

Tulong: An Articulation of Politics in the Christian Philippines. Chuan Yen Soon. Manila: University of Santo Tomas Press, 2015, 275 pp. ISBN 978-971-506-765-2.

This book provides a view of politics from the point of view of local actors and the culturally-meaningful categories they invoke in making sense of agency and constraint in political life. A cursory reading of the book reveals that the author's aim is to contribute toward an assessment of the patron-client framework, which is often invoked in understanding Philippine local politics. The author attempts to accomplish this task by proposing a "bottom-up reading" of the interaction of politicians and constituents in a town in Tanauan, Batangas province (south of Metro Manila). The aim of this type of reading is to bring the stories and viewpoints of ordinary people to a "political history of everyday life experiences" (31).

The author situates the study within the "micro" tradition of research, a methodology that extols the agency of individual respondents. The turn to agency has brought the author to bracket the "politics" as activities of politicians so that experiences of ordinary people are understood (32). The author argues that the narratives of local actors contradict existing literature on Philippine local politics, which ascribe an instrumentalist and functionalist reading of patron-client relations (21). The author's analysis centered on three important dimensions of *tulong* (help): resources, particularly *pera* (money), which is discussed in chapter three; emotions, which is discussed in chapter four; and religion, which is discussed in chapter five.

In chapter three, the author situates *pera* beyond dole outs provided by politicians, and proceeds to unravel local meanings associated with the provision of resources in the context of *tulong*. While *tulong* is equated with the politician's public visibility in official communications, it is mostly

perceived in terms of assistance for ordinary people's everyday concerns. The author argues that, while *pera* has always been instrumentalized, there is the need to see how resources are used in the context of "personal touch," as for *tulong*.

In chapter four, the author appeals to notions of scrutinizing (*pagkilatis*) and debt of gratitude (*utang na loob*) in interrogating the role of emotions in political participation. This is premised on an assertion that, while emotions are personal, they have far-reaching implications in framing participation in social life. In Tanauan local politics, constituents deploy their emotions in assessing the affinity of politicians with their needs and aspirations. The author further argues that this ability to scrutinize politicians is honed by the constituent's life trajectory that is characterized by pain, hardship and difficulties.

In Chapter five, the author suffuses the discussion of help (*tulong*) with religious significance, highlighting the role of religious ideas in the maintenance of worldviews. In this regard, the discussion on sainthood is interesting because it demonstrates how the notion of a *virtuosi* (ascetics and heroes) is deployed by constituents in making sense of politicians' public persona. This basically suggests that political participation in Tanauan is part of the constituents' local moral world (see Kleinman 1994), where religious ideas inform aspirations, platforms, and choices.

In broad strokes the contribution of the author's work on Philippine local politics makes a case for intra-Southeast Asian scholarship, wherein scholars from the region attune their interests to the culture and society of neighboring countries within the region. The author's positionality of being a foreigner (*dayuhan*) and yet a neighbor (*kapitbahay*) afforded him a few methodological privileges. As expected, language issues pose a problem for this mode of research; it is commendable that the author is upfront regarding his linguistic limitations in using Tagalog. This allows readers to situate the author's keenness to utilize Tagalog terminologies in his analysis of local political processes.

The book's contribution is a panoply of Tagalog terminologies that offer a nuanced assessment of Philippine local politics "from below". The choice of these terminologies fits with the author's intention to subject the patron-client framework to scrutiny and transcend an overly instrumentalist reading of the same. In the course of the book, it was explained that meanings associated with the use of terminologies like *tulong*, *pera*, and *utang na loob* betray a dialogical intent that is premised on a moral universe. This is the promise of any cultural reading, and in the case of Philippine local politics, the author's analysis offers renewed interest in the role of agency working through structures that constrain possibilities for action.

While the keenness to employ local terminologies is commendable, the author misses the opportunity to offer a clearer trajectory of an alternative reading of the patron-client framework. This is quite surprising, considering that the book's intent is to revisit debates surrounding patronage politics and offer an alternative view "from below." The book demonstrated that the view of ordinary people differed from the depictions found in existing literature. In responding to this significant finding, it has, however, remained rudimentary in framing a theoretically informed inquiry.

Overall, the "micro" reading of the narratives of local Tanauan constituents has remained at the level of "self-contextualized interpretations" (Glynos & Howarth 2007). The inherent deficiency of resorting to self-contextualized interpretations alone is that the author was unable to frame agents' individual actions as part of a broader class of actors, which is the proper reference point in analyzing social and political *logics* (Glynos and Howarth 2007). This is the reason why there was no critical assessment of who the "ordinary people" are: it seems that the ordinariness of the respondents was assumed rather than problematized. This prevents a discussion of prevailing discourses and counter-discourses in Tanauan politics, which I believe is a potent trajectory toward a reframing of political clientilism and patronage politics.

This limitation notwithstanding, however, the book has reoriented scholarly interest in studying the subjectivities of political actors. I

recommend the book to scholars and other researchers who seek alternative directions in studying Philippine political dynamics. The book is a useful contribution to studies on the cultural “reading” of local politics, southern Tagalog political culture, and agency in politics.

References

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