Political Clientelism, Developmentalism and Postcolonial Theory

Carl H. Lande

I was surprised, and somewhat bemused that a small monograph, that I published thirty-five years ago, is still remembered, and indeed is described as "classic" and "hegemonic", as well as that it has exerted ""some force in the political scene."[1] I was less pleased that what are seen as the shortcomings of my monograph are attributed in part to my personal attributes. Here, therefore, is my reply:

Reynaldo Ileto's criticism of my work and that of several other American scholars who have written on the Philippines has two main components: 1. That we have used a model of *clientelism* to "essentialize" Philippine society and politics. 2. That we have used the concept of *development* in a manner that, by focusing on "difference", and by seeing the Philippines as the "other", denigrates his country, and seemed designed to justify a half-century of American colonial rule.

Political Clientelism

I am a specialist in the comparative study of politics. Thus, like other comparativists, I was trained to look for uniformities and variations among political systems, to devise simplified "models" of how they work, and to inquire into their causes and effects.

When I came to the Philippines as a doctoral candidate in the mid-1950s, my intention was to study organized interest groups. But I could find few of these, and they had little influence. Instead, I was struck by some features of the then existing Philippine political party system that distinguished it from most of the party systems that then were familiar to students of comparative politics. The most

important of these features (Ileto faults me for calling them *peculiarities*) was the predominance at elections of two nation-wide and competitive but virtually identical political parties.

In the older democracies of the Western Europe and North America, which at that time had been studied most extensively, elections since the late 19th century, normally turned on the rivalries between programmatically distinctive political parties that were supported by, and championed the interests of, different social classes: Liberal and conservative parties that championed the interests of the bourgeoisie, and Socialist and later, communist parties, that championed the interests of the urban working class. The growing organization of the European industrial workers explains the creation and endurance of these parties of the Left.

But in the mainly agricultural Philippines, during the early post-war decades, both major political parties in every province were led by members of the wealthier classes or their representatives, who were the main beneficiaries of government policy and action. Still, these two parties, the Liberals and Nacionalistas, managed to monopolize the votes of all social classes. How did they do this, and in particular, how did they win the votes of most of the the poor? The suppression of the revolutionary Hukbalahap movement and the collapse of the short-lived Democratic Alliance, was part of the answer. But it was not a sufficient one.

Another part of the answer, I found, was the upward flow of votes from ordinary voters to wealthy candidates, through two competing party pyramids of barrio, municipal and provincial leaders, and in return, the downward distribution of public and private funds and other favors to individual leaders and their follower among the voters. Hoping to share in this distribution of benefits, poor voters could not afford to vote their class interests by supporting candidates of the Left. This system of "patron-client"

relationships, or of "political clientelism", also made for easy party-switching by politicians, for when a political patron found it advantageous to move from one party to the other, he could count on his clients to follow him. This became the main subject of my doctoral dissertation, and later of my 1965 monograph.

Other observers in many countries also have found clientelism to be an important part of politics. Indeed clientelism quickly became an accepted element in comparative political analysis, a supplement though not a substitute for class or interest group analysis.

In my monograph, I did miss an important feature of Philippine electoral politics:

The importance of regional loyalties in elections for nation-wide offices., i.e. the presidency, vice presidency, and members of the Senate. Since the collapse of the old two-party system during the martial law years, and its replacement by many competing presidential candidates, with their separate but ephemeral parties, each presidential aspirant has depended heavily on the support of leaders and voters in his or her own home region. The effect of regional loyalties is demonstrated in my book on the 1992 presidential election.[2]

Still, since 1986, presidential candidates who made distinctive policy appeals have been few in number. The exceptions were, in 1992, Miriam Defensor Santiago, whose good government campaign won heavy support in the cities, and Jovito Salonga, who appealed to nationalistic voters and believers in social reform Then in 1998, there was the faux-populist Joseph Estrada, who won massive support among he poor, but turned out to be dedicated mainly to his private interests and those of his wealthy cronies. The remaining post-Marcos presidential aspirants in these two elections have been much alike, and relied heavily on home-region support. Certainly Philippine politics has changed

since the early post-war years. But In the rural areas, personalism and clientelism remain an important element of electoral politics.

Ileto is correct in criticizing some American scholars for missing or downplaying two other aspects of Philippine politics: He rightly faults us for seeing elite politicians as merely self serving strong men, and for overlooking the patriotic motives of those members of the elite who led the common people in the struggle for national independence even while protecting their own familial interests. That is what successful leaders do in all societies. He faults us also for depicting the masses as "blind, passive *tao*." From the wartime records of a community that Ileto studied, he concluded that "power flows from the bottom up as well, (and that) indebtedness is not simply a one-way, oppressive relationship but rather a reciprocal one." Thus, "Political power is not just a repressive force emanating from above. It circulates throughout the social body, and in fact enables the rule of the big men." He is correct. Reciprocity is the essence of clientelism.

But I do not find in Ileto's piece a serious attempt to critique the concept of clientelism as such, or of our use of it in describing Philippine politics. He presents no alternative model of the Philippine political party system. The topic does not appear to interest him. Instead, he takes aim at what he suggests were our conscious or unconscious motives. He objects to our stress on clientelism, it appears, because it seems to denigrate by "essentializing" Philippine society and behavior, and believes that it could be used to justify American colonial rule.

Developmentalism

Ileto also faults us for continuing a "colonial discourse" that viewed Philippine society and politics from a perspective of evolutionary development that sees the "West" as having developed more early than the "East." As evidence of this,

he notes that I mentioned the existence of clientelist parties, similar to those of the Philippines, in 18th-century England, and more recently in the Southern United States. I did use a developmental framework, as have innumerable other scholars and political leaders. But I made no invidious binary distinction between "West", and the "East" as such. Rather, I was interested in the process of modernization. Whether he likes it or not, modernization, however one defines it, did come earliest in the West and has led, in much of the West, to changes in social, economic, and political institutions that are widely admired in other regions of the world, including the Philippines.

Does Ileto reject out of hand the possibility and desirability of "development?" Or does he just object to the Philippines being viewed from a developmental perspective? If one of his colleagues were to visit two multi-ethnic mountainous countries: Peaceful, prosperous, and democratic Switzerland, and then impoverished Afghanistan, with its warring ethnic groups under their warlord leaders, (a type of leadership not unknown to rural Filipinos), and if that colleague were to report that he found the former to be in some sense more "modern" or "developed" than the latter, would Ileto fault him for being judgmental?

I do not think that Ileto really discounts the idea of development as such. But perhaps he has in mind a different development path than I. What does he think, or hope, will be the future path for his country? To true national independence, of course! That exists in North Korea and Burma. But what beyond that? Government by patriotic ilustrados? The growth of a more egalitarian liberal democracy? A Marxist transformation? Both of the latter represent political development, though in quite different directions.

While criticizing us for our developmental approach, Ileto, somewhat inconsistently, also faults us for "essentializing" Philippine culture and behavior, and assuming that these are fixed and have never rally changed.

In fact I have argued that clientelism is a function of the economic dependency of the poor, and will become less widespread as an economy becomes more productive and the poor become less dependent on personal or governmental patrons.

Motives

Ileto speculates extensively, and incorrectly, about my motives. He suspects me of being "more than a passive observer" of Philippine politics, in part because "it is the product of decades of "American tutelage". He wonders if my work is not in fact "an attempt to shore up a construction of a 'normal' Philippine politics that is already under threat" by a "mainly Marxist-nationalist challenge to the post-war construction of history and politics". He thinks that I "fear that the American style party system will end up not being the sole vehicle of politics. He says that I think that the kind of politics offered by totalitarian rivals is un-Filipino. In fact I think that totalitarianism is bad for *any* society. He says that despite my criticism of the party system and my hope that it would change, I "still favor constitutional democracy". Of course I do. And I hoped then as now, that Philippine democracy, while remaining constitutional, will become more truly democratic by becoming more participatory and more equal. Does Ileto, a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the abandonment of socialism in China, and the disappearance of most of Latin America's dictatorships, prefer a non-constitutional alternative for his country?

Critical Theory

Ileto has examined the works of a group of American scholars who, he believes, have been unfair to his homeland. He is entitled to that opinion. It is with his *method* of criticism that I take issue.

Ileto does not challenge my analysis of the pre-Marcos political party system, What upsets him, it appears, was that

I contrasted that system with those of the older democracies." He has searched through my monograph with a fine-toothed comb, looking for words that offend him. Thus he points to my use of the word "peculiarity."

I simply noted what was distinctive and therefore interesting about the Philippines for a student of comparative politics.

He claims, nonsensically, that I was engaged in the "feminization" of Philippine politics by using such words as "moods", "unpredictable", "even fluid" to describe party switching by Filipino politicians. I chose those words to describe reality, not to "feminize" Filipinos. `Patronage politics in a setting of closely competitive political parties that were indistinguishable except for the names of their leaders, made party-switching a rational choice for male and female politicians alike. He claims that I have put the Philippines in the role of the less than ideal "other", that I describe that country in terms of "negativity and lack, in relation to the 'masculine' Western and American ideal." If Ileto can suggest a suitably *macho* or androgynous English equivalent for *balimbing,* I would be happy to know it. I described the party system as I saw it. Many Filipinos have seen it that way as well. If Ileto can help to change that reality by working to create a system of more stable and broadly representative political parties, I would be delighted. The "Party List" electoral system, mandated by the 1987 Constitution, was a step in that direction.

Ileto's own choice of certain words, as well as the nature of his critique, suggest that he is an adherent of the controversial postmodernist neo-Marxist approach known as "Critical Theory", which aims to expose "oppression", "domination", or "hegemony" and the power arrangements that contribute to them. These include scholarly "discourses" and "texts". The task of a Critical Scholar therefore is to "deconstruct" the works of other writers and to expose how their "discourses" contribute to such abuses, An example of

such an effort has been litarary critic Edward Said's critique of Jane Austen's classic domestic novel *Mansfield Park*, which, he claimed, contributed to the maintenance of the slave trade in the British Empire.

A skeptic has called this kind of criticism a "parlor game in which we "deconstruct great works of the past and impose our own meaning on them, without regard for the authors' intentions or the truth or falsity of our interpretations." Critical Theory thrives mainly in university language departments, which are not known for their expertise in history or politics. At my university, the History, Political Science and Philosophy faculties do not take Critical Theory seriously. Its pretentious neologisms turn them off, as well.

One branch of Critical Theory, "Postcolonial Theory," aims to expose how Western societies, including their scholars, dominate Third World peoples, and hopes thereby to undermine such domination. Thus, the same Edward Said, in his book *Orientalism*, sought to show that nineteenth century books about the Orient, meaning the Middle East, written by European scholars, provided a rationale for imperialism. Inconvenient for Said's thesis is the fact that the most important Nineteen-Century scholarship on the Middle East was performed by Germans, who never had a Middle-Eastern colony.

Following Said, Reynaldo Ileto, in his *Orientalism and the Study of Philippine Politics*, deconstructs the work of a number of American scholars to show that we have helped to maintain neo-colonialism in the Philippines, or justified colonialism retroactively. In claiming that we "essentialized" the Philippines, that we saw it as a "negative other", he employs words and concepts borrowed from Said. In his effort to expose our biases, he becomes trivial or downright silly. Thus, he suggests that my research may be colored by my "close friendship with senators and congressmen, (my) race, even (my) gender". But how can one study the tactics of politicians without getting to know them? And why my gender?

Ileto attributes to me a "Hobbesian view that personal relations are basically founded on domination and fear." That is not my view, nor that of other political scientists. In speculating about my motives in writing and publishing of my dissertation (what dissertation writer has a motive beyond earning his PhD?), and in suggesting that my monograph "is one more node of power in the Philippine political scene", Ileto follows Michel Faucault's assertion that academic disciplines do not merely produce knowledge but also generate power. That, I think, is an exaggeration, insofar as our works are concerned.

An inherent weakness of any ideologically-driven, politically-engaged approach, such as Critical Theory or Postcolonial Theory, is that it commits the true believer to finding what his theory expects him to find and thus may lead him to misunderstand or distort reality. It also can lead him to assume malign intent, where there was none. That is why Ileto's critique of American scholarship on the Philippines may please other postcolonial theorists, but will leave mainstream scholars, who judge a work by its factual accuracy and analytical persuasiveness, not by the nationality or gender of its author, unimpressed. Scholarship is not, like the Olympics, a contest between nations. Ileto is recognized and admired for his fine book *Pasyon and Revolution*. His foray into Postcolonialsm is a disappointing departure from that earlier work

An un-stated implication of Ileto's piece is that the study of a country's politics should be left to its own citizens, who presumably know it best. Of course they do. But there is value, too, in the more detached eye of an outsider. The finest study of American society and culture ever written remains *Democracy in America*, by Alexis de Tocquevilles, a 19th century French visitor to America. None of us can claim to be de Tocqueville. But I think that we have provided a good deal of serious research and some useful insights into Philippine society and politics, to add to those of Filipino scholars.

Looking back, I am content that my analysis of the Philippine political party system in the 1950's seemed to many who knew that system from the inside to be a useful contribution to the understanding of Philippine politics, and that my theoretical work on political clientelism helped to bring about an awareness and understanding of that phenomenon by students of comparative politics far beyond the Philippines and the United States. Finally, I make no apologies for preferring constitutional democracy to totalitarian dictatorship. ❖

Notes:

[1] *Leaders, Factions and Parties: The Structure of Philippine Politics* (New Haven: Yale Southeast Asian Studies, Monograph Series No. 6, 1965.Yale Southeast Asian Studies).

[2] *Post Marcos Politics: A Geographical and Statistical Analysis of the 1992 Presidential Election* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1996, and New York: St Martin's Press, 1996).