

History of the Philippine socialist movement 1920-1960

A Military Officer Explores the Roots of Social Unrest

Sunday 30 May 2021, by [TADEM Eduardo C.](#) (Date first published: 30 June 2018).

The book tracks and analyzes the history of the Philippine socialist movement from 1920 to 1960 and is a remarkable product of the search by a young army officer in the late 1950s into the historical origins of agrarian unrest and rebellion, the role played by the radical Socialist movement in the 1920s and 1930s, and the latter's phenomenal growth in the 1940s and decline in the 1950s.

Review Essay: *When the Rains Come, Will Not the Grass Grow Again?: The Socialist Movement in the Philippines, 1920-1960*, by Dante C. Simbulan. Quezon City: Pantas Publishing & Printing Inc., 2018. Pp. 200. ISBN 9786219583541.

In October 2018, the spokesperson of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) named 18 colleges and universities in Metro Manila where communists were allegedly recruiting students into a plot to oust President Rodrigo Duterte (Andrade 2018). Code named "Red October," the plot was supposedly hatched by the Communist Party, the legal opposition, some church leaders, and former military rebels. At the same time, the chief of the Philippine National Police (PNP) warned professors against encouraging their students to entertain rebellious ideas on pain of being cited for contempt. The PNP chief "also reminded students in state universities that they should not rebel against the government which gives them free education" (Gonzales 2018).

These "revelations" by the country's "guardians of peace and order" display a mindset that presumes that rebellion and unrest are simply the handiwork of a conspiracy hatched by power-hungry sectors bent on destabilizing the current order for dubious gains. In light of this, AFP and PNP officials would do well to read Dante Simbulan's recently published book *When the Rains Come, Will Not the Grass Grow Again?* (2018)

A PMA Graduate as a UP Student

Simbulan was born on 3 May 1930 in San Simon, Pampanga. He graduated from the elite Philippine Military Academy (PMA) Class of 1952. The following year, he joined the Philippine Army's elite Scout Rangers where he served under then Captain Rafael Iletto until 1955. He was involved in combat intelligence operations against the PKP-HMB (Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas-Hukbong Mapagpalaya ng Bayan/People's Liberation Army) postwar Huk rebellion. At its height in 1950, the PKP-HMB rebellion counted on an armed force of 21,800 men and women, with a mass base of over half a million, ranged against 25,000 government troops (Henson 1963; Fuller 2007). Later that same year, however, the rebellion suffered a major blow when its entire leadership was captured in a series of raids in Manila. Simbulan reveals that, as an Army captain in his twenties, he was able to interview and have long discussions with the imprisoned top leaders of the PKP-HMB.

In 1955, he was invited to teach at the Philippine Military Academy. On a government scholarship to

do a master's degree in political science at the University of the Philippines (UP), Simbulan was exposed to what he calls "liberal-progressive views" (Simbulan 2018, xvi) of professors like Onofre D. Corpuz, Ruben Santos Cuyugan, and a visiting Marxist sociology professor, Paul Oren, Jr. This exposure enabled him to "remove the military blinders [he] got from [his] military training and to see a wider view of Philippine society." (p. xvi) Thus began Simbulan's ideological transition where he now "began to sympathize with the oppressed and exploited marginalized peasants who took up arms to defend themselves from the violence of their cruel landlords and an uncaring government." (pp. xvi-xvii) Encouraged by his professors, he decided to write his master's thesis on the history of the Socialist/Communist movement in the Philippines, which he completed in 1960.

Simbulan's manuscript, however, remained in the archives of the UP Library even as it was accessible to the more enterprising researchers. Upcoming scholars like Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, when researching for his book on the Huk rebellion, were able to benefit from its insights and analysis. Fifty-eight years would elapse before the manuscript would finally see print. And in the intervening years, many works on the same topic and taking the same progressive and openminded standpoint vis-à-vis the rebel movement have been published. But as Kerkvliet (2018) pointed out in the book's foreword, Simbulan's opus is still a "valuable contribution to scholarship" as it "helps us to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses on how those matters were initially researched and analyzed." (p. xi)

Perhaps it was just as well for Dante Simbulan's personal safety and his fledgling military career that his thesis did not immediately see publication. The early sixties was not a particularly good and convenient period for those expressing even a glimmer of sympathy for the socialist cause or espousing simple liberal progressive and nationalist views.

The 1960s Witch-hunts

Inspired by or dictated by the infamous McCarthy witch-huntlike pogroms in the US Senate against progressive and left-leaning Americans in the late 1950s, the Congressional House Committee on Anti-Filipino Activities (CAFA), headed by Representative Leonardo Perez, similarly persecuted Filipinos, especially intellectuals, whom it suspected to be closet supporters of the Communist cause. The University of the Philippines was a principal target of CAFA hearings and "in a blatant assault on academic freedom... several UP professors and students" were "subjected to 'loyalty' checks for allegedly harboring Communist leanings" (de Joya 2016, 5).

An unintended consequence of the CAFA witch-hunts, however, was that it provided the trigger for the surge of activism at UP as students and faculty rallied to defend the University's academic freedom and scholarly integrity. This culminated in a 5,000-strong mass action by the UP community in March 1961 led by the Student Cultural Association of UP (SCAUP) that delegitimized the CAFA pogroms against the university (Sison 2010).

As for the PKP-HMB itself, it had already reached its lowest point—its leaders imprisoned and detached from their mass base, its once formidable organizational structure in total disarray, and its military arm, the HMB, reduced to roving squads in search of political leadership. While some guerrillas remained true to their original calling and tried, against all odds, to keep the faith, others degenerated into banditry and gangsterism (e.g., the Sumulong group in Angeles City). The debacle of the PKP was accomplished mainly through crucial and timely military, technical, and economic assistance from the United States (Kerkvliet 2014, 281).

The overtly hostile atmosphere for critical and progressive thinking that marked the beginning of the 1960s makes Dante Simbulan's work all the more remarkable and path breaking. That Simbulan chose to go against the prevailing mainstream analysis and provide a heterodox view of the Socialist

movement speaks volumes for fortitude and courage in the face of overwhelming personal risks.

The Book's Contents

The book's seven chapters take the reader through a historical journey starting with the Spanish colonial era and its oppressive land tenure systems, the Philippine revolution of the 1890s, the role of intellectuals, and to the subsequent American colonial takeover. Simbulan also traces the development of trade unionism among a nascent working class, its transposition into a militant Socialist movement, and the ensuing crackdown by the colonial government's forces. A merged Communist and Socialist movement confronted and scored major successes in Central Luzon against the Japanese invaders during World War II by way of a guerrilla war. Suppression of peasant land rights, state repression, and assassinations of its leaders drove the movement to launch the now famous Huk rebellion of 1946-1952.

Simbulan does not dwell on the details of the actual rebellion but focuses instead on what he had set out to do: analyze the "social, political, and economic setting" (pp. 97-113) that gave rise to the unrest. This is the book's main strength. In Chapter 6, he dispels the state-propagated notion that "agrarian unrest and revolts stem from the introduction of a foreign ideology, expertly utilized by professional agitators, troublemakers and demagogues to stir the masses to overthrow the government." (p. 97) Simbulan shows that even before socialist ideas came to the Philippines, peasant unrest and agrarian revolts were already commonplace and were motivated by "a legitimate and genuine desire of the masses to escape from their miserable conditions." (pp. 97-98)

He defines the social class structure of Philippine society using both Marxist and conventional categories, the social and economic inequalities this setup breeds, the one-sided neocolonial ties with the US, and the bankruptcy of the Philippine political party system. To address the latter, he proposes the establishment of "a mass party of the lower socio-economic classes... to promote the development of a true and real democracy." (p. 113)

Simbulan provides interesting insights into the men and women who made up the leadership and rank and file of the PKP-HMB rebellion and for whom he provides brief life profiles. He notes that they "come from various classes of society" (p. 82) including "the ranks of the educated upper and middle classes." They are "convinced of the validity of their philosophy, the goodness of their goals, and the righteousness of their cause" and therefore "are willing to endure hardships, imprisonment, and even death." (p. 90) Whether from a rich or poor background, "what they do share... is a common dream of creating a 'good society' and a better world." (p. 92)

Chapter 7 contains the summary and conclusions and this is better presented in Simbulan's own words:

It is the observation of this study that in presentday Philippine society, where there is great inequality in the distribution of wealth and income; where a few live well off the rent of land or the exploitation of natural resources, or from inherited funds, or from graft and corruption, while many millions toil from dawn to dusk but barely get enough for the dire necessities of life; where there is a raging conflict between those who aggrandize themselves and those who seek to look after the welfare of society; where ethical standards and the vaunted Christian standards of morality fail to check the mad scramble for power and money; where the individual who acquires the most material goods or who succeeds economically is considered the "best" regardless of the means he has employed; and where only a few are rich, happy, and prosperous while a great many are poor, unhappy, and miserable, there are bound to emerge two general modes of thought: the radical and the conservative. (p. 120)

Simbulan then makes no doubt where his preference lies:

Radicalism is generally opposed to the status quo. The radicals are those who are not happy under the existing regime and who desire to better or improve the prevailing conditions. They are the non-conformists and independent thinkers who disagree with the political, economic, social, and moral ideas of those in power... Radicals are generally critical in nature. In seeking to destroy obsolete and outmoded ideas, they necessarily contribute to progress and, at the same time, possibly prevent stagnation. In this sense, radicalism may be said to be constructive. But when provoked, and when the slow, legal means of instituting change (evolutionary) are suppressed and forbidden by force, radicalism can easily turn to force and violence and become revolutionary. (p. 121)

Simbulan concludes by reasserting that the Socialist “movement is fundamentally a product of social, political, and economic conditions prevailing in a given society. It was suggested that as a social movement, its aim is primarily to change the existing social order and that there must be certain ‘unwanted’ conditions and ‘outmoded’ institutions that provoke and instigate this desire for change” (p. 115).

Other Works by Military Officers

In his foreword, Kerkvliet compares Simbulan’s thesis with other works by retired military officers published between 1954 and 1960 that also dealt with the PKP-Huk rebellion. These were *The Red Lie* (Crisol 1954); *Lessons from the Huk Campaign in the Philippines* (Baclagon 1956); and *Counter-Guerrilla Operations: The Philippine Experience* (Valeriano and Bohannon 1962). These three, however, simply looked at the rebellion as the result of “gullible” and “neurotic” peasants “succumbing to the demagoguery of Communist propaganda” and “coercion.” (pp. xii-xiii) Kerkvliet observes that, in contrast to Simbulan, “[n]one of these three military officers pay much attention to social, economic, and political conditions that might help to explain unrest and rebellion.” (p. xiv)

The Committee on Anti-Filipino Activities was created in 1948 by the House of Representatives of the Philippine Congress to investigate the extent of perceived Communist influence in the country. It was also in this year that the PKP-led Huk rebellion reached its height to seriously challenge the newly inaugurated Philippine state. Except for reports issued in 1949, 1951, and 1957 (as documented by Simbulan), the committee was generally inactive. But CAFA sprang into action when UP publications produced articles that were seen by committee members as Communist-leaning, if not outwardly Communist. These were “The Peasant War in the Philippines” published in the *Philippine Social Sciences and Humanities Review* (1958) and various articles in the student paper, *Philippine Collegian* and the *Philippinensian* yearbook of 1961. Targets of this witch-hunt were venerable and distinguished professors such as Leopoldo Yabes, Cesar Majul, Ricardo Pascual, and no less than then UP President Vicente Sinco (de Joya 2016, 8). To demonstrate the level at which CAFA hearings were conducted, a UP student, Ninotchka Rosca, was grilled by the committee and was reportedly demanded an explanation on why she had a Russian-sounding name.

From Military Officer to Left Radical Activist

Fortunately for Simbulan, an inept and incompetent CAFA had not gotten wind of his master’s thesis which was completed and successfully defended just a year before the hearings and public “trials” against UP professors and students began. Otherwise the young Army captain, a recent UP graduate and on the cusp of his military career, would have found himself in hot water and the unfortunate object of a similar pogrom. With his “subversive” MA thesis safely filed in the UP Library Archives, Simbulan went back to teach at the PMA where he ostensibly imparted to future military officers his now radical and heretical views of Philippine political, economic, and social conditions. In the book’s

blurb about the author, it was reported that Simbulan “got into trouble with the PMA Superintendent... for inviting speakers from UP instead of the usual American officers from JUSMAG (Joint US Military Advisory Group) who were regular lecturers on the Vietnam War.” In 1965, he earned a Ph.D. in Political Science from the Australian National University, the first Filipino to be so honored by the university.

In 1967, “accused of inviting ‘subversives’ and practically ostracized,” 37-year-old Colonel Dante Simbulan opted for early retirement from the AFP and from the PMA Corps of Professors. He then pursued an academic teaching career at the Philippine College of Commerce (now Polytechnic University of the Philippines) where he became dean of the College of Liberal Arts, University of the Philippines, Maryknoll College (now Miriam College), and Ateneo de Manila University (Orejas 2016). By this time, he had become a fully committed radical activist leader. At the height of martial law, in 1974, he was arrested and was a political detainee for three years.

His PMA teaching stint, however, seemed to have borne fruit when one of his former students, Lieutenant Victor N. Corpus, shocked the military establishment in December 1971 by defecting to the New People’s Army (NPA), the military arm of a new and rival Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) established in 1968 (Remollino 2003). Corpus’s defection was dramatic. Assigned as PMA officer of the day on 29 December 1970, he instead led a group of NPA guerrillas that raided the school’s armory and carted off a huge cache of arms and ammunition which they brought to their camp in Isabela province. Corpus later rose to become a CPP Central Committee member.

Another defector was Lieutenant Crispin Tagamolila, a reserved officer, who went over to the NPA in 1972. He was reportedly politicized by his brother, UP student leader and *Collegian* Editor Antonio Tagamolila and his girlfriend who was a member of Kabataang Makabayan (R. Simbulan 2018). [1] Tagamolila, however, was killed in an encounter with the military in April 1972. The twin defections of Corpus and Tagamolila led to reports of a Corpus-Tagamolila Movement (CTM) within the AFP. Activists jokingly nicknamed the alleged group the “Christ The Messiah” movement.

Other military officers who also crossed over to the radical Left movement were navy captain and Philippine Coast Guard Chief-of-Staff and AFP Inspector General Danilo Vizmanos in 1971 and Brigadier General Raymundo Jarque in 1995. Like Corpus and Tagamolila, Jarque actually joined the NPA. Unlike Dante Simbulan, however, none of them were into writing their stories. Corpus did publish *Silent War* (1989) but only after he had abandoned the CPP-NPA and was reinstated in the AFP after EDSA in 1986. Besides, the book was simply a manual on how to defeat the insurgency of which he was once a leading member.

Lt. Colonel Bonifacio H. Gillego also transformed himself into an anti-martial law activist, though he was not part of the Left radical movement per se. In the 1950s, as an AFP officer assigned to the Military Intelligence Service (MIS), he was one of those who interrogated the PKP-HMB political prisoners. Ironically, he found himself being won over by the persuasive arguments on why social unrest and a communist insurgency existed in the country. On an AFP scholarship for a master’s degree at Johns Hopkins University, Gillego studied Marxism and later made friends with left-wing intellectuals (Bantayog ng mga Bayani 2016).

Exiled in the US during Martial Law, Gillego was active in the anti-Marcos movement and gained fame by meticulously researching on and exposing Marcos’s fake World War II medals. After Marcos fell in 1986, he returned to the country and was elected for three terms as the representative of Sorsogon’s 2nd Congressional district. He chaired the House Committee on Agrarian Reform and, as a declared socialist, championed a radical agrarian reform program in 1988. He resigned his committee chairmanship after the landlord-dominated House of Representatives approved an extremely watered-down version of his agrarian reform bill (House Bill No. 800).

I first met Dante Simbulan in 1974 when we were both political detainees at the 5th Philippine Constabulary Security Unit (CSU) in Camp Crame in Quezon City. The 5th CSU was one of the most notorious military units that implemented and administered the Martial Law regime of the dictator Marcos. It harbored the likes of Aguinaldo and Abadilla, two of the most fearsome and brutal interrogators of political prisoners. Dante's prison cell was across mine and this allowed us to play chess while telling each other our moves on individual chessboards in our respective cells. He also had a guitar and we would sometimes sing together songs we both liked. I recall that one of his favorites was the love song theme from the movie *Doctor Zhivago*. Our personal interactions under those trying circumstances somehow provided me with an insight on the human side of a highly trained military officer that made a major life-changing decision to go over to the other side.

Contemporary Times

In the book's postscript written for the 2018 publication, Simbulan notes that in the 58 years since he wrote his master's thesis, "the socio-economic conditions in the country have not changed much, providing fertile soil for social ferment" and that "the vast majority of the Filipino people are still poor and neglected by the government [and] the marginalized masses do not have enough food, shelter, and adequate health care for their families" (p. 123). He ends by citing the metaphor that informs the book's main title: "The grass has been cut but the roots remain. The rains have come, and the grass is growing again" (p. 123).

Simbulan's optimism on the prospects for the Left radical movement may be justified by prevailing objective conditions, but whether the Left forces can, once again, threaten the existing order will also depend on the subjective factor (i.e., the state of its organizational capabilities). The Philippine Left remains divided, no longer the once formidable and unified force that seriously challenged the postwar Philippine state and the Marcos martial law regime. The mainstream Left was weakened by internal splits in the 1990s over questions of ideology and strategy that saw some of its best leaders form breakaway groups. It was also severely damaged by deadly internal purges that unfairly victimized large numbers of its top cadres in the post-Marcos years. Moreover, the independence and integrity of some of the Left groups have been compromised by tactical alliances with oligarchic traditional parties.

Prospects for the Philippine Left

Today, the various Left factions are no longer able to generate the level of mass mobilizations that characterized the era covered by Simbulan's book and the period from the late sixties to the early eighties. Its influence among students, the working class, and peasantry has waned. The Left has also failed to seize the public imagination in terms of an alternative political, economic, and social system. By and large, its language remains locked in the jargon of the sixties, thus failing to stimulate the masses to take action and rally under the Left banner.

This deficiency in the subjective dimension is compelling because, as pointed out by an earlier commentary, "throughout history, [the Philippine Left] has played an indispensable role in leading the struggle to meaningfully transform society and institute [needed] radical change" (Tadem 2017). The same commentary argues that "it is the only political group with a sharp and solid analysis of the country's ills and a thoroughgoing vision for a new and alternative society."

In order to, once again, be a major player in Philippine society, the Left needs to reignite and reinterpret that vision given current political, social, and economic realities, overcome the baggage of the past by initiating new and more creative modes of struggle, and unify its hitherto divergent forces. Otherwise, as the past decades have shown in many parts of the world, the people will continue to put up with liberal solutions that only exacerbate inequalities and further enrich the

propertied classes while continuing to impoverish the many. Or, as is already taking place in several societies, a desperate citizenry will be swayed and mesmerized by right-wing demagogues taking a populist stance and promising knee-jerk solutions to deepseated social problems.

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Footnotes

[1] Roland Simbulan, e-mail interview, October 6, 2018.