

# **Performing Politics: Dissent of the Mass Movement Against Neoliberal Policies in the Philippines**

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## **Abstract:**

Nationalist and democratic mass movements consistently resist the implementation of neoliberal policies by the Philippine government. The government's affirmation to the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), inclusion of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), and the hosting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in 2015 and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit in 2017, among others, have all been dealt with protests by tens of thousands of militant activists. In these demonstrations, activists convert major roads into public spaces wherein not only dissent against imperialist globalization, privatization, and issues alike are expressed, but also it made an opportunity for them to further educate the people about how the said issues affect their personal and everyday lives.

This paper combined Habermas' concept of a public sphere, Lefebvre's concept of public space, and Foucault's concept of micropolitics as a form of resistance in setting a basis to establish that political participation at resistance is a form of performance. A performative look on political participation will not only give a better meaning on political works but also deepens the understanding of one on discourses and resistances.

*Keywords: neoliberalism, public space, activism, Performative Theory of Assembly, Philippines*

## INTRODUCTION

As tens of thousands were expected to protest during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Economic Leaders' Meeting in November 18-19, 2015, a 32,000-strong force of policemen, military, and emergency response teams were deployed by the government of the Philippines in Manila that time (Cupin, 2015). The event coincided with the International Students' Day on November 17<sup>th</sup>, wherein students protested for their rights on free and good quality state-funded education. They also expressed their dissent against the commercialization, privatization, and deregulation of the educational system of the country. A month before the actual APEC leaders' meeting, thousands of indigenous peoples from southern Philippines walked their way toward the country's capital to vent out their frustrations on the worsening situation of the mining industry in the country.

Going back to June 2015, the International Peoples' Tribunal on Crimes of President Benigno Simeon Aquino III and the US government as represented by President Barack Obama against the Filipino people was established by non-government organizations, international organizations on human rights, and other allied groups and tried the governments of the Philippines and the United States for their "abuses and anti-people policies" in the country (Guda, 2015). Non-stop protests, led by the national democratic movement, happened that year as their reaction to the worsening attacks of neoliberal policies in the Philippines.

Quito (as cited in Liwanag, 2015) pointed out that Filipinos have a spirit of nationalistic sensitivity and pride, that is why they would rather choose stay quiet and struggle instead of changing the overall sociopolitical system of the country. History has proven otherwise.

To contextualize international political phenomena in the Global South, this paper will discuss the significance of the concept of public space in the increasing intervention of the Filipino masses in the discourses of neoliberal policies in the Philippines. Additionally, this paper will touch the following aspects that caused protest actions in the country: (1) the establishment of the Philippines as a neoliberal state; (2) the national democratic ideology and its struggles; (3) the emergence of conflicts within public space; and (4) the localization of global political issues through protests.

## THE PHILIPPINES AS A NEOLIBERAL STATE

In establishing a neoliberal state, planned states undergo massive changes in their institutional processes. Harvey (2005) introduced the four characteristics of a neoliberal state: (1) it introduces itself as an activist with a progressive business climate and works its way as a competitive identity in global politics; (2) it relies on authoritarianism by implementing legislations that would ensure the stability of its markets; (3) it secures its financial situation from financial instability; and (4) it presents itself as an entity that has social solidarity to lessen the social tension that resulted from the implementation of neoliberal reforms in its economy. This concept shows that neoliberalization intensifies class struggles and the exploitation of the ruling elite in the country.

I argue that Lindio-McGovern's (2007) summarization of the primary facets of neoliberal globalization in the Philippines goes hand-in-hand with Harvey's conceptualization of a neoliberal state. The Philippines tries to present itself as a good destination for investments and establishing a business by being part of treaties that liberalize the country's economy (p. 3). The General

Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) of the World Trade Organization (WTO) moves under the principle exported products should be able to freely get in an importing country as they see “free trade” as a concept that would benefit WTO member-states. These treaties then forces governments to pass legislations that would reduce regulations on tariffs and trade. Governments also started marketing the idea to the consumers that having more options for products and corporate competition would reduce the prices of goods and services (p. 4). The Philippines adapted and implement the WTO Agreement on agriculture that reduced the restrictions on the importation of foreign agricultural goods in the country (p. 5).

Part of economic liberalization is the execution of policies on privatization and deregulation (Lindio-McGovern, 2007, p. 5-8). Deregulation removed the price ceiling system to ensure that the leading economies’ profit will not be affected by forces in market. The Philippines adapted the regulations of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank (IMF-WB) on privatization. In simpler terms, the government removed subsidies on social services and pass these on to the private sector. As profit-oriented entities, corporations providing privatized social services may declare their own pricing on their products to ensure a large revenue.

Capitalism creates more surplus goods than the needs of the consumers. As these are not profitable for capitalists, they went into the business of financial transactions. The speculative investments market was introduced to finance capitalism as a way of capitalizing in speculative finances that gives investors the chance to exponentially increase (or decrease) their capital (Lindio-McGovern, 2007, p. 9-10). Productive investments that actually gives work to the greater masses are being left out.

Included in economic liberalization, deregulation, and privatization is labor flexibilization (Lindio-McGovern, 2007, p. 11-13). Labor flexibilization, or commonly known in the Philippines as contractualization, is a legal means of not giving employment security or tenure on workers. This allows capitalists to hire employees and limit their term of employment so that they will not pay for the workers’ social benefits on health, pension, and insurance. This maximizes a company’s profit. This also gives employers the choice to not rehire contractual employees.

All these legal means to exploit Filipino workers coincide with Harvey’s definition of the Philippines as neoliberal state as it ensure stability financial stability for its foreign investors. Due to the lack of job security, social benefits, and low wages, 6,092 Filipino workers are forced to leave the country everyday (Department of Labor and Employment as cited by Migrante, 2015) and look for greener pastures overseas.

#### THE PROTESTORS

All these injustices on Filipino workers led to the establishment of national and democratic groups such as the Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (BAYAN, or New Patriotic Alliance in English). Its website introduced the organization as, ““it brought together more than one thousand mass organizations with a total membership of more than one million, representing different classes and sectors of society and committed to the people’s struggle for national liberation and democracy (Bagong Alyansang Makabayan, n.d.).”

BAYAN recognizes that the roots of social injustice in the Philippines are imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucrat capitalism. Their ideology stems from the national democratic movement that considers the country as having a semicolonial and semifeudal society. The country is semifeudal as it: (1) maintains the hacienda system of the Spanish colonizers wherein only in-demand and specific cash crops are toiled in farms; and (2) the political and economic power only resides with a few known elite families. The country is colonial as its economic policies are being dictated by leading economies and international financial institutions through so-called policy recommendations.

Now that I have laid down the conflicting forces that caused protests in the Philippines, this study is now aiming to answer the following central questions:

1. How are discursive spaces being established by the protesters?
2. How is neoliberalism being included in the day-to-day discourses of Filipino masses?

The next sections of this paper will discuss several philosophical and theoretical answers to the said questions.

#### PROTESTERS AND THE EMERGENCE OF DISCURSIVE SPACES

Lefebvre (1991) focused his attention on analyzing social and public spaces. For him, space is not just a material space where people do acts they naturally do, but it is actually a subject that creates identity and may affect the lives of every individual. From the initial dualist conception of space as a physical form (perceived space) and mental form (conceived space), Lefebvre theorized the term 'lived space.' He defined this term as:

*The fields we are concerned with are, first, the physical – nature, the Cosmos; secondly, the mental, including logical and formal abstractions; and, thirdly, the social. In other words, we are concerned with logico-epistemological space, the space of social practice, the space occupied by sensory phenomena, including products of the imagination such as projects and projections, symbols and utopias (p. 11-12).*

This perspective on space differs from the initial dualist conceptions. Lefebvre added that space is not fragmented or divided, but rather a combination and formation of all three kinds of spaces: (1) perceived space which refers to the material and physical state of space; (2) conceived space which refers to the conventional ideas of space; and (3) lived space which refers to space from the constructed experiences of an individual. Lefebvre's philosophical studies on space are now being studied in political science, sociology, anthropology, urban studies, and performance studies.

This study looks at the roads where protests are being held as a place where Lefebvre's concept of public space can be applied. Traffic congestions is a big issues in the metropolitan city of Manila in the Philippines. A common Filipino citizen would look at roads from a perspective of perceived and conceived spaces—places that are made of cement and asphalt where cars ply through. The supposed use of roads change when protests are being done. Protesters look at roads beyond its conventional use as for them, roads are lived spaces where they could air out their situations, concerns, and fights on social issues. Their goal is to make the masses understand national and international political issues and included them in the said discourses.

## THE MASSES AS PART OF THE DISCOURSES ON NEOLIBERALISM

As the mass movement is getting stronger, activists utilize the public sphere in expressing their political agenda, calling attention upon political issues and exploitation – issues that they believe are not being discussed by the government and parliament. To put things simply, a public sphere is a space where conflicting groups call out the attention of each other. This study looks at protests as a symbolic political act that gives activists the opportunity reach out to a bigger population.

Jurgen Habermas first conceptualized the bourgeois public sphere – a space where private individuals discuss and exchange political ideas (1991). It was considered bourgeois as these discussions usually happened in tea houses, beer pubs, universities, and other places where only the financially-privileged were able to access. This failed to include the greater masses in the relevant discourses that affect them, enabling the bourgeois to monopolize and control the decision in the public sphere.

To democratize public spaces, Foucault (1980), in his concept of discourse politics, attempted to empower marginalized groups by denouncing dominant discourses so that groups with varying interests can be able to convey their specific concerns. He added that discourse is power as the laws of discourses set the criteria on what is rational and true, and to speak against these will put one into marginalization. All discourses are constructed by individuals and groups, and may be used as a strategy to topple down dominant discourses.

Counter-discourses give way to political struggles through remembering the historical memory of imperialist exploitation. The dominance of one discourse is the achievement of initial struggles for meanings and authority. There will no triumph without struggles, and so there can be no power without conflict.

The semicolonial and semifeudal argument can continually be observed in the counter-discourses of BAYAN. Up until now, discourses on the victory of the mass movement on toppling down the dictatorial regime of Ferdinand Marcos is still being expressed. They still get hold of their achievement in being able to close down United States military bases in the Philippines (History of Bagong Alyansang Makabayan. n.d.). The said discourses reflect their stands on current issues such as the implementation of the Visiting Forces Agreement-Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (VFA-EDCA) between the government of the Philippines and the United States of America.

McCarthy (1990) criticized Foucault for devoiding an individual of political action as the latter only looked at the act only as a ‘effect of power.’ He changed an individual’s agency to an ‘anonymous and impersonal power.’ McCarthy added that if individuals do not form their own actions, their political act can only be considered as an involuntary bodily function.

To resolve McCarthy’s criticism of Foucault, we should look at protesting as a performative action, as opposed to an exposing act to answer the questions of agency and normativity.



Figure 1. Protests of organizations allied to Bagong Alyansang Makabayan, with the call “Junk EDCA” circled by the author.

Judith Butler (2015) expanded her performative theory in her work “Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly.” She explained that protests are dynamic under dominant political and economic situations as it examines what certain phenomena mean and how these happen. She considered protests as a collective and form of performative action, and told that precarity, or the dissolution of living conditions, is an influential force and theme in demonstrations today.

The expansion of performativity theory from speech acts to concerted actions embody the primary idea of the performative theory of assembly. The integration of physical bodies show a dimension of expression that cannot be brought down to a level of speech act, as the fact that people are collectively “speaking out” and they are not anymore constricted to the thought of speech alone. Butler further mentioned that these integration of bodies, along with the unities on issues with peoples all over the world, gives us new knowledge on perceiving the public space of appearance that is essential in politics. Lastly, she pointed out that, “the people...are not just produced by their vocalized claims, but also by the conditions of possibility of their appearance... and by their actions, and so as part of embodied performance.”

## CONCLUSION

Butler’s expansion of the performativity theory is significant to the studies on mass and social movements. Protest actions involve thousands of people, not just in the Philippines, but in many parts of the world. Their collectively struggle against the attacks of neoliberal policies show that there is a huge failure in the capitalist system at the global level.

From the conventional perception that roads are for vehicles, it is being by activists into spaces for enlightening and arousing the Filipino masses on complicated issues that affect their daily lives. Before, sociopolitical issues were mainly discussed in the four walls of the Parliament. Through

the 'parliament of the streets,' the often-ignored masses are being included in the discourses, further democratizing the processes of political interaction.

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