

Philippines: The war on reason - Duterte, symbols, and the spectacle of killing

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“The fist is the synthesis of our theory.” That statement, made sometime in 1920, belongs to a militant follower of Il Duce, Benito Mussolini, the leader of Italian fascism. But, it could have been uttered just as proudly by an ardent DDS (Diehard Duterte Supporter) while executing the fist salute made famous by President Du30. What it signifies is the primacy of symbols over ideas, of sensual experience over reasoned debate, and of sentiment over reason.

The writer Walter Benjamin observed that fascism marked not just the rise of strongmen but also the transformation of Europe’s politics into aesthetics. And, the ultimate aesthetic experience during that period was war. In Mr. Duterte’s time, the ultimate sensual experience has to be the slaughter of human beings in the name of the war on drugs.

There is no way one can reason against the spectacle of killing. It is simply there, a banal reality of our times. Whether the appropriate term is EJK (extrajudicial killing) or DUI (death under investigation) is no longer important. The government has gone past the debate on whether capital punishment should be restored or not. The killings have happened, and continue to happen, in vague retribution for some collective wrong. What’s important, we are told, is that something is being done at last about criminality.

Of course, the government insists there is no official policy to kill. Policies, after all, are subject to debate. Law enforcers do not debate whether they should kill or not. Killing, for them, is part of the reality of law enforcement, something that happens in the course of their daily work—a matter of self-defense, not of policy.

The killing of innocent bystanders as a result of police operations is likewise not a matter of policy. The correct label, we are told, is “collateral damage,” a blanket term that connotes a regrettable but excusable outcome. Nor can it be said that the government approves or tolerates the killing of drug suspects by unidentified gunmen. The appropriate authorities are supposedly investigating these deaths, even if finding the killers seems to be really low in their priorities.

But, what is perhaps most astonishing to the liberal sensibility is that the Filipino public’s response to these killings has generally been one of awe, rather than of outrage. That is what sets them apart from other forms of murder, and even from the classic cases of extrajudicial killings. In the latter, the public typically calls for justice in the name of the victims. In the case of the drug killings, the call for justice, if there is any at all, is drowned out by an expressed readiness to believe that these executions are in fact a form of justice. The reasoning is that drug users and pushers destroy many lives, including their own. Therefore, they don’t deserve to live.

It is important to understand the public predisposition that is being mobilized in support of these killings. For, here, I think, lies the key to deciphering Mr. Duterte’s sustained popular appeal. It is a popularity that appears to be impermeable to any kind of objective reasoning because its wellsprings

are basically emotional rather than rational. What I call Dutertismo draws from a deep aquifer of generalized public anger that is fed by chronic feelings of demoralization and powerlessness. Using the semantics of killing as its principal medium, Dutertismo communicates an unbending will to destroy with finality the enemies of the nation, whoever and wherever they may be.

This wasn't at all obvious in the beginning, when Mr. Duterte was campaigning for the presidency. But a careful review of his speeches during the campaign would reveal, even then, a remarkable thematic preoccupation with the idea of killing. In one of the presidential debates, he asserted: "Anyone who is afraid to kill or be killed does not deserve to be president." Many thought he was using hyperbolic language just to get the audience's attention. Little did they realize he meant it literally.

The power to take a human being's life has thus become the ultimate signifier for Mr. Duterte's strongman rule. Everything else he does pales in comparison — whether it is the outright dismissal of a corrupt government official, or the crushing of a business group, or the destruction of an entire city to flush out the enemy. In wielding this power, Mr. Duterte has been able to command terror more than respect, awe more than trust, and subservience more than support.

There is a speaking style that is typical for this form of leadership. In Hitler and Mussolini, it took the form of the extensive use of rhythm and cadence, and the repetition of emotionally laden words. George Mosse, who studied Hitler's speeches, described them as "logically constructed, but the inner logic was disguised by the rhythm and activity of the voice. The audience thus experienced the logic in the speeches emotionally; they felt only the militancy and the faith, without grasping the real content or reflecting on its meaning."

We find little of that in Mr. Duterte's oral communication. More like streams of consciousness than methodically crafted messages, his long and meandering public speeches do not draw from existing models of powerful oratory. He is no Winston Churchill or Fidel Castro, or Claro M. Recto, but he's a tireless storyteller. People listen to him as he weaves oral tapestries of gossipy references and allusions to people and events that he then embroiders with invectives, profanities, and curses. Various audiences hang on to his every word, not for the meaning but for the shock and awe, and the dark humor behind the words. It is an odd gift.

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P.S.

* «The war on reason». Philippine Daily Inquirer / 05:10 AM January 07, 2018:
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