

How the Left Organized the Filipino Diaspora

Review of *Insurgent Communities: How Protests Create a Filipino Diaspora* by Sharon M. Quinsaat (University of Chicago Press, 2024)

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Over 10 percent of the population of the Philippines works overseas, sending back remittances that are crucial to the country's economy. A new book outlines how the Left won this demographic — only to soon lose it.

When people move abroad and settle in other countries, they don't automatically form a diaspora. Rather, a diaspora is shaped through political activity and mobilization, Sharon M. Quinsaat, associate professor of sociology at Grinnell College, argues in her [book](#) *Insurgent Communities: How Protests Create a Filipino Diaspora*.

For several reasons, Filipino migrants offer an interesting case. Not only is the Filipino migrant population, more than ten million spread over more than two hundred countries and territories abroad, one of the largest of any nation. Labor migration is a key aspect of the state's economic policy. And although political persecution drove part of the Filipino diaspora out of the country, most of all during the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos between 1972 and 1986, it is not the result of ethnic or religious persecution, the "classical" causes of diaspora populations.

Both [Bongbong Marcos](#), the current Philippine president, and the son of the former dictator, and his predecessor, [Rodrigo Duterte](#), played important roles in whitewashing the legacy of Ferdinand Marcos, who in 2016 was buried with military honors in the national cemetery. The Filipino diaspora was once an important source of resistance against the dictatorship, which successive conservative governments have sought to rehabilitate. Today large parts of the diaspora support right-wing leaders like Duterte and Bongbong Marcos. This shift has not happened in isolation. It is, Quinsaat shows, the result of transformations in global politics and capitalism.

Colonial and Neocolonial Patterns

Colonialism "predisposed the Philippines to become a migrant-sending nation," Quinsaat writes. Migration began during the Spanish colonization of the archipelago, but by the late nineteenth century, Spain was the country of destination for only a small but influential group of Filipinos who were either trying to avoid persecution by the colonial authorities or looking to further their education.

The initially rather modest demands for liberal reforms by such so-called *Ilustrados*, educated and wealthy Filipinos, inevitably clashed with the uncompromising attitude of the colonial authorities — an incipient nationalism fused with popular discontent following the breaking out of the Philippine Revolution in 1896. Two years later, the United States declared war on Spain and the newly rising power took control of the Philippines, marking a new colonial era and the "real beginnings of Filipino emigration."

American colonial policy marked Filipinos as “US nationals,” denying them political rights while allowing them freedom of movement within US borders. In the early twentieth century, the US government began recruiting Filipinos for work on naval bases. Large numbers began working in plantations on Hawai’i as well as on the US West Coast. Many of the latter were seasonal workers, traveling between plantations and farms, taking on jobs as bellmen, cooks, dishwashers, and janitors during the winter. One of them, [Carlos Bulosan](#), drew on his own experiences and those of Filipino workers around him in writing the classic working-class novel *America Is in the Heart*.

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In 1946, the United States officially declared the Philippines independent. But treaties that linked Philippine economic policies to those of its former colonizer by offering preferential treatment to American business tied the two countries together. The US Navy also continued to recruit Filipinos, many of them eventually obtaining US citizenship and bringing over their families. Among pioneers of modern Filipino labor emigration were nurses who, trained according to US standards, were able to work abroad.

As a large and long-established community, Filipinos in the United States are an obvious group to discuss in a study of the Filipino diaspora. Quinsaat compares their case with another, less well known, group: Filipinos in the Netherlands. Starting in the ’60s and ’70s, a small number of women workers arrived in the Netherlands, first taking up jobs as nurses and later in the textile industry.

A widespread proficiency in English, a legacy of US colonialism and the education system it had set up, facilitated such migration but it was the Philippines neocolonial position in world capitalism that really made the country into an exporter of labor power. In 1974, Ferdinand Marcos officially instituted the overseas employment program and “shifted the locus of international migration from the US to new destinations around the world.” The encouragement of international migration continued after the dictator was brought down by popular protest in 1986.

Neoliberal measures in the form of a structural adjustment program imposed by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank led to a growth of unemployment as Philippine agriculture and enterprises were unable to withstand international competition. Combined with reductions in public services and welfare imposed by the same program, this led to the spread of poverty.

In such circumstances “migration not only became an official policy solution to temper the impact of the crises through remittance inflows but also a coping strategy — an accepted way of life — for ordinary Filipinos to overcome day-to-day hardships,” Quinsaat writes. Rather than attempt to introduce measures that would address the root causes driving people to leave their home and family, successive Philippine governments continued economic policies that locked the country into the position of supplier of cheap labor power and cheap resources for international capital.

Quinsaat points out that “unique to the Filipino case is the role of the Philippine state in stimulating and managing the migration of its citizens, recognized by the World Bank for ‘its highly developed support system for migrant workers that is a model for other sending countries.’”

Today Filipino workers based overseas form a vital part of the country’s working class. Representing about 10 percent of the total population of the country, they supply over thirty billion USD in remittances, over nine percent of the Philippines’ GDP. Overseas migration also functions as a “safety valve,” attracting young working people who are looking for a better life for themselves and their loved ones. In other words, the kind of people who would be a natural constituency for opposition movements in the country.

Organizing for Change

Insurgent Communities does not treat Filipinos working overseas merely as victims of international capitalist relations. The core of the book discusses various ways in which they have organized to resist exploitation and oppression at home and abroad. More so than any natural ethnic identity, this activity was, Quinsaat argues, crucial to forming the Philippine diaspora.

One organization that played an important role in this process was the US-based Katipunan ng Demokratikong Pilipino (Union of Democratic Filipinos; [KDP](#)). Founded in 1973, the KDP brought together different generations, uniting activists born in the United States and recent migrants, and connected national and international struggles. The KDP “fought transnationally on two fronts: against the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines and against capitalism in the US.”

Democracy in the Philippines would, it was hoped, end the need for Filipinos to leave the country, while the fight for socialism in the United States was seen as part of the fight to end the exploitation and racism that Filipino workers faced there. The ideology of the KDP was heavily influenced by the Maoism of the underground Communist Party of the Philippines ([CPP](#)) to which it was closely linked throughout the '70s.

The KDP was very much part of the general radicalization of the late '60s and '70s. Young Filipino American activists “expressed solidarity with the communists in Vietnam who, in their view, were struggling for independence and self-determination.” These radicals saw the Vietnam War as a continuation of the US racist imperialism in Asia that had earlier colonized the Philippines. The history of early anti-colonial struggles in the Philippines was recovered as young radicals saw themselves as carrying on this legacy.

Just as with its rise, the decline of the influence of the Filipino American left cannot be separated from the international decline of the Left and the loss of credibility of socialism as an alternative.

Compared to the United States, the Filipino community in the Netherlands was small and homogeneous. The earliest generation of activism actually originated outside of this community. In 1975, development aid volunteers and Dutch missionaries organized the Filippijnengroep Nederland (Philippine Group Netherlands) with the aim of drawing attention to human rights violations that they had become aware of while they were in the Philippines. Through a historical fluke, the Netherlands later became home to top leaders of the CPP, who, with the aid of religious congregations, successfully applied for refugee status in the country. Utrecht became home to the office of the National Democratic Front (NDF) of the Philippines, a front of mass organization under control of the party that functioned as its diplomatic wing.

Quinsaat’s discussion of two very different communities shows the similarities in the challenges activists faced. Both in the United States and the Netherlands, activists were confronted with tensions arising from organizing in communities with different ties to different countries. The KDP faced opposition from activists who considered its opposition to the Marcos dictatorship “divisive” and its radicalism in struggles inside the United States was not appreciated by liberal Filipino activists, including bourgeois exiles from the Philippines, who wanted to lobby the US state to pressure Marcos. But it was the KDP’s radicalism that allowed it to bring together recent migrants and exiles from the anti-dictatorship struggle in the Philippines and the younger generations in the United States who were radicalized by their own experiences of racism and exploitation.

“Activism shapes one’s self and identity,” Quinsaat summarizes one of the main themes of her book. It was not just the identification of the activists that changed; by being part of larger communities

and movements, they changed those of wider groups. Identification with the Filipino people was separated from loyalty to the Philippine state by anti-dictatorship organizing. Philippine nationalism was given a new anti-imperialist content by connecting with histories of anti-colonial revolts as cultural identities became politicized.

Shifting Political Tides

Insurgent Communities documents attempts by diaspora activists to oppose the whitewashing of the Marcos dictatorship, but today, support among overseas workers for these right-wing leaders is very high. While Marcos won 58 percent of the vote among Filipinos at home, the [figure](#) for members of the diaspora was 72 percent.

Many of the [analyses](#) of the popularity of Duterte and [Marcos](#) discuss the role of misinformation that portrays the dictatorship as a golden age for the Philippines. Quinsaat points out that although this is a significant factor, it raises the question of how this information was received; why did people find it credible, how did it seemingly make sense to them? *Insurgent Communities* is partly a document of the decline of left-wing influences in the Filipino diaspora, and their replacement with other points of identification that frame the country's hardships not in terms of imperialism and capitalist exploitation, but as the result of a supposed lack of "discipline" and need for strong leadership.

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Developments inside the Philippines fall outside the scope of the book, but the crisis the Philippine left's main organization, the CPP, entered into in the late '80s affected international efforts that were sometimes directly linked to the party. In opposing Duterte, the inconsistent attitude of the party and its transnational network did not help either. Despite the mounting death toll of the so-called war on drugs, a [number](#) of [prominent activists](#) nominated by the NDF [continued](#) to serve Duterte in cabinet-level posts until after the Marcos burial.

Insurgent Communities is a relatively short but dense book. Readers looking to understand the shifting sense of identification and the challenges faced in transnational activism will undoubtedly learn a lot from it. For activists looking to create new insurgent communities, the book is a valuable tool.

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