

PEASANT PARTICIPATION IN CONTEMPORARY PHILIPPINE SOCIETY

TIMOTEO G. BUTALID, S.J.

Share and Care Apostolate For Poor Settlers

*Present-day crisis:
A structural inadequacy*

Reports on the gross national output despite the energy crisis, inflation and balance of payment deficits have remained optimistic. In 1979, one single province alone in Northern Luzon boasted of exporting 100,000 tons of rice to Indonesia in exchange for oil.¹ Again, last year, the Philippines was reported to have eventually achieved self-sufficiency in corn, to have become the third largest supplier of fish in Southeast Asia, and to have produced a huge surplus of sugar.

Some years ago, the Philippines overtook Hawaii as the world's largest pineapple exporter. The growth of the Philippine banana export industry is no less astonishing. From zero in the mid-1960s, exports rose on average by 225 times each year for the first decade until it became the world's fourth largest exporter.² These are just some examples of the growing output specifically from the rural Philippines.

Paradoxically enough, that same province in Northern Luzon was reported, in that same year 1979, to be one of the most depressed areas in terms of malnutrition. Seventy-two percent of its people were said to be undernourished. In the national scene, never has the percentage of undernourishment been as high — 69 percent of the total population were found deficient in the recommended nutrient requirement, and deprived of even the minimum standards of decent existence: that is, food, housing, clothing, fuel and medical care.³ Worse still, a recent study has just concluded that 35 million Filipinos or 84 percent of the country's population "belong to the poverty level."⁴ More specifically is the

problematic plight of the 29,000 workers on the banana and pineapple industries, whose average daily wage of about P11.00, puts them below the national level.⁵

Now what do these conflicting data show? They show a country which has the capacity of producing substantial wealth side by side with phenomenal poverty. It is a capacity borne of socio-economic structures which could extract substantial wealth for predominantly urban-based centers sucking in resources from the rural peripheries. They indicate a presence of a minority that is assured of political and legal support and is capable of producing wealth which could redound for national growth but not for the betterment of the people. In the presence of such proven production capacity, mass poverty then seems to stem not from the infertility of the soil or the destructive power of natural calamities and people's laziness, but rather to laws and institutions which are created by man himself. Then what brought about the inequality in these man-made structures that favor the few at the expense of the many?

The answer seems to point to the lack and even absence of participation in the very formulation and periodic revision of these structures by the majority themselves. For without their participation, these structures could not authentically reflect their aspirations and even their basic needs.

*Restraining forces to peasant
participation*

*Cultural heritage — Its "culture of
silence."* One dominant feature in the

socialization process among Filipinos is the authority of *persons* rather than that of *ideas/consensus*. Laws, family practices, church rulings and school regulations find their legitimacy more in the persons decreeing them than in the ideas validating them. This downward flow of commands and impositions has produced a pyramidal, dictating society whose cohesive force comes from people on top. A "culture of silence" pervades over its mass base; a culture which is characterized by dependence, apathy and individualist mentality.

It is a dependence that is rooted in the patron-client relationship, robbing the majority of its aspirations to active participation. It is an apathy or indifference to community affairs that has been engendered by the alienating process of being dictated upon and where the consequent motivating force to participation remains in the basic-needs level. Finally, it is an individualist mentality stemming from the masses' identity with their respective *patrons*, that divides their potential collective thrust towards participation.

Political implications. The "authority of persons" from the top, coupled with the "culture of silence" from below, forms political power. It stands in contrast to the circular structure of political power in which participation is obtained from the broad membership, and authority is derived from consensus.

Not an evil by itself, especially where fellowship and unity of aspirations between leaders and led exist, this pyramidal structure of political power has been called in question lately with the advent of two social phenomena, namely, the rise of international capitalism to a higher stage and the intensification of bureaucracy.

The invasion of agri-business funded by transnational corporations and tourism into

rural Philippines has led to a more pointed estrangement of the ruling elite from the masses, even more so than in the case of absentee landlordism. *Hacienderos* and Filipino businessmen, it has been said, gradually found themselves having more in common with foreign capitalists and tourists than with their brother Filipinos such as the farmers and fishermen in the rural areas.

Moreover, the setting in of bureaucracy so necessary in the efficient ordering of complex technological forces in developing countries, far from easing the tension, has only reinforced the rigid, impersonal and already strained relationship between the power-holder and their subjects, occasioned by the growing centralization of foreign and outside powers.

Such an estrangement of the ruling elite from the broad masses has only aggravated the cultural block to peasant participation in political involvement.

Economic perspective. Philippine society has been described as fragmented; the division occasioned primarily by conflicting socio-economic interests. Basically, it is divided into the have-nots — the power elite and the dependent masses, with a thin line of the middle class separating the two. And it is this economic dependence on the elite that stands as an obstacle to the people's true expression of their oppressed state and hence to effective participation to structural change.

Education for peasant participation

Given the "culture of silence" the question is raised as how to awaken the silenced peasantry to active participation; and once moved to social commitment, how to effect a participation that is both intelligent and mature. Concretely, how do we remedy the cultural inadequacies enumerated above, namely, from dependence to self-reliance, from the *kanya-kanya* mentality to solidarity with one's class, and finally, from apathy to

involvement — and all these for an *active, intelligent* and *mature* participation in the building up of a just and responsive society?

Education for active participation. A people long silenced by tradition and oppression, the peasantry can be roused to effective action on the basis of community issues which are perceived as problems by the people themselves. As problems, these issues act as the motivating force to participation; and being common to the group, these issues form the internal, unifying element to community participation.

This issue-approach to community organizing stands in contrast to educating the peasantry through sheer indoctrination. It opposes that blind and passive participation where the subdued masses are pushed to implementing programs drawn up from the top and where issues are not intelligently discussed, if discussed at all, and finally where national plans are foisted upon an unknowing citizenry.

Active participation emanates from a people's need to develop themselves and their community; and thus, must embrace not only the implementation of a plan but also the very planning itself.

As distinguished from the "banking" method of education, this issue/problem-solving approach starts with a questioning stance towards reality, an inquiry into societal constraints and tensions; the resolution of which made through concrete collective action and reflection.

Education for intelligent participation. This type of participation may be had initially by an analysis of local issues. Through free group discussions and outside inputs from knowledgeable resource persons, local community problems are gradually seen as interlinked one with the other, as having roots to deeper sectoral economic issues and even to those of national and global significance. In

this way, the so-called mythical consciousness of the peasantry, in which reality is regarded as a given and not to be questioned, gives way to consciousness that is analytical and oriented to action. It is in the light of this analysis that a reasonable and effective community action is possible.

Moreover, given an analytical framework of their situation, a clearer vision and direction in organizing emerges. The motivating power for participation shifts from the individual basic-needs level to a higher level of intellectual analysis and concerted action on a wider basis. In this way, transcending the bounds of localism and small-issue orientation, the organized peasant communities can stand committed to structural change of greater and even national importance, and be open to alliances without losing their autonomous stance on issues and becoming easy victims to false propaganda and manipulations.

Finally, with the broadening of one's horizon through wider and more significant issues, there emerges a growing commitment to an ever-widening circle of people as affected by these issues.

Education for mature participation. Mature participation does not exist as a ready-made product but is born out of an action-reflection-action process. As the content of decision-making, the consensus for action is gradually purified by the crucible of collective experience in a series of revisions. This continuing process of refinement and nuanced articulation of community decisions through reflection, communal discernment and analysis, and this, in the light of their folk wisdom, ethos and tradition makes for maturity in social involvement.

Some techniques

Preliminary Social Investigation. More than a general inquiry into the social conditions of a locality, it seeks first and foremost for the clusters of significant problems of that

community, their inter-relationship with one another, with their sectoral and national roots — whether they be economic, political or religio-cultural in nature. This constellation of issues arranged thus schematically provides the initial framework within which plans for both politicalization and community building take place. Once understood by the local peasantry and improved according to their actual understanding of the total life situation, this schema becomes the normative basis for action, direction and alliances, and the ground on which an indigenous ideology could develop.

Class Categorization. It is the identification of the various sectors, e.g., fishermen, farmers, etc.; and the sub-groups of a particular sector, e.g., independent landowners, renters, lessees whose land are as yet not formally titled, share-cropped tenants, farm workers, etc. Commonality of issues does not guarantee unity of perception and action. For example, the fishermen in a land-eviction case differed in their reasons for opposition from those of the farmers in a locality. More important still is the difference of viewpoints among the various sub-groups of a particular sector. Conflicting economic interests and the traditional inferior roles played by those in the lower strata of a sector inhibit genuine participation. Initially, then these sub-groups may not be organized together until such time as each finds its own social identity through a common understanding and tentative solutions to the issue at hand. And only then can equal participation, authentic dialogue and unity of action among all sub-groups be achieved.

Core group formation. Peasant conscientization for effective participation entails a long drawn out and protracted process. Thus it demands a leadership that is *continuing, consistent, and systematic*. It calls for the formation of the so-called organic intellectuals to whom could be given the task of recalling significant events of a community/sector from the perspective of an oppressed peasantry; of interpreting present

problems in the context of their deeper national (even global) roots; and finally, of projecting trends and mapping out strategies in the light of the peasants' quest for total human fulfillment.

Furthermore, it calls for an *indigenous* leadership who could command respect and loyalty to a still newly awakened people, and could protect them from a worldview that once kept them in the state of mythical consciousness and subservience. Finally, it calls for a *collective* leadership whose function is to safeguard communities from excesses and dictatorial tendencies of individual leaders to develop pro-people qualities of a leader through mutual criticism and support and finally, to build up an esprit de corps where the limitations of some leaders are supplemented and enriched by the positive qualities of the others.

Conclusion

At present, the Philippines is witnessing the awakening of the masses. It is a deepening critical awareness of their oppressed situation in society, a growing consciousness of solidarity among themselves as a class, and gradual realization that they can wield power to transform society into one according to their needs and aspirations.

Lacking maturity or being a newly-emerging force the people's movement can wreck havoc on the nation already divided by conflicting socio-economic interests.

Lacking discernment, it can easily fall prey to superimposed ideologies, and can be splintered into factions by the secondary contradictions of the local elite classes, and the insidious machinations of foreign imperialist powers. It can be overwhelmed by outside manipulative forces and used unwittingly as a pawn in the power play of world politics such as is happening in socialist countries in Indochina.

Lacking coordination and a deeper understanding of their common basis of unity, the peasant's movement through its localized, although widely scattered, efforts against oppression, can remain diffused and insignificant in the face of a national struggle for a just and human society.

Thus it is that through their thrust towards active, intelligent and mature participation in nation building, the organized peasantry can hope for a people's movement where the spirit of fellowship pervades and where the dignity of the individual is respected and not sacrificed. They can envision a people's movement — not as a brute force blindly clashing with other sectors of society, but rather a human power capable of holding authentic dialogue-confrontation with those on top and hopefully transforming a nation where the citizens can work out their total

human development in the spirit of freedom, love and service.

Notes

¹Bulletin Today (August 1979).

²SELA Newsletter, September-October 1980, p. 5 (mimeographed).

³Constantino, Renato, *The Nationalist Alternative*, (Foundation for Nationalist Studies, 1979), p. 15.

⁴Social Development News, published by the Philippine Business for Social Progress, VII: 4, (October-December 1978).

⁵SELA Newsletter, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

THE PHILIPPINE ECONOMIC JOURNAL

Volume XVIII

Number 4, 1979

<i>H. T. Oshima</i>	Some Poverty Research Issues
<i>T. Mizoguchi</i>	Poverty Concepts
<i>H. N. S. Karunatilake</i>	Poverty in: Sri Lanka
<i>M. Kringkaew</i>	Thailand
<i>I. Shari</i>	Malaysia
<i>E. A. Tan and V. Holazo</i>	Philippines
<i>Y. I. Chung</i>	Korea
<i>C. C. Chen</i>	Taiwan
<i>L. L. C. Chau</i>	Hongkong
<i>V. V. B. Rao</i>	Singapore Household Expenditure Distributions
<i>M. Mangahas</i>	Poverty Measurement Problems in the Philippines

Place your orders at the PSSC Central Subscription Service, House No. 7,
Purok Heneral Aguinaldo, University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City.