

Marking a Turn: Thoughts on a Generation of Philippine Scholarship

Professor Resil B. Mojares



If there is the sense that Philippine studies is taking a “turn,” we have to ask where it has been before asking where it is going. The question of where Filipino scholars have been came to me a few months ago when I was asked to write the introduction to a festschrift for the country’s leading theater scholar, Nicanor Tiongson (Chua *et al.* forthcoming). This reminded me that we are indeed in a time of commemorations. This started sometime back, with the festschrifts for William Henry Scott, Doreen Fernandez, and Fr. John Schumacher, and it has ominously heightened, with similar tributes to the contributions of scholars like Soledad Reyes and Isagani Cruz. And last year, Ateneo de Manila had commemorative events on the works of Reynaldo Ileto and Vicente Rafael.¹

Thinking about Nic Tiongson reminded me that Nic and I belong to the same generation (the men and women who set out to be writers and scholars at the end of the 1960s), and that it is a generation coming to a close. And that while we can rightly (if immodestly) claim that it has been one of the most vibrant and productive generations in the country’s intellectual history, it is not quite clear what its work has amounted to (I am thinking here of the social sciences and the humanities although I imagine this claim can be extended). What has been gained, missed, left unclarified or unfulfilled? And what do these suggest of directions, new or renewed, that Philippine scholarship can or should take?

Conjunctures in Recent Philippine History

In 1970s Philippines, widespread disillusion with the state in the context of a deepening economic and

political crisis was marked, for instance, by the violent elections of 1969, regarded at the time as the most degraded and corrupt in Philippine history. Vicente Rafael calls this period “the long 1970s,” by which he means the Marcos years, from 1965 to 1986.² The paradox of this period is that, beyond its political stereotyping as “the dark years of the dictatorship,” it is in fact one of the most intellectually dynamic periods in Philippine history. One can cite several reasons for this: that the largely unprecedented experience of martial rule (“the years of living dangerously,” both in fantasy and reality) was not just stultifying but mentally fertilizing as well; that Marcos was our most intellectually-minded president and that could not but invite an intellectual response; that Marcos authoritarianism was not, after all, the hegemonic kind that existed, for instance, in Central European states; or that Filipinos are equipped with a large reserve of survival skills, adept at creating spaces of autonomy under conditions of restriction and repression.³ However one will explain it, the fact is that the long 1970s was, in creative terms, truly an “interesting” time.

A great deal has been written on how the Marcoses sought to exploit the mystifying power of culture and the arts through patronage, state institutions, and other instrumentalities. But the most important initiatives were undertaken outside state circuits. As Rafael narrates of his own intellectual formation in Manila in the late martial-law period, disaffection and risk-taking fueled a great deal of excitement and creativity in popular music, theater, and cinema, as well as the informal sites and networks of artistic and intellectual exchange.⁴ Many of these initiatives were linked to the anti-Marcos opposition but many

(Rafael says) were simply “conjunctural and contingent,” as well as “counter-cultural,” ambivalent in their relation to authority whether that of the Marcos government or the Communist Party. In any case, they nurtured and preserved that space of creativity and autonomy that is largely unacknowledged (because of the focus on the “event” of the Benigno Aquino assassination) as the cultural groundwork for the 1986 “People Power” uprising.

By the late 1980s, after “People Power,” the mood became less polarized and more pluralist. There was a great deal of intellectual excitement with the so-called “opening up of democratic space,” and much interest in providing the new government of Corazon Aquino and a newly-self-conscious “civil society” with the academic and intellectual support for the post-authoritarian transition to democracy. But the situation also became more diffuse and fragmented, with the flourishing of new Western theories and the diversification of scholarship, with the interest (often sector-bound) in such fields as gender, migration, and in particular foreign aid-driven development studies.

In the above context, as the sociologists Virginia Miralao and Cynthia Bautista see it, Philippine studies moved “from polarization to pluralism and convergence.” Greater tolerance and dialogue among different perspectives tempered the rabid ideological and factional partisanship of the 1970s, and there has been a convergence of methodologies as scholars attempt integrative discourses that cut across disciplines. This assessment is rather generous since one can point to countervailing facts as well: much scholarship remains discipline- or subject-bound, with little conversation across disciplines; much empirical research, unenergized by fresh theoretical perspectives, remains dreary and unimaginative; and theoretically-smart studies are frequently empirically thin (subsisting, like orchids, on air rather than grown out of the rich loam of local data and knowledge).

Still, it can be said that Filipino scholarship has truly come into its own. The past half-century in the Philippines has witnessed the expansion and diversification of academic disciplines, advances in the volume, range, and quality of research and publishing; the emergence of academic professional societies and research institutions, and by implication a larger, more diverse community of scholars and academics.⁵

One can, for instance, compare two state-of-the-field assessments of Philippine studies, one done in the 1970s by the Center for Southeast Asian Studies of Northern Illinois University (NIU) in the US and the other in the 1990s by the Philippine Social Science Council (PSSC).⁶ Separated by some 20 years, the NIU and PSSC reports are not quite comparable

because of the particular circumstances of their production, yet the differences are nevertheless telling. The NIU assessments, produced primarily as guide for American researchers in the field, are almost entirely written by Americans and mostly cover English-language works. On the other hand, the PSSC volumes, addressed primarily to Filipinos in the self-conscious context of celebrating national scholarship, are done by Filipinos. The NIU reports of the 1970s leave the impression of an American-dominated field. In a list, for instance, of 47 “major” works in Philippine historiography between 1955 and 1976, 23 were authored by Americans, 20 by Filipinos, 3 Spaniards, and 1 Australian. Of the 20 Filipino works cited, eight were US dissertations. And 31 of the 47 works were published in the US.⁷ On the other hand, the PSSC reports of the 1990s, simply by the sheer density of their content, clearly indicate that the field’s center of gravity has shifted from the US to the Philippines (assuming that it was ever in the US in the first place).

Impact on Scholarship

Unlike popular forms like cinema and theater, or such types of intellectual work as policy studies, action-oriented research, journalism, or polemical writings, the impact of much scholarship is rarely direct and dramatic, and much more difficult to trace and assess.

In their overview of Philippine studies, Miralao and Bautista cite Marxism and the “indigenous movement” as the two major themes of social science scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s (and this can well be said of the humanities as well).⁸ These themes can be viewed as expressions of the much broader current of “nationalism”—a word that I use here as shorthand for what is in fact a variously conceived and contested idea, as well as the heated context in which it played out in the Philippines. The paradox is that while nationalism is the engine of scholarship of “the long ‘70s,” it is also one that biased and constrained the scholarship of the period.

This was the case with studies in local history and regional literatures. Stimulated by the popular-democratic sentiments of the 1970s and subsequent efforts at decentralization after 1986, these studies were driven by the hope of redefining the nation as one more inclusive, people-centered, and broadly based.⁹ These studies, it can be said, helped create a more inclusive awareness of the country’s regional or subnational units, and an understanding of the national literature and history geographically wider and empirically thicker.

But whether “significantly new,” I am not too sure.

While there are exemplary exceptions, much of the work in historical and literary studies has remained distinctly “local.” There are very few cross-regional, cross-national, and integrative studies, little direct, critical engagement with established conceptions of the “nation” or its constituent units, and a low level of theorization, such that much work in this area (as some have complained) does not significantly reconfigure the familiar, dominant national narratives.¹⁰

Nationalism and Certain Tendencies

One of the tendencies of nationalism is the readiness to take the nation as a given and thus address oneself to simply inscribing into the received narrative the marginalized and the excluded without critically interrogating or revising the form and logic of this narrative (as Reynaldo Ileto has argued). Another is the tendency to essentialize the nation—whether strategically or not—in the struggle to define it as something other than what dominant discourses (whether that of the elite, the authoritarian state, or the “West”) have claimed it to be. Thus, there is the predisposition to short-circuit or gloss over internal social divisions and disjunctures to claim the authority of what is unitary, organic, and encompassing.

Related to the privileging of the “nation” is the privileging of the “popular.” While the bias in favor of the marginal and the excluded was a necessary one, it also occasioned gaps in research, a bias for certain research problems (particularly in history and anthropology) that left subjects of privilege and power relatively unexamined.

In today’s more open, pluralist environment, how compelling is the idea of “nation”? To what extent has this obsession been overtaken by the realities of the country’s prospects for an economic breakthrough, the pressure of globalizing forces that are redefining ideas of identity, territoriality, and structures of economic and political power?

Indeed, there is quite nothing like “progress”—with the confidence and cosmopolitanism it brings—more conducive to an “internationalizing” scholarship. Yet, the country still finds itself mired in the old, tenacious realities of poverty and inequality, the rule of predatory elites, large-scale corruption, and chronic natural and man-made disasters. And if progress internationalizes, there is quite nothing like poverty and inequality—with the feelings of oppression, dependence, danger, and vulnerability they foster—more conducive for the appeals of nationalism.

The dilemma is not a case of one or the other. My own sense is that “nationalizing” and “internationalizing” forces in the intellectual field need not be viewed as antithetical or a case of *pre* and *post*, but as part of a simultaneous process. Instead of dichotomies

of global/local, center/periphery, or inside/outside, we need to hold both in view at the same time without blurring their distinctness or subordinating one to the other. If studies of local histories, local literatures, and native mentalities have reached a theoretical impasse, it is because such studies—in an intellectual form of “protectionism”—have tended to draw circles around themselves instead of building outwards. While this can be understood as a necessary mode of concentrating and building up local intellectual resources, it has to be done as well in vital conversation with the rest of the world.

“Toward a More Expansive Approach”

We have been asked “to think ourselves beyond the nation.”¹¹ Such thinking need not mean we now begin to do transnational or post-national studies. My own proposal is quite modest and proceeds from what has already been accomplished. We can begin by deepening our appreciation for the “world” within the “nation,” by investigating the linkages, connections, and correspondences that extend beyond the territorial borders of the nation and its localities, by undertaking more comparative and multi-site studies, or by simply making greater use of “world” scholarship in better understanding the nation and its localities. This crucially includes cultivating greater interest in studies on the Philippines done in Japan, Spain, the United States (unavoidably), and other places, not only for how these studies augment or affirm what we know about ourselves but, more importantly, because these studies—with the particular advantages of their location—can do things we cannot do and see what we do not quite see.

As a “home scholar,” I fully appreciate the tremendous constraints in a more expansive approach to Philippine studies (constraints that include opportunities to do research outside one’s locality, or even simple access to information resources). That is why when we speak of accumulating and building intellectual resources, we mean not just the mental but the material as well—in terms of the infrastructure for education and scholarship, like research support institutions, publishing houses, and a large and active community of readers, scholars, and writers.

There is a measure of bad faith in urging a country that has been colonized by foreign powers to “globalize,” since by definition a nation colonized is globalized. Ultimately, the imperative lies in whether it is being globalized in ways that people are critically aware of, and in terms that they can effectively negotiate with or command.

Notes

This article is adapted from a keynote paper that was presented at the Philippine Studies Conference in Japan (PSCJ), Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, Kyoto, Japan, February 28 – March 1 2014.

¹ See Jonathan Chua, ed., *Feasts and Feats: Festschrift for Doreen G. Fernandez* (Quezon City: Office of Research and Publications, Loyola Schools, Ateneo de Manila University, 2000); Jesus T. Peralta, ed., *Reflections on Philippine Culture and History: Festschrift in Honor of William Henry Scott* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2001); Eduardo Jose Calasanz et al., eds., *Thought the Harder, Heart the Keener: A Festschrift for Soledad S. Reyes* (Quezon City: Office of Research and Publications, Loyola Schools, Ateneo de Manila University, 2008); David Jonathan Bayot, ed., *Inter/Sections: Isagani R. Cruz and Friends* (Metro Manila: Anvil Publishing, 2010); "Festschrift in Honor of Fr. John N. Schumacher, S. J.," *Philippine Studies*, 58: 1–2 (2010); [Symposium on Vicente L. Rafael's *Contracting Colonialism* in celebration of the twenty-fifth year of its publication], *Philippine Studies*, 61: 4 (2013), 477–520. On February 4, 2013, "Historiography and Nation since *Pasyon and Revolution*: Conference in Honor of Prof. Reynaldo Ileta" was held at Ateneo de Manila University, under the sponsorship of Ateneo's *Philippine Studies* and Department of History and Kyoto University's *Southeast Asian Studies*.

² Vicente L. Rafael, "Contracting Colonialism and the Long 1970s," *Philippine Studies*, 61: 4 (2013), 477–94.

³ In 2000–01, the US Social Science Research Council's Southeast Asia Regional Advisory Panel (of which I was a member) organized roundtables in Bandung and Kuala Lumpur, in which selected scholars from Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines narrated how their involvement in a revolutionary movement influenced their intellectual careers. What was striking was the difference between the serious, tense, and inhibited presentations of the Thai, Malaysian, and (to a lesser extent) Indonesian participants, and the candid but funny and self-deprecatory narrations of the Filipinos. Not that the Filipinos' "confessions" were devoid of "deep" emotion or less honest, they were (apart from the contextual differences in the experiences narrated) simply more skilled in the arts of distancing and detachment.

⁴ Rafael (*Contracting Colonialism* and the Long 1970s) cites five characteristics of the developments in what he calls "the long 1970s" (1965–1986): they were conjunctural and contingent; "counter-cultural"; "modernizing" (in the sense of consciously seeking to reinvent traditions); "obsessed with the collection and archiving of artifacts of all sorts"; and characterized by a kind of "cosmopolitan nationalism" as well as "nationalist cosmopolitanism."

⁵ This is illustrated in the founding of the Philippine Political Science Association (1962), Philippine Economic Society (1962), Psychological Association of the Philippines (1963), Philippine Sociological Society (1963), Linguistics Society of the Philippines (1969), and Ugnayang Pang-Agham Tao (Anthropological Association of the Philippines) (1977). In 1968, the Philippine Social Science Council was established as a coordinating body of the country's social science associations.

⁶ Donn V. Hart, ed., *Philippine Studies: Geography, Archaeology, Psychology and Literature: Present Knowledge and Research Trends* (DeKalb: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, 1974); *Philippine Studies: History, Sociology, Mass Media and Bibliography* (DeKalb: Center for

Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, 1978); *Philippine Studies: Political Science, Economics, and Linguistics* (DeKalb: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, 1981). These volumes collect papers presented at the 1973 Association for Asian Studies Conference, the 1977 Midwest Conference on Asian Affairs, and the 1980 First International Conference on the Philippines at Western Michigan University. See *The Philippine Social Sciences in the Life of the Nation*, ed. V. A. Miralao (Quezon City: Philippine Social Science Council, 1999). Conceived in the Fourth National Social Science Congress in Quezon City in 1998, as part of the celebration of the Centennial of Philippine Independence. This is a condensed view of the disciplines surveyed in *Philippine Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (Quezon City: Philippine Social Science Council, 1993), 5 vols.

⁷ Bruce Cruikshank, "Philippine Historiography: Accomplishment and Promise, 1955–1976," *Philippine Studies: History, Sociology, Mass Media and Bibliography*, 1–97.

⁸ Virginia A. Miralao, "The Philippine Social Sciences in the Balance: Reflections at the Close of the Century," and Cynthia Rose B. Bautista, "The Social Sciences in the Philippines: Reflections on Developments and Prospects," *Philippine Social Sciences in the Life of the Nation*, 344–80, 381–409.

⁹ For early statements for what local historical and literary studies aimed to accomplish, see John A. Larkin, "The Place of Local History in Philippine Historiography," *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, 8: 2 (September 1967), 317, and Bienvenido Lumbera, "The Rugged Terrain of Vernacular Literature," *Revaluation: Essays on Philippine Literature, Cinema & Popular Culture* (Quezon City: Index, 1984), 103–115. Lumbera's essay, an agenda-setting statement on vernacular literary studies, was delivered as a lecture at the University of San Carlos, Cebu City, in 1976 and first published in 1977. In the case of regional literary studies, see Resil B. Mojares, "The Rugged Terrain: The State of Literary Research in the Philippines," *Illumined Terrain: The Sites and Dimensions of Philippine Literature*, ed. V. N. Sugbo (Manila: National Commission for Culture and the Arts, 1998), 6–14.

¹⁰ Alfred W. McCoy, "Introduction: The Social History of an Archipelago," *Philippine Social History: Global Trade and Local Transformations*, ed. A. W. McCoy and E. C. de Jesus (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1982), 1–18. Looking beyond local history, McCoy calls for comparative work within and beyond Southeast Asia as well as studies that are not necessarily tied to the local/national axis. This has not quite happened.

¹¹ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 158; Umut Ozkarimli, *Contemporary Debates on Nationalism: A Critical Engagement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 195–205.