

San Juan Jr.

Book Review

Reflections on Revolution and Prospects, by Jose Maria Sison

Epifanio San Juan Jr.

University of Connecticut, United States of America

Writing for the Madrid journal *La Solidaridad* in 1889, a decade before the United States occupied the Philippines as its new possession, Jose Rizal surmised in his essay “Filipinas dentro de cien años”: “Perhaps the great American Republic, whose interests lie in the Pacific and who has no hand in the spoliation of Africa may some day dream of foreign possession....” But if she did, even contrary to her tradition, the European powers would forbid it, and if the United States tried to, “Very likely the Philippines will defend with inexpressible valor the liberty secured at the price of so much blood and sacrifice.” (1972, 127). Rizal’s uncanny presentiment was a warning: the natives resisted McKinley’s “Benevolent Assimilation” and U.S. “tutelage” from 1898 on. They persevered up to the Sakdal and Huk uprisings, and the ongoing resistance of the National Democratic Front and its national-popular combatants.

Under the aegis of global capitalism’s “war against terrorism,” the carnage has worsened in the longest-held U.S. neocolony in Asia since its annexation at the turn of the last century. After 9/11, U.S. imperial subjugation of the Philippines intensified with successive counterinsurgency schemes dating back to the Cold War. Beyond the three million Filipinos killed by U.S. troops in the Filipino-American War (1899-1913, dubbed the “first Vietnam”), thousands died in the bloody years of the Marcos dictatorship (1972-1986), supported by Washington and the Pentagon (Ahmad 1971; Zinn 1984).

We are witness to current U.S. interventions via the Visiting Forces Agreement, EDCA, Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines, and other bilateral transactions to preserve its neocolonial domination. This includes the supply of weaponry, logistics, and supervision over the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). This was recently demonstrated by the U.S. participation in the devastation of Marawi City in 2017. Without U.S. stranglehold of key ideological-state apparatuses implementing IMF/World Bank/WTO regulations, the local oligarchy of landlords, compradors, and bureaucrat-capitalists from 1899 to 1972—as Jose Maria Sison has expounded in *Philippine Society and Revolution (PSR)*— would not survive.

Sison is universally recognized as a pertinacious radical leader of the Filipino contingent challenging U.S. imperialism. His signal accomplishment, in my view, is his cogent re-telling of the narrative of the Filipino national-liberation odyssey in *PSR*, updated in 1986. Of exceeding importance is Julieta De Lima’s perspicuous thematic inquiry of this narrative in “Jose Maria Sison on the Mode of Production” (Sison and De Lima 1988). Earlier



Aguipo Global South Journal vol. 4, 2025, 75-81

ISSN 2984-8342

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17283249>

© Epifanio San Juan Jr.



attempts have been made by Apolinario Mabini, Claro Recto, Teodoro Agoncilo, and Renato Constantino, among others. But only with *PSR* did the Filipino masses finally acquire a counter-hegemonic voice, freeing the energies of its long-repressed incarnate *Geist*, and enabling the rekindling of revolutionary agency. Of course, world events, in particular the 1955 Bandung Conference, the Cuban Revolution, the 1965-68 Cultural Revolution in China, the Civil Rights struggle in the U.S. coinciding with worldwide resistance against U.S. aggression in Vietnam, and the resurgence of the nationalist movement in the 1970 “First Quarter Storm,” etc.—all these and more provided fertile ground for its germination.

In 1968, Sison broke away from the old Soviet-inspired Communist Party initially led by Crisanto Evangelista and Pedro Abad Santos. Its caretakers (the Lava brothers, etc.) easily succumbed to the Marcos regime. Humans make history, but not under circumstances of their choosing. Sison undertook the necessary critical inventory and launched a rectification campaign that led to the re-establishment of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) by Sison and his comrades in 1968. It was preceded by his formation of Kabataang Makabayan in November 1964. The concept of united front in the national-democratic, anti-imperialist campaign acquired saliency, accompanied by a regeneration of commitment to the ideals of emancipatory praxis. The new CPP was inspired by Mao’s vision of conducting people’s war in a non-European setting. What was at stake was not a set of dogmas or personality-cult but a model of guidelines or methods for testing hypotheses and applying Marxist-Leninist principles on the historical specificities of the Philippine socio-economic formation (see “Programme for a People’s Democratic Revolution in the Philippines”) (Saulo 1990, 196-209; San Juan 2015).

Curiously enough, the U.S. State Dept 1950 report on the Huk insurgency concurs with Sison’s re-emphasis on the central role of the peasantry in elucidating the feudal/landlord problem (1987). Just as Mao renewed Marxist dialectics in his 1927 investigation of the Hunan peasant movement, Sison’s re-appraisal of the diverse political forces involved in the unrelenting class struggle from Spanish times to the present revitalized historical-materialist thinking applied to Philippine reality. He tested Lenin’s methodology of concrete analysis of historically dynamic situations, focused on “the weak links,” which led to Lenin’s insight into the decisive role of national-liberation struggles in catalyzing the Western proletariat’s internationalist mission (1968). He examined the historical particularities of crucial conjunctures in the saga of our uneven development. What proved to be decisive was the reevaluation of the strategy and tactics of the class struggle with the founding of the New People’s Army on March 29, 1969, and the application of Mao Zedong’s theory of protracted war, pursuing various interlocking stages of the revolutionary process (Ch’en 1965; Rossanda 1970).

The next historic milestone in Sison’s contribution to the Marxist archive is the 1974 discourse on *Specific Characteristics of People’s War in the Philippines*. Sison was arrested



San Juan Jr.

by the Marcos regime in 1977 and endured torture and other indignities until its overthrow in February 1986. He has described this ordeal and its aftermath in his poems, letters, interviews, and other essays collected in *Continuing the Struggle for National and Social Liberation* (2015). After the U.S. debacle in Vietnam and at the height of the Cultural Revolution in China, the gains of the CPP and New People's Army made possible the reaffirmation of the Filipino struggle as part of the radical democratic-socialist transformations around the world initiated by the 1917 Russian Revolution.

Historians have argued that instead of homogenizing the planet, capitalism generates zones of differences, asymmetrical or disaggregated networks of actions and motivations that defy synthesis. Unity and conflict of opposites prevail. While the 1930 Depression stimulated union organizing among migrant workers of Bulosan's generation, the Japanese Occupation taught the peasants the various modes of guerrilla warfare and collective mobilization. The Cold War from the 1950s to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 ushered in the need for an uninterrupted, all-encompassing Cultural Revolution. What is original in Sison's 1974 discourse is the re-articulation of the country's historical peculiarities in line with the national-democratic program: the mountainous archipelagic terrain, the dialectic of rural and urban zones, and, in particular, the contours of strategic defensive-stalemate-offensive stages in the uninterrupted transition from a feudal-bourgeois to a new-democratic formation. Following this trajectory, the National Democratic Front of the Philippines, founded in 1973, issued the 10-Point (later 12-Point) program, which informs the ultimate agenda of the peace talks.

In 1988, Dr. Rainer Werning conducted a wide-ranging series of interviews with Sison in *The Philippine Revolution: The Leader's View*. Sison's travels around the world, interacting with various progressive organizations, afforded him opportunities to connect the Philippine project with other third-world and European solidarity movements. Before that, in 1980, we were able to arrange the publication of Sison's other writings in the volume *Victory to Our People's War* released in Quebec, Canada.

With the next historic intervention in 1992, "Reaffirm our Basic Principles and Rectify Errors," Sison demonstrated once again his grasp of a dialectical analysis of the interaction of strategy and tactics, fallibilistic hypotheses and contingencies, enabling a grasp of the multi-layered contradictions in the vicissitudes of the national-democratic endeavor. By refusing the empiricist or eclectic position of his critics, Sison has applied the concept of the unity of opposites as the fundamental law of dialectical materialism, a concept which Mao first addressed in the classic 1937 discourse, "On Contradiction" (elaborated further in the 1957 talk, "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People" (1977, 384-419; see Knight 1997, 104). Failure to recognize the unity and antagonism of opposites has led to various left and right opportunisms (pacifism, revisionist compromises, etc.), including collusion with reactionary security agencies and CIA counterinsurgency schemes (Distor 1977). The bankruptcy of such deviations has been



evidenced in the spectacle of former leftists functioning as apologists of U.S. neoliberal policies, with assorted NGOs set up to serve the corrupt oligarchy (landlords, compradors) managing the neocolonial State bureaucracy.

Sison's vocation as a Filipino advocate for national sovereignty and human rights in the diaspora has opened a new field of internationalist contestation. Over ten million Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) are scattered today around the world, forcing candidates for office to campaign in Hong Kong, Singapore, in the Middle East, etc. Their remittances are significant in relieving the Philippine foreign debt as well as intensifying commodity-fetishism, alienation, and consumerist decadence. Meanwhile, Filipino activists are politicizing these communities in the U.S., Europe, and in the Netherlands, where Sison has been a political refugee since 1988. Apart from his imprisonment by the Marcos regime, his detention by the Dutch government on August 28, 2007, until September 13, 2007, for unsubstantiated charges has made Sison a symbol of all the thousands victimized by the U.S. imperial "war on terror." Since 2001, he has guided the International League of People's Struggles, the biggest international united front of people's organizations along the anti-imperialist and democratic line.

One of the most instructive sections of these interviews is Sison's insightful critique of the neocolonial administrations since the fall of Marcos up to the current fascist Duterte regime. His discussion of the impact of global changes on the Philippine system, in particular the capitalist restoration in the former Soviet Union and in China, as well as the decline of U.S. global hegemony, gives us the framework for speculations on the prospects of the Philippine revolution amidst a worldwide socialist resurgence. Again, the focus is on the exploited and oppressed, the community of victims, workers and peasants whose narratives remain to be written. With the assassination of NDFP consultant Felix Malayao and the arrest of other progressive activists at the behest of U.S. imperialist agencies, Sison believes a peace agreement is unlikely—unless the revolutionary mass movement unleashes its counter-hegemonic force against Duterte's murderous regime, with its horrendous record of extra-judicial killings and betrayal of the nation's patrimony and sovereignty.

Equally fascinating in this volume are Sison's reflections on diverse topics as a Filipino patriot, chief political consultant of the NDFP, and as an intransigent Marxist public intellectual. Sison invokes his descent from the first Filipino socialist agitator, Isabelo de Los Reyes, who organized the first labor unions and also co-founded the nationalistic *Iglesia Filipino Independiente*. Sison pays homage to the Enlightenment tradition of de los Reyes, Rizal, Mabini, and others, which the Chinese patriot Sun Yat-sen had the sagacity to admire. Sison sums up his legacy "in the form of theoretical and political writings needed for the reestablishment and development of the CCP as a revolutionary party of the proletariat and for the creation and growth of all other necessary revolutionary forces, including the NPA, the NDFP, the mass organizations and the people's democratic



government from the village level upward.” Indeed, this legacy today continues to be a powerful challenge to predatory capitalism worldwide, a “disintegrated capitalism” wreaking havoc on the environment and mutilating the lives of millions, unable to resolve the contradictions inherent in the system and therefore destined to either destroy the planet or be thoroughly replaced by a socialist/communist alternative (Harvey 2014).

Overall, this volume contains the most important record of Sison’s life based on his prodigious memory and ability to contextualize the most significant events shaping his thoughts and actions. It contributes substantial information on his education, political inquiries, and the scope and depth of his artistic creativity. It also documents his timely interventions into the most pivotal moments of our history. It gives a nuanced orchestration to his dialogue with his European interviewer. I am sure it will furnish material for future biographies and commentaries on the symbiosis of human will and objective circumstances. However, to anticipate the chances that the reader may miss the historic resonance of these interviews, I would like to add a personal note. We (if I may speak for our group of militants in the East Coast circa 1965-80) read Marx, Lenin, Mao, Luxemburg, Fanon, Lukacs, Che Guevarra, and others before we encountered *PSR*. We were then trying to mobilize the “brainwashed” Filipino community in the U.S. against Marcos’ barbaric rule, his violation of human rights, his opening the country to foreign corporate plunder, etc. It was difficult until *PSR* provided a clue to arousing the historical consciousness of young Pinoys/Pinays. And so we began to retell the story of Lapu-Lapu, Gabriela Silang, Gomburza, Bonifacio, Sakay, Salud Algabre, Teresa Magbanua, Maria Lorena Barros, and countless heroic protagonists of our history.

“Only connect,” as the saying goes. We thus succeeded in organizing rallies and learning/teaching seminars, lobbying legislators to cut off military aid to Marcos, supporting multiethnic farmworkers exploited by the same corporations pillaging their homeland, and other activities. We also used Carlos Bulosan’s works together with the testimonies of Filipino unionists who spearheaded dangerous strikes in the fields of Hawaii and California. For us, *PSR* then afforded us an excellent pedagogical instrument which sparked the *conscientization* (Paulo Freire’s term) of almost two generations of activists in the U.S. and elsewhere. *PSR* is now a legendary document that, contextualized in its milieu and with reference to Sison’s whole career, can be more justly appreciated as a contribution to the advance of counter-hegemonic, national-popular movements around the world.

The Filipino people today, with its long durable tradition of anti-colonial and anti-feudal resistance, finds itself at a crossroad. The moribund system in its convulsive death-pangs eviscerates both victims and victimizers. The global crisis is worsening every day. Profit accumulation by finance capital signifies prolonging and aggravating underdevelopment—the poverty and misery of millions—particularly in the non-industrialized, neocolonized regions such as the Philippines. The Permanent People’s Tribunal held in the Hague in 2007, which I attended, pronounced the U.S.-Arroyo regime



San Juan Jr.

guilty of massive crimes, among them untold cases of extra-judicial killings, torture, enforced disappearances, barbaric brutalities with impunity—communities destroyed or dispersed, millions of lives wasted (for Marcos' crimes, see McCoy 2011). The verdict declared that the systematic violations of the rights of the Filipino people, their sovereignty and integrity, by the Bush and Arroyo governments are crimes against humanity. The Tribunal also condemned those powers that “under the pretext of the so-called ‘war on terrorism’ and in the mantle of ‘market- and profit-driven globalization’, deprive the marginalized of a life in justice, dignity, and peace” (San Juan 2007, 252-53).

History, unfortunately, seems to repeat itself. On 19 September 2018, this same Tribunal, after days of sifting the evidence and hearing oral testimonies, arrived at a verdict sounding much the same as the 2007 one; this time the defendants on trial were Philippine President Rodrigo Roa Duterte and U.S. President Donald Trump. They were found guilty of “gross and systematic violations of human rights—civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights—in particular, “the rights of the people to national self-determination and development, the people’s right to liberation” (Cohn 2019). Whether these outrages will continue for the next decades or so, barring ecological cataclysms, is the urgent question to which Sison’s interviews here can provide the answers if not the heuristic orientation necessary in clarifying what needs to be done. As we celebrate the golden anniversary of the founding of the New People’s Army, and the 80th birthday of its founder, we forge our passage through the “labor of the negative,” expressing here the travails and hopes of the proletarianized masses in the long march not to a proverbial utopia but to a sense of fulfillment in having affirmed our people’s dignity, integrity, and inexhaustible creativity.

References

- Ahmad, Eqbal. 1971. “The Theory and Fallacies of Counter-Insurgency.” *The Nation*, August 2, 19–26.
- Ch’en, Jerome. 1965. *Mao and the Chinese Revolution*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cohn, Marjorie. 2019. “Tribunal Declares Trump and Duterte Guilty of Crimes against Humanity.” *Truthout*, March 14. <http://truthout.org>.
- Communist Party of the Philippines. 1990. “Programme for a People’s Democratic Revolution in the Philippines.” In *Communism in the Philippines: An Introduction*, by Alfredo Saulo, 221–44. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- Distor, Emerita Dionisio. 1977. “Maoism and the Development of the Communist Party of the Philippines.” In *Critical Perspectives on Mao Zedong’s Thought*, edited by Arif Dirlik, Paul Healy, and Nick Knight, 137–58. New Jersey: Humanities Press.



San Juan Jr.

Harvey, David. 2014. *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Knight, Nick. 1977. "The Laws of Dialectical Materialism in Mao Zedong's Thought: The Question of 'Orthodoxy.'" In *Critical Perspectives on Mao Zedong's Thought*, edited by Arif Dirlik, Paul Healy, and Nick Knight, 181–204. New Jersey: Humanities Press.

Lanin, Vladimir. 1968. *National Liberation, Socialism and Imperialism: Selected Writings*. New York: International Publishers.

Mao Zedong. 1977. "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People." In *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. 5, 384–421. Peking: Foreign Languages Press.

McCoy, Alfred. 2011. "Dark Legacy: Human Rights under the Marcos Regime." In *Memory, Truth Telling and the Pursuit of Justice: A Conference on the Legacies of the Marcos Dictatorship*, 129–44. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University, Office of Research and Publications.

Rizal, Jose. 1979. "The Philippines a Century Hence." Translated by Charles Derbyshire. In *Jose Rizal*, 96–129. Manila: National Historical Institute.

Rossanda, Rossana. 1971. "Mao's Marxism." *Socialist Register*, 53–80.

San Juan, E. 2007. *U.S. Imperialism and Revolution in the Philippines*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

———. 2015. *Between Empire and Insurgency*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press.

Sison, Jose Maria [Amado Guerrero, pseud.]. 1971. *Philippine Society and Revolution*. Manila: Pulang Tala.

———. [Amado Guerrero, pseud.]. 1974. *Specific Characteristics of People's War in the Philippines*. Oakland, CA: International Association of Filipino Patriots.

———. 2015. *Continuing the Struggle for National Liberation*. Manila: International Network for Philippines Studies and Aklat ng Bayan.

Sison, Jose Maria, and Juliet De Lima. 1998. *Philippine Economy and Politics*. Manila: Aklat ng Bayan Publishing House.

U.S. Department of State. 1987. "The Hukbalahaps." In *The Philippines Reader*, edited by Daniel B. Schirmer and Stephen Shalom, 70–77. Boston: South End Press.

Zinn, Howard. 1984. *The Twentieth Century*. New York: Harper.

