The Role of the Intellectual in Nation-building

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I am deeply honored and grateful to be invited as your guest speaker on the occasion of the Loyola Schools’ Faculty Day. I am told that the purpose of this event is, among others, to provide the faculty, the professional staff, and the administrators the chance to gather as a community and to reflect on issues relevant to the university and the nation. The invitation I received expressly asked if I could offer some thoughts on the topic, “The role of the intellectual in nation-building,” focusing specifically on some of the issues that today confront us as a nation.

I admit to being initially intimidated by the title. It almost sounds like an invitation to bare the ivory-tower arrogance of which academics like us have often been accused. The highly charged word in the title, of course, is “intellectual.”

Indeed, who among us will dare claim this appellation? We may be writers, opinion-makers, pundits, political analysts, or academics whose views on a broad range of questions are routinely sought by the mass media. But, that would not entitle us to the title, even in its more recent incarnation as “public intellectual.”

I cringe when I’m sometimes introduced as a “public intellectual.” I have encountered many forms of conceit in my life, but I have yet to meet anybody who carries a calling card with the profession: “public intellectual.” The concept “intellectual” is highly abused enough as it is; one can only imagine what complex work it is expected to do when paired with the equally contested term “public.” Assuming we can agree on what it means, do academics like us have a duty to play the role of public intellectual in nation-building? If so, what expectations accompany the performance of this role?

If the concept were meant just to refer to someone who relies on her intellect more than on her instincts and emotions, it might

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1 Lecture given at the Ateneo Loyola Schools’ Faculty Day celebration, Leong Hall Auditorium, 27 January 2017
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suffice to use the word “thinker.” A “thinker” would be someone who spends her time creating, examining, or sorting out ideas, rather than fabricating things. But this generic word would cast such a huge net that it would surely fail to distinguish the kind of work we tacitly expect of intellectuals.

Whatever it might mean, the word “intellectual” has been a favored label throughout the 20th century, acquiring in the course of its usage many other positive connotations like fearlessness, autonomy, and even a contrarian bent. When paired with the term “public” to form the appellation “public intellectual,” we have a concept that is even more suggestive of a predisposition to stand up to power whoever wields it, of someone who employs ideas as weapons, and uses the arena of public discourse to wage war against obsolete ideas, outright lies, official dogma, and conservative ideologies.

One thinks of Western figures like Albert Einstein, Bertrand Russell, Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Hannah Arendt, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Mark Twain, John Dewey – or contemporary ones like Noam Chomsky, Jürgen Habermas, Amartya Sen, or John Rawls – as personifications of the public intellectual. In like manner, the term might suggest the kind of influence exerted by Filipino writers like Horacio de la Costa, Renato Constantino, Hernando Abaya, or Carmen Guerrero Nakpil on their generation – the way Jose Rizal did on his contemporaries and succeeding generations of Filipinos.

All of them went against the grain and questioned the conventions of their time. But, more than this, in the intellectual, such as any of them, we find someone who not only resists power but resolutely disavows it. While she may be political in the broad sense that she challenges power to explain itself, she cannot be called a politician, because she is not herself in pursuit of political power. It comes as no surprise then that while many of them have an ideological affinity with the left, they tend to spell trouble to leftwing parties.

In contrast to the private scholar, the public intellectual typically establishes a presence in the modern mass media – something that is not so difficult to do now because of the Internet. Unlike the quiet academic who spends a lifetime to get published in refereed journals, the public intellectual would be more keen to acquire a
foothold in the public consciousness. She gives interviews to the mass media on a broad range of issues, and becomes known as a social critic or a “political analyst.” Today, she might also be an active “blogger.”

Acquiring a public image is not without its problems. By the public nature of her interventions, the public intellectual gains, in time, not just a mass following, but a constituency that expects her not only to write or speak or criticize, but to lead. Michel Foucault, one of the greatest French public intellectuals, who, in his time, was avidly sought by the mass media for his views on many subjects, was deeply aware of the dangers of the public adulation of intellectuals.

In an interview he gave to the newspaper “Le Monde,” Foucault made the unusual request that only his views be recorded; he wished to remain anonymous in the interview. “In our societies,” he said, “characters dominate our perceptions.... Why did I suggest that we use anonymity? Out of nostalgia for a time when, being quite unknown, what I said had some chance of being heard….A name makes reading too easy.”

When intellectuals become public, they join the ranks of what we today call “celebrities.” People start to assign value to what they say not always because of the thoughts they express, but more because of the person behind the words. Foucault said he had nothing against intellectuals appearing on television, so long as they, or the public, did not start to think that their works were worth reading, or their views taken seriously, simply because they were seen on television.

I believe this. When intellectuals allow themselves to be seduced into becoming moral entrepreneurs or politicians, they end up compromising the basic role they are expected to play in society. And that role is to sharpen the public’s sense of reality in a world bombarded by a plethora of information and so-called “alternative facts.” This sharpened sense of reality, Foucault reminds us, comes from “a certain determination to throw off familiar ways of thoughts and to look at the same things in a different way; a passion for seizing what is happening now and what is

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3 Michel Foucault, Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and other writings, 1977-1984, edited by Lawrence Kritzman, 1988, p. 324
disappearing; a lack of respect for the traditional hierarchies of what is important and fundamental.\textsuperscript{4} The moment an intellectual seeks popularity, power, or profit, it will not take long before she loses her autonomy, betrays her craft, and becomes no different from a media star, a politician, or an entrepreneur.

Intoxicated by public adulation, she might be prodded to publicize everything that comes to her mind, no matter in what state it is, leaving no thought unpublished. Seeking constant affirmation, she might be tempted to become a mouthpiece for all kinds of advocacies, or, worse, a hack in the service of the moneyed and the powerful. Soon she might allow herself to be enticed to run for public office, convinced that she, indeed, is the embodiment of the alternative. Before she realizes it, she gives up the hard work of reflexive thinking, and begins to dwell in one comforting delusion after another.

But, let me not overstate these dangers, lest we think the ideal intellectual has to retreat into the hallowed halls of academe, or find refuge in the aristocracy of incommunicable thoughts, in order to produce worthwhile ideas. No, that would be farthest from my conception of an intellectual’s vocation in society. I believe it is important that an intellectual must engage her society and her time. She must speak to the public, make herself understood. She must learn to make use of all available media, never fearing that the appearance of lofty ideas in the popular media cheapens them.

My template for the quintessential Filipino intellectual is Jose Rizal, this university’s foremost alumnus. It was he, among all the thinkers of his time, who articulated the clearest vision of where the emergent Filipino nation stood at that point in its history as a Spanish colony -- what it could be, and what challenges it faced in the course of its evolution. But, more than that, Rizal was also fully aware of the need for an “enlightened class” that could oversee the birthing of the new nation.

This he explains in one of his most important essays, “The Philippines a century hence.” Allow me to quote a long passage from this essay: “Today there is a factor which did not exist before. The national spirit has awakened, and a common misfortune and a

\textsuperscript{4} ibid, p. 328
common abasement have united all the inhabitants of the Islands. It counts on a large enlightened class within and without the Archipelago, a class created and augmented more and more by the stupidities of certain rulers who compel the inhabitants to expatriate themselves, to seek education abroad – a class that perseveres and struggles thanks to the official provocations and the system of persecution. This class whose number is increasing progressively is in constant communication with the rest of the Islands, and if today it constitutes the brains of the country, within a few years it will constitute its entire nervous system and demonstrate its existence in all its acts.\textsuperscript{5}

It is difficult to find a more graphic description of the role of Filipino intellectuals in nation-building. To persevere and struggle against persecution, to increase their numbers, to remain in continual communication with the rest of the people, to serve not just as the nation’s brains, but indeed as its nervous system, conveying all the vital impulses to act through the entire body of an awakened people.

Clearly, this role-definition of the intellectual is drawn from the early modern epoch of nationalist emancipation and nation-state building. Rizal wrote his famous essay more than a century ago, in the closing years of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. And yet the aspirations that he associated with modern nationhood – namely, (1) the unity of all the ethnic and racial groups in these Islands, on the basis of a shared national identity; (2) the formation of a free and self-governing polity and the building of a self-reliant economy; and (3) the establishment of a just, modern, and democratic society on the foundations of the rule of law and respect for individual freedom – these aspirations seem as urgent today as they were during Rizal’s time.

Indeed, every constitution we have had since Malolos has been a reiteration of these values. At once, what this tells us is that the building of the Filipino nation, after more than a century, has remained an unfinished project.

It is not difficult to see how national unity in a multi-ethnic and archipelagic society like ours has remained a formidable

\textsuperscript{5} “The Philippines a Century Hence,” Jose Rizal’s Political and Historical Writings, National Historical Institute, p. 140.
challenge. Nothing perhaps illustrates this more vividly than the persistence of a secessionist movement in Southern Mindanao. But, in a more subdued way, we might also see it in the fragmentation of the national vote along ethno-linguistic lines every election year. Similarly, we cannot ignore the persistence of economic underdevelopment -- of a shallow, remittance-driven and consumption-oriented economy -- as we try to find enduring solutions to the basic problems of mass poverty and social inequality. Nor can we be blind to the fact that despite the modernity of our institutions, the practice of democracy, amid gross disparities in wealth and opportunity, has been largely illusory. Rather than vanish with the advent of modernity, political dynasties and patron-client politics have continued to flourish beneath the institutional cover of the modern political system outlined in our Constitution.

Indeed, in view of all these realities, one cannot be faulted for clinging to the same aspirations that once animated the anticolonial struggles of our ancestors.

But, we cannot possibly be oblivious of the fact that the world has changed tremendously in the meantime. Filipinos too have changed in mind-boggling ways. More of our people are going abroad, not as young students as in Rizal’s time, but as workers in search of opportunity and a better life. For many of them, the future of the nation they leave behind could be farthest from their minds and irrelevant to their own personal plans. Abroad, the Filipino passport they carry has sometimes impeded their mobility and advancement instead of serving them as a badge of pride and self-respect.

In the light of these developments, surely, it is fair to ask: Why are we pursuing 19th century aspirations in a modern world order that is far more complex and more interconnected than the one that confronted Rizal and his generation? What does it mean, for example, to pursue national unity and promote a Filipino identity in a world that, because of the extensive migration of peoples, now operates according to norms cognizant of cultural pluralism and diversity? What would the pursuit of a self-reliant economy mean in a world capitalist system that has long defied the artifice of national borders, and ignores the ecological limits of the planet we all share? What might national self-rule mean in a world where international covenants, forged in the wake of devastating wars,
permit the scrutiny of the actions of nation-states and their leaders in the name of universal values? What does the quest for democracy and social justice mean in a world where the forces of the market are allowed to determine ultimately who shall live and who shall die?

In raising these questions, I do not wish to be misunderstood. Nation-building is not passé, but the role of the intellectual cannot be pegged exclusively to what Gianni Vattimo⁶ calls “ultimate points of reference in the most specific kinds of attachment (to race, ethnic group, family, or class)....” To do so, he warns, would be to “limit our perspective right at the outset.” The Italian philosopher suggests that we can at least “show how wide the horizons really are.” But, what would such awareness signify in terms of the kinds of values we must pursue?

Very much aware of the relativism that is engulfing today’s world, Vattimo proposes two modes of action that the intellectual might consider adopting as an act of responsibility. The first is “to start clearing away the dense undergrowth of metaphysical absolutes” – i.e. belief systems that are founded on first principles – the most recent specimen of which, Vattimo says, has come in the form of so-called “laws of the marketplace.” And second, to cultivate an alertness to the “content of our heritage and provenance,” meaning to be sensitive to those core ideas and values “of which we consider ourselves the heirs and by which we feel ourselves summoned.”

Let me try to unpack Vattimo’s conception of the intellectual’s role in society. It is, first of all, anti-metaphysical and highly critical of arguments that refer back to absolutes, or ground themselves on first principles. For, he sees in such absolutist beliefs all the seeds of human violence. In the face of what he calls “the nihilistic destiny of our epoch,” and the demon of relativism that has accompanied it, Vattimo’s intellectual seeks answers, wages reason, from the standpoint of what he calls “the ethics of finitude.” He explains: “Respect for the other, in the ethics of finitude, is not in the least grounded in the presumption that she (the other) is a bearer of human reason equal and identical in everyone.... Respect for others is, above all, recognition of the finitude that

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characterizes all of us and that rules out any complete conquest of the opacity that every person bears.”

If we accept this, Vattimo says -- if we grant the nihilism that is now upon us, while refusing to rely upon any ultimate foundation to ground our positions, “then any possible legitimation of the violent abuse of others vanishes.” Aware that this expectation is itself ultimately ungrounded, Vattimo offers a consoling note: “The temptation to violence may never be extinguished…. [but] the difference here is that the temptation is stripped of all appearance of legitimacy….”

In an age where violence is routinely justified in the name of religious and political values, where disrespect and sheer nastiness dominate everyday discourse, and where passions and emotions take precedence over truth, there has to be room for Vattimo’s notion of “weak thought.” But, the intellectual, in his view, cannot pretend to be an aloof or ironic observer, detached from any commitments.

The intellectual is, above all, heir to a legacy and is answerable to her provenance, her origins. Therefore, her first duty is to be alert to the content of that heritage – to deconstruct it if necessary – but always to interpret what it summons us to do through changing times.

We must aim to do this without seeking refuge in first principles, or without lapsing into some kind of essentialism – even in the face of so much violence and antagonism. We need to cultivate an ethics that is responsible to its own epoch – an ethics that, at once, excludes violence, particularly the type that thinks itself legitimate. Most important of all, we must exclude from the values that have been passed on to us the “authoritarian silencing of the other in the name of first principles.” A very recent example of this, I think, is President Duterte’s constant mantra: that anything is justifiable if done for the good of the Filipino nation, as though the nation itself were an unproblematic construct.

Let us take a moment at this point to briefly tackle the elephant in the room. How would Vattimo’s intellectual deal with Rodrigo Duterte -- and his penchant to disrespect every standing institution that disagrees with him, to insult his critics, and to express blanket
approval of the summary killing of drug peddlers, and everyone else who stands in the way of his righteous war on drugs?

I believe that if we don’t question his notion of what constitutes the national good and what its pursuit requires, then it won’t be long before we find ourselves unable to speak out against the summary killing of illegal gambling operators, corrupt government personnel, usurious money-lenders, rapacious oligarchs, and everyone else he might label as a pest, as part of his comprehensive cleansing of Philippine society.

In Vattimo’s view, it would be futile to respond to a ruthless autocrat like Duterte by invoking first principles – for example, the sanctity of life or the intrinsic inviolability of human rights. “These drug dealers are no longer human,” Duterte has been heard to say in response, and many believe him. Our aim rather should be to bring back rational norms to the discussion, on the basis of a commitment to reduce violence.

Let me elaborate by borrowing from what New York Times writer Frank Bruni recently wrote7 in reference to America’s own new president. “You know how Donald Trump wins,” he begins. “I’m talking about the battle between incivility and dignity. He triumphs when opponents trade righteous anger for crude tantrums. When they lose sight of the line between protest and catcalls…. There’s so much substantive ground on which to confront Trump…. Why swerve into the gutter? Why help him dismiss his detractors as people in thrall to the theater of their outrage and no better than he is?”

Towards the end of his piece, Bruni observes: “If Trump’s presidency mirrors its dangerous prelude, one of the fundamental challenges will be to respond to him, his abettors, and his agenda in the most tactically prudent way and not just the most emotionally satisfying one. To rant less and organize more. To resist taunts and stick with facts. To answer invective with intelligence. And to show, in the process, that there are two very different sets of values here, manifest in two very distinct modes of discourse.” I couldn’t have put it better.

What is important – when one reckons the role of the public intellectual – is the impact she creates on the self-understanding of society. Her work consists in challenging dominant ways of thinking, doubting all ideologies, and offering new ways of thinking and speaking about old problems. She tells society where it is at any given moment, and where it is headed. In this sense she might be closer to a prophet than an ideologue.

Because of their shared affinity with the world of ideas, it seems almost logical for academics to aspire to become public intellectuals. But, it is interesting that the more prominent of public intellectuals in the West have no ties with academe, although they may have been professors at one time or another. I have often wondered why.

I now think it has largely to do with the academic ethos, which tightly binds us to the disciplines or branches of knowledge in which we hold our professorships or academic appointments, creating intellectual echo chambers in the process. There is something about university disciplines that abhors popular audiences. It is the snobbishness of the ivory tower. We not only do not feel any obligation to be understood by the lay public, we also often take a bizarre pride in our splendid isolation. As a result, academics tend to look at their colleagues who appear or publish in the popular media as lesser scholars. This charge is, of course, not entirely without basis. Indeed, there are people who have a habit of flashing their academic credentials and institutional affiliations in the public sphere in order to gain the right to be heard on a wide range of issues – including those in which they do not enjoy any expertise.

But all this is changing very fast. Today, in Europe as in the US, the trend is reversed. Well-endowed private universities have been known to pursue intellectual rock stars who have made a name for themselves not only in the academic world but also in the public sphere. I think the massive penetration by the new media of almost every aspect of our daily lives has a lot to do with this. This has increased the pressure on academe to establish its presence in the public square, to reach out beyond the classrooms and campuses, in order to respond to the intellectual needs of diverse communities in an increasingly complex world. Part of the labor of speaking truth to power is being able to counter peddled lies with the truth from our disciplines and sciences.
Herein, I think, lies a unique role for Filipino academics like us. Many of our colleagues are already performing this role through blogs, newspaper columns, and regular appearances as resource persons in public affairs programs. But the route to the public sphere need not always be through mainstream media. Most academic units and faculties are well suited to issue “white papers” or occasional studies that can enrich public discourse, challenge attempts to revise history, or serve as the basis for the re-examination of existing public policy. Such papers often do not require new research, but only a perseverance to bring together and synthesize the latest information on a given problem. What is important is that the point of view of academe is communicated in a language that is not too remote from that used by the general public.

A university like Ateneo can very well hold regular press conferences in which its scholars are given the platform to articulate their own assessment of the State of the Nation. These interventions may often antagonize the politicians and bureaucrats who make decisions in our name, but they will also show our people what it means to think hard about the nation’s problems. I am convinced that this is very much a part of the vocation of forming the consciousness of a nation.

Of course, let us not forget that our students are our principal constituency. I will not speak here about the need to keep our discussion of ideas inside the classroom always current – to take pains to relate what we teach to the crucial issues we face as a nation. But, more than teaching our students values – whether moral or ethical or political – I would put the stress on the need to show them the importance of thinking properly.

What do I mean? Let me end these reflections by turning to Heidegger’s essay “What is called thinking?” “We must not imagine it to be enough,” he wrote, “for any man merely to inhabit the world of his own representational ideas, and to express only them. For the world of this expression is shot through with blindly adopted and unexamined ideas and concepts. How could this

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confused manner of forming ideas be called thinking, however loudly it may claim to be creative?”

To Heidegger, a thinker is someone who takes a critical view of what is taken for granted as common-sense reason, especially her own. This built-in skepticism at once puts the thinking individual at odds with the moral and political conventions of her society and time. To me, this is precisely the first function of a university – to produce people who can think -- individuals who are not afraid to examine prevailing views, including their own, and to take responsibility for the way they think. This formulation may not have anything directly to do with the task of nation-building. But, I cannot imagine a better definition of the role of the intellectual than this – to teach people how to think.