Wataru Kusaka, *Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality, Democracy, and the Urban Poor*. Singapore: NUS Press, in association with Kyoto University Press [Kyoto-CSEAS Series on Asian Studies], 2017, xiii + 341 pp. ISBN: 9789814722384, price: SGD 55.00 (hardcover).

Wataru Kusaka's *Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality, Democracy and the Urban Poor* is a careful, scholarly, but easy-to-read, description and analysis of Philippine democracy and urban poor politics. The book accurately presents the wide gap (disparities in language, lifestyle, education, accessed media, place of residence) between the middle class and the urban poor of Metro Manila, and how it is deepened even more by political "moralization" (casting issues along "we-good" versus "they-evil" framing). This book should be of interest to anyone who cares not only about the transformative directions of contemporary Philippine society, but also for those who follow recent developments in academic approaches, themes, and theories related to the nature of Philippine democracy. Kusaka makes good use not only of the methodological tools of political science and sociology but, more importantly, that of ethnography (specifically, participant observation fieldwork in an urban poor community for a year). Additionally, his summary of a considerable body of studies (especially by Japanese scholars such as Igarashi, Kawanaka, Fujiwara, and Shimizu who may be less-known to English-speaking readers) on the nature of Philippine democratic institutions and class relations is effortlessly written while covering broad ground. The major theoretical lines of the book are also built up through Kusaka's critical and creative tinkering with key concepts and constructs from varied authors (such as Chantal Mouffe, Asef Bayat, and Mary Louise Pratt).

The book's two main theses may be condensed as (1) present political engagements construct "antagonistic" (instead of the idealized "agonistic") groups and struggles, and (2) "moralization" in the political sphere either reduces "plurality" (as an ideal in Kusaka's notion of "democracy") or hides issues of "inequality."

If one does not tarry too much on big concepts ("counter-hegemonic struggles") and excitable theories ("transforming antagonism to agonism") and goes straight to the story, one can easily understand Kusaka's points. What is the Philippines' enduring problem even after the overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship? According to Kusaka: continuing socioeconomic inequalities and ever-deepening "moral" divisions. And how shall these be fixed? First, expand the "contact zones:" places and situations where the deeply divided and bias-prone classes, groups, and individuals can interact, listen to each other's "vulnerab-

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ilities" and life stories, and develop "new mutualities" with "an ethic of self-restraint." Second, focus more on "interest politics" or addressing real socioeconomic inequalities, in lieu of "moral politics."

Kusaka begins his critique of "moral politics" by arguing that the dominant flavor of Philippine elite politics (from Cory Aquino up to Duterte) has been to bank on "political moralizations" of varying moves and forms, which contends in the "public sphere" by attracting support from either the middle class ("civic sphere"), or the urban poor ("mass sphere"), or from both. With post-EDSA presidential regimes as markers, he constructs the following typology of such "hegemonic practices:" (1) "moral nationalism" (rallies both spheres along the moral and emotive theme of "solidarity of the nation" against the equally moralized enemy called "corruption"), (2) "civic inclusivity" (a basically middle-class civic-minded moral discourse to unite the poor and everyone else under the banner of "good citizenry"), (3) "civic exclusivism" (relies on the middle class and looks down on the 'uneducated and undisciplined' poor), and (4) "populism" (opportunistically rallying the poor against the rich).

Of the four, Kusaka thinks that it is "moral nationalism" that has played an enduring role in the electoral field (as mobilized by the two Aquinos and, perhaps unexpectedly, by Duterte). Although at some points efficacious (at least by elite standards) in forging national "solidarity" against demonized "corrupt enemies" (or in the case of Duterte, against the forces of "disorder"), what is consistently sidelined by such a discourse is the need to focus on addressing the gap in "socioeconomic distribution." This leads Kusaka to call for the drastic downplaying of "moral politics" in favor of "interest politics."

Is there a call in Kusaka to dispense of all forms of political "moralizing?" The greater part of Kusaka's book seems to say so; but, in the end, he carefully notes that a distinction should be drawn between 'moral politics that merits criticism and one that merits support' (p. 257). But perhaps it is not enough to make this distinction alone, but to rethink the true nature of "we/they" "moral politics" and its ideological moorings. This reviewer wonders if there are mislabelled discourses in Kusaka's "moralized" readings; if there are "political emotion" and "true feelings" in Kusaka's data which, in practice and intent, carry socioeconomic interests, but only cast in "moral" terms. It is useful to recall here Talitha Espiritu's *Passionate Revolutions* (2017) (see also a review in Ragraio 2018, underlining the importance of doing careful studies of local emotive categories), and Kerkvliet (1991:265–273) for a relevant comparative evaluation of the limits and debates opened by James Scott's "moral economy" in the case of "prevalent idioms" in rural Central Luzon. Placing Kusaka besides these two works can alert us about issues that people can only talk about in terms of "triumphing" over systemic "evils," needful of a strong "we" yet open-ended and receptive to sincere, civil struggles.

The promising notion of a “contact zone” is where Kusaka hinges his imagined (future) state of politics that has striven to contain strong “antagonisms” and “excessive” political moves. With a political vision one might describe as a mix of Mouffe with Habermas, Kusaka looks forward to the spread and deepening of “contact zones” if we are to halt the advancing “social fragmentation” of the Philippines and opt for genuine “interest politics.” Where are the present seeds of such hopeful “contact zones?” If one looks at the scattered examples in the book, the “contact zone” “success stories” are all situations privileging inter-personal, identitarian transformations. The one instance in the book that takes a political “demonstration” as ‘an attempt [by the urban poor] to create a contact zone for addressing their problems’ (p. 187) is a failure; however, it is not descriptively developed or underlined as an example of the difficulties of creating “contact zones.”

Nevertheless, Kusaka’s empirical reports are always valuable. Here he describes the realization of “Cion,” a 50-year-old female leader of a vendors’ alliance:

One MMVA [Metro Manila Vendors Alliance] leader proudly stated that she had *gained a deeper understanding of the workings of society and politics* through the process of leading these protests, and had also acquired the skills to negotiate with politicians and bureaucrats.

p. 185, emphasis added

Thus taking note of Cion’s priceless reflection, there are actually three possible political outcomes when disparate classes and antagonistic groups meet and grapple in the contact zone: (a) the dividing lines are blurred; (b) the dividing lines are intensified; and (c) neither of the two, but, following Cion’s view, a deepened grasp of the workings of society.

Kusaka’s enumeration of concrete situations of positive interactions in various contact zones are almost all of the first type: a person lets go of his/her biases against the other and each realize their mutual interests and broaden their solidarity, even as conflicts continue. In Kusaka’s terms, this would be transforming antagonism to agonism because contestations are now premised upon a deep recognition of each other’s legitimacy (like having a “worthy enemy” that is not worth “eradicating”). As per Kusaka’s example, the second scenario transpires when, for example, a member of the middle class who has strong civic feelings but “romanticized” notions of the poor finally comes face to face with them and experiences their “intractability.” In this case, Kusaka says, the middle class inclusivist will become an exclusivist, realizing that the masses, after all, lack the proper ‘skills and morals to become true “citizens”’ (p. 249).

Perhaps more than the other two, the third is what is most relevant at present: a political experience that someone like Lenin might describe as heightened political consciousness (see Žižek 2002 for an engagement with Chantal Mouffe's philosophical assumptions from a Leninist standpoint). This, as Kusaka's book itself outlines in its historical presentations, cannot be delinked from the inescapable role of "organized" left-political movements. But because the Philippine "national democratic" practice is intentionally excluded from Kusaka's analysis, readers are left with a gap in being able to fully consider Kusaka's prescriptions to avoid "social fragmentation."

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