



# Reflections on the Development of Philippine Studies in the Philippines: The U.P. Asian Center Experience\*

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*In a way the Philippines is what we as social scientists think or imagine it is since after all governments listen to the ravings of economists and the narratives of historians, the preachings of psychologists, the serendipitous views of anthropologists, the warnings of demographers, or alternatively take offence at the views of novelists, poets and film makers, and particularly of radical sociologists. In all of these activities we, as professionals, are creating, constituting, imagining this reality called the Philippines (Pertierra 1989: 29).*

## **Introduction**

I discuss this paper based on more than four decades of experience in teaching graduate level courses in Philippine Studies at the Asian Center. I identify and examine the various factors and issues that have influenced the thrust and contents of the Philippine Studies program at the Asian Center. Although the success of an academic program depends on many factors like the availability of resources, faculty competence and management processes, these are not mentioned here. Instead, my

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reflections focus on the possibilities and limits of area and multi-disciplinary programs like Philippine Studies, both for theory building and relevant scholarship. I have taken note of the opportunities as well as challenges of engaging traditional or mainstream disciplines; of producing knowledge that combine in the most creative, yet often disquieting manner, the perspectives and methodologies of the fields of history, political science, sociology, anthropology and the other social sciences. In light of current theoretical debates about the politics and culture of knowledge production, I end this short paper with a discussion of the future of Philippine Studies in the Philippines.

### Why Philippine Studies in the UP?

The teaching of Philippine Studies at the graduate level in the University of the Philippines dates back to the mid-fifties with the establishment of the Institute of Asian Studies at the College of Liberal Arts. It was organized, following a directive from President Magsaysay, to provide a “common ground in which to bring together scholars and students in Asia ... for joint endeavors... to preserve and advance their common cultural heritage” (AC Brochure 1968:5). Since the Philippines was seen at that time as a “stranger in Southeast Asia”, the establishment of the Institute, with Philippine Studies as the core area of inquiry, would allow for the training of a “new breed” of Filipino scholars who could bring the country closer to its Asian neighbors. The general objective of the Institute was “to bring the reality of Asia to the Philippines and the Philippines to the rest of Asia” (Ibid:9). Professor Aurora Lim, one of the earliest faculty members recruited into the program noted that the IAS was established “to promote and advance the study of Asia and was one of the corrective measures to balance the heavily western bias of the University curriculum and of its research and professional orientation” (Lim n.d.:1).

A cursory examination of the scanty documents from this period shows that the faculty who joined the IAS on a part-time basis came from

the various departments of the College of Liberal Arts. With graduate training in various disciplines (i.e. history, political science, and literature) from the United States, they jointly undertook research and developed the area courses which, however, bore strong similarities to those offered by the disciplinal departments. It would take many years and countless experiments by the faculty to develop courses that integrated the perspectives and empirical materials coming from the various social sciences.

In 1968, the IAS was reorganized and renamed as the Asian Center through a law (Republic Act 5334) which also declared it a national policy “to develop a closer and broader contact with... Asian neighbors in the field of learning and scholarship to attain knowledge of ... national identity in relation to other Asian nations through profound studies on Asian cultures, histories, social forces and aspirations” (AC 1968:1). The law gave the UP the funds for the building, equipment and facilities for the Asian Center; it mandated that the IAS be absorbed by this new unit and that there would be “ emphasis on Philippine studies.”

The Philippine Studies program was operationalized through the creation of more courses on Philippine society and culture and on Philippine relations with Asian countries. Additionally, the Asian Center published together with the social science departments an annual journal on Philippine society and culture called *Lipunan*; it expanded its library collection of local materials and launched a number of studies on Philippine historical relations with countries like India, China and Japan.

With the declaration of martial law in 1972, the Asian Center was again reorganized, this time to backstop the government in the formulation of foreign policies and national development plans and programs. Through a Presidential Proclamation, the Asian Center became the Philippine Center for Advanced Studies (PCAS) and its programs and facilities were expanded to include an ethnographic museum, a laboratory for the learning of various Asian and Philippine languages and a library that included the subscription of all the major academic journals in Asia.

The curricular programs were strengthened through the opening of a doctoral degree in Philippine Studies and a master of arts degree in Islamic Studies. The M.A. programs in Philippine and Asian Studies of the Asian Center were retained.

The conversion of the Asian Center into a “think tank” of government led to a reconceptualization of the thrust of Philippine Studies. If originally, the program intended to link and locate the Philippines within the culture and history of Asia, this time the intent was to produce scholars that would help “increase the Filipino’s participation in his society and culture within the context of world affairs through greater understanding and appreciation of his role in the development of the Filipino nation” (PCAS Terminal Report, 1979). Concepts like “national development” and “social engineering” guided much of the work of the Center and the teaching agenda of many Philippine Studies faculty throughout the dark years of martial rule. I would like to mention in passing the valiant efforts of faculty members and students who resisted the pressure to convert their classrooms into a propaganda arm of the Marcos government.

The list of curricular offerings during the PCAS period shows a strong bias for courses that examine the various forms and expressions of culture change in the country (i.e. acculturation, development processes, urbanization) and problem-oriented topics. This is understandable inasmuch as the overriding agenda of the program was to bring together the different theories and methods of investigation of the different disciplines to develop a body of knowledge about the roots of underdevelopment and contribute to the building of a “progressive Philippine society” (PCAS Terminal Report 1979: 17). The curricular structure was designed in such a way that the graduates could directly participate, either through service in government or development organizations, in resolving national issues and problems.

When PCAS was finally dissolved in 1979 and the Asian Center reverted to its former status as one of the colleges of the UP, the curricular

programs were retained together with most of the faculty members. To this day there has been very little change in the curricular offerings. However there is the spirited attempt by some of its faculty to infuse the program with new paradigms and perspectives for studying Philippine society and culture.

### **Current Status of the Teaching Program**

The Asian Center continues to offer three graduate degrees in Philippine Studies: (a) the Master of Arts (M.A.); (b) the Master in Philippine Studies (without thesis requirement); and the (c) Ph.D. program. The doctoral program is now jointly managed by three colleges, the Asian Center, the College of Arts and Letters (CAL) and the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy (CSSP).<sup>1</sup> The CSSP offers only the Ph. D. degree whereas the two colleges offer both M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in Philippine Studies. The degree programs at the CSSP and CAL are discipline-based and students have to select their areas of emphasis or concentration from among the various disciplines within their home college (Conaco, n.d.).

As the three colleges came together to set common curricular standards and requirements, they also agreed to adopt the same program objectives which are:

- To study Filipino civilization and its constituent ethnolinguistic cultures;
- To problematize our own distinct identity as Filipinos;
- To acquire a profound, holistic idea about ourselves, as a starting point for knowing other cultures and civilizations (*Report on the Proposed Single Ph. D. Philippine Studies Program, 1992*).

Unlike the two aforementioned colleges, the Asian Center uses the multi-disciplinary area study approach. Students have to choose for their area of specialization among (a) Philippine society and culture, (b)

Philippine external relations; and (c) Philippine bureaucracy. The study of Philippine society and culture can theoretically encompass a wide range of themes or topics, from ethnicity and ethnic relations, to urbanization, religious cultures and even literature and language. Meanwhile, the area of Philippine bureaucracy exposes students to the study of organizational culture, leadership, and comparative bureaucracy. Philippine external relations offers a wide range of topics on the dynamics, cultural, economic and political dimensions of Philippine relations with other countries and international organizations.

*Application of the multi-disciplinary approach.* The curriculum for all the degree programs is structured to provide “(a) training to do quality research, (b) flexibility and breadth of knowledge and intellectual outlook without sacrificing the depth and substance in any chosen major area of study; and (c) continuity in the development of graduate skills” (PSP Brochure, n.d.). The courses vary in content and objectives. Students are first required to pass the core courses. At the Ph.D. level, these consist of subjects that would enable the students to have a firm grasp of issues, theories, perspectives, and methodologies needed to complete the course work and undertake the dissertation research. After the students pass the core courses, they enlist in survey or introductory courses that provide thrusts, breadth and unity to the curricular program. Finally, the students are made to choose from among a wide array of readings and topic or problem- focused courses, depending on the chosen thesis or dissertation topic. Such curricular structure ensures that the students acquire the analytical skills to process empirical material and build theories grounded on Philippine realities.

The application of the multi- and inter-disciplinary integration occurs at four levels: “(a) at the formulation and development of courses, (b) in teaching of these courses, (3) in planning the students’ program of study, and (4) in the selection of the dissertation problem that may serve as focal point of this integrative process” (Report on the proposed single Ph.D, Studies Program, 1992). The Asian Center maintains only a small number of full-time faculty members for Philippine Studies, and allows its students

to take courses in various colleges and choose research topics from a wide variety of theoretical and practical problems and issues. Faculty members from the different disciplines and colleges are invited as thesis and dissertation readers.

*Number and profile of students and graduates.* The Asian Center has graduated a total of 139 Philippine Studies students in the last twenty five years, 68 Ph.D. and 71 M.A. and MPS degree holders. Student enrollment has increased across the years, making it the “biggest single sector of the AC” (Social Science Agenda 2000, Internal Assessment Report). From 1995 to 2000, the average student enrolment was 129 per semester; between 31 to 54 percent of the enrollees were doctoral students. Compared to the enrolment performance of other units, however, the number of AC students has been generally lower, causing cost-recovery, efficiency and sustainability concerns from administration.

Majority of the enrollees are working students. More than half are faculty members and researchers from the University of the Philippines and tertiary schools from the different regions of the country. The rest work for private companies and non-government organizations. Since Philippine external relations is one of the areas of specialization, the program tends to attract middle-level personnel from government particularly the Department of Foreign Affairs. The program also attracts foreign students, particularly Americans, Japanese and Koreans. In terms of geographic distribution, most of the students in the seventies and eighties came from Mindanao and the Visayas. This pattern has changed in recent years with the increase of students residing in Metro-Manila and nearby provinces.

### **Reflections on Program Strengths and Weaknesses**

I started teaching Philippine Studies in 1974 and for the past 27 years I have served as adviser and reader of many thesis and dissertation students. My participation in several multi-disciplinary studies has given me a lot of insights about the possibilities and limits of area studies in

producing knowledge about, for and by Filipinos. Going over the theses and dissertations written by the graduates, I marvel at the richness of empirical data and grounded theories they have produced. The strengths of area studies, in fact, lie in the opportunity given to students to focus on a subject matter, theme or issue, and the availability of theories and data from various disciplines. The other side of this, however, is the difficulty of arriving at a set of standards on which to evaluate the quality of area studies. Some faculty members would sometimes insist on discipline-based conventions of teaching and research. Occasionally, students would also have problems negotiating the competing demands and divergent views of their examiners who come from different academic backgrounds. The other difficulties encountered by students in the program are:

- Inadequate preparation to integrate knowledge, methodologies and approaches coming from different disciplines. The courses and other academic requirements to complete a degree in Philippine Studies are not adequate to hone the skills of many students in inter-disciplinary research. There is a need for additional capacity-building measures to address this issue. Some possible solutions are the development of a mentoring program in multi-disciplinary studies and active participation of students in local and foreign multi-disciplinary conferences.
- Lack of faculty advisers who are open to multi- and inter-disciplinary modes of knowledge production; and
- Prevailing differences among disciplines in their approaches and interpretations of the various theoretical and empirical issues in Philippine Studies. The process of integration must be subjected to more rigorous discussions among scholars since this is mediated by many contentious theoretical issues.

I would like to take note of the fact that different perspectives for doing Philippine Studies have emerged in recent years, strongly influencing the thrusts and directions of teaching and research. These are the

perspectives developed by Filipino scholars (i.e. *pantayong pananaw*, *sikolohiyang Filipino*) that challenge many of the traditional, albeit western modes of knowledge production. But while the students are introduced to these various perspectives, the AC Philippine Studies program also uses western models and theories of society and culture (i.e. critical theory, feminism, class analysis) to explain and understand local conditions and contexts. Courses are taught both in Filipino and English and reading materials are drawn from those written by both foreign and local scholars. More importantly, the program commits to relevant scholarship; it encourages the rereading/deconstruction of colonial and western-oriented texts, critical analyses of social processes and development efforts as well as the production of knowledge about the marginalized groups and sectors in Philippine society.

Current developments in academe augur well for the future of area studies. These include the availability of more faculty members trained in the use of the multi-disciplinal approach and theoretical as well as methodology literature. There are more academic gatherings that presently provide the venue for scholars to cross disciplinary boundaries and collectively discuss a common topic and issue. Most importantly, area studies has shown the capacity to generate knowledge that can directly and indirectly, immediately and in the long run, help solve the many pestering social and political problems of the country and the global community. After all, the University's guiding philosophy is to respond to new challenges in life and fresh forms of knowledge.

### Note

- 1 In 1974, the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) initiated a Ph.D. Philippine Studies program. This was administered separately from the Asian Center program. During the term of UP President Angara, a committee was formed to study the merging of the two Philippine Studies programs (AC-CAS Ad Hoc Committee on Philippine Studies 1982). Before this could happen, the CAS was divided into the College of Arts and Letters (CAL) and the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy (CSSP), and each new college opted to administer their own Philippine Studies program. Following further attempts at unifying the program, there is now a single Ph.D. Philippine Studies program that gives students some leeway to design their program of study according to the unique features of the three participating colleges.

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