Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality, Democracy, and the Urban Poor. Wataru Kusaka. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017. 341 pages. ISBN: 9789715508988.

There are many studies about political mobilization and democratization in post-authoritarian Philippines that have often painted the country as an exemplar of democratic deepening and popular participation. Over time, this euphoric mood faded as the country's democracy eroded despite its supposedly robust and dynamic civil society. Kusaka's study puts the commitment of the country's middle class and civil society under an ethnographic microscope. Transcending the heavily interest-based academic literature on the subject, he offers a new analytical framework that emphasized the role of moral politics, or a politics between the "good" and "bad."

The book is a culmination of the author's scholarly residence in the Philippines for more than fifteen years. It is thick with narratives from his informants mostly from the urban poor in Metro Manila but he also includes middle-class residents, scholars, and members of civil society. This type of "investment" in time as well as effort to learn Filipino is rarely found in foreign scholars given the relative ease of research access to the country. One can even say that the efforts of local scholars who often hail from the middle and upper classes of Filipino society pale in comparison to Kusaka's meticulous and robust research design that combines ethnography, life history, and other interpretive methods of inquiry often found in outstanding scholarship of urban studies.

The book's central research question delves on the ambiguous democratizing role of the Filipino middle class and by extension, civil society. Kusaka exposes a quandary that was already being probed by Filipino scholars particularly in the aftermath of the country's "lost decade of democracy" from 2001 to 2010. During this highly contentious and

polarizing episode, the country witnessed two popular upheavals, undue military intervention in politics, and institutional crises. My own research on civil society coups and polarization was simultaneous with the author's study of urban politics in Metro Manila. Moving away from the naïve interpretation of civil society as a ballast for Philippine democracy, *Moral Politics* argues that the contingent commitment of political elites, the middle class, and civil society toward democracy must be viewed in the lens of either moral unity or antagonism within what he called the civic sphere, the mass sphere, and the frontier between them. Major episodes of political mobilization in the country like "people power" revolts are moments of moral unity through a coalition of the members of the civic and mass spheres united by their antagonism over immoral politicians.

Apart from the introduction, the book has seven chapters that combine theoretical discussions with rich data gathered for over a decade of ethnography in urban Metro Manila as the locus of moral politics, whether in the slums of Quezon City or downtown middle-class neighborhoods. The empirical backbone of the book are the three chapters that flesh out the moral antagonism between the civic and mass spheres of Metro Manila in three thematic areas: people power, elections, and urban governance. Rich in personal narratives and iterative interviews conducted over time, Kusaka unveils the sentiments, opinions, and logic of the urban poor that may surprise the reader who conventionally believes in the stereotypical descriptions of the Filipino masses. The book's findings are less informative to serious scholars of Philippine studies who engage in either rigorous fieldwork or grounded studies traversing everyday politics in the country. However, Kusaka's deep dive into the intricacies of class-based antagonism over the perennial questions of inequality, democracy, and political justice remains relevant in today's iteration of Philippine politics. The author himself recognized this in the book's addendum that discusses Duterte's 2016 electoral victory as president and how it potentially unleashed a new cycle of morally antagonistic politics. There is little doubt that Kusaka's

study portends the bone of political contention in current Philippine politics. Duterte's moral crusade against illegal drugs, terrorism, communism, and liberal democracy permeates both the country's civic and mass spheres.

While the study sought to explain the ambiguity of the Filipino middle class and civil society, the book ended as a probe into the personal narratives of the country's urban poor. Kusaka seemed to confound analytically distinct concepts in political science such as civil society, social movements, middle class, elites, rich, and poor. The reader, particularly with a more social science persuasion, will not get the neat delineations often found in empirical studies. If the book's central inquiry is about the middle class, it did not reconcile this with its empirical data. From a theoretical point of view, the Gramscian perspective of treating civil society as an arena of class conflict was the appropriate choice, but is unoriginal given previous studies such as Hedman's *In the Name of Civil Society* (2005) that actually discusses middle class-based civil society in the Philippines. Kusaka contended that Tocqueville's civil society has not been helpful in understanding of the poor's relationship with Philippine democracy as intermediated by civil society organizations. But between Tocqueville and Gramsci lie other theoretical perspectives on civil society that the author fails to discuss. His treatment of Mouffe's antagonistic democracy also was disjointed and did not integrate it with Gramsci. Finally, the book's research design does not offer a robust validation of its arguments. The choice of the three thematic areas focuses on moral antagonistic relations, but fails to specify whether they are expressions of moral nationalism, civic inclusivism, civic exclusivism, or populism. Kusaka's discussion of populism is also heavily simplistic despite the extant academic literature on this subject. The populist leader as a moral entrepreneur goes beyond the simple anti-rich antagonism especially give the recent rise of right-wing populism.

Despite these notes, Kusaka's rich study about the urban poor in Metro Manila is the standard for empirics in Philippine social science. While scholars might not have the time, resources, and tolerance to conduct

a decade of ethnography, they can adopt some of his reflectivist leanings, a sensitive and ethical treatment of research subjects, and a commitment that does not necessarily treat research with a cold balance sheet. Research is always for someone and for some purpose.

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