

Recognizing the Exploited and Marginalized: ASEAN Integration and Critical Education

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The Philippines' hosting of the ASEAN Summit in 2017 was significant because it coincided with the organization's 50th anniversary. That the ASEAN has existed and grown (it only had five members at its founding) for half a century, despite some setbacks such as intermittent tensions mostly arising from conflicting territorial claims, can only mean the viability of regional cooperation in this part of the world.

The move toward further integration in the region has had its share of cynics. To the dismay of those who believe in protectionism and national self-sufficiency, it means the lifting of some of the remaining trade restrictions, and the continued promotion of labor migration. The undue liberalization of trade has also proved detrimental to local manufacturers and workers who have had to deal with the influx of goods and services from other countries, which are generally offered at lower prices. The call for integration has also pressured member states into hastily implementing policies, instead of doing so at their own pace or until the systemic requirements have been put in place. For example, the addition of two more years in the Philippine educational system raises the major repercussions (say, additional tuition costs and the dislodgement of tenured college teachers) and foregrounds perennial concerns such as the shortage of classrooms, school buildings, and teaching personnel. All these and other issues have raised doubts about the readiness of the country's educational system for integration.

On a more positive note, the ASEAN has also served as a platform for dialogue among member states, cognizant that cooperation is a better option than isolationism. Likewise, the organization has been viewed as a buffer against the growing might of China and, as ever, the pantopragmatic machinations of the US. It may also play a crucial role in addressing the menace posed by North Korea, which if not resolved adequately, may plunge the Asia-Pacific, or for that matter, the rest of the world into a major catastrophe. This is because the ASEAN is widely perceived as a better alternative to traditional players, like the US and even China whose motives could invariably be viewed with suspicion, given their checkered reputation as the dominant power wielders in the Asia-Pacific. ASEAN, in this regard, performs a two-fold obligation: one that is intramural, for it introduces organizational policies that help promote the inclusive growth in the region; and another that is outward-looking, ready to take on greater responsibilities beyond its traditional purview in an increasingly globalized world. Even superpowers have accorded it due recognition primarily as a crucial economic partner, and attend the annual ASEAN summits.

Critical Education

The promise of regional integration is too seductive to be ignored. Efforts to incorporate elements of this integration into the educational systems of ASEAN member states are underway. But such an education should offer as much space for dialogue and cooperation as for creative and critical interrogation. But will there be space for critical discourse in an ASEAN-inspired education? If so, how can such critical interventions be compatible with dialogue and integration? What will be the role of the humanities and the social sciences, the traditional foci of critical studies, in a regional organization that seems to operate according to the logic of political economy?

In this day and age of globalization, with regional integrations as one of its geopolitical ramifications, it is imperative that education keep its rightful importance in the proverbial scheme of things. It cannot just be a kind of education that exalts integration but ignores its dire implications for certain segments. It cannot just be a kind of education that, in favor of

international progress and cooperation, would easily jettison the accounts of the region's troubled past. Critical education serves a counterpoint to the more dominant discourse of (supposedly shared) growth and development under the conditions of integration. In other words, it acknowledges integration as an inevitability, but refuses the primacy of economics over humanism. Critical education, in that regard, is ostensibly political and even partisan. It studies and questions our histories, and acknowledges the polyphony of voices quite often pushed to the margins in the name of development.

In what follows, I try to articulate in rather broad strokes the content and strategies of critical education, which could interpose itself into the praxis of regional integration.

Anticolonial Histories

The very provenance of ASEAN member states lends itself to a critical positionality. One cannot speak of the emergence of these states without invoking, in particular, the struggle against centuries of colonialism: Malaysia (which used to include Singapore) and Myanmar against Britain; Indonesia against the Netherlands; Indochina against France; the Philippines against Spain and, later, against the United States. If developing a kind of ASEAN consciousness through education is an essential element of integration, such an endeavor should necessarily include the histories fraught with the challenges posed by Western colonial powers. If problematizing an ASEAN identity under the conditions of integration is in order, then it should also critically take stock of how colonialism shaped—and perchance continues to shape—the peoples and the cultures of the region. One can interrogate, for example, how the natives were represented according to the colonizers' Orientalist optics, which complemented the use of draconian measures to maintain the colonizers' stranglehold on the region for many years. What is suggested, therefore, is the teaching of the ASEAN history and character that should not fail to highlight the (counter)memories of the region's anticolonial past. This should necessarily involve familiarizing ASEAN students with the lives and teachings of great heroes and leaders from the region like José Rizal,

Ho Chi Minh, Sukarno, and Lee Kwan Yew, and see their implications for the present.

Peasant Rebellions

The relative economic progress of Southeast Asian states after colonialism has not eradicated certain features of the region's colonial past. For example, many Southeast Asian societies, with the exception of Singapore, remain largely agricultural. In this regard, peasant or rural studies may still be a source of academic interest, intersecting politics, history, and culture in a region where a big cross section of the population continues to wrest its living from the soil. Inspiration may be drawn from groundbreaking studies on peasant movements—including chiliastic groups—that played no minor role in the region's struggle against colonialism and imperialism, even if they lay outside the acknowledged centers of power and revolutionary activity. Filipino Reynaldo Ileto's *Pasyon at Rebolusyon* illustrates this kind of counterhistoriography that dispenses with historical linearity and the traditional concentration on big events and personages, and instead sheds critical light on popular chiliastic movements whose anticolonial struggles took, as it were, uncanny trajectories. Some of the peasant groups that Ileto cites interwove Biblical readings, local myths, and the gnawing desire for independence in waging their own brand of revolution. Another example is the story of Myanmar's Saya San and his leadership of an anti-British millenarian rebellion in the 1930s, which remains a source of ceaseless fascination among contemporary scholars. Such proud moments, it goes without saying, should have their rightful place in an integrative, but also critical, ASEAN social history.

Narratives of the Marginalized

Given the rapid industrialization within ASEAN member states, critical attention should be paid to workers who serve as the lifeblood of any given society. Add to this the unabated promotion of labor export in the name of globalization. These developments, however, are not without

complications, for many workers do not receive a fair share of the wealth they themselves create; their importance are undervalued in many respects and worse, and their basic rights are violated. Such paradoxes necessitate a critical engagement with these obvious cracks in the metanarrative of progress. If the ASEAN is to foster inclusive growth, more attention ought to be paid to these social cleavages and ‘little stories’ that are often relegated to the margins, among them the stories of abuse and exploitation experienced by workers. I can cite in particular the stories of some Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) who do not only negotiate strong feelings of alienation and longing for home, but also confront abuse in varied forms. These critical articulations should find their way into the curriculum, not really to cast a pall over regional development, but to devote some space to groups and voices often set aside by the credo of progress.

The Role of Critical Education in ASEAN Integration

Because it aims to be relevant, the pedagogy of the 21st century—critical discourse—calls for the fusion of the local and the global. As part of ASEAN integration, 21st-century education should be relentlessly democratizing. It should foreground, raise awareness of, and help rectify the experiences of the marginalized and exploited citizens of ASEAN member states, who have a long, venerable tradition of anticolonial, anti-imperial nationalism, as well as an ongoing struggle against an aggressive neoliberal capitalism. At the same time, this education should view students, learners, and mentors as intellectuals in their own right, who do not just absorb or transmit knowledge, but also unmask their connections to past or current relations of power. Indeed, despite integration, the forbidding language of development should not be allowed to ease out the more humanistic, interactional, and critical aspects of such education.

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