

# Philippines: Iletto's Pasyon and Revolution revisited

Sunday 1 August 2021, by [SCALICE Joseph](#) (Date first published: 9 September 2018).

**As an undergraduate student at UC Berkeley in the early aughts, I was, like most scholars of Philippine history, deeply inspired by Reynaldo Iletto's classic 1979 work, *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910*. In my first semester as a freshman, I wrote a research paper on the life of Macario Sakay, drawing heavily from Iletto's ideas and material.**

*Pasyon and Revolution* was a work to which I returned repeatedly, but each re-reading left me with a growing sense of unease. Something did not gel. Iletto's question — how did the masses' perceive the Philippine revolution against Spain and their place within it? — resonated profoundly with me. And yet, my lingering awareness that something about his answer was not right expanded. ☹

In late 2004, I first wrote down some stray notes expressing this unease —

This work left me feeling unsettled and critical.

A sentence in Iletto's concluding paragraph [to an article of Iletto's, "Rizal and the Underside of Philippine History"] clarified for me the unease that I had felt throughout the article: "These leaders [Lantayug, et. al.] have, until recently at least, always belonged to the 'dark underside' of the struggle for independence dominated by such ilustrado notables as Quezon, Roxas and Osmena." It seems clear to me that the division between an ilustrado led resistance and a 'dark underside' is a false dichotomy.

There are a multitude of underside resistances, many of them with a very different self-concept from the one put forward by Iletto. It would appear that in attempting to 'retrieve' history from below, Iletto has manufactured a monolith: a Filipino 'underclass' that conceives of power and loób in terms that sound remarkably like those used by Benedict Anderson in his "Idea of Power in Javanese Culture."

Where in this underside would Iletto fit the Union Obrera Democratica, the first Filipino labor movement, which was forming at this time, was composed entirely of working class Filipinos and whose perceptions were sharply different from that of Iletto's underclass? Where to put Isabelo de los Reyes' and Gregorio Aglipay's Iglesia Filipina Independiente? Do Macario Sakay and the Republika ng Katagalugan really fit Iletto's description?

It would involve an extensive investigation of sources, but it seems likely that Iletto's 'underside to Philippine history' was actually a minority of lower class resistance movements.

This brings me to a second objection: underside? Lower class? Iletto's article really has no definition of class. What groups constitute the subject of his investigation? It would

seem that Iletto has merely taken the ilustrado concept of 'pobres y ignorantes' as his starting point and has attempted to listen to this ilustrado defined group and to recover their voice. It seems doubtful that the Philippine peasantry and incipient working class defined themselves in these terms.

An investigation that started by examining the historical relations of production and exploitation might have given much needed definition to Iletto's concept of 'underside.'

I also posed the question —

Both Iletto and Vicente Rafael have explored the way that Latin and Spanish words like *ego sum*, *Verbo*, *potencia*, *Espiritu*, and *Personas* can become reified and take on bizarre, unintended meanings through colonial pretensions of untranslatability and 'underside' reappropriation. Is it not odd then that Iletto should do something similar with *loób*, *kapangyarihan*, and *liwanag*? Does this not open the door for bizarre and unintended meanings through academic pretensions of untranslatability and scholastic reappropriation?

I did not turn my attention to these questions until I began work on my Master's thesis at Berkeley in late 2007. I determined that I would undertake a careful re-examination of Iletto's work and attempt to conduct my proposed "extensive investigation of sources." I went back over my old notes and posted them, in November 2007, on an older blog that I maintained at the time, under the title *Notes on Iletto's "Rizal and the Underside of Philippine History."* While the site no longer exists, the Waybackmachine maintains [a copy](#) from December 2007.

In 2008, Iletto responded to my post and, while the website containing the response is now lost to the sands of time, Von Totanes in a chapter published in 2011 documented the exchange.

In December 2009, I completed my masters thesis, "Pasyon, Awit, Legend: Reynaldo Iletto's *Pasyon and Revolution* Revisited, a critique."

The work attempted to do two things: to document what I considered the marked limitations of Iletto's answer to his critical question, and to formulate an alternative methodology to answer it adequately.

I presented my findings on June 18, 2010 before a conference hosted by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore, *Engaging the Classics in Malay and Southeast Asian Studies Conference*. Over the course of the conference, Bomen Guillermo and I spoke extensively, and discovered that we were addressing ourselves to similar issues in regard to translation in Iletto's work. Guillermo's ideas were published in *Philippine Studies* in 2014.

Guillermo carried out a sustained and careful examination of Iletto's nontranslation of *loób* in his work and the implications of this for the plausibility of Iletto's argument. In a footnote to Guillermo noted, "Indeed, although Scalice has devoted much more time developing a critical Marxist perspective on Iletto's work, I have been surprised by our convergence of views independently arrived at while using quite different tools." I can only express a similar feeling of pleasant surprise at this marked convergence.

My attention, however, turned to my doctoral dissertation on the Communist Parties of the Philippines in the 1960s and early 1970s. My thesis on Iletto gathered dust for several years.

In 2017, having completed my dissertation, I revisited the old project, rewriting my thesis into two articles, effectively reworking and separating its two aspects — criticism and alternative

methodology. These parts were published in 2018 as "[Reynaldo Ileto's Pasyon and Revolution Revisited, a Critique](#)," *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 33, no. 1 (2018): 29-58, and "[Pamitinan and Tapusi: Using the Carpio Legend to Reconstruct Lower-Class Consciousness in the Late Spanish Philippines](#)," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 2, no. June (2018): 250-76.

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**Joseph Scalice**

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**P.S.**

Joseph Scalice

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