their behavior.

When Lito starts his *paghahanapbuhay* (livelihood, or in his case, searching for customers) his main concern is, of course, to obtain as many fares as possible while operating within the rules of the taxi-driving game. He must drive from north of Manila into the heart of the city, arriving in time to pick up the lucrative 5:00-8:00 trade when most people take taxis. As he says, "My business is up to 11, then it becomes very dangerous because you must always be on the lookout for holduppers." While he is driving in Quezon City, he is fairly scrupulous about remaining on the right of the yellow line that marks off the for-hire vehicles from the "V.I.P." or *mayaman lang* (rich only) traffic. When he arrives in Manila, however, he surrenders to the pressure of circumstance and violates the city ordinance which forbids the utilization of the left-hand lane by for-hire vehicles.

Lito is an experienced driver and he does not take unnecessary chances. As he says, "I'm afraid of getting a traffic violation, and then you have to make lagáy." In this attitude, he may be atypical, since one of his main concerns in the driving game is to be continuously aware of the *barumbado* (reckless drivers) and of the *swapang* (greedy) and *buwaya* (crocodile) — both terms referring to road hogs. He must also be aware of pedestrians who are *tangá* (stupid), who do not play by the rules.

One subgame which Lito encounters daily is the pedestrian no-contest syndrome. The situation is this: both vehicle and pedestrian are contesting for a particular piece of space—the driver to continue along the thoroughfare, the pedestrian to get to the other side of the street. If the pedestrian looks both ways before crossing the street he enters into a conscious contest with the driver of the oncoming vehicle on the right side of the

road. If however, he does not look to his left, he denies participation in the contest for valued space and takes possession of it through no contest—a “bye” in the language of tennis.¹ The driver is obliged to stop for the pedestrian, an action he would rarely take if the pedestrian had acknowledged his presence in the street and signalled he was ready to enter into a contest situation for temporary possession of the property. By denying conscious participation in this *singitán* (or conscious contest for acquiring space), the pedestrian has achieved one of the other aims of the driving game—that of *ayaw malamangán* (the conscious desire not to be left behind, not to be fooled, not to be taken advantage of; one loose translation of *lamangán* is “to step on, or to step over”). *Nalamangán niyá siyá*: “he has one-upped the vehicle driver and put one over him.” This attitude of me versus them (my group versus the outsider) is vividly illustrated in the following excerpt from field notes:

This evening the traffic was extremely heavy in the Ayala area. The driver decided to pass Quiapo because it appeared that traffic was moving steadily there. This was a wise decision until we reached the corner of Raon and Quezon Boulevard where traffic was piled up. To our right was a taxi from the same company. The drivers talked with each other for awhile, and then when traffic began to move, we proceeded side by side until, at one point, a private vehicle was attempting to enter a lane of traffic just ahead of us. If the driver to the right had gone on ahead, we would have been squeezed out of traffic; instead, he pulled to the right, blocking the private vehicle, and turned to us, a smile on his face, and raised his thumb. We proceeded ahead; the private car behind us honking furiously, and the driver of my cab raised his arm in signal of thanks to the other driver. (Conscious group solidarity here—not only same company, same occupation, but also taxi-drivers against private vehicles.) Later on, we brushed a couple of pedestrians who were jaywalking. I remarked aloud that it was a pretty close call. The driver, a wizened old fellow, turned and smiled and said: When I'm driving here in the city, I drive like that. Because if you don't they will

¹ This game must be understood as well in terms of segmentation. Most often, the pedestrian player in the game is a woman—and the contest situation must be seen and understood in terms of equal representation in the contest. Generally speaking, the female in contest with a male driver is quite possibly excused from participation in the game.

puck you. They look at me, those pedestrians, and they say, Oh, that is only an old man. I will puck him. But me, I am driving here in Manila now for 32 years. I will puck them first. I know how to play the game. If you don't puck them, they will puck you.

Those vehicles whose drivers engage themselves conspicuously in the lamangan syndrome are called *pasikat* (show-off), and Lito thinks of them as *palaging nagmamadalí* (unable to wait, or always in a hurry). One manifestation of this is the driver who pulls up directly under a stop light, allowing no space for pedestrians to cross the street in front of them. Another manifestation is the driver (generally in a jeepney) who weaves in and out of traffic, *nalalamangan niya ang mga ibang tsupér* (one-upping the other drivers, or stepping over the other drivers)—an activity which causes Lito to shout after the one-upping driver: *Bakit ha? Meron ka bang dalawang asawa?* (Why? Do you have two wives?)²

The basic aspect of the driving game is the contest for public space. It appears, at this stage of the investigation, that Lito feels that the space on which his car is travelling at the moment belongs to him. In other words, he has rights in it as long as his vehicle is on it. Hence, the phenomenon of the stalled car in the middle of the busy intersection. The driver sees no need to move it, since it is sitting on space which belongs to him at the time he is on it. This explains in part, I feel, the chaotic traffic situation which the Westerner sees on arrival in Manila. A hand signal does not mean "I am turning right," or "I am turning left," but means "I am taking possession of the adjacent space. It should be considered mine, and my rights in it are to be respected until I vacate it—provided, of course, that you do not get it before I do." This follows from the public attitude that public space belongs to no one—therefore, the first to use it has rights in it until he vacates it.

Max Soliven (1967: 5), the columnist, calls the situation "anarchy on the road" and writes:

The Italian poet Dante who wrote the "Inferno" was born too soon. Otherwise he would have reserved a

² This appears to be the standard assumption about the man in a hurry. He needs to rush a bit more than his co-drivers because he's supporting two wives.

special place in hell for some of our bus drivers. Too many of this country's bus jockeys are speed maniacs who imagine themselves running in the Grand Prix. They swerve out of line both on the highway and in the city streets (and the heck with any small vehicles that happen to be in the way). They stop to load and unload passengers in the middle of the street. And when they successfully force someone off the road, they wave goodbye to him with a sarcastic horse-laugh.

Nalámangán na niyá siyá. What is important here, and has, I think, been implicit throughout this discussion, is that the average Filipino looks upon and treats moving space precisely the same way as he does stationary space. He behaves in an automobile as he would strolling down the sidewalk. He is at liberty to stop where he pleases, stay as long as he likes, simply because there is no prior claim to that space—no fences, no immediate signs, no one else using it. This type of behavior carries with it certain important implications, particularly if one thinks of the difference between being nudged by 150 pounds moving at five miles per hour, and being nudged by 2,000 pounds moving at 30, 40, 50 miles per hour. One need not dwell on the comparison.

Summary

To summarize: Different cultures utilize, structure, and handle space differently. An individual's handling of space is a product of deuterio-learning, and is by and large unconscious. The Filipino, in contrast to the Westerner, uses public space while driving as he would while walking—taking on rights to it as he moves. He considers that particular spot on which he stands, into which he is moving, as his personal property, and therefore he may utilize it as long as necessary. Plug these facts into a conscious game situation, and you have, I feel, a possible answer to Manila driving behavior. Sheer, unadulterated, one-upmanship, consciously felt, consciously articulated. *Nalálámangán*, fortunately most of the time with a good-natured smile.

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