

Philippine Society and the Challenge of Modernity*

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Introduction

I wish to thank Mrs. Maribel G. Ongpin and the Ateneo de Manila University for inviting me to give the first Jaime V. Ongpin Annual Memorial Lecture on Public Service in Business and Government. I am deeply honored by this assignment, being an admirer of the courage and wisdom of the man we fondly remember by this Memorial Lecture.

Here was a truly modern man who dared to measure the government of his time by the values it was supposed to represent. Jimmy Ongpin's outspokenness in a time of trepidation was instrumental in the release of the rest of our people from the timidity to which Martial Law had accustomed them. It is in appreciation of this that I offer this lecture to his memory.

Until recently, to modernize was an option that every society could either take up or ignore. The manifest link between modernity and economic progress provided developing nations with a powerful reason to follow the road earlier taken by the West. Even so, not everyone was convinced about this road. Some countries actually chose value-friendly slow growth over the West's value-disrupting fast growth.

Today globalization is radically erasing that choice. To modernize has become a legal and moral imperative for every society that seeks acceptance in the larger community of nations. Nations are virtually being commanded to modernize or perish.

A case in point is Afghanistan. This country's basic infrastructure was completely destroyed by more than two decades of war. Its social

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institutions ground to a halt, leaving in their wake the ghosts of a nation that has become illiterate, hungry, desperate, and suspicious of the outside world. Modern education, which had flourished through the decades of the '50s and the '60s, vanished almost overnight, and the metaphysics of a fundamentalist Islam took over the nation's soul like an awesome shadow. The harsh rules of the Taliban's brand of Islam became the core of a coercive social order. Under the direction of the Saudi-born terrorist-millionaire, Osama bin Laden, the country was transformed into a spawning ground of the world's most dangerous terrorists. On September 11, 2001 the world woke up to this nightmare.

In the past, the world was content to view the tragedy of such societies as Afghanistan purely in the humanitarian terms of refugees to be fed and sheltered, and fragile governments to be nudged in the direction of greater respect for human rights, democracy, and a more open way of life. Today, the kinds of risks previously associated only with America calls "rogue states" -- those with the capability to launch weapons of mass destruction -- are being monitored in every society that has a potential for sheltering terrorist networks, dirty money, drug dealers, and criminal syndicates. Failure to comply with the modern standards of civilized behavior in the community of nations opens a country and its citizens to the threat of crippling isolation, sanctions, and military attack. The enforcement of global anti-money laundering norms, the formation of an International Criminal Court, and more recently the US-led counter-terrorist campaign, exemplify this resolve.

Opponents of capitalist globalization see in these developments the larger danger that a few powerful governments led by the US might monopolize the disciplinary powers reserved to the international community. On several occasions, the United States has shown that it can easily trump the UN whenever its own national interests are at stake. Madeleine Albright once articulated this superpower principle thus: "We will behave multilaterally when we can, and unilaterally when we must." Without discounting the crucial importance of these related issues, I will leave them aside for now and focus on the main subject of this paper – the imperative and challenge of modernity.

"To be modern," Marshall Berman wrote, "is to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one's world and oneself in

perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air.”

Berman meant this as a portrait of the human condition in modern society, but I believe it is also a graphic description of the situation of Filipino overseas workers. They who bravely wrench themselves free from everything that is familiar -- family, community, and nation – in order to participate in cultures of which they know nothing, to earn a living among strange peoples that welcome their labor but not always their person, in a time of great uncertainty and danger, in a world pregnant with the possibilities of personal disintegration and re-invention. I consider our OFWs the “true moderns”, and my sense is that a close look at their situation may illustrate for us the realities and options facing us as a nation.

“To be a modernist,” continued Berman, “is to make oneself somehow at home in the maelstrom, to make its rhythms one’s own, to move within its currents in search of the forms of reality, of beauty, of freedom, of justice that its fervid and perilous flow allows.”

This characterization is interesting because it applies to individuals as well as to whole nations. To be a modern does not mean to be engulfed in the maelstrom. It is rather to have the audacity to create a home within it, to master its rhythms, and to move within its currents. It is not to drown, but to flow with its tides; it is to live and survive in a frenzied and eternally spinning environment trusting and using whatever personal strength one can summon from within. At once we think of those intrepid adventurers who work all week but fill Europe’s otherwise empty cathedrals every Sunday, or gather spontaneously in the central squares of Hong Kong, Singapore, and Jeddah to recreate a bit of the hometown in the bosom of a faraway land.

The overseas Filipino worker is like a turtle: she carries her home on her back wherever she goes. She may go away, she may cut all physical ties, clear the deck of all entanglements, and harden herself for the rigors of isolation and powerlessness and abuse, but in whatever she does, she continually draws from the core self that her native culture had put together for her. No matter if she is alone, she

never feels totally unprotected. Researchers of Filipino migrant workers have taken note of this remarkable gift and refer to it in various ways – resiliency, resourcefulness, courage, survival instinct, practicality, spiritual fortitude, or simply the good old “bahala na” attitude surfacing as a positive virtue. I think of it simply as the Filipino way of being modern.

We don't need to go away, of course, to experience modernity. Our own society has been rapidly transformed in ways that evoke Berman's metaphor of the maelstrom. Some who grew up in an earlier time often feel like immigrants in their own society. They have problems living with the new and pine for the simplicity and integrity of the old.

But theirs is a world that is permanently gone. Modern technology has changed our lives in ways we cannot begin to imagine. Satellite television, the fax machine, the personal computer, the Internet, the cellular phone and the whole amazing culture of “texting”, just to take the most recent examples, have massively altered the way we experience and look at the world, and relate to one another. To fail to realize this is to risk isolation and disorientation.

This is probably the right moment to define some terms. **Modernity** is the term we use to refer to a mode of experiencing the world as an environment of ceaseless change. The complex process that brings this change about is called **Modernization**. **Modernist** is the term we apply to those who thrive and make themselves at home in such a world, while **Traditionalist** refers to those who are intimidated by the new and derive comfort in nostalgic recollections of the past.

The response to modernity may be passive or it may be active. *Passive modernists* are caught in the swirl of a world they cannot hope to control; theirs is a life of constant coping under pain of isolation. *Active modernists*, in contrast, try to assert control over some aspects of their situation by anticipating events and planning ahead; theirs is a life of adaptation, non-stop experimentation and passionate engagement.

Passive traditionalists retreat into their cocoon of memories and become grumpy classicists – they measure everything by the

venerable canons of the familiar. *Active traditionalists*, on the other hand, take up the ideologies and worldviews of the past and invest them with eternal meanings; they organize constituencies against modernity and strive to return humanity back to the fold of an idealized past. They often seek validation for their activism in the language of fundamentalism, and some of them, like Osama bin Laden, can be very dangerous.

My lecture this morning concerns our country's transition to modernity. The questions I try to answer are the following:

- (1) Is there one modernity or are there many? What does it mean to shape our transition to modernity?
- (2) What have been the driving forces of modernization in our country and who have been its most abiding constituencies? And conversely, what have been the most important obstacles to modernization, and who have been its main opponents?
- (3) What have been the unintended consequences of modernization? And what kind of adaptations has it bred?
- (4) And finally, what dangers and opportunities will modernization throw into our path in the future, and how shall we deal with them?

1. One modernity or many?

Development theory or the social science of modernization encouraged the belief that human progress follows a unilinear course, and that the West shows the rest of the societies of this planet the image of their own future. Modernization and Westernization became one and the same. Under its spell, the agenda of development came to mean: (a) the methodical cultivation of the Western values of instrumental rationality, secularism, and individualism; (b) the establishment of a modern representative state, and (c) the creation of an industrialized market-driven economy.

Because the Philippines was Asia's most Westernized nation after the Second World War, everyone looked up to Filipinos to show the way forward. The Americans left us a legacy that included an

advanced public school system that produced modern individuals, a constitutional government patterned after that of the United States, and a market economy run by a growing Filipino entrepreneurial class. All the basic ingredients of Western-style development were present, and so there was no question that the Philippines would emerge phoenix-like from the ashes of the war as the most advanced country in Asia.

That expectation, as we all know, did not materialize. One theory focuses on the persistence of a dual economy – an economy with a small capitalist manufacturing sector that fails to connect with and energize a huge feudalistic agricultural base. A genuine agrarian reform program, the theory goes, would have spurred the growth of a domestic market and thus of a manufacturing sector, but this was thwarted at every turn by a politically powerful landlord class.

Another theory singles out the dependent or colonial character of the Philippine political economy as the main cause of its underdevelopment. According to this view, U.S. geo-political interests in the Asia-Pacific region dictated the retention of the two large American bases in the country after independence. A parasitic Filipino elite used these bases as a leverage to extract trade concessions for the benefit of the sugar barons who controlled the government. The United States relied on them to keep the country free from communists and accessible to American interests.

The truth probably lies somewhere between the two pictures drawn by these two theories. Successive administrations oscillated between a program of industrialization and a stress on agricultural modernization without committing sustained support to either one over the long term. While an educated and highly-trained middle class grew steadily thanks to an expanding educational system, the gaps in wealth also widened. The needs of a rapidly growing population ate up much of the economic growth, and this further exacerbated the poverty of the many from year to year.

Meanwhile, some of our Asian neighbors began to hitch their economies to the dynamic sectors of an expanding world economy. Charismatic strongmen wielded power in these societies. Using the immense power and resources of the state, they created their own

domestic bourgeoisie that would catalyze the industrialization of their economies. State intervention became the key to the attainment of late-development in the countries we now call the tiger economies – Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, and Malaysia. These countries managed to craft their own modernity, while Filipinos were still debating the wisdom of the textbook model of capitalist industrialization.

In 1972, Marcos changed the course of things by declaring his own regime of “constitutional authoritarianism”, in the hope of duplicating the success of South Korea under Park Chung Hee. His strategy was daring and ambitious, but the economic resources it required could not be provided by an international economy that was reeling from the impact of two oil crises, falling commodity prices, and unprecedented defaults on foreign loans.

But even so, we may view the Marcos experiment as the boldest attempt by any Filipino president to deviate from the American model of development. Marcos targeted the big landed estates. He believed that an unreformed land-based oligarchy was the biggest obstacle to capitalist growth and sought to strip it of its power. In this he was thinking like a World Bank modernist. But Marcos had other things in mind. He saw the value of myths in the formation of a national identity and in the forging of a social consensus. He commissioned a group of academics to dig deep into the country’s pre-Hispanic past, and assigned his trusted advisers to write a Filipino ideology, which he promoted through the schools and the mass media. Though flawed and excessive, effectively exploiting cultural themes to legitimize authoritarian rule, Marcos showed the way to an alternative modernity. But, he and his cronies, however, could not wait to fill their own pockets using the power of the state, prompting Jimmy Ongpin to coin the term “crony capitalism” to describe the Philippine economy under Marcos. At the end of the day, Marcos forsook his modernist vision and remained every inch an unreconstructed traditionalist.

2. Driving forces and obstacles to modernization

Modernist impulses have flourished in our society mainly via four important channels, namely: (a) the school, (b) the market, (c) the

mass media, and (d) overseas work. On the other hand, modernity has been impeded by three basic forces, namely: (a) the family, (b) the Church, and (c) traditional politics.

Channels of Modernization

(a) *Education*. As it was then, when the American teachers known as the Thomasites first arrived on our shores a hundred years ago, so it is today, through the popular computer schools that are making the new science of information accessible to the lower classes -- the school remains the most important workshop of modernity. Filipino parents know that only formal education can rescue their children from the vicious cycle of poverty. It is formal education that has created the Filipino middle class.

Unlike traditionalist cultures that look upon the modern school as the workshop of the devil or the incubator of dangerous ideas, our culture has always nurtured an instinctive faith in the miracle of education. The modern school is without doubt the most important channel for social mobility, a fact that makes us wonder even more why we have allowed the state of our public educational system to languish in neglect.

(b) *The Market*. By "market," I mean here the wide arena of exchange through which products are introduced and traded. From the moment our ancestors began to trade with the Chinese junk boat merchants, we became aware that there is a world outside waiting to be explored. We are a nation of tireless shoppers, and our fondness for imported goods is legendary. We often see it as a colonial hangover, but in many ways, our receptiveness to things foreign is what makes us so open to the modern. Goods are the bearers of entire lifestyles, and as a people we have always been friendly to imports. Unlike the Japanese, we have no emotional or insular attachment to our own products. For a nation that seeks to develop its own productive system, this is not exactly something to rejoice over. But it is what makes us Asia's most modern people.

Over time, as we learn the techniques of the modern, we adjust our ways, and improvise and improve upon the imported. To be sure, we have not been passive recipients of foreign goods and technologies.

Just to take one example, McDonalds's entry into the local food sector launched the whole notion of "fast-food," a way of delivering service in a fast-paced, efficient, inexpensive, and cheerful way without sacrificing quality and hygiene. Today it is not unusual to see Filipino fast-food chains doing better than their foreign counterparts.

(c) *The Mass Media*. Television, in particular, has exerted a profound influence on the way we live. Because of the pervasiveness of English, we are a natural market for American programs and American movies, which are the most effective carriers of modernity. Unlike newspapers, TV cuts through class barriers. The most impoverished families would do without basic furniture but not a television set. TV has always been for our people a window to what they can be, and to a way of life they can aspire to have. In many ways, the long exposure to American television has given millions of Filipino overseas workers the basic cosmopolitanism that allows them to adapt easily to other cultures. Again, this is a quality of the modern person.

Today, the Internet is playing the same radical role in our lives shown earlier by television. Internet use in our society is in its early stages still, but the great class divide that I thought would prevent the children of poor families from participating in the new world it opens up today no longer seems insurmountable. Computer schools and Internet shops are sprouting all over, and while it is still a largely middle class tool, with the diminishing costs of computers, the ability to use the Internet is becoming more and more a lifeline to the future for the children of the poor.

E-mail and e-groups are reweaving the various threads of the Filipino nation, be they families, regional and linguistic communities, school-based affinities, professional associations or hobby groups dispersed around the globe. These electronic tools are also spawning new communities, new social movements, and new cultural and political forums never before thought possible. The speed and simplicity with which these modern tools work have transformed the whole world of communication. Interestingly, instead of obliterating the content of the old cultures and erasing old ties, the Internet has also served as a resuscitator and intensifier of primordial identities. But unlike traditional loyalties, the new electronic communities do not engulf the

whole person. Withdrawal from their fold can be quick and as easy as typing “unsubscribe”. No explanation is needed or required.

(d) *Overseas work*. Finally, there is overseas employment, about which I spoke earlier and on which I wish to devote a few more notes here. If one examines Philippine social history, one would be hard-pressed to find any other phenomenon that has had as dramatic, as deep, and as comprehensive an impact on the collective fate and private lives of Filipinos as overseas employment.

Short-term overseas work of the last 25 years has irreversibly shaped the Philippine economy, modified the bureaucracy, and transformed the Filipino family -- the relations between spouses, and between parents and children. It has changed the physical landscape of the remotest barrios, now teeming with the ubiquitous “katas ng Saudi” (literally, “sap from Saudi”) homes. It has transposed career patterns, consumer tastes, status systems, and even modes of spirituality.

It has altered the nature of consular work abroad, and made new demands on foreign policy. It has liberated Filipino women contract workers from traditional bondage to the men in their families. It has allowed them to nurture their private self as a worthy project, free from the constraints of tradition, and away from the unrelenting and often suffocating pressure of family obligations.

Within only one generation, the foreign travel that overseas contract work has made possible has brought our nation into the very heart of the modern and global age.

I call this phenomenon and the sum total of its effects the ***Filipino Diaspora*** – a collection of experiences arising from the “doubled relationship or dual loyalty that migrants, exiles, and refugees have to places – their connections to the space they currently occupy and their continuing involvement with ‘back home’.” (Lavie and Swedenburg, 1996, p.14)

It is not the travel itself that is new, but the purpose and magnitude in which it is being undertaken, and the various unexpected consequences it has brought about. What was originally conceived as a stop-gap measure to alleviate domestic unemployment and to help

the country pay for its oil imports in the mid-70s has become a lucrative industry for recruiters, a steady source of foreign exchange for the government and a popular and instant exit from poverty for millions of poor families.

The gender shift in migration may be regarded as among the most revolutionary events in the history of the Filipino family. Filipino women in traditional households were homebound and institutionally deprived of the opportunities for higher education, a professional career, and a life of their own. But as the OCW program successfully penetrated the international market for domestic helpers, tradition crumbled and millions of Filipino women found themselves suddenly released from their tacit vows of obedience to the males in their families – their fathers, uncles, brothers, and husbands. To go abroad, to work in foreign homes became for them an act of liberation. This phenomenon triggered the out-migration of Filipino women for other overseas jobs – as singers, dancers, and hostesses in Japan, as factory workers in Japan, Taiwan and South Korea, and as “care providers” in Singapore, Hong Kong, Italy, Spain, and the United States. A corollary route was intercultural marriage, which was extensively promoted by “mail-order-bride” or match-making agencies.

Obstacles to modernization

Of the persistent obstacles to modernization, there are three that I would like to briefly take up here.

(a) *Family*. The first is the family. Its grip on the individual is one of unequalled tenacity. From childhood, the concept of obligation to parents and siblings is drummed into the Filipino’s consciousness. Childhood is a protracted phase in the life of the average Filipino, and so the relationships he develops in later life tend not to be as salient and as powerful as his attachment to the family. Thus, the family nearly always trumps the nation. The Filipino’s evolution into a full citizen is severely slowed down by his deep familial attachments. We have not been able to achieve full nationhood because of the power of our families, and the historian Alfred McCoy was fully justified to label Philippine society an “anarchy of families.” This is not to say that the strong attachment to family has not been functional to the

individual Filipino. On the contrary, I believe that this facet of his personality is what has probably lent the Filipino some measure of emotional stability as he makes his way into the modern world. All this is changing of course. And as I said before, migration and mobility are significantly eroding the influence of the Filipino family in the shaping of the Filipino persona in the last 25 years.

(b) *The Church.* The same might be said of the Catholic Church. While it provided a sanctuary and a secure language of dissent in crucial political conjunctures such as during Martial Law, the Church has also been the source of the most stubborn resistance to the formulation of a rational and responsible population planning policy. Its views on the use of contraceptives are incredibly pre-modern. While we cannot argue against the right of any religious community to air its views on an issue they regard as moral, we nevertheless expect our leaders, insofar as they are officials of a secular state, to avoid mixing national policy with their personal religious beliefs. Alas, this has not been possible. The political clout of the Catholic Church in our society is such that even the most liberal-minded politician would think twice before crossing swords with Church leaders. And so we go on as a nation pretending that population growth is not an issue worthy of serious attention.

Yet the reality of many unwanted pregnancies and countless starving children dying a slow death in the poorest families is so urgent that most of our people just proceed to do what they think they must do in spite of their religion. They seek relief through unsafe illegal abortions. The desire to take charge of their lives in some ways is there, but the state has not been disposed to lend a helping hand to actualize that wish.

[c] *Traditional politics.* More than the family or the Church, however, it is the traditional politicians who have prevented our people from fully taking up the challenge of modernity. Unable to justify their bid for public office in terms of carefully thought-out visions and plans, traditional politicians operate by tapping existing networks of interpersonal obligations and by exploiting the short-term material needs of voters. Once elected, they help themselves to a share in a shameless pork-barrel system that allows them not only to recover the money they spent during election but also to fund the old system

of patronage. It is for this reason that Filipino politics has remained a profoundly personalistic exercise. Traditional politicians keep it that way because it is the only game they can win. The moderns shy away from its filth, its compromises, and its violence. They tend to abstain from electoral politics until they realize that left unchallenged, the stupid and the corrupt will always dominate public life.

3. Dilemmas, contradictions, and adaptations

This brings us, I think, to the contradictions and dilemmas of the Philippine transition to modernity.

The transition to modernity is toughest when, to borrow a line from Antonio Gramsci, “the old is dying but the new cannot be born.” The culture of our ancestors was a profoundly personalistic culture befitting small face-to-face communities, where ‘*hiya*’ or shame was a powerful social sanction, and where the need for social acceptance kept members of the community from straying too far from the customary.

That culture, based largely on tacit understandings and expectations, has, over the years, become irrelevant to the requirements of a complex society. But the spread of an explicit legal culture, that would take the place of the old, has been slow and uneven.

Culture and law often clash with one another in some settings, while in others they ingeniously ride on each other. We find lawyers, judges, and bureaucrats bending the legal to accommodate what is culturally expected. And vice-versa, we find old cultural scores being settled using the law as a weapon and as a resource. The trial of Erap is a volatile blend of all these.

The reason for the failure of the culture of the law to be internalized by our people is due, I think, in no small measure to the foreign origin of our legal system. Our civil and penal codes are largely Spanish. Our corporate and electoral laws are American. These legal systems, like our own political system, did not spring organically from the cumulative experiences of our nation. They do not resonate deeply-held values. Offenses are well-defined, but they are seldom accompanied by a sense of guilt in the offenders. There is, we say, a

disconnect between the formal legal system and the community's collective conscience. This is not to say that laws of foreign origin can never be our own. It is only to say that a process like this can be very problematic. We cannot presume too much. The Filipino driver who goes through a red traffic light is not always maliciously flouting the law; in his mind, he is just being practical, and chances are he cannot even read or understand traffic signs.

The disconnect is perhaps most visible in behavior in public office. One of the most basic features of Western modernity is the clear separation of the public and the private. Where this distinction is not ingrained in the consciousness of individuals, it is difficult to speak of corruption in any meaningful sense. In our society, the personal almost always shades into the official, and vice-versa. A public official may not accept a bribe, but the Filipino seems unable to turn down a gift without insulting the giver. Joseph Estrada's troubles as president multiplied from the precise moment he stopped going to his designated office in Malacanang and decided to conduct official business instead in the sala of the Presidential Residence. There, official Cabinet meetings melded with the informal gatherings of presidential cronies. Erap saw nothing wrong with this arrangement; he thought it was the most practical thing to do.

Perhaps no laws are taken more lightly than our election laws. I know of no one in our country who has been jailed or disqualified from holding office for violating the laws on over-spending and campaign contributions. The Comelec gives no more than a cursory glance at the declaration of contributions and expenditures filed by candidates at the end of every election. These sworn statements are only very rarely truthful; no one believes them. The same cavalier attitude shown toward electoral laws is mirrored in the Filipino voter's lack of appreciation for the meaning of his ballot. He seldom gives his right to vote the importance it deserves because he does not understand the simple philosophy in which it is embedded. Political rights came to our people ahead of economic liberation. And so they have spent the last half century trying to appease their economic wants by trading in their political rights.

4. Dangers and opportunities, and the prospects for a gentler modernity

We know by now, I think, that the biggest danger we face as a nation is fragmentation and dissolution by a prolonged civil war. We were closest to a civil war during the dying years of Martial Law, when the regime was increasingly unable to govern effectively, and yet a credible mechanism of succession did not exist. Marcos offered the challenge of an election that we knew he would rig, and we took it despite what reason was telling us. If our people had rejected it, as they had every reason to reject it, there would have been no other choice but armed struggle.

We took a leap of faith, literally and metaphorically. In this, I believe, we were being modern, albeit in a reckless way. Instead of a clear plan of action, we drew from a rich reserve of spirituality to overcome our fears.

At one point, the Americans advised us to accept the spurious results of the 1986 elections which Marcos had stolen, and to fight another day. This was also what they wanted us to do during the impeachment trial of Estrada in 2001 – not to protest and abandon the impeachment process in the interest of saving our institutions, even if this meant accepting the foregone conclusion that the majority would acquit Estrada. If we were being modern in the Western sense, the basic commitment to institutions would have dictated a submissive course of action in both instances.

But we decided to be modern in an alternative way – we rejected what was wrong and rushed headlong into the swirl of events without demanding to know beforehand how the process would end. Perhaps the right word is “postmodern” – foreign analysts thought we had a dangerous tendency to distrust our own institutions. In a sense they are right. In 1986, we knew nothing about people power. We stumbled upon it as a political device lying somewhere between elections and revolutions. Fifteen years later, we were not certain whether we could resort to it again to oust a corrupt and incompetent president. But, by then, uncertainties no longer fazed us.

But today we have begun to worry that we have not paid much attention to nurturing our institutions. We worry that we may have frayed the fabric of our national life too often and stretched the

meaning of democracy beyond recognition. We look around us and we are distressed to see how many incompetent people and suspected criminals we have elected to public office. Criminal syndicates roam the country with impunity. The whole nation is held hostage by well-armed bandits styling themselves as warriors for Islam. We cannot seem to trust the military or the police to protect us, or our courts to dispense justice, or the mass media to tell us the truth.

So many Filipinos account for our predicament in the silliest ways. They fault the shallowness of our culture, forgetting that the efficacy of cultures is a function of time. They question God's wisdom for giving us the kind of leaders we have, forgetting that leaders only mirror the general qualities of the people who chose them. Only in the Philippines, we are wont to say in mocking exasperation.

None of these will get us anywhere. Our first task should be to understand and accept what we have become. To understand means to take a hard look at our present situation and to identify the weakest areas of our national life requiring the most urgent and sustained intervention. To accept means to free ourselves from the resentments of past generations: to stop blaming colonialism, or the betrayal and complicity of our leaders, for our troubles as a people.

It is to believe that we are what we are today as a result of the peculiar circumstances of our evolution as a nation. That colonialism produced both good and bad effects. That we must learn to preserve and build upon the good, and charge the bad to experience. Today we have a nation to develop; we have a people to feed, house, and educate. There is a whole world out there that gets more and more complex every day. Its presence is for us both danger and opportunity.

Concluding Note

Modernity remains an unfinished project waiting for a committed and determined constituency to pursue it. The first organized mass movement to champion modernity as a project was Edsa Dos. Its battle cry was good governance; its enemies were corruption and incompetence. Its long-term vision was the strengthening of social

institutions so as to render them impermeable to the corrosive effects of corruption and adventurism.

Its political expression – civil society – however remains amorphous and sporadic in its activism. It lacks the mechanisms to contest political power. During elections, it is content to play a marginal role – as electoral watchdog and voter-educator. Political power remains in the hands of traditional politicians, who play and operate by the old rules of patronage politics. Civil society speaks of empowerment through a long and painstaking process of social reform, but the needs of the poor are urgent, and it is the traditional politicians that are adept in offering instant relief.

Edsa Tres was the most visible and most dramatic expression of the existence of a political constituency of the mobilized poor. By itself, this constituency is not an enemy of modernity, but its desperate calls for social justice and relief from debasing poverty can easily be hijacked by traditional politicians and millenarian figures who resist change.

It is thus that we find ourselves today locked in a seeming contradiction between two social movements – one supporting an agenda of good governance – and another pushing for an agenda of social justice. The first aims to eliminate corruption and incompetence, the other seeks to end poverty and powerlessness.

The two agendas, to my mind, can constitute the unique vision of a Filipino quest for modernity. But we must be mindful of their separate provenance and the ideological baggage they carry. The quest for good governance tends to resonate the themes of a smug middle class modernity, while the advocacy against poverty is more associated with the agitation of populist and socialist politics. Good governance tends to be a cover for aggressive market liberalism, while social justice tends to be a euphemism for aggressive state interventionism.

They need not clash with one another if we bear in mind that their common denominator is freedom. We must avoid recycling the terms of the old debate between capitalism and socialism. That debate has become passe with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the

turn to a market economy by China and Russia. The world has one economy and it is capitalist. We have no choice but to play by its rules, even as we seek, in solidarity with other nations, to amend some of its oppressive features.

Within the constraints of the global economy, however, there is a whole range of choices we can adopt for ourselves as a nation. We must go for those institutional arrangements that assure for us flexibility and growth as a society, and that give us the best chances as human beings to free ourselves from the rigid inherited hierarchies of our culture. This to me is the only path to a humane modernity.

I have tried in this paper to outline what I think have been the main features of the Philippine experience with Modernity. I have used the heroic figure of the Overseas Filipino Worker as an analogue for a nation in the throes of globalist modernization. The saga of the Filipino nation has also been a story of ceaseless coping with recurrent problems that worsen with time. Like the OFW, we drift as a nation, we manage, and we coast along, and miraculously survive the trials that come our way – until another major crisis hits us. Then we summon all our faith, and draw from a heroism that we think we no longer have. We jolt the whole world by the awesome risks we take, and surprise even ourselves with the providential results we achieve by our recklessness. No wonder we are a people of uncommon faith.

But our problems are graver with every passing year. The silent crisis we live in is more dangerous. We know we have not prepared ourselves for the economic storm that is shaking the rest of the world. This is all because we tend to reserve our passion and heroism for those dramatic moments -- the people power events -- rather than for the long intervals when we seem to be at rest, when nothing great seems to be happening.

Here I refer in particular to a few basic tasks that I believe form the core agenda of any modern nation, namely, (1) a coherent and practical strategy for ending mass poverty, (2) the continuous upgrading of the educational system, (3) the sustained modernization of the nation's physical infrastructure, (4) a program of scientific research and technological development, (5) the stabilization of the

political system through the modernization of state institutions and processes like the electoral and judicial system, and the civil service, (6) a program for cultural development, and lastly, (7) a program to protect the environment against the ravages of unplanned development.

I do not doubt for a moment that these concerns are being attended to by the present administration. But never adequately. The reason is not a lack of resources so much as a lack of passion and sense of urgency in what we have to do. We give in to cynicism so easily; we allow ourselves to be intimidated by the complexity of the tasks at hand, and to be discouraged by the pettiness of our politicians. We demand so much of our government, but expect so little from ourselves. Again it is because we don't see the interconnections.

To be modern is not just to survive a world of continuous change; more than this, it is to be able to exercise some measure of control over our lives. This we cannot hope to do by being satisfied with mere coping.

And here I go back to Berman's reminders. To be modern is to open ourselves to the possibilities brought about by the unending flux of innovation and obsolescence. It is to welcome change, and to be at home in it, rather than to sneer at the new from the vantage point of a romanticized past. But to be modern is also to grow in freedom with time, to strive to reduce our vulnerability to unsettling events and phenomena, and to discipline and form ourselves into a confident, stable, and peaceful nation.

To be pre-modern is to reject a world that contradicts our faith, while to be modern is to leap into it and to create ever new meanings and ever new lives on the back of time without losing sense of what it is to be human.

The formation of a new culture hospitable to social justice, democracy, and freedom will not come from the simple revival of traditional values, nor will it come from the blind imitation of Western institutions and practices. As in the past, it will come from the imagination of those who, like Jaime Ongpin and Jose Rizal before him, could step out of their own cultures, criticize these in relation to

the exigencies of survival in a vastly changed world, and offer new perspectives that were appropriate to the times in which they lived.

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