

Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality, democracy and the urban poor, by Wataru Kusaka, Singapore, NUS Press in association with Kyoto University Press, 2017, 358 pages, 44 SGD, Casebound - 978-981-4722-38-4, Paperback – 978-4-8140-0066-1

Reviewed by: Redento B. Recio, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning (Informal Urbanism Research Hub), The University of Melbourne, Australia

In February 1986, the world witnessed how Filipinos from various sectors toppled the dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr. through peaceful demonstrations. The Philippines suddenly became an international darling of democracy, inspiring some social movements elsewhere in their struggle against authoritarianism. A decade and a half later, in 2001 the Filipino middle-class ousted the populist president Joseph Estrada after a series of political rallies on the same street where the 1986 protests took place – Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA). Yet, three months after, another mass of people - mostly urban poor - congregated on EDSA demanding the re-installment of the deposed Estrada. These events came to be called as ‘EDSA People Power’ revolts. As EDSA3 was taking place, the statement below circulated as a text message:

EDSA 1: free the nation from a dictator. EDSA 2: free the nation from a thief. EDSA 3: free lunch, dinner, breakfast and snacks too... let’s go. (p. 109)

This sarcastic note captures the dominant EDSA narrative among the Filipino middle-class. It reflects a loaded judgment on political acts in a highly unequal Philippine society. Why is this so? Why has the erstwhile darling of democracy seemed to have fragmented so fast? What accounts for the deeply dismissive view of EDSA3? Kusaka’s book – *Moral Politics in the Philippines* - addresses these questions and other issues engulfing the Philippines since the historic EDSA1 uprising.

In Chapter 1, Kusaka introduces the idea of ‘hegemonic struggles in the dual spheres’ as an analytical framework, which draws on Mouffe’s (2005) agonism, in examining the antagonistic relations emerging from the disparate visions of change in a class-divided society. In a schema reminiscent of Chatterjee’s (2004) ‘civil society-political society’ divide, Kusaka dichotomizes the Philippine living environment and discourse spaces into a ‘civic sphere’ for the middle-class and a ‘mass sphere’ for the impoverished people. He employs the notion of ‘contact zone’ as the space where the two spheres meet, and diverse discourses converge. The dual spheres are a terrain for moral politics – a politics that inscribes groups as either ‘good’ or ‘evil’. The moralization of politics, Kusaka argues, undermines democracy due to the antagonistic ‘we/they’ relations and the depolitization of acute inequality arising from the ‘moral nationalism’ rhetoric.

Kusaka traces in Chapter 2 the acrimonious rift to class disparities in language, media, and living atmosphere, which began in the colonial period and have persisted through the post-colonial and neo-liberal Philippines. He examines how the ‘we/they’ relations manifest in post-Marcos socio-political issues, explaining how and why moral antagonisms are embedded in the EDSA2 and EDSA3 protests (Chapter 3), electoral politics (Chapter 4), and urban governance (Chapter 5). In linking these issues to moral politics, Kusaka’s analysis is sharp when discussing the middle-class biases against ‘populism’, and when locating the urban poor politics in structural and micro socio-spatial relations. His take on populism departs from the usual cynical outlook, contending that it embodies a counter-discourse on an antagonistic relationship between the oppressed masses and the rich. “The ‘masses’ constructed by populism must be acknowledged as a subject... that often exceeds the [populists’] intentions or control in the desire for transformation of the stratified socio-economic structure” (p. 94). By stressing that poor people are not passive political actors, he lends a voice to poor people’s ability to situate their daily struggles in the broader power asymmetries. This gains expression in Kusaka’s referencing of the urban poor’s logic for their EDSA3 involvement:

Politicians dropped by EDSA3 because elections were coming up. But we poor people knew why we were there. It was to change the system under which they taxed us and made us suffer at the hands of the police and the army. Our dream of having our own homes had disappeared. When we poor folks felt so angry we couldn't stand it, we banded together and stormed the Malacañang [Presidential] Palace. (p. 117)

This attention to poor people's views and lives makes the book relevant for urban planning and geography scholars studying informality and governance issues in the global South. Kusaka's 'moral politics' prism shows how structural inequities are treated as a question of culture and a spatial issue for everyday governance. The middle-class biases against informal settlements and work spaces – described as “lawless, dangerous places, hotbeds of depravity and corruption” (p. 167) - illustrate that urban revanchist aspirations need not stem from hostile state actors. His discussion on the dilemma between the morality of 'livelihoods and dignity' and the enforcement of 'law and discipline' echoes how conflicting rationalities (Watson, 2003), when situated in a profoundly moralized socio-political environment, can entrench class antagonisms and impair democratic ethos.

Kusaka's analysis in Chapter 7 of how capitalism intensifies moral frictions captures the paradox between neoliberalism and urban informality. On the one hand, the neoliberal policies promote minimal state role in providing the needed services and livelihood opportunities, thereby valorizing the entrepreneurial ingenuity of poor people through self-help (informal) livelihoods. On the other hand, the neoliberal-inspired 'world-class city' narrative often banishes informal employment like street trading, seen as blight and backward, from public spaces. In the scramble for urban spaces, capitalism elevates property rights as a central concern and relegates other rights to a secondary status (Harvey, 2008). As shown in Kusaka's scrutiny of street vending and informal settlement issues, these secondary rights involve the urban poor's right to work and adequate housing in coveted spaces. The book ends in Chapter 7 with an optimistic musing, charting some ways to overcome the dual spheres. Kusaka draws on how Filipino middle-class students and working entertainers in Japan surmounted class antagonism. He cites their ability to exercise an 'ethics of care' and a 'compassion for the vulnerabilities of life' (p. 258) as a basis for mutuality.

I will now turn to the book's insights that require some analytical rigour. First, Kusaka is less convincing when making correlations between key historical junctures like electoral outcomes and the populism-civic exclusivism divide (Chapter 6). National political events result from the interplay of structural relations and agential expressions; they cannot be understood by reducing the complex elements to a hazy dichotomy, which contains ambiguities and interfaces between the constructed categories. For instance, in his effort to paint the outcomes of EDSA1 uprising and the 2010 elections as rare occasions for 'moral solidarity', Kusaka ignores how the years of social movements' grassroots organizing and public protests might have contributed to conditions leading to these political moments.

A second concern pertains to the players in grassroots politics. Although Kusaka provides an empirically-rich account of the urban poor's varied forms of agency, the analysis fails to consider other key actors in urban poor politics. There is inadequate discussion on the role of grassroots intermediaries/leaders in reinforcing and/or transcending the dual spheres. This analytical oversight is critical since grassroots leaders are often part of the in/formal networks of urban poor and street traders in the Philippines (Recio, et al., 2017). Moreover, as Kusaka embarks on uncovering the role of the 'ordinary people' in the moralization of class politics, he overlooks how the organized forces shape moral politics in informal settlements and vending spaces. To illustrate, the urban poor organization Philippine Movement Against Poverty – an organization known to be politically affiliated with the ousted Joseph Estrada - got heavily involved in mobilizing the urban poor for EDSA3. Yet, Kusaka merely mentioned the group without examining the 'moral' logic it deployed in reaching out to Metro Manila's urban poor communities.

Third, at a time when the ‘Southern turn’ in urban studies (Rao, 2006) urges scholars to go beyond the Euro-American models in examining the urban global South issues, Kusaka could have expounded on how his conceptual underpinning – agonism, a lens rooted in Western realities – resonate with indigenous epistemic discourses on Filipino socio-cultural practices. Although he cites studies by Filipino and foreign thinkers, Kusaka has not fully engaged with writings that examine Filipino cultural patterns and societal values. The *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* or SP (Filipino Psychology) literature (Enriquez, 1978), for instance, has rich scholarly accounts of values like *kapwa* (shared identity) and *dignidad* (honor), which were alluded to in the book but not adequately problematized. The SP scholarship could have provided that ‘South’ epistemic grounding, offering conceptual insights into the moralist ‘othering’ in Kusaka’s dual spheres schema.

So, what can urban planning scholars glean from the book? I will touch on several issues. Let me start with Kusaka’s attention to the ‘good-bad’ and ‘we-they’ divide, which shows how planning process is usually stacked against the urban poor. The book’s narrative of the stigma against informal settlers and street vendors – often viewed as ‘eyesores’, ‘undeserving poor’, ‘street anarchists’ (p. 168) – unveils how a labelling technique negates the legitimacy of their demand for access to urban space. Labelling becomes an element of moral politics, which consigns the urban poor’s rights as narrow and disruptive of the ‘public good’. It reveals how the qualities of citizenship and the cost of participation in planning can be enormously taxing for the marginalized urban poor when labelling entrenches the divisive moralist politics. The cost of participation affects people’s attitude towards political activity (Inch, 2015). This is seen in the book’s depiction of how the vendors stopped attending public protests and negotiations after spending considerable time away from work and failing to secure favorable outcome. While understandable, the unsustainable involvement in democratic engagement indicates how the expectation to have positive result impels them to resort to clientelist ties or the *lagayan* system as state engagement channels. Thus, the imperatives of participation in planning echo the need to strengthen the civil component of democracy (Caldeira & Holston, 1999) in many global South cities. This civil component represents the mechanisms that enable the urban poor to exercise their rights, enhance their capacity to form associations, and engage in urban governance processes.

Strengthening the civil component of democracy raises the question on how Kusaka’s favoured agonistic framework can institutionalize a democratic and inclusive planning process in a moralist political environment. This is crucial because while Mouffe’s agonism stresses disagreement as key elements of democratic practice, it overlooks the institutionalization of democratic ethos (Inch, 2015), which can serve as the “medium in which general purposes become crystallized and enacted” (Norval, 2007, p. 55). The need to engage in planning process, which can be tough for marginalized groups, also draws attention to how the urban poor and the middle-class might not easily fit the (agonistic) role demanded by Kusaka’s agonistic prism.

The previous point relates to another planning issue - the capacity of informal traders to become ‘political’ by creating invented engagement spaces to occupy strategic city locations. Kusaka’s *lagayan* (bribery) system – a scheme of gaining tacit state approval of informal livelihoods through bribery - might constitute an invented engagement space in which vendors slip through backdoor channels to encroach upon streetscapes. While many Filipinos see *lagayan* as a bribery transaction, Kusaka refuses to associate it with clientelism, asserting that *lagayan* has oppositional character because it enables the poor to defy social order and appropriate contested spaces. This contention resonates with insurgent citizenship, which begins with the everyday struggle for the right to have a life in the city worthy of a citizen’s dignity (Holston, 2009). The invented engagement space and the quest for citizenship may indeed be inegalitarian, parochial, and ‘uncivil’, leading to fractured urbanity in which citizens interact differentially with state authorities to claim (the rights of/to) urban citizenship (Hammett, 2017). In

other words, although *lagayan* enables the informal traders to persist in an exclusionary urban space, it reveals how moral politics intersects with uneven experiences of urban citizenship and rights.

A final insight pertains to the role of emotions in governing urban space. Emotions shape our understanding of space and society; they are embedded in relations and structures of power (Sandberg & Rönnblom, 2016). Thus, privileging the emotive reactions of some while silencing others constitutes an exclusionary engagement and generates a partial understanding of realities. This is seen in how the book presented Bayani Fernando's (former Metropolitan Manila Development Authority head) reason for ignoring the poor people's plea. He contends, "It gives me a heavy heart to do things that offend some [poor] people. But being a public official, I cannot cry with them. Because if I cry, my eyes will be blind, and who else will guide them?" (p. 172). This reveals how some feelings are muffled and delegitimized, demonstrating how power relations operate in the (mis)articulation and (un)reading of emotions. Inevitably, the informal vendors take pride in the opportunity to yell "Hayop Kayo!" (You Beasts!) at state officials during public protests. As Kusaka notes, while protests serve as an occasion for the urban poor to soothe 'their wounded dignity', they also teach them about the workings of society. Can a planning process accommodate and respond to conflicting emotions? How can a planning process engage the sentiments of the middle-class and the urban poor in unpacking what produces informality and impoverishment in cities? The book implicitly asks these questions as it unmasks how moral politics inhabits the many facets of urban governance.

On whole, despite the need for analytical nuancing of some arguments, Kusaka's book offers empirical and conceptual insights that unsettle the conventional reading of inequality, democracy, and poor people's responses to evolving socio-political conditions in the Philippines and other global South nations.

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Author/s:

Recio, RB

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