

Philippines - Frying in their Own Oil: Capital, Nature and Mindanao

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The Filipinos have a saying, “*gimsa sa sariling mantika*” – frying in your own oil. They use this phrase to describe how their natural resources are being used against them, in other words, to their sense of alienation from their environment; much like what Marx was getting at when he used the terms *entäussern* (to alienate) or *entfremden* (to estrange) in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844, the Filipinos of Mindanao, whether they be Christian settler, Bangsamoro, Lumad or Subanean, are experiencing a fundamental rift in their relationship to nature due to the productive relations which pervade across the island, i.e. those of the capitalist market.

The demand in Mindanao is not for oil, in fact, but for minerals (the mining of gold, nickel and copper is omnipresent) and for vast swathes of agricultural lands for logging (forests are said to be disappearing at around 2% per year, that’s 550,000 ha!), and plantations (one third of land in Mindanao is dedicated to agricultural production, e.g. rubber, pineapple, banana, coffee, corn, coconut, the new biofuel crop jatropha, or the new ‘flexi-crop’ palm oil) – helped along, as these markets are, by an export-driven logic that has been institutionalised since the neoliberal SAPs (Structural Adjustment Programs) of the 1990s.

These practices – both mining and farming – are, of course, leading to the over-exploitation of the natural environment (excessive extraction, use of petrochemicals, pollution of water sources, destruction of habitats, carbon emissions, etc.), as well as the dominance of local labour practices by monopoly capital in the form of multinational corporations, such as Monsanto, Cargill, Del Monte (its difficult to trace mining companies!), with all the usual exploitative relations therein – GMO seeds, debt, low pay, poor conditions, etc...

What are comrades doing to counteract the expansion of the exploitative and ecocidal tendencies of capital? They’re attacking what Marx saw as the core problem in our alienation from production, from each other and from nature – the institution of private property! How? Through the practice and advocacy of food sovereignty, organic farming and land reform!

While in the Philippines, I was escorted by a well-organised team of dedicated comrades from the Revolutionary Workers’ Party of Mindanao (RPM-M), who, in their hospitality and openness, led me from location to location in order to learn about the party’s strategic approach to the invasion of global capital. Via a complex network of NGOs, urban partisans, rural guerrilla forces and general cadres, the RPM-M have managed to build and coordinate a complex programme of food sovereignty, organic farming and land reform, as well as units responsive to the natural disasters (typhoons, monsoons, etc.) that plague the Philippines, such as Flood Sendong last December (where logging practices decimated a whole city!), and which are themselves a result of the industrial economies that dominate this planet.

Thus, I was given an education on organic farming and food sovereignty in Zamboanga Del Sur, where I learnt about how to make vermi tea from African Night crawlers (email me for the recipe!); what goes into the creation of organic fertilizers and pesticides (vermi compost, the nitrogenous leaves of madre de cacao, the phosphorous and potassium rich Kakawati plant, etc.); the effects of

the changing climate on rain-fed farming (irrigation is not wide-spread); how capitalism and climate change, the title of a presentation I gave to local (mainly female!) farmers, adversely affects women in particular; and the collection of indigenous rice seed, an important practice in itself; taken together, these measures can counteract the monopolising tendencies of global capital that lock small-scale farmers into production by way of GMO seeds, accompanying petrochemicals and the resulting control of the market. Not only that, but food sovereignty, significantly different from the more liberal term of “food security”, is giving the producers back the autonomy over production; that is, we have an ecosocialist model where production is organised by the workers on an agro-ecological basis. For it to be truly ecosocialist, however, there must be security of tenure, i.e. these initiatives must be accompanied by land reform and common ownership of the land itself, which is what the RPM-M are attempting to do!

Besides Zamboanga de Sur, my visit to Lanao Del Norte, first to meet the Fisherfolk communities and then to digest the flood damage of Iligan City, was also a case in point. The Fisherfolk, for example, put forward the argument for aquatic reform – the practices of dynamite and cyanide fishing are destroying the coral and fish stocks off the coast of Mindanao, and so in order to protect the coastal regions Fisherfolk organisations are acting as conservationists, propagating mangroves in an attempt to maintain the coastal habitat and to provide a buffer against the waste that slowly slithers down from the mining operations in the mountains. Conversely, when I got to Iligan, the problems were much more urban-centric and much more devastating! Flood Sendong hit Iligan City back in December; the waters may have subsided, but the relics and hangovers of destruction remain – the crumbling bridge, smashed by the unshipped logs of the logging companies; the “temporary” evacuation centres which have been rounded up into one big camp ironically known as “Siao’s Shelter Box” (SSB) due to the donation of the land by a local politician named Siao and the conditions under which people endure; there’s the snail-paced re-housing of those hit hardest by the flood; and, ultimately, an absence of the funding promised by the Department of Social Welfare (SWD) to put people back on their feet.

But then, even with the 5,000 death toll, the outbreak of Leptospirosis, and the lack of infrastructure and security, the Filipino spirit, as ever, was not dampened by the flood waters and a strength of mind remains. My experience at MSU-ITT was testament to this. I was invited to give a lecture on “Climate and Capitalism” to a group of academics and their students as part of a forum on “Global Ecological Crisis and Proposed Alternatives” and, besides some disagreement over the REDD+ programmes of the UN, the idea of ecosocialism and what this meant was surprisingly well received; it seems that those who are hardest hit by the events of climate change are the most open to “proposed alternatives”. How ironic.

I have much more to say, but the space available here is limited, and so, with a nod to the Lumad in Cotabato and their struggle for Ancestral Domain with both the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and Government forces, a tilt of my new Maoist hat (donated by the Secretary of PALEA) to the Asian Global Justice School and a well-received lecture on Marx and Ecology in Manila, and a wave of the hand to the friends and comrades I met during my 5 weeks, I finish with one last statement: “*Mabuhay ang mga manggagawa!*” – Long live the workers!

Jamie Moloney reports from the Philippines

P.S.

* <http://socialistresistance.org/3820/frying-in-their-own-oil-capital-nature-and-mindanao>