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Revisiting Two Classics: Charting the Mental World of the Oppressed

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Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1980–1910. By Reynaldo Clemeña Iletto. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979.

Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance. By James C. Scott. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985.

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It is true that history is largely based on textual accounts of past events. Non-textual material such as archaeological artefacts can speak only through intervention and interpretation from a latter-day agent.

But to be sure, it is also the fate of texts to remain relatively silent until a latter-day agent intervenes. And from that point onwards, they go through a transformation that turns them into the raw material of historical description.

What this means is that some texts tend to be more popular than others among scholars, owing to the latter's training, the preferences of his or her peers and superiors, and the individual scholar's ability to tease significance out of the words he or she studies.

The thing Reynaldo Clemeña Iletto attempted to do back in the 1970s in his classic was to achieve “a history from below”. Such an ambition is not uncommon as such, and works inspired by that commendable goal usually do succeed in writing the lower classes into the interlinked processes of oppression and resistance, even portraying them as active participants and not as grey and passive shadows fluttering in the background, hoping for salvation.

But Iletto's work goes beyond that. Instead of merely highlighting the physical involvement of the masses in revolution, he wished in his impressive piece of work to pierce the meaning of their actions, and to dismiss the simple assumption that they were merely conforming and responding to the articulation of the educated revolutionary class, known as the *ilustrados*, the "enlightened".

This latter class, found in the colonial world of the 1800s and 1900s, and not only in the Philippines or the Spanish colonies, but in occupied territories throughout the globe, was apparently enthused by a body of closely linked liberal or egalitarian ideas. Where they did not initiate revolution, they helped to voice the aspirations for movements started without their intervention. In the process, they cannot but invest meaning and ascribe motives into actions not always within their power to understand.

Iletto sought to fathom what revolution and resistance meant to the Filipino mass base *before* the revolution got described in nationalistic terms and in thought patterns comprehensible to the educated elite. This admirable effort immediately stirs up a host of questions, and already through that simple fact, much is gained. Such is indeed the earmark of a cogent scientific approach.

In raising his question, Iletto unveils the powerful tendency common among historians and other educated narrators to streamline revolutionary events that are fuelled by outraged energy and enraged sacrifice, in order to present a singular rationale of nationalism and liberation evolving and gaining consciousness and articulation over time. Iletto puts it well:

Were the various religious leaders — messiahs, popes, supremos, and kings — who with their peasant followers formed their own communities, harassed landowners and confronted the armed might of the constabulary, simply "religious fanatics or frustrated peasants" blindly and irrationally reacting to oppressive conditions? Were nationalist Filipino leaders justified in helping the colonialists suppress these "disturbances"? Even well-meaning historians tend to answer these questions affirmatively. Others regard these movements as curious, interesting but nevertheless minor sidelights compared to the politics of the metropolis. Still others sympathize to a

great extent with their anticolonial and antielite aspects but fail to understand them in their own light. “Blind reaction” theories prevail; intentions and hopes are left unexamined. This leads to the foregone conclusion that early popular movements were largely failures, and continued to be so until they turned more “rational” and “secular”. (Ileto 1979, p. 7).

However, by concentrating on what revolution meant to those who actually executed it at specific points in time and space, Ileto was always bound to run the risk of streamlining the masses instead, and simplifying their multiplicity of goals. Indeed, when challenged on that point many years later that his “‘underside to Philippine history’ was actually a minority of lower class resistance movements”, Ileto agreed that he did see how his early works “were the product of their time and youth” (Scalice 2007).

His endeavour was difficult, not only because his views were restricted by the times that gave them birth or the admitted limitations of the scholar, but because his ambitions were high.

To understand things “in their own light” is never an easy task. Much empathy is needed, much humility is needed, and much cautious scholarship is needed; especially if the study is to end in an academic work that modern-day *ilustrados* can appreciate, and discuss meaningfully. There has to be some assumption that such a task of interpretation and transliteration is possible, and that significantly less ascription of meaning is performed regarding the understanding of the revolutionary masses than the *ilustrados* are accused of doing through their rational and educated methods.

What Ileto wishes to confront, besides challenging elite perspectives through his choice of methodology, is the flattening of historical events to fit a notion of progress best championed by the middle-class elite.

He chooses therefore to recognize popular movements as “occasions in which hidden or unarticulated features of society reveal themselves to the contemporary inquirer” (Ileto 1979, p. 13). His intention does therefore stop short of claiming to unveil an easily understood alternative explanation for revolution conducted by the lowest classes

of society. This humility, to the extent that he manages to remain true to it, lessens the force of the criticism against him that he is inadvertently “manufacturing a monolith” out of “the masses” (Scalice 2007).

To have any chance of perceiving the history of revolution “from below”, one has to identify sources and documents that can be argued to be sufficiently reflective of the *ethos* and *pathos* of the masses. For a start, there is the problem of language. Iletto’s objectives disallow him from relying on non-Tagalog sources for inspiration. The language of the masses, and the texts most relevant to them, has to be mulled over “internally”, as it were. The propensity to discard “errors” must be reined in, especially when a method to madness — or at least the lack of logicity — is to be recognized. Patterns are the thing, not rationality.

There is apparently little choice when picking commonly used Tagalog texts from the 1800s to dissect. Iletto proposes that only after proper examination of key textual events in the life of the masses should outsider accounts be considered. And this is what he sets out to do.

Both the appeal of the book and the hesitation one feels in sauntering along with the author come from this difficult narrative balance that he takes upon himself. By basing his findings on perceptions and a phenomenological approach, suggestive interpretations are achieved and a believable narrative about the psychological life and the poetic ethos of the masses is impressively presented.

But at the end of the day, what Iletto does is introduce the educated reader to the dynamics of a world which by definition lies outside the narrow rationality of the discourse being carried out between the author and his audience.

This wish to bridge the gap between his subject and his reader leads to problematic postures. Jim Richardson (2005) points out what he calls major faults in Iletto’s project, going so far as to compare *Pasyon and Revolution* itself to the *pyason* for its ability to generate “multiple, even contradictory, meanings”.

This is somewhat unfair, given Iletto's tricky task of releasing the beasts of folk religiosity and collective passions inadequately expressed, into the confines of scientific discourse. In the shadows of such a scene, paradoxes and contradictions will appear, but they do not have to be — and in most cases, are not — debilitating to the main arguments.

Iletto's book thus builds on the *pasyon* texts of the Filipinos. These Christian folk texts both expressed powerful emotions and values, and greatly influenced events, which leads Iletto to understand plebeian resistance to have been drawing pivotal inspiration from the imaginaries and the poetry of the story of Jesus Christ as depicted in them.

Why *pasyon* texts can be made to claim such a role builds on the idea that they came to fill the vacuum for collective expression left behind by “the destruction and decline of native epic traditions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries”.

Filipinos nevertheless continued to maintain a coherent image of the world and their place in it through their familiarity with the *pasyon*, an epic that appears to be alien in content, but upon closer examination in a historical context, reveals the vitality of the Filipino mind (Iletto 1979, p. 16).

The *pasyon* is formally the accounting of the Christian Holy Week, and refers to the “Sacred Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ”. This stems from the imposition of Catholicism by Spanish missionaries on lowland Filipinos, which included the reading and dramatization of the story of Jesus Christ to inculcate loyalty towards Spain and the Church and encourage passivity in deference to an afterlife. As Iletto points out, a perhaps unintended effect of this process was that it provided a new framework through which the colonized, recently robbed of their native cultural apparatus, could articulate their experiences and aspirations.

Throughout the book, however, it is the second point that Iletto concentrates on, and the efficacy of the first is badly ignored. What this indicates is that Iletto is out to describe how the suppression of the Filipinos silenced their articulation of the world, only to channel

their life-force through the *pasyon* and the rituals that went with it, in effect equipping the lost culture with a new — and inadequate — voice.

In the end, loyalty towards Spain and the Church was found wanting, but not the need to revolt.

The *pasyon* is still re-enacted passionately throughout the Philippines. It portrays “Jesus’s betrayal, trial and death, is staged during Holy Week through dramatic readings in churches, street plays and, in some provinces, 24-hour recitations lasting the entire week. In some areas of the country, the suffering Jesus underwent is physically emulated” (Garrido 2004).

Though necessarily fragmented, the intellectual and emotional life arrested within the conceptual structure used by the Spanish for the committing of what amounted to ethnocide would bubble to the surface in a string of uprisings. This current of longing for emancipation and fulfilment — “undercurrent” if seen from the point of view of *ilustrados* — sought release throughout the 1800s, but not necessarily as the vanguard for the ideologies of the urban classes in its triumphant liberation from Spanish control.

Most significantly, in the eyes of the low-level revolutionary, the legal and rationalistic methods of *ilustrados* were “inauthentic” for it lacked “Christ-like suffering and the transformation of the *loób*” (Ileto 1979, p. 318). The *loób* is understood as “the inner self ... intimately connected with ideas of leadership and power, nationalism and revolution” (ibid., p. 20).

What is perhaps of lasting value in Ileto’s book, and something that imbues his approach with credibility and poignancy is this very reminder that the world of humans is complex to the point where we may be actors on the same stage, but we are seldom in the same play. And yet, in the end, a finale involving all actors is assumed necessary.

Not only does the loser lose his history, but the less articulate, even if victorious, cannot take centre stage in a saga written for them by others. History, as I started out by saying, is largely about texts. The weaker your texts are, the smaller your potential place in history.

While Ileo studies revolutionaries from the past, which limited him to analysing his subject through textual remains, as it were, James C. Scott seeks to describe the weak who are alive and breathing. His revolutionaries are not martyrs and heroes, but the common man and woman caught in coercive intrusions.

In *Weapons of the Weak*, Scott claims historical credit for the unsung methods of resistance adopted by the weak in a village in the rice-growing state of Kedah, in Malaysia. His research builds on data collected anthropologically over two years, through field studies and interviews in a village renamed Sedaka. What his studies show us is that *resistance* — perhaps best situated at the opposite end of *hegemony* in the Gramscian sense — never ends. It may not always be evident to the passing observer, or even a political scientist given to theoretically informed approaches, but it is there for those who take their time to see and feel it.

Every now and then, a phrase comes along in the world of social science which catches on, and is immediately employed in an endless variety of contexts. This happens partly because of the suggestiveness of the phrase, and partly because of the poetic quality of the integrated notions. “Weapons of the Weak” is definitely such a phrase. The alliteration certainly does not hurt, and the image of the feeble being far from helpless is definitely hopeful and appealing. What makes it even more popular is the field it conceptually opens up for re-inspection, exciting both old and young scholars into looking for low-level resistance where they had once seen nothing. The obvious danger here, of course, is that all recalcitrance may get relabelled as conscious resistance, and also that resistance of any kind becomes part of a collective struggle. From women fighting their husbands to hill tribes having trouble adjusting to modern changes, resistance may get read into their behaviour and rationalizations as the underlying motivation.

It is easy to see how the notion of everyday resistance can be applied to most other cases where human exploitation and class tensions exist.

What gives Scott's arguments force is the fact that his empirical studies focus on "the peasant class". Here is where the efficacy of the weapons he observes the weak to have is most significant. The stability both of the class and its relationship to other classes provide the pattern and the persistence required which are more observable than in cases where relations of power are more fleeting and less ingrained in the history books.

Especially in the many cases where threats to their interests are systematic and omnipresent, peasants must be expected to remain "mute about their intentions". Indeed, one of the most valuable contributions from Scott lies in his assertion that these intentions "may be so embedded in the peasant subculture and in the routine, taken-for-granted struggle for subsistence as to remain inarticulate".

"The fish do not talk about the water" (Scott 1986, p. 452).

Scott did see himself as part of a scholarly movement of his times which emphasized "social action, cultural history, intentional behaviour, group formation, and various patterns of organization", and which struggled to resist — that is indeed the right word — the tradition of understanding popular movements either as "unmediated expression of mass rage and anger" or "a reaction to quantifiable standards of material oppression and exploitation" (ibid., p. 418). This was in effect a paradigmatic shift.

In this context, Iletto's *Pasyon* must be understood as being part of the latter tendency in the study of uprisings and resistance, despite his wish to extract the inherent poetic rationale of the lowland Filipinos. While the enemy overshadowing the passionate world of the armed revolutionary in the Philippines are the *ilustrados*, the protagonist standing against the poor peasant in Sedaka is the rich peasant.

But even within the emerging scholarly movement in the 1970s, Scott has to be placed at the far end. His arguments basically target the bias that only forms of resistance pursuing broader aims can be considered a social movement. Most of the constant struggles of the poor peasant do not have such aims, but must yet be recognized as constituting "the core of peasant politics" (1986, p. 419). Here lie the "everyday forms of resistance" that are not only the fertile soil

from which social movements occasionally leap, but whose efficacy and duration are overlooked and whose practitioners over time far outnumber participants in social movements impressively.

In a lecture given at Monash University a year after *Weapons* was published, Scott continued to link his work in Kedah to the study of peasant resistance in general. The working definition he proposed, and from which he drew important conclusions, was the following:

Peasant resistance is any act by a peasant (or peasants) that is intended either to mitigate or deny claims (e.g. rents, taxes, corvée, deference) made on that class by superordinate classes (e.g. landlords, the state, moneylenders) or to advance peasant claims (e.g. to land, work, charity, respect) vis-à-vis these superordinate classes (1986, p. 419).

Scott adamantly states that resistance does not have to take the form of collective action, that intent is in fact built into the definition, and that peasant resistance has a potential symbolic or ideological nature. It was also true that peasant involvement in an eventual social movement required the mediation of non-peasant allies. The peasantry, often lacking the means to influence the legal and bureaucratic system, tended to “defend its interests at the enforcement stage” (1986, p. 422).

Scott’s perspective mounts a challenge to the standard historiography of class struggle. Firstly, non-organized resistance that aims to succeed by avoiding drama does not easily make its way into the history books. Secondly, not only do scholars lack records of such resistance to study, researchers are prone to adopt explosive events as sharp turning points in history around which they can convincingly build their narratives. Thirdly, state officials are not given to publicizing widespread discontent in case this undermines their own authority further and reveals their policies to be unpopular.

As pointed out by Grant Evans (1986), Scott was among those who rode a wave of academic interest in peasant societies that started with Barrington Moore’s *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966) and Eric Wolf’s *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (1969). Scott’s *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in*

Southeast Asia from 1976 definitely marks his early contribution to this trend. Interestingly, his study of political ideology in Malaysia published in 1968 lacks any hint at all about resistance on the ground, and is instead based on the values and concerns of top civil servants. The change in his methods for studying power and democracy in Malaysia, which led to the publishing of *Weapons* in 1985, was significant indeed, given the influence the latter has had on the social sciences in general.

The conventional tameness in the theoretical approach found in *Political Ideology* is happily replaced by sensitive and insightful brilliance in *Weapons*, where the implications of his arguments are wide-reaching, and where the described anatomy of the everyday struggles of peasants inspires endless research projects.

An adulation of the peasant is notable in *Moral Economy* and its author is criticized for his “search for a peasant radical subject situated beyond the reaches of hegemonic capitalism” who can occupy the role of an historical agent of change, untainted by hegemonic capitalism (Evans 1986, p. 35). This analysis echoes Maoist reverence of the peasant as the replacement for the alienated proletariat, a position common among academic leftists in the West in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In *Weapons*, the superior morality of the peasant as an agent of change is toned down to the extent that the fate of being the subordinate party in the exercise of power by “landlords, the state, moneylenders” is inescapable. This is a substantial retreat from the view that peasants hold the moral key to a better world beyond capitalism.

Hegemony as conceived by Gramsci never takes a break and is very much part and parcel of class societies, while Scott’s conception of resistance as an everyday struggle that does not necessarily wish to culminate in revolution suggests that the need among poor peasants to withstand coercion is eternal. As Eric Hobsbawm felt forced to admit, the aim of most peasants is to work the system “to their minimum disadvantage” (Hobsbawm 1971, p. 12). Scott agrees with this in saying that peasant resistance is “most effective when it follows the path of least resistance” (Scott 1986, p. 423). The most

one can do is “to hold one’s own against overwhelming odds — a spirit and practice that prevents the worst and promises something better” (Scott 1985, p. 350).

But in arriving at this stark and sad conclusion, Scott ascribes at the same time more agency and consciousness to the poor peasant than most other theoreticians on the sociology of oppression do. He opposes Gramsci’s view that the radicalism of the oppressed is found in their actions and not their beliefs.

The realm of behaviour — particularly in power-laden situations — is precisely where dominated classes are most constrained. And it is at the level of beliefs and interpretations — where they can safely be ventured — that subordinate classes are least trammelled. The rich in Sedaka can usually insist on conforming public behaviour and get it; they can neither insist on private ideological conformity, nor do they need it (Scott 1985, p. 322).

It is in the realm of the mental attitudes adopted by poor peasants that Scott finds their real resistance. Scholars such as Richard Hoggart (1954, pp. 77–78, quoted in Scott 1985, p. 322) note how the oppressed, in realizing their lack of power and choices, learn to live with it by adopting a fatalistic attitude and accepting “the nature of things”. Barrington Moore goes further to suggest that inevitable suffering is mystified and declared to be legitimate and just by the oppressed themselves (1978, pp. 458–59), while Bourdieu discusses beliefs adopted “to refuse what is anyway refused and to love the inevitable” (Bourdieu 1977, p. 164).

Scott dismisses — almost categorically — the idea of mystification and the defensive creation of false consciousness among the oppressed. The inevitable is taken by those receiving the short end of the stick the same way they would take the weather. The inevitable is, simply, inevitable. There is no logical need for them to call it just, fated or legitimate. As they do with the weather, poor peasants merely adjust their behaviour *practically* to the reality of being coerced (Scott 1985, p. 324).

In the end, the consciousness of the oppressed about their objective conditions is observed in their everyday dealings with the

superordinate classes, and that is possible only through a careful study of their own understanding of their playing field. This playing field is not static in the long run, and the methods of resistance required to play on it shift according to the ingenuity of the oppressed.

The two books reviewed here are similar in their wish to understand the oppressed at their own level. Although Iletto's subject — being more esoteric in essence and specific in time — does not allow him to generalize too freely about the poetic rationale of resistance, his recognition of the existence of the *ethos* and *pathos* that did not conform to the rationalizations of educated revolutionaries does open up the minds of his many readers to the colonizing nature of rational structures.

Scott's conclusions and methods are more easily applied in other contexts, engaging as it does a great many other scholars and approaches in constructing his view of the undefeated oppressed of the world.

In closing, since both projects take on the tough and commendable task of unveiling overshadowed phenomena and highlighting the inner workings of the non-articulate — and both succeed most admirably in doing that — there is a real danger that they overrate the pro-activeness of the oppressed persons involved.

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