
It has almost become a truism that Philippine traditional politics is infused with, and even fueled by, emotion. Officials are addressed with kin terms, and criteria for holding office are framed through idioms of goodness, trust, and even having “heart.” A comprehensive history of this phenomenon is still waiting to be written, but Talitha Espiritu’s *Passionate Revolutions* is a good place to begin.

Espiritu’s thesis is simple: both the rise and fall of Ferdinand Marcos saw the vigorous activation of “political emotion” in cinema, in journalism, and in the public “performances” of electoral campaigns and student demonstrations (both as performances *as such* and as captured by print and television reportage). The book explicitly focuses upon ‘how political emotions operate in official and popular forms of nationalism’ through ‘national allegory, melodramatic politics, and sentimental publicity’ (p. 3) and in what ways these were used in support of, and to resist against, the dictatorship. Drawing primarily from Lauren Berlant’s writings on “true feeling” (2001) and generally from the “affective turn” in cultural studies, Espiritu argues for a more categorical consideration of the emotive dimension of this era—a theme that is only implicitly broached (though nevertheless almost always present) in most other standard accounts.

The first three chapters detail Marcos’ ascent and consolidation of power. Espiritu focuses on the propagation of the national allegory of nation as “family”, (with Marcos and his wife Imelda as parent-figures) with all of its emotional underpinnings and dissonances (as exemplified in the Dovie Beams scandal). This framing bears upon notions of discipline and cultural rejuvenation as codified in Marcos’ official cultural policies. Scholars interested in postcolonial discourse may want to be alert to Espiritu’s juxtaposition of these policies and Fanon’s perspectives on decolonization, and her explication of how the latter was appropriated to serve oppressive ends. The last three chapters, on the other hand, delve into the push from below as various opposition groups themselves mobilized “political feeling” in the anti-dictatorship resistance. These are most apparent in the New Cinema of acclaimed Filipino film director Lino Brocka and others, and in the writings of the alternative press in the aftermath of the assassination of opposition leader Benigno Aquino, Jr.
The introduction in which the book’s theoretical approaches are explicated may be a bit laden, but the rest of it is quite easily readable, especially for those with a working knowledge of Martial Law history. This is because the book as a whole is equal parts historical narrative and media analysis, most probably for the sake of readers who may not be too familiar with Martial Law and its historical milieu. On the one hand, this reviewer does not mind the reiteration (in Espiritu’s succinct writing style) of established facts about the dictatorship in the face of recent attempts at historical revisionism even by public institutions (Rappler.com 2016). But on the other, this may be seen as taking away from a denser and more concentrated probing of the samples of media work tackled in the book. For example, Chapter 5’s discussion of print media in the waning of the Marcos years is amply historically contextualized, but it could have elaborated more about the contents of the cited written pieces similar to how film was extensively treated in other portions of the book. This could have given a fuller presentation of the different ways of constructing and conveying “political feeling” across different types of media.

Another aspect of the study that could have been further enriched is how local categories of emotion were utilized and mobilized in the media works discussed herein. The reviewer emphasizes this for two reasons. First, such an approach was integral in the works of Reynaldo C. Ileto and Vicente L. Rafael with their close scrutiny of emotive categories such as loob (self) and awa (pity). This also could have been an opportunity to engage with the increasing body of literature on local Filipino concepts of emotion (such as Paz 2008). Second, such a consideration could have further fleshed out the book’s argument for the connection between political emotion and political action, particularly in the ‘practical resonance of their “truth effects”’ (San Juan 2000: 275). The naming of these local emotional categories is a crucial variable that could have been explored more. We only begin to see this in the book in Imelda’s shrewd choice to sing local folk songs to serenade the crowds. This could also help elucidate why ordinary protesters would spontaneously break out into the highly emotive Tagalog anthem Bayan Ko (My Country) but not into the other appropriated anti-dictatorship song, Tie a Yellow Ribbon ‘Round the Old Oak Tree.

But this observation would not have come to mind if not for Espiritu’s conscious teasing out of players and roles in this historical episode. From an extensive discussion of Lino Brocka’s political trajectory to briefly touching on Jose Maria Sison’s disagreement with the “maximum boycott” policy of the Communist Party in the 1985 snap elections, Espiritu shows readers the uneven terrain of “rational” political discourse made all the more brambly by the deployment of national feeling and public sentiment.
Towards the end of her book Espiritu offers her quick assessments of the post-Marcos regimes, from the restoration of patronage democracy to the persisting gap between rich and poor. One significant thing to be understood from this book is that the creation of new forms of public ways of feeling is not an end in itself but are the means by which invested (emotionally and materially) entities seek to gain and maintain control over the nation’s economy. For example, she notes that for all of Corazon Aquino’s ‘emotional appeals to “meaningful politics” of the popular classes’ (p. 195), there were hardly any concrete gains for this sector during her presidency.

Being enlightened in this approach by this book, one then cannot help but speculate about the presently observed rise of “populist” regimes, and their use of emotional provocations and how the public responds to these. Passionate Revolutions seeks to understand this phenomenon historically by looking back at the Martial Law era, and readers of this book could very well be challenged to understand it today as it actively unfolds.

Andrea Malaya M. Ragragio
Leiden University and University of the Philippines-Mindanao
a.m.m.ragragio@fsw.leidenuniv.nl; amragragio@up.edu.ph

References