

ANGELO DE LA CRUZ AND THE POLITICS OF VICTIMS

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Abstract

Ibane's paper proposes an articulation of the noble aspirations of traditional cultures against the horizon of the monolithic grids of Western globalization. The case of Mr. Angelo de la Cruz, the truck driver whose life was saved by the Philippine government by withdrawing its troops from Iraq has shown that the intrusive powers of the global geopolitics can be thwarted by local cultures as long as the latter can justify their values within the broader context of the community of human persons. The withdrawal by the weaker party from the game of power can succeed only to the extent that such a withdrawal is premised on the affirmation of higher values.

Introduction

On July 20, 2004, Angelo de la Cruz, a Filipino truck driver was freed by his Iraqi captors in exchange for the Philippine government's withdrawal of its humanitarian contingent from Iraq. The whole nation expressed its relief and thanksgiving by hosting a festival in his hometown. The events celebrated traditional Filipino values such as our zest for life, personalism, intimate family life, and religiosity.

Our western allies, such as Australia and the United States, however, ridiculed us and bewailed our lack of courage and commitment to keep our promises to the so-called "Coalition of the Willing." The U.S. Ambassador, at one point, quipped that we should not mistake our friends from our enemies (PDI).

The conflict between the decision of the Philippine President and our western allies reveal the inherent tension between the local values of traditional societies like the Philippines and the liberal presuppositions of modern countries like the USA and Australia. This paper will show that the possible resolution of these conflicts lies in the recognition of the “right to be different” by other nations and by an appreciation of how the distinctive differences among nations can contribute to the infinite wealth of our shared moral universe.

Zest for Life

The festive mood that greeted Angelo dela Cruz upon his arrival in Manila confirmed our zest for life. As survivors of typhoons, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and other natural calamities, we mark every event that celebrates life with feasts: the birth of children, baptisms, birthdays, graduation ceremonies, awards of recognition, weddings, arrival and departure of friends and relatives from or to other countries, funerals, wedding anniversaries, death anniversaries, feast day of saints, etc. . . . Our Department of Tourism even advertised ourselves as an archipelago of festivals because one can conceivably attend a feast somewhere in the Islands at any day of the year.

These feasts are celebrated with the best food that our homes can offer. It was estimated that three hundred thousand pesos (Php 300,000 or US\$ 5,390) were spent for the banquet held in honor of Mr. dela Cruz alone. The honoree actually could not have been able to afford to pay for these celebrations; but his neighbors, friends, patrons and politicians felt that they were socially obliged to sponsor and pay for the festivities. The extravagance that stands out in sharp contrast to our surroundings accentuates how our festivals celebrate our triumphs over the adversities that hound our everyday lives. It is no wonder that we exude with our happiest expressions when we greet our guests, friends, and relatives with our deepest wish for ourselves: *Mabuhay!* (To Live! or Viva!)

Such celebrations also pervade our political culture. Our national and local elections, even our rituals of protest, are all festive. The colorful flyers that decorate our homes and the gigantic effigies that walk our streets

during festivals are all recreated during political rallies and protest marches. We share our food, water and other resources during these political events. Even the entertainment industry joins the fray to the extent that movie actors become indistinguishable from politicians.

If the troops from Iraq were not withdrawn and Mr. dela Cruz was sacrificed in the altar of the “Coalition of the Willing,” his coffin would have been paraded from the airport to his hometown with thousands of sympathizers and supporters that chant the ouster of Mrs. Arroyo along with effigies that depict American imperialism. This would have paved the way for the galvanization of the political forces that have been aligned against Mrs. Arroyo during the recently contested national elections and they would have created enough chaos to change the national leadership. The American military would have to intervene to defend Mrs. Arroyo against her own people. Our collective memory of funeral marches, such as that of Ninoy Aquino’s and Flor Contemplacion’s, are dreadful reminders of protest-actions, led by the dead, against those who happen to stand in positions of power.

Personalism

The withdrawal of our troops from Iraq can be justified on high moral grounds had it not been for the political pragmatism of our President in not invoking the ire of the United States and its Western allies. Contractual obligations, such as the “Coalition of the Willing,” are valid only for as long as these contracts do not violate the rights and dignity of the contracting parties. Laws are made for humans, and not the other way round since humans were the ones who legislated these agreements in the first place. When the very existence of human beings are being threatened by the laws that they have promulgated, then these laws have become irrelevant and oppressive and therefore can no longer be considered just.

Nations may call upon individuals to sacrifice their lives in case of wars. But such wars must be justified in the first place. In the case of the Western invasion of Iraq, the justification of finding weapons of mass destruction has come to naught and Mr. Saddam whom the West detests has been captured already from his foxhole by the time that we were

asked to withdraw from Iraq. The only reason why our troops were kept there was to adhere to the foreign policy of other countries.

Our personalism is known all over the world. Our medical practitioners, singers, and entertainers are in demand for overseas work because of our propensity to extend our services from the mere performance of our institutional duties towards a more personal interest in the living conditions of our clients. This is done to the extent that other clients find us nosy and intrusive of their personal affairs. We ask questions pertaining to their love lives, the state of their emotions, their relationship with prominent people, their home addresses, birthdays, civil status, number of children, etc...

Personalism also pervades our political culture. The majority of our people vote for candidates not on the basis of platforms and ideas but on the basis of how they were personally treated in the past: whether they visited and ate in their homes, whether they were sincere when they shook their hands, whether they spoke the same language and acted like they do. In one documentary film on our political culture, one informant said that she will vote for a presidential candidate not because he will provide them with jobs and food, but because he recognized her as a fellow human being. “*Nililingon niya kami.*” “He looks back to us.” They were referring to a candidate who did not even finish a college education and his main claim to fame is being a former movie actor.¹

Family Values

The first request made by Mr. dela Cruz upon his arrival in Manila was to allow him more private time with his family.² It was for the sake of his family that he ventured into Iraq in the first place. Even his captors learned about his family life through the television footages that were covered by Filipino media practitioners whose first instinct was to go to his home in order to cover the news of his captivity.³

Lacking in social security and services that are usually provided by modern governments and economies, Filipinos rely on the support system accorded to them by their extended families. Success is not evaluated in terms of individual efforts and achievements but as a product of fortune and luck to be shared with family members. Educational

certificates, ribbons and trophies are displayed prominently in middle class living rooms in order to take pride in the achievements of its members.

Our political culture has been rightly described as an “Anarchy of Families.” Political dynasties are evident in the example of Mrs. Arroyo who is herself a daughter of a former President of the Republic. The wife and son of Mr. Estrada, her chief political opponent, were both recently elected to the Senate. Other congressmen seem to have inherited the congressional seats of their parents. That they were actually elected into office by the population shows that this form of aristocracy is not only promoted by the candidates themselves but is also embraced by the electorate. Philippine aristocracy seems to be legitimized by electoral processes.

The sympathy accorded to Mr. dela Cruz’s family during their time of need has galvanized our political opposition against the “Coalition of the Willing.” (Even the underground Communist Party of the Philippines and its leftist organizations expressed their support for the government’s withdrawal from Iraq and the preservation of the life of Mr. dela Cruz.) Agreements with foreign countries have become irrelevant and relegated to the back burner for the sake of the dela Cruz’s family, whose name, by the way, is the same as the Filipino symbol for every man personified by Juan dela Cruz.

Religiosity

Saints were petitioned and candles were lit for the sake of Mr. de la Cruz’s release. Upon his arrival, The President of the Republic brought him to the shrine of our Lady of Rosales in Pangasinan whose intercession she had sought to secure his release. Church bells toiled upon Angelo’s arrival in his hometown and the police chaplain referred to him as the “angel of the cross.”

Our piety serves as our depository of hope against the harsh realities of life. This hope allows the poor among us to brave foreign lands, sleep soundly under the shadow of mountains of garbage, build homes on stilts along river banks, hang on to jeepneys as they speed along ravines and highways, and gamble their last centavo in the hope of turning the tides of

fortune in their favor. We take big risks because we believe that since we are now at the bottom of the heap, there is no other way for us to go except to get out of our misery. We have nothing to lose because we already have nothing but our being.

We say “*Bahala na*” (come what may) as we go on with our lives. *Bahala na* has its etymological roots in *Bathala*, our word for the most supreme being. After doing everything that is humanly possible to advance our plight, we leave everything to *Bathala* for him to determine our fate. Our attitude of “*Bahala na*” is the dynamo that empowers us to move on with our lives instead of wallowing in hopelessness.

The cost of alienation from America and the Western world as a consequence of our withdrawal from Iraq is a small price to pay for the thousands of overseas contract workers who have risked their lives, in the spirit of *Bahala na*, in the Middle East. In fact, many more overseas contract workers are still lining up in order to work there even after our withdrawal from Iraq. They are willing to risk their lives rather than die of hunger in our own land. The expectations raised by the spectre of globalization as magnified by the mass media are not of much help to quench the thirst of our people for the possibilities of a better life for themselves and their families. Our overseas contract workers have been hailed as our new national heroes for keeping our economy afloat in spite of the fluctuations of the global and local markets.

The Politics of Victims

A *New York Times* editorial was quoted by the Philippine press for its astute observation that “President Arroyo’s surrender shows the perils of assembling a coalition of weak allies eager to please Washington but lacking much conviction in the American cause.” This remark was dismissed by Mrs. Arroyo’s spokesperson by simply proclaiming “We don’t read the New York Times here,” emphasizing the role of local politics in the decision to withdraw our troops from Iraq.

This NYT editorial, however, poses a serious warning to Western nations that the inequities of the global economic and political systems could actually imperil their hegemonic agenda. The practices of Liberal

Democracy, nevertheless, unsoundly presuppose symmetry among sovereign and powerful nations.

In situations of grave political and economic inequalities, however, the only recourse of weaker countries is their access to the inner resources of their cultural heritage. Max Scheler has long observed that Asians practice a different kind of politics than their Western counterparts. He referred to this as the politics of the hunted or the victim, as opposed to the politics of the hunter or the victor. In this kind of politics, the hunted lures the hunter into his lair in order to trap the latter to a more familiar terrain and thus win the battle in its own terms.

The United States lost the war the moment they landed in Iraq. They thought that the power of their guns and the might of their technologies could subdue a whole nation by invading its territory. They, however, were trapped by their own naïveté and it is now too late for them to realize the consequences of their folly. They are now being plucked and assassinated, one by one, in a foreign terrain, with their enemies taking advantage of their familiarity with the environment, fighting battles in their own turf. The Americans did find Saddam holed inside a pit; but they had to sacrifice many American lives and there are many more militant Iraqis who continue to assert their sovereignty by means of assassinations and other guerilla tactics against US soldiers.

A similar strategy was deployed against Napoleon by the Russians when they gave up Moscow after the French Grand Army who began the invasion with over 600,000 men, retreated during the dreaded Winter of 1812 with fewer than 10,000 men plodding home to France in defeat. The French forces were decimated, not by the weaker armory of Russian soldiers, but by the invincible powers of nature herself. We must not forget that the Iraqis were under Russian military tutelage before the American invasion. The Vietnamese who were likewise trained by the Russians have employed the same tactics against the Americans, but the latter, unfortunately, never learned the lessons of their own history.

Max Scheler tells us that Shiva, the Indian deity, escaped the world snake by submitting his body to the strangling forces of his nemesis and thus escaped as gracefully as a woman taking off her gloves. In a similar fashion, Taoists remind us that formlessness is the more advantageous

position in a confrontation. The first party who reveals its form will show its weaknesses and thus expose its vulnerability.

For Westerners, such astute tactics are unethical, dishonest, and treacherous. Their notion of modern politics is hinged on the presupposition that human beings and, by extrapolation, all nations, fight their battles on equal terms. This Western enlightenment ideal, however, fails to recognize not only the variety and differences of peoples' cultures, but the obviously disadvantaged starting points of human political and economic development of many nations and the cultural element that determines their politics and economics.

Bamboo Politics

It has been said that Filipinos survive by dancing like the bamboo, bowing according to the strength of the winds but remaining standing at the end, unlike the other proud trees that have been uprooted by the storm. One of our myths of origin even narrates how our ancestors emerged out of a bamboo pole when the first male and female tricked a mythical bird to peck a bamboo node in order to bring us to existence. Our bamboo dance, which warns of broken ankles if we don't follow its rhythms, reminds us that we must abide by the laws of nature, never going against her contours if we wish to keep our composure in the midst of danger.

Located at the fringes of the geopolitics of Australia and America, we are a small nation whose survival instincts affirm the values of life. We greet our visitors with *Mabuhay!* (Long Live!) as we receive them at our airports with leis of flowers and kisses. We provide our guests with the best bed, food, and entertainment facilities even at the expense of our convenience. We hold our families close to our hearts and we hope in God with all our might.

Our sense of justice is therefore grounded on the depths of our relationships and not on the modern egalitarian notion of equal rights that can be claimed by anyone regardless of who she or he may happen to be. Thus, we are more forgiving of the remarks inflicted on us by the Americans in comparison with the Australians whom we are barely getting to know more recently on our beaches and entertainment centers. The Australian Ambassador was actually called in by our Department of Foreign Affairs

as a result of unsolicited remarks made by their ministers.⁵ We still look up to America with a sense of debt of gratitude for our shared experiences during the Second World War. Our President therefore confidently declared that “No President can weaken Philippine American Friendship” because of our shared history.

As a weak nation, we are beholden to those who have aided us during our times of need. We have always looked up to America as the land where our relatives have made a better life for themselves. American movies and fast foods have invaded our cultural horizons, just like any developing country in this age of globalization.

But globalization has also allowed us to send our overseas workers to the Middle East. It is for the sake of these workers that we have withdrawn our troops and saved the life of one of them, signifying our concern and dedication for these new national heroes who brave foreign lands in order to uplift the lives of their families at home. Our relationships with other nations, therefore, have now become pluralistic in comparison with our previous alliance with the Americans and the Western world.

We used to pride ourselves on our Hispanic heritage, having been a colony of Spain for 300 years. With the American annexation, we became Uncle Sam’s “Little Brown Brother” in Asia. But with the ascendancy of the East Asian Economies, we suddenly became aware of our Oriental heritage and rediscovered our Chinese and Japanese affinities. The recent deployment of our workers in Arab countries has further broadened our horizon to include our Muslim brothers in the south whom we have relegated to the margins since the coming of the Spanish galleons.

This expansion of our awareness of our historical contexts demands from us that we think for ourselves, in the same manner that the modern enlightenment thinkers of the West have demanded of their people to dare to think (*Sapere Aude!*). Unlike the empty formalist forms of thought discovered by modernity, however, our modes of thinking will inevitably arise from the historical and geographical contexts that determine the cultural matrix of our everyday lives. In contradistinction to Kant’s “Critique of Pure Reason,” we are impure thinkers who must come to terms with our cultural baggage in order to offer our distinctive contribution to the wealth of values in the moral universe.

By articulating the noble aspirations of traditional values against the horizon of the monolithic grids of Western globalization, our local cultures can gain moral ascendancy by distinguishing itself from the leveling logic of economic of globalization. The case of Angelo dela Cruz has shown that the intrusive powers of global geopolitics can be thwarted by local cultures for as long as the latter can justify its values within the broader context of the community of human persons. The withdrawal by the weaker party from the game of political power can succeed only to the extent that such a withdrawal is premised on an affirmation of higher values.

ENDNOTES

¹ Ditsi Carolino, "Riles: Life on the Tracks" (A documentary film).

² PDI July 24, 2004, p. A9.

³ PDI August 1, 2004, p. A21.

⁴ PDI July 21, 2004, p. A5.

⁵ Jerome Aning, "Fuming at Australia but not at America" Philippine Daily Inquirer (July 30, 2004), p. A1.