

Introduction

Despite being essays meant for a general audience, Randolf David's work addresses key sociological issues. He provides an examination of the relationship between the Self and society in the contemporary period. I shall draw out the central themes in this work and outline the implications for Philippine sociology. I have organized the review around the dominant themes present, taking ideas from different essays with similar subjects.

Early on, David warns us of the unfamiliar temper of his recent work. He explains that this work was intended to explore "new vocabularies, while militantly hedging the perils of such flirtation by a staunch refusal to give up the certitudes of our youth" (p. x). This tension resonates throughout. Despite the embarrassing silence of his younger, polemical, and Marxist Self, the progressive and humanist themes of his work resonate in these essays. According to him, this collection is just a "pastiche of many selves—possibly contradictory and incoherent even—that are unfinished and in flux" (p. xii). The tentative constitution of these essays, as he himself disclosed, does not diminish the soundness of David's

ideas. What we may have lost in terms of ideological certainty, we have gained in the accessibility of his ideas.

Structural hindrances to the self

There are definite changes in the way human beings live today. The great leaps in technological advancement, especially in the field of communication, has radically altered human interaction. Thus, there is a need to recontextualize theory to account for the effect and potential uses of these technologies. One of the strengths of this collection is the insightful way in which David looks at the power of new and emergent technologies and their effect on the individual. Frederic Jameson calls them reproductive technologies, examples of which include the personal computer, the world wide web, television and other forms of media. At the center of human activity in postmodern society are these reproductive technologies (Ritzer 1996:479). For another social theorist, Jean Baudrillard, the "code" of production replaces the mode of production, where "the objective has shifted from exploitation and profit to domination by the signs and systems that produce them" (Ritzer 1996:481). In contemporary Philippine society,

where internet cafés are becoming as common as the sari-sari store, a sober and enlightened view on these enchanting yet influential machines is necessary. What are the various effects of these powerful cultural technologies in the way people make sense of their lives?

David writes extensively on the power of television. He points out the media coverage of a hostage taking incident in a church in early 1996. He recognizes "the contrived and stagey" actions of the key players in the "true-to-life" scenes and the cinematic quality of the coverage. He observes: "It is as if the hostage taker is acting out a role in a drama he has seen before. And so as he moves about frame by frame; there is method in his anguish. This is not the amok of the olden days. This is the postmodern desperado who patterns his behavior after the idiom of radio and television" (p. 36).

Such is the power of television. For those under the scrutiny of its cold lenses, one is required to employ an alternative grammar, a certain pattern of behavior that the camera can recognize. Angel, the hostage taker, appropriated this "idiom" for himself in his bid to act out his distress. And quite successfully, for he was able to satisfy the prerequisites of what the people behind the camera define as "a good copy." Thus, his act was made a national event while the rest of us watch. The reporter and writer with their side comments and remarks frame the experience on our behalf according

to their definition of the situation. This is how truth is re-manufactured by media. Reality is validated by television.

This probing insight into the role of the media in patterning behavior and monopolizing the truth raises serious questions about the effect of media for the individual. His essay on Mang Pandoy is an example of this dilemma (p. 11). We might come to the point where we validate our identities using the standards required by media. In the future, one might have to learn the rules for cinematic gestures, and the "idiom" of truth that TV requires. In this world, entertainment is valued more than substance. David adds: "We would be emoting our feelings in an effort to persuade ourselves they are real. Our interactions would be in sound bites that mock our deepest sentiments" (p. 36).

In the recent sinking of an interisland vessel, a survivor was interviewed by a TV reporter. The reporter asked the man what the experience was like. The man, after a moment of silence, replied, "*Basta... parang Titanic.*" Human experience, because of the dominance of these cultural forms as propagated by these new powerful technologies, is measured by how they compare with versions of the same experience on film or TV. Hence, we risk becoming mere copies of the heroes we see on film. How sure are we that our feelings are not just simulations of what the heroine felt in the corresponding soap opera? What takes precedence, human

experience or representations of it by media?

Media also has a way of victimizing their subjects, stripping them of their dignity. They have the propensity to portray people as victims. Most media institutions of today are plagued by a messianic complex. David cites the portrayal by media of the people affected by lahar as helpless victims. This leads him, in a subsequent essay (p. 167), to theorize on what transpires between the viewer and the camera. "The camera, in this sense, is not the neutral eye it is often thought to be. It chooses what to see and how to see. The relationship between the camera and the viewer therefore is essentially one of trust" (p. 167). Media's power to frame experience gives its practitioners a lot of responsibility. David adds that though it is necessary to sensitize people to the meanness of everyday life, it must not numb them.

Another example of how structures constrict experience is the culture of oppression endured by women. David deplores certain linguistic conventions that "instrumentalize" women. These forms of language imply the absence of control by women over their bodies. For example, the use of the term *pag-gamit* when the husband is referring to the sexual act between him and his wife (p. 15), portrays the woman's body as an object to be used by the man. He believes that by viewing rape merely as a stolen sexual act, we are ignoring the violence expended on the person's body and spirit. It is sad that

institutions, like Congress, re-inforce this flawed definition of women. David places the blame on patriarchal culture, the same culture that "assigns mothers the role of enforcer of the ethos of submission and compromise upon their daughters" (p. 46). Patriarchy is first reproduced in the family and David joins Debold, Wilson, and Malave in locating the locus of struggle also within the family, specifically the "truth-telling" that is supposed to transpire between mothers and daughters (p. 46). And for those who cannot directly participate in such struggles, David suggests that they look at "the world through women's eyes" (p. 16).

These two examples highlight certain structural formations that impinge upon the individual. Both abrogate powers of defining lives. Cultural technologies and the people behind them monopolize truth, the same truth with which individuals mirror themselves. Patriarchy also makes victims out of women. However, David is not satisfied by just outlining the oppression wrought by these structural formations. He provides us with ideas for our liberation. These ideas are not derived from grand theories but instead center on individuals and the different means they make sense of their life.

The new ethics:
Re-imagining the self.

David suggests, in the face of these oppressive structures, that we turn to the possibility of re-imagining our-

selves. Among the "crazy prophets" that he uses are Richard Rorty and Friedrich Nietzsche. For David, echoing Rorty's philosophy, "life is really a matter of description and re-description, and it has no meaning apart from the metaphors we happen to be using at any given time" (p. 80). This fluid perspective in looking at identities is based on the belief that "contingencies" arise in the course of a life that radically alters its path. Yet, it is important to qualify that this reinvention is not done to satisfy the standards demanded by others. It is to reclaim one's identity "from those who, by the power of their dominant vocabularies, have defined it for us" (p. 84). Therefore, as chance thrusts the individual into a new context, it is necessary to create new metaphors to redescribe one's identity and make it viable. He uses Rosanna Rocas as a prime example of a Self reinvented (p. 83).

The re-imagination of the Self is not an easy process. Perhaps chiding his colleagues at the academe, David writes: "We mostly live unconscious lives. Even the best of us may sometimes draw the most elaborate models of social reality, and yet be thoroughly incapable of any form of introspection. They will tell us about the laws of motion of practically everything in the external world, but nothing about the murmur of their own solitude" (p. 34). And so, he challenges us to an adventure of self-discovery, freeing ourselves from the dominant vocabularies generated in the past by our

authority figures, our moral elders, our parents, our significant others. The first step in this task of self-creation is the building of new metaphors (p. 106).

David provides us with examples of these acts of self-definition and the means by which we can go about doing this task. Although he is wary of the demands of these new cultural technologies, it is possible to employ these tools for creative self-definition. Interactive communication technologies like the telephone and the internet can become mechanisms to recreate the human community, not necessarily physically but virtually. He further adds that maybe the popularity of these new forms of communication technology have nothing to do with urban alienation. He cites the possibilities that anonymous interaction provides for participants: "here there is no face to protect, no honor or reputation to uphold, no hierarchies or protocol to observe" (p. 55). One can recreate the Self and engage in interaction with a considerably less amount of social risk given the blanket of anonymity the technology provides. With these technologies, it is possible to weave new metaphors into one's biography. David sees a future where these technologies can liberate the human community from "distortions of class, race, gender and religion" (p. 55). However, it is unfortunate that dominant cultural technologies like television and film are non-interactive. These technologies have the subliminal power to keep the viewer hostage.

In a couple of excellent essays, David looks into the function of human memory and imagination as anchors for human identity. Debunking the common notion that the past is most often a burden, he posits the idea that it is possible to reimagine the past and use it as the material with which one can create the Self. He shares with us the story of Mrs. Maniago and her attempts to locate herself within her family's narrative (p. 59). Her story led him to theorize that "...the family, above all, resides in memory. Without memory, we are but boarders in an impersonal dormitory" (p. 61). He also extends this theory to make sense of the lahar problem in Pampanga. Hailing from this province himself, David understands the violence wrought on the cultural landscape of the people, erasing memories and thus disrupting narratives. With physical landmarks buried under meters of lahar, Pampangueños are virtually "immigrants from the past" awakened to a world they barely know. However, he reminds us that this experience is something that all of us share in postmodern society. He writes: "It is interesting that as globalization shrinks and homogenizes the world, we see everywhere a frantic effort to recover what is unique in each of us as persons, as families, as cultures, and as nations. This effort often entails not only an attempt to form coherent narratives of our lives, but also to redescribe these lives autonomously, which is to say to free them from the chains of past descriptions" (p. 78). With the pervasive influence of dominant cultural

forms in our everyday lives, it is important that we keep our identities intact by reimaging the meaning of our memories constantly.

David presents as a model of this creative task of self-invention the Filipino Overseas Contract Workers. He is amazed by the resilience and strength of Filipino OCWs in forging Filipino identities abroad in such harsh cultural and physical conditions. According to him, Filipinos have the ability to adapt themselves to different cultures. Unlike people with assertive ethnic personalities and traditions, a Filipino abroad wears his ethnic identity not as a public badge but rather like a private amulet or *anting-anting* (p. 102). This is not a "discourse of a marginalized ethnicity," (p. 94) but rather is an ingenious and creative act of Filipinos in the midst of a more dominant culture and an oppressive economic situation. For this, he proudly hails the Filipinos working abroad as the "first postmodern nomads," (p. 102) a people who is neither bounded by place, tradition, nor ethnicity. Instead, these Filipinos anchor themselves through something oddly Filipino – simple things like *daing* and *bagoong*. He also observes the strength that these Filipinos derive as members of collectivities. He notes the important role that religious congregations play as sources of comfort and bonding for the lonely Filipino abroad. Inseparable with the Filipinos' strength in 'belonging' is their "intimacy with the unknown" (p. 51), what David defines as their "deep and abiding

faith... [that] allows them to imagine that nothing will happen to them, even in the most threatening circumstances" (p. 51). This earnest spirituality is very much like the *anting-anting* or amulet - similar to the native identity that Filipinos conceal, it is hidden yet provides the strength necessary to survive in a hostile foreign world. These twin amulets of religiosity and ethnicity are the powers that these postmodern Filipinos employ to remain distinctly Filipino.

Limits of personal empowerment

However, David is not disavowing the presence of deep structural problems that plague Philippine society. He recognizes that personal coping mechanisms do not address structural problems (p. 119). Commenting on the inadequacy of market-ready private solutions to structural problems, he writes: "The varied forms of knowledge offered in the market can be so beguiling that the modern person comes to believe that he can actually arm himself with to what may be essentially structurally generated problems" (p. 33). Therefore, individuals, despite all the courage and creativity they spend on self-definition, still have to account for the fact that they belong to a community with common concerns and interests that also envelops their concerns and interests as well. In their quest for self-actualization, it is still necessary to take part in attempts to make society better. David concerns himself with these

structural problems in the second part of the book.

David's views on government are not flattering. He decries the technocratic solutions that government agencies are always prone to employ. Commenting on government's response to the lahar problem, he disapproves of the insensitivity of government in its attempts to solve the problem through engineering methods alone, ignoring the cultural problem that lahar had spawned (p. 129). He also laments government's policy to send the brains and brawn of our people abroad as if it was some sort of "permanent industry" instead of merely being a stopgap measure (p. 123).

However, he does not ascribe all the ills of society to government alone. His complex view of society's ills can be attributed to the novel sociological outlook that he employs. In his discourse on graft and corruption, he places emphasis on the moral dimension of this social problem. He theorizes on the failure of the campaign against graft and corruption and ascribes it to the inability to "mobilize moral impulses against what is essentially regarded only as a legal wrong" (p. 151). While decrying the delay of the courts in handling cases, he puts equal blame on enterprising lawyers who delay trials and get criminals off the hook (p. 141). He is also concerned over the problem of translating language from the vernacular to English in courtrooms because of the

possibility that "the life of a person may often be decided not on a point of law but of translation" (p. 171).

David writes extensively on the power of media as a social institution in contemporary Philippine society. He specifically highlights the increasing role of media in the administration of justice in the public sphere. By probing into the accused moral history, media reconstructs "moral careers." Media often use "stereotype models of human biographies" (p. 114). In such cases, they abrogate the power of being the sole defender of either the victim or accused, and we, the audience assume the position of judge, forced to decide based on the moral history and the scanty evidence that the media provide (p. 200). However, the public is not exactly the innocent and helpless participants of this charade. He observes that, as a means of balancing the advantage of the powerful, public opinion tends to give the weak the moral upper hand (p. 113). He writes: "Justice is distributive: the moral failings of ordinary mortals do not excite the public as much as the weakness of their moral and political mentors. There is thus an instant, and sometimes malicious, delight in the modern demystification of power and holiness" (p. 229). What David finds alarming is the marriage of media and politics, where political victory is not attained through responsible political work but through the fabrication of ready-for-TV images.

David also looks into the history of the nation. He comments that the more than three centuries under colonial rule that we experienced resulted in demoralization and the loss of our self-esteem. He writes: "Throughout all these years, our nation's history had been one of perpetual adjustment to the condition of subjugation. The result was a culture of improvisation and mediocrity. Instead of a passion for perfection, we adopted the rule of the minimum. Instead of an ethic of public service, we embraced the ethic of profit seeking. Instead of honor and accountability, we valued evasion of duty. Instead of the pursuit of excellence, we found comfort in resilience. It was a way of life appropriate to the colonial condition or to any other situation of enslavement. It was a weapon of the weak" (p. 150). This comment provides an insight into the effects of colonial subjugation.

Towards social solidarity

The discussion of these structural problems implies the necessity of social action. Solitary individuals cannot re-imagine society alone much less change it. They need the aid of fellow community members. Consistent with his prescription for the dilemmas of the Self, he suggests that we, as a collectivity, forge new meanings about our society – its history, its problems and its future. He looks into our past and uses as an example the *Kalayaan*, the underground publication of the

Katipunan. He highlights the role of the native language as used by our young heroes in the re-imagination of our destiny as a nation (p. 147). He is proposing a new vocabulary and metaphors to rebuild our self-worth and respect as a nation.

Writing on the problem of lahar: "The fault is not in Nature that we are vulnerable. It is in the way we have organized ourselves into a human community. We have failed to develop that collective conscience that allows human beings to effectively negotiate with Nature a sustainable mode of existence. Our responses to recurrent problems such as those posed by natural phenomena have sadly been individualistic rather than communal, ad hoc rather than comprehensive, and passive rather than willful" (p. 135). To rid government of graft, he proposes that business adopt new ethical standards when it deals with government and other institutions (p. 153). He also sees merit in Mayor Lim's attempt to employ informal methods of social control in curbing drug trafficking (p. 243). These solutions imply a Durkheimian approach for addressing these problems.

Conclusion

With the exception of a few sociologists belonging to the interpretive schools, the centrality of structures has always been stressed. Not because reality demands such an interpretation, but rather the composition of dominant sociological theory had always

emphasized the role of structure, in obvious neglect of human agency. This bias towards structure instead of agency holds true for Sociology in the Philippines as well. A look into the output of the *Philippine Sociological Review* in the 70s indicate the dominance of studies that privilege structure over agency (Abad and Eviota 1982:143). The same can be said for most of local sociological output in the past two decades. Recent developments in theory challenge the soundness of dominant sociological paradigms in the context of contemporary society. The critique posed by postmodernism against the inadequacies of grand theories led to a rethinking of how sociologists do sociology. Thus, a reworking of the discipline's subject, method, and theory had steadily taken place both here and abroad. In recent years, there have been attempts to update theory to acknowledge the role of agents (Aquino 1991:11). However, more work in the field still needs to be done.

David takes us into new territories through these essays. His work on the sociology of identity opens for us a whole new theoretical discourse where the possibilities are exciting. Viable identities must not only be configured relative to others but also to the Self. Implicit is a coherent and creative Self that is capable of re-imagining its identity not for others but for personal satisfaction- a departure from the Goffmanian view of the Self. His examples of how the Self re-imagines his/her identity is pioneering.

The prescriptions that David offers about the Self are non-ideological. Nevertheless, we can sense a common ground from which these ideas were drawn. The thread that holds the two sets of essays together is the inseparability and dual nature of the Self and the structural form containing it. Implicit in the perspectives and solutions that he prescribes for both individual and societal concerns is the high regard he places on the capabilities of the self to face structural hindrances. The struggle to actualize the Self occur in two levels – within the Self and the Society. Therefore, the individual has, by virtue of being a member of a human community, a stake in the condition of society. There is still a need for collective social action. This social action is not done in furtherance of a definite political goal. Neither is this type of social action based on a strong concept of nationalism. David has become critical of such notions. He writes, "If nationalism means a commitment to defend and advance the national interest, then it behooves thoughtful Filipinos to state what is the national interest in a society riven by glaring class differences. Whose interests are these" (p. 246)? What is then the basis of such a social action?

One possible basis for social action is what David, taking off from Zygmunt Bauman, calls Civility. For Bauman, there are those who we live with and those we live for. The former pertains to those who are objects of our cognitive spacing about while the latter refers to those who are objects of our moral spacing. For those who are at the

margins of our cognitive spacing, we know little about them and desire to know even less. For those who are at the margins of our moral spacing, we care little for them and we are prompted to care even less. This "scant moral attention" to those who are strangers is the problem that pervades post-modern society. David writes: "Most of us are incapable of plain civility, the one virtue that makes it possible for strangers to live with one another. We continue to conduct our lives according to the outmoded social maps of small communities that are becoming rarer and rarer in the modern world." He joins the call to value and recognize the strangers in our midst as part of the same human community.

In this collection of essays, David challenges not only dominant theoretical perspectives, but also most of how sociological work is done in this country. He places considerable importance on how human beings make sense of their lives. The conscious attempt to veer away from dominant and traditional theoretical paradigms results in a new manner of making sense of Philippine social reality. The attempt to understand the powerful cultural technologies and emergent social institutions like the media opens a whole new field of sociological study. Given the dominance of media, a study on who controls these institutions and the processes that take place inside them is warranted. In sum, by giving us a new set of metaphors to describe Filipino reality, we are enabled to redescribe Filipino society differently.

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