

## **Manila's Developmental Regression as an Effect of the Mass' Collective Struggle Beyond the Political Dimension and Towards a Sociological Standpoint of Identity, Memory and Power**

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### **ABSTRACT OF THE STUDY**

Manila serves as capital of the Philippines where it holds a vivid history rooted from the golden years traced back from the Manila-Acapulco Galleon Trade, yet the city remains to face deeply-seated societal problems such as overpopulation, poverty, pollution and rampant crises. This paper assesses Manila's economical and physical regression from a political economy standpoint towards an understanding of everyday living from the city's gated communities to a disparity of perspectives seen from the *ibang-tao* and *hindi-ibang-tao* Filipino perspectives of the public and private spheres. Social realities have affected Filipinos' identity and mindset where a shared space has become a place where only companies, and local government units thrive equipped with an obligation to the space concerned resulting in a disintegration of the people or the public's collective memory hampering the city's overall development.

### **KEYWORDS:**

Manila, Political Economy, Memory, Power, Filipino Identity, Urban Blight, Developmental Regression, Cultural Confusion, Lefebvrist Rhythm analyst

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“As we shape our cities, so do our cities shape us.”  
-Felino A. Pelafox, Jr.

## **Manila as ‘The Pearl of the Orient’: A Vivid History**

The city of Manila is one of South East Asia’s oldest cities as its history dates back to 1571 with the Spaniards’ confrontation with Rajah Sulayman (World Facts Index, n.d.). Manila had been the center of Spanish activity for almost 300 years and soon after, the city boomed during the era of Manila-Acapulco Galleon Trade – the world’s first global economy where the city was recognized as the “Pearl of the Orient”. Soon, the city was shaped from the country’s different colonizers that served various cultural and social influences, and was also greatly influenced by the terrors of warfare. Still, Manila excelled through the 1800’s. Public transportation, witnessed by Manila’s trains first established in 1891, is among the pioneers of South East Asia. In fact, Manila’s Manila Light Rail Transit System is the first metro system in the region (Freeman, 1913).

### **Present Situation**

On its present situation, the city’s population emerged exponentially with over 14 million registered residents while 37% live in shanty areas (Palafox, Jr., 2014). The city became known for its misconduct and crimes (murder, theft, prostitution, etc.), polluted streets and derelict buildings. Unfortunately, the once beautiful and thriving city of Manila faces the issue of urban blight despite the country’s economy’s promising social-ecological advantages. Urban blight is defined by Collins Dictionary as “the decay and deterioration of an urban area due to neglect or age”. The city of Manila has suffered from urban blight as many of the buildings constructed in its heyday have deteriorated over time as a result of negligence and poor economic standing decades ago. Thus, the city lags behind more modern cities such as Makati, Ortigas and Fort Bonifacio Global City.

One solution from the government is to seek more demands from public-private partnership programs. The Philippine Business Inquirer reports that more than 50 projects are given to private developers (Dumlao, 2012). Some private firms dominate Manila’s seizing low-cost opportunities expanding unregulated developments that led to the country’s robust economy, yet further degrading the urban region. Both theories give the same conclusion that Manila’s urban degradation became a result of the Philippines’ history, political mindset and economical behavior.

Scottish Geographer Neil Smith asserts that the globe continues to restructure its geographic space as a response to crisis and a long-term solution to the struggles of capitalism such as high unemployment, falling average rates of profit, etc. (Smith, 2008). Despite being the country alleged capital city, Manila still has the lowest unemployment rate in the country according to the National Statistics Report on Labour Force Survey (Felongo, 2013). Furthermore, Manila is the country’s second most pollution-prone city next to Baguio city with 22 micrograms per cubic meter of air reported last year by a World Health Organization study (GMA News Online, 2014). These struggles continue to haunt the city of Manila despite current initiatives from the government and other Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with the initiative to support the ailing city.

## Manila's Ecological Decay

In the perspective of social ecology, Manila's urban decay and overall environmental degradation is a result of space, time and organization deeply rooted from its history; urban decay became a result of age and existence. As an example, Manila Zoo became a target of criticism by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) from the zoo's deteriorated infrastructure and rusty cages that are not conducive for the animals<sup>1</sup>. The city's historical context including rapid urbanization and suffering from war's massive destruction must be considered in this theory. Other factors of Manila's blight are an increase in population due to migration of Filipinos from rural areas to urban cities mainly in Metro Manila, and the rapidly emerging technological trends, which are also especially apparent in other Asian cities like Tokyo and Singapore.

Aside from rapid urbanization, Manila's streets remain thronged with people from day to night. Infrastructures to house people remain increasing, further decreasing its green areas as an effect. The city's green areas are threatened by private developments as the government remains in need of funds to finance its public spaces<sup>2</sup>. Inevitably, a city facing an extremity of population imposes risks on disasters such as flooding. Dr. Nereus Acosta, former lawmaker and current presidential adviser for Environmental Protection and general manager of the Laguna Lake Development Authority, appeal to real estate developers to consider ecology in shaping and constructing their master plans. As he mentioned during his past year's Clean Air Act lecture, "Economy without regard to ecology is disastrous in the long run."<sup>3</sup>

## Manila as Structured by Political Economy

However, the dilapidation of Manila hinges not only on social trends and deteriorated ecology, but also over political and economic agendas covered by the theory of political economy. Political economists would argue on the basis of political and administrative actors from the government and developers. Shatkin's article concluded that privatization of urban and regional planning defined most of Metro Manila's development. Joel Guinto's article on Philippine Inquirer expounds on the administration of President Benigno Aquino and his plans regarding urban developments. He plans to increase infrastructure spending to five percent by the end of his term in 2016 to address Manila's decaying infrastructures.

## Divide Between the Public and Private Spheres

At the root of Manila's protracted development is a lack of a compelling public sector vision persuading private developers to enact their own vision of Manila (Shatkin, 2005). During Ramos' administration from 1992-1998, the public sector remains to have a relatively strong engagement as seen from the efforts focused on the development of flyovers, particularly along the key EDSA corridor. However since the mid-1990s, public-private partnerships have dominated with the focus has been on expanding the transportation and rail systems. As a result, developers are immersed in infrastructure and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://blog.petaasiapacific.com/animals-in-entertainment/10-more-reasons-the-manila-zoo-should-close>

<sup>2</sup> '6 Ecological Issues That Affect Real Estate of Metro Manila'. *Zip Match Blog* 2015. Web. Accessed: 18 Feb. 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

large-scale transportation systems developments such as Manuel V. Pangilinan, the current owner of Smart Telecommunications, is also the owner of Metro Pacific Tollways Corporation (MPIC) that holds a generous share from various road developments from the North and Luzon Expressways (NLEX). Further, both private firms MPIC and the San Miguel-Citra collaborate with current President Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino regarding road systems specifically the NLEX-SLEX project (Dumlao, 2012). However, the divide among private developers causes disparity in vision alignment that further complicates the structure of Manila.

### Harvey and Mulder’s Organization and Filipino Identity

Dutch Anthropologist, Neil Mulders, mentioned the importance of nationalism in shaping an identity as a nation, “As many columnists, educators and officials would have it, the absence of vigorous nationalist sentiment is at the root of all sorts of social problems”. Most Filipinos have molded an identity that mirrors societal issues and sentiments. In return, anthropologists and sociologist Harvey have viewed the city’s organization as a result of the great divide between public and private spheres in the city.

The division of the spheres of Manila created people’s lack of sympathy with their national government. Manileños have viewed the government as ‘*Ibang-tao*’ instead of ‘*Hindi-Ibang-Tao*’ (Pe-Pua et. al, 2000). Sikolohiyang Pilipino differentiates the two perspectives of belongingness where *Ibang-tao* is viewed without affiliation or without a sense of belongingness, while *Hindi-Ibang-Tao* is viewed with familiarity and kinship. When viewed as *ibang-tao*, there is a view of disparity with regards to a group or individuals that creates indifference and lack of empathy. For example, if one is regarded as *ibang-tao*, the interaction can range from “*pakikitungo* (transaction/civility with), *pakikisalamuha* (interaction with), to *pakikilahok* (joining/participating), *pakikibagay* (in-conformity with/in-accord with), and to *pakikisama* (being along with) or even *pakikibaka* or resistance” (Ibid.). On the other hand when one is regarded as *hindi-ibang-tao*, one can expect “*pakikipagpalagayang-loob* (being in-rapport/understanding/acceptance with), or *pakikisangkot* (getting involved), or the highest level of *pakikiisa* or being one with or in unity” (Ibid.).

As a consequence of this perspective, the idea of shared space has only become a place where street vendors, electricity companies, local government units, and business owners can do as they please. As individuals, we perform what is just to the society, but the collective effort as public citizens remain lagging behind for a city such as Manila. For David Harvey, Manileños view the government as an entity they can either tolerate or resist, as seen by numerous street protests in Manila, rather than seeing the government or the state as an entity for their rights as a member of the state. In a city where people are indifferent, they are not ignorant yet negligent to the issues causing an air of tolerance. Further, Filipinos are known for tightly knitted relations to their family and this may cause an easier disparity among non-family members, much more larger entities such as businesses and the government.

Another possible justification regarding public and private disparity or the mass’ indifference can be traced to anthropologist Richard Stone’s phenomenon of the ‘transitory possession (or ownership) of property’ (Steinberg, 2000). From this perspective, Filipinos believe that a space may belong to an individual or family until they are displaced with an individual or an entity with more legitimate power. Illegal form of settlements such as shanty areas is one of the examples of this concept wherein there is a

temporary mindset that provokes an uncaring mindset from the civilians. Therefore, Filipinos tend to distrust each other in public spaces and the much-desired concept of '*bayanihan*' or communal unity and cooperation is regrettably absent<sup>4</sup>.

As a result, a perspective and glimpses of Filipino's value of '*Utang na Loob*' or an obligation rooted from gratitude can only be inferred from the private spheres. It is often secluded from the collective public sphere and can only be present in private spheres. Private developers and businesses participate in *utang na loob* as they are obliged to reciprocate help, support, favors, and even money. The public sphere, on the other hand, becomes the crowd of distrusted men.

### **Lefebvrist Rhythmanalyst and Daily Living**

Filipinos then mirror this behavior resulting from a breach between the government and civilians to a more conventional setting of the streets where Filipinos may tend to distrust their '*kapwa*' if there is no familiarity already established. In Lefebvre's theory of rhythms, an analysis is made not only through observing words from outside but to the rhythm internally through the breathing and movement of the muscle and limbs. Lefebvre uses and observes everyday life to make his assertions. According to this theory, political power understands how to manipulate *time*, *calendar*, and *daily routine* of men eventually controlling human development, which he calls 'mobilization' (Goonewardena, et al., 2008). When Lefebvre speaks of mobilization he is thinking of men subjected to the rhythm of politics and technology. Simple daily activities such as walking and eating depend on multiple factors that formed the habit. His concept of *production of space* in a city would deal with the slow-moving yet impactful movements in the city such as the perspectives of *ibang-tao* and *hindi-ibang-tao*.

According to Lefebvre's Rhythmanalyst, every day life mirrors everyday conflicts. Quoting Goonewardena, et al. - "everyday life becomes a stage upon which the conflict between the indestructible nature-rhythms and the socio-economic processes are played out in dramatic fashion."<sup>5</sup> Through Lefebvre's rhythm of the cities, it analyzes street rhythms and the overall ambience and atmosphere of the city emanating from its people, commodities and architecture. In Manila, one can observe the dominant walls and gated residential communities that illustrate high system of security and protection. The lack of trust to the public realm, from the government and to its entities, show to daily living wherein Filipinos are promptly inclined to produce gated walls in their own residential units. In each residential unit where a family resides, the inclination towards communicating to the '*ibang-tao*' such as a community is often doubted and considered unnatural unless its with regards to a family.

### **Manileños' Adaptive Coping Strategy and Memory Disintegration**

The disparity between the public and the private spheres provoked a 'Bahala Na' coping strategy that can be derived from "bathala na" or laying troubles off to a god or a supreme being. It is a Filipino cultural value without exact English translation, but most Western psychologists recognize 'bahala na' with American fatality or simply resignation to challenging situations or an adaptive coping strategy (Pe-

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<sup>4</sup> Everything-Filipino.com, (n.d.). *Filipino Culture: Bayanihan: The Filipino Value that must be retained*. [online] Available at: [http://www.everything-filipino.com/Filipino\\_culture\\_bayanihan.html](http://www.everything-filipino.com/Filipino_culture_bayanihan.html) [Accessed 5 Mar. 2015].

<sup>5</sup> Goonewardena, et al. - *Space, Difference, Everyday Life* - Reading Henri Lefebvre. 2008.

Pua and Protacio-Marcelino, 2000). According to Sikolohiyang Pilipino, most Filipinos engage in the bahala na attitude as a culture-influenced adaptive coping strategy when faced with problems and challenging situations. This attitude often engages an individual to withdraw from an engagement or crisis or avoidance from personal responsibility.

Due to prevailing implications rising from numerous issues of social inequity and political transparency and accountability, it became the standard that remains to be a challenge. Instead of Manileños creating a better community in their city, they would remain suspended in distasteful thoughts and resignation coupled with the negative connotation of “bahala na”.

Where does the public cry and when does the voices of the public become audible when the representation of the public itself becomes a blur? Harvey stresses the importance of public opinion and public space in shaping political activities and relational meanings in a geographical area’s transformation. Public space is where people can represent themselves in a larger population and by claiming space in public, various social groups themselves become part of the public (Harvey, 2004). This in return, increases responsibility and responsiveness in the realm of the public sphere.

Blurred lines in identity and acquisitions grow without the creation of public spaces where people can identify themselves with each other. Civilians represent each person in the city and this is where the idea of ‘collective memories’ is shaped, which is crucial to forming and strengthening national identity. Nationalism and patriotism is strengthened through identification with the cities. However, collective memories in Manila such as the Manila massacre from 1945 where 110,000 civilians died or the Mendiola massacre last 1987 from Cory Aquino’s term are often left forgotten unlike days while the state commemorates itself through widely commercialized events such as varied sports events such as boxing – or the victory of the famous Manny Pacquiao, or from a victory of a beauty queen. It is in such marketable moments that people spontaneously express their sense of nationalism and evoke a sense of ‘bayanihan’ in the national community. This reality mirrors how civilians and simple men remain forgotten. The people remain indifferent and so are the issues.

The role of religious groups grew in the country’s identity and public representation as a result of the tension between both public and private spheres. The Philippine church plays a big role to the mass as demonstrated in mass allegations against former president Marcos and Estrada (Mulder, 2013). The country’s religious drive is individual-oriented in its approving of a person’s moral worth.

### **Identity Confusion and Conclusion**

In Manila’s developmental regression illustrated by the everyday living of the masses, it mirrors deep issues of the country shaped by its history and wide disparity from the private and public sectors. The public space remains to appear as a domain of impersonal relations to the vast majority, where civilians tend only to one’s political and economic interest without a more personal approach of belongingness seen in the “hindi-ibang-tao” perspective. It is the arena reported in the media and marketed segments that provide transient by which the spirit of oneness or communal feelings arise.

Thus, everyday Manila culture of nationalism radiates from fleeting forms of entertainment and endless distractions, while giving little care to their collective public space leaving it to disintegrate and leaving the rest either to the government or what they perceive as the public in-charge of the space or to the financially obsessed businesses or what they perceive as the private sector.

The idea of genuine nationalism and identification with the state remains a question, as politics is not seen as belonging or concerning to the people's affairs. The identification of the mass remains in a far end from the notion of neither public space nor the private space, which results in gated and indifferent individuals as a collective mass or people of Manila City. As a consequence, most Filipinos feel they had better focus on survival and the safety of their family or take solace in religion. This identity confusion slows down development initiatives of the country's oldest city. David Harvey affirms that values of authenticity, locality, history, culture, collective memories and tradition overall play an important role and responsibility that "opens a space for proper political thought and action within which alternatives can be both devised and pursued" (Harvey, 2001). No single issue is addressed singularly as everything connects to one element to another.

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