

Response to lleto: Or, Why I Am Not an Orientalist

John T. Sidel

I am grateful for this opportunity to respond to the criticisms and charges launched against me by Reynaldo lleto in the pages of this journal. I should add that I am also grateful to lleto himself, for including me, *en passant*, among much more established and distinguished scholars of the Philippines, and for mistaking me for a social historian, which, sadly, I must admit I am not. Finally, I should note that I am likewise grateful to him for articulating clearly – if not very convincingly – the charge of Orientalism against scholars who have focused on ‘real existing democracy’ in the Philippines. There is indeed something potentially problematic about foreign – especially American – scholars focusing their attention on the shortcomings of Philippine democracy, especially if they follow Stanley Karnow’s lead in measuring putative Filipino inadequacies against an idealized American standard. An attack on ‘Orientalism’ in Philippine Studies is perhaps long overdue.

That said, I must admit that I find lleto’s arguments misleading and unconvincing, in terms of his caricature of other scholars’ work and of my own. More importantly, perhaps, I am struck by his failure to articulate a clear and constructive vision of scholarship on the Philippines which would overcome the problems and pitfalls he identifies in the existing literature. As an avid reader, listener, and admirer of Edward Said and his work over the years, I find myself dissatisfied with lleto’s (mis)use of the term ‘Orientalism’ in his attack on other scholars, and disappointed by the missed opportunity for a productive debate on Philippine Studies. It is in the hopes of exploring the possibility for such a debate – and the potential for better scholarship on the Philippines – that I am offering the comments below.

In my view, lleto’s criticisms of American scholarship on the Philippines do in fact correspond to some serious

underlying problems confronting students of 'real existing democracy' in the archipelago. These problems, some of which are glaringly, tragi-comically evident in Stanley Karnow's *In Our Image*, as lleto points out, are inherent in the study of politics, not only in the Philippines, but in many other settings as well. These problems are evident in my own work on Philippine politics to be sure. But my sense is that I have tried to deal with these problems in ways ignored and obscured by lleto's article.

Like Carl Lande, whose oft-cited monograph is attacked at great length by lleto, I was trained as an American political scientist, and thus the standard operating procedure of applying social-science models, frameworks, and jargon to Philippine politics is something that formed the point of departure for my work. But unlike Lande, my research on the Philippines was undertaken many years after the political science literature on 'patron-client relations' had lost its original appeal and momentum, and against the backdrop of considerable revisionist literature on machine politics in countries like Italy and the United States. I also began my research in the Philippines at a time when it was abundantly clear from local accounts that coercive pressures played a much more important role in social relations and political competition in the country than had previously been acknowledged by scholars.

Against this backdrop, the picture of Philippine politics which I began to explore while conducting research on my doctoral thesis (when the essay cited by lleto was written) was not just 'through a glass darkly' but based on fundamentally different premises than those identified with the 'patron-client' literature. Following the arguments made by revisionist scholars of American and Italian machine politics like Steven Erie and Judith Chubb, I rejected the assumption that the Philippine political system reflected and reproduced the preferences and proclivities of Filipinos, that Filipinos 'got the government they wanted' (and thus, implicitly, deserved). Politicians, in other words, did not simply respond to the demands of their constituents: they, and the political system in which they were embedded, in considerable measure determined, disaggregated, and

diffused these demands. The perpetrators, not the victims, were to be identified and blamed.

Thus the argument I articulated in my PhD thesis (Cornell University, 1995) and then in my first book¹ ascribed the emergence and entrenchment of 'local bosses' in municipalities, congressional districts, and provinces around the Philippines to a set of structural coordinates external to any assumed 'cultural values' specific to Filipinos, whether immutable or otherwise. 'Bossism', I argued, was found in one manifestation or another in all polities in which the state was subordinated to competitively elected officials at a stage of capitalist development which could be understood in terms of 'primitive accumulation'. Given the poverty and economic insecurity of the broad mass of the population, voters were susceptible to clientelist, coercive, and monetary pressures and inducements, and control over state resources and regulatory powers provided a crucial basis for private capital accumulation. Under these circumstances, I concluded, 'bosses' were likely to emerge and entrench themselves, especially in localities whose political economy allowed for the creation and maintenance of an enduring economic empire and political machine. Viewed through the prism of comparative politics, bossism in the Philippines is thus typical of a broader pattern of class rule under democratic auspices, as seen in 'Old Corruption' in England, county court house cliques and urban political machines in the United States, *caciques* in Latin America, *mafiosi* in southern Italy (and now Russia), *chao pho* (godfathers) in Thailand, and gangsters and machine politicians in India.

Yet as a student at a major 'area studies' center for the study of Southeast Asia, I was also inspired by a very different conception of scholarship than that offered by mainstream American political science. Here in many ways the model was Al McCoy, whose investigative research on the imprisonment of left-wing priests in Negros, on Marcos' bogus war record, and on the RAMboys' role in the torture of political prisoners encouraged me – and other young scholars at the time – to think that our scholarship should be 'muckraking' in style and political engaged in substance. The goal was clear: to provide insight, evidence, and

ammunition to those forces in the Philippines who were working to deepen the process of democratization that began with the ouster of Ferdinand Marcos in 1986, and to expose and undermine those forms of local authoritarianism that seemed to be thriving under conditions of formal democracy in the country.

I was thus especially gratified when my own research proved to be useful to Filipino investigative journalists and political activists, and on more than one occasion I involved myself in efforts to assist people who were clearly victimized by the local bosses who formed the focus of my research. Here the advantage of being a foreigner – perhaps of being an American in particular – was not the supposed analytical clarity and comparative perspective that is said to come with distance, but my relative ‘untouchability’ as a well-connected ‘Kano poking around in dangerous waters without fear of getting hurt.

Aside from the inexorably colonizing logic of positivist social science, and the obvious conceits of the adventurist-muckraker, two additional problems and pitfalls of this approach to Philippine politics preoccupied me during my research. First and foremost was the problem of my perspective as a non-Filipino. American muckrakers, after all, had been bemoaning the shortcomings of ‘real existing democracy’ in the Philippines for nearly a century. In their lurid, sensationalist accounts they had often suggested that the Philippines did not measure up to the standards and ideals of their American counterparts and (former) colonial masters. Here there was clearly a certain kind of perverse pleasure at work: if not *schadenfreude*, then a kind of delight in plunging the phantasmagoric depths of the depravity of the barbaric Other.

Thus in my work I was careful to reverse this logic: bossism in the Philippines, I argued time and again, owes very little to indigenous Filipino political culture or Spanish-era caciquism. It is instead best understood as a product of American colonial rule: instead of creating a centralized, insulated bureaucracy as elsewhere in late-colonial Southeast Asia, the Americans subordinated a weakly

insulated state to officials elected locally and under a highly restricted suffrage. If so much of Philippine politics can be described as local machine politics, the reason is precisely that the Philippine polity was made 'in the image' of United States. With such a highly decentralized state subordinated to elected officials at such an 'early' stage of capitalist development, Philippine politics was destined to look very much like American politics: dominated by local machine politicians and big business interests and distinguished by the weakness of working-class movements and left-wing political parties. Unlike previous American authors who disavowed U.S. responsibility for the shortcomings of democracy in the Philippines and attributed them instead to Filipinos' failures to create a polity 'in our image', to borrow a phrase from Karnow, I have been keen to show how the United States has been the handmaiden of 'bossism' in the country.

A second problem which preoccupied me concerned the question of 'ideology' and 'lived experience' within the context of this seemingly seamless web of capital, coercion, and crime. On the one hand, the assimilation of what I have described as boss rule to the paradigm of patron-client relations would rest on the acceptance at face value of dubious claims that local politicians simply reflect, represent, and respond to the demands, preferences, and political culture of their constituents. On the other hand, the reduction of the legitimating claims of local bosses to the realm of instrumentality and mystification would be equally unconvincing.

How then should one understand the 'phenomenology' of bossism? One strategy is to avoid the issue entirely, focusing instead on the macro-political and macro-sociological conditions that gave rise to this kind of politics, and the micro-economic conditions that shape patterns of variation – over time and across localities – in the success of bosses in entrenching themselves in power. In short, to focus on 'objective' circumstances and ignore 'subjective' conditions, thus arguably denying the Philippines any distinctiveness and Filipinos any voice or agency in the

making of their own politics. For better and for worse, this is in large part what I tried to do in most of my research.

An alternative strategy is to listen to and 'translate' the language of legitimation used by local bosses as they wield power and project their authority, interpreting their claims of legitimacy not as masking over the 'real' business of politics, but as fundamentally emblematic of the experience of becoming – and remaining – a boss. This is the strategy adopted by Michael Cullinane in his essay, which Iletto rubbishes as cursorily as he does my own, and constitutes the focus of an essay I wrote shortly after the *Anarchy of Families* volume was published. This strategy is best complemented by the kind of ethnographic fieldwork pioneered by James C. Scott and Benedict Kerkvliet, so as to gain a sense of the 'everyday forms of resistance', and the 'hidden transcripts' of those subalterns whose voices remain muted and inaudible in portraits of bossism as a seamlessly hegemonic and monolithic form of domination.

Against this backdrop, it is possible to reflect on the essay I contributed to Al McCoy's edited volume, *An Anarchy of Families*, which Iletto attacks in the article he published in this journal. The charges Iletto launches against me in particular are twofold. First he claims that my portrait of Justiniano Montano works "to register the negative 'other' of the ideal modern politician", just as my rather cynical portrayal of Filipino politics in terms of "narrow, selfish, Hobbesian agendas" is both essentializing and reductionist, setting up the Philippines as a "negative pole" against 'real' (i.e. American) democracy. Second, he suggests that I portray Spanish friars and American Constabulary officers as effective checks on the emergence of would-be bosses, thus making me complicit with colonialism and the ideology of 'saving the natives from themselves'.

It is very easy to rebut these two charges. After all, nowhere in my essay or elsewhere in my work do I suggest that American democracy should be idealized, and throughout my work I stress the importance of American colonial rule for prefiguring the emergence of 'bossism' in the Philippines. It should be added that such charges are

utterly ludicrous when applied to McCoy: this is the same historian who has spent decades detailing American complicity in dictatorships and in the drug trade in Southeast Asia and elsewhere in the world, and whose work on Philippine social and political history has portrayed Spanish and American colonialism in highly unflattering terms. For myself and, I suspect, for McCoy, much of politics in general – American politics as well as Philippine politics – is, to borrow a term used by Iletto, *pulitika*, best understood – and for political reasons exposed – as shaped by the interplay of private economic interests.

What is perhaps much more understandable about Iletto's attack on my essay on Justiniano Montano, however, is his discomfort with my reference to a 20th-century Filipino politician as a 'big man' or 'man of prowess', and my reference to pre-colonial forms of political organization and leadership as an analogue – and possible source of origins and influence – for post-independence bossism. After all, if Montano, described in my essay more or less as a murderous, avaricious brute, was a 'big man', and if 'big man' politics is indigenous to the Philippines, then I must be essentializing some kind of Filipino political culture which has endured beneath the constraints of Spanish and American colonial rule, only to resurface in full bloom with independence.

But this is not the case. At no point is the pre-colonial 'big man' or 'man of prowess' said to reflect distinctly Filipino, or Southeast Asian, 'cultural values'. Instead, this pattern of political organization, leadership, and legitimation is shown to correspond to a set of historical and sociological circumstances: "conditions of land abundance, dispersed settlement, and shifting cultivation", with "kinship reckoned cognatically (bilaterally), and lineage ineffective in regulating succession to political leadership". Under these circumstances, it is suggested, power rested – in large part by default – on what Max Weber described as charismatic authority. The signs of charisma as a quality, so difficult to disentangle from the effectiveness of charismatic authority as a relationship, I was careful to note, may be manifold and varied: "magical powers, oratorical skills, spiritual refinement, or bravery in war."

Why the reference to the pre-colonial 'man of prowess' in an essay on a 20th-century local politician? In part, the point was to call into question the ostensible premise of the volume in which my essay was included, *An Anarchy of Families*. Instead of reifying the Filipino family as a 'natural' and effective basis for social and political organization, or attributing its political significance solely to the nature of the Philippine state, my case study was chosen as a counterfactual of sorts. My account of a single-generation boss who failed to pass on his power and wealth to successive generations was intended to show how the emergence and entrenchment of 'political dynasties' was in fact contingent on secure property rights, private capital accumulation, and other conditions associated with capitalism and class rule hardly unique to the Philippines, and how the nature of the Philippine state left open other paths to the accumulation of local power and wealth than those which cohered in familial form.

In what way should we understand local politicians in the Philippines as latter-day 'big men' or 'men of prowess'? Insofar as the pattern of state formation observed in the Philippines has left control over local state offices in the hands of elected officials, the underlying structural conditions for the assertion of 'big man' power and authority have remained closer to those obtaining in the pre-colonial era than in any other country in Southeast Asia. Like their pre-colonial predecessor, local politicians in the Philippines owe their power and authority to their success in making claims on people – i.e. voters – rather than territory. Moreover, for reasons and in forms rather different from the pre-colonial era, the broad mass of the population today suffers from poverty and economic insecurity, thus making personal protection and access to scarce resources an overriding priority in negotiating social relations and political authority. Finally, insofar as the agencies, resources, and prerogatives of the Philippine state are effectively controlled by elected politicians (thanks to the distinctly American colonial legacy of a weakly insulated bureaucracy), the provision of goods and services formally designated as 'public' is often understood – rightly, in large measure – as contingent on

the personal achievement and discretion of these local powerholders.

As I have argued elsewhere, this is where the ideology of boss rule comes into view, not in a narrowly instrumental sense, but as the lived experience of domination by ruler and ruled. Critical here is the combination of regular, competitive elections to positions ranging from barangay captain to Philippine president and governing the allocation of a broad array of resources and regulatory powers, on the one hand, and the harsh realities of a labor-surplus economy, on the other. Those who succeed in obtaining the greatest control over the state are in the best position to provide for their dependents. Thus, as Cullinane shows in his case study of Ramon Durano, Sr., the long-time congressman used his control over a solid bloc of votes in Danao City and the first congressional district of Cebu to extract a broad range of concessions, favors, and resources from a succession of Philippine presidents, thus not only amassing a considerable fortune, but also financing a wide range of new economic ventures – coal mines, a cement plant, a sugar mill, a local port, illegal firearms production – in what might otherwise have been just another sleepy provincial town. In this sense, Durano was not simply self-deluded or overly self-congratulatory when he claimed that he provided for 'his' people. At the apogee of his power, thousands of local residents owed their jobs and livelihoods to the congressman, his business empire, and his influence over appointments to government posts in Danao, Cebu City, and beyond.

Here is where the 'big man' or 'man of prowess' can be invoked in terms of the *modus operandi* of the local politician. In localities where stable property rights are established and proprietary wealth forms the basis for the entrenchment of a 'political dynasty', the projection of authority can be variously 'paternalistic' or 'maternalistic', with the *achievement* of power and wealth relegated to the realm of the past. But in localities where property rights are weakly established, and where state resources and regulatory powers are themselves the basis for the accumulation of wealth (e.g. through 'protected' illegal activities), then the means by which power was achieved must be persistently maintained and displayed to ward off would-be challengers,

from without and from within. Thus in Montano's Cavite – as in pre-colonial Southeast Asia and in any other setting in which state power and proprietary wealth are not securely established – the threat and practice of 'prowess' – and, in particular, violence – constitute an abiding imperative. There is nothing essentializing about this picture of Philippine politics. To the contrary, this is a portrayal of Philippine democracy utterly devoid of culturally specific references to Filipino values, preferences, and practices. No references to *utang na loob* here.

In conclusion, I am broadly sympathetic to Iletto's arguments, insofar as I too abhor and condemn depictions of Philippine politics which rest on essentialized notions of timeless Filipino political culture and set up 'real existing democracy' in the Philippines as inherently inferior to an idealized democracy in the United States. But I am not sympathetic to Iletto's crude and unconstructive caricature of scholarly efforts to understand and expose the nature of domination, exclusion, and exploitation under democratic auspices in the Philippines. All my writings on local bosses in the Philippines have shown that local forms of authoritarianism flourish under conditions of liberal democracy, not because of the passive acquiescence of Filipinos, but because of the weight of colonial history and the dull compulsion of economic relations, in which American colonialism and global capitalism are clearly both deeply implicated. If, in the course of this research, I and others working in the same spirit have tended to neglect questions of language, legitimacy, audience, and consent, as Iletto charges, our efforts not to 'blame the victim' should not be mistaken for cultural essentialism or American-style Orientalism. As Perry Anderson noted in another context: "A 'history from above' - of the intricate machinery of class domination - is thus no less essential than a 'history from below': indeed, without it, the latter in the end becomes one-sided (if the better side)."² ❖

Notes:

¹ John T. Sidel, *Capital, Coercion, and Crime: Bossism in the Philippines* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

² Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso, 1974), p. 11.