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The Bid to Build the Archipelago as an Internetwork of Adversarial Friendship

A Critical Reading of Bas Umali's Essays

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December 2020

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A desire to read a book critically is similar to translating: it bridges a gap and weaves together a fabric between text, author, and reader, especially when the importance of difference is not overlooked. The difficulties are apparent from the beginning, as each reader is coming from different contexts, prejudices, languages, and political framings (different strands of anti-authoritarian politics). The differences contribute to the challenge. However, the possibility of discord brought by the anxiety of difference can be overcome. Following Frantz Fanon's postcolonial understanding of the pathology in the dichotomy of "colonizer vs. colonized," we find the reproduction of estrangement. To overcome discordant separation means for us to critically rethink the binary of differences. From this critique, we can reclaim our dignity against the prevalent neoliberal logic of "us vs. them."

The separation apparent in our time is structural, normalizing the disparity between the self and others. The neoliberal global strategies that liberalize economy and society benefit from this antagonistic mode of politics. The antagonism has its roots in modern ideologies, both on the political Left and Right. Frantz Fanon saw this pathological danger among the national liberation movements of his time. He proposed a very different political position, veering away from the dialectics of what we, today, call "identity politics."

As Fanon argued for the importance of relationships with others despite the obstacles of differences, he poetically said that, "Every time a man has brought victory to the dignity of the spirit, every time a man has said no to an attempt to enslave his fellow man, I have felt a sense of solidarity with his act."[1] It is this desire for affinity and critical solidarity with others that this text is asking. From its discourse, we can hopefully break the limitations that deny us the power to act against all forms of slavery.

Applying this perspective in "reading differently," I would first like to acknowledge my solidarity with the writings of anarchist author Bas Umali. At the same time, I consider my critical distance. Umali's writings could be the beginning of an anti-authoritarian discourse between activists from postcolonial countries in Southeast Asia and the world. Yet, his writings essentialize history as a prescriptive approach of projecting the future, and, if read without a critical lens, they could contribute to a conservative tendency in the Philippine anarchist movement. The contradictory appreciation of his work defines the structure of my text. I am not interested in corrections or the demand for a single and rightful solution. I am hoping that my contradictory appreciation could pave the way for a productive discussion that will contribute to the discourse of contemporary anarchism.

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[1] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008 [1952]), 201.

In the first section of the text, I will examine the framework of Umali's essay "Archipelagic Confederation: Advancing Genuine Citizens' Politics through Free Assemblies and Independent Structures from the Barangay and Communities," which echoes through the entire compendium of essays. The discussion will center around the precedence of the social as an abstraction of real political relations between individuals, especially how democracy dialectically displaces this reality. As, in most of Umali's essays, the precolonial past is essentialized as a model of "anarchy," the following section will discuss the tradition of patronage politics in the Philippines as a comparative case to his theoretical imagination. Finally, I will call for a critical and open engagement with Umali's writings, which declaratively suggests identity politics as a decolonial method of resistance. I will relate this to how we should critically embody, without essentializing, a different notion of the archipelago in building an *internetwork of adversarial friendship*.

Social Anarchism and Super Identity

Let us begin with the central argument in "Archipelagic Confederation," and deliberately examine its framework, especially how it echoes through the following essays, playing a central role in suggesting the precolonial barangay as a model for an anarchist political strategy in the Philippines. This is also a key inspiration for the author to venerate anything ancestral and indigenous as complementary to the proposed political strategy.

The central argument of the said essay asserts an alternative political strategy that seeks an answer to a structural social problem in the country, which according to Umali is caused by a dysfunctional democracy due to "colonization and coercive formation of a centralized government." The alternative political strategy proposed by Umali should build social relations that do not distinguish between "democracy" and "anarchy." The essay is a kind of manifesto, applying the framework of "social anarchism," borrowed from Murray Bookchin, to articulate the strategy.

Umali's reference to "democracy" appeals to many people. Who does not like democracy? Back in the Cold War era, the triumph of democracy was regarded as the triumph of good over evil (capitalism vs. communism). Democracy was what people wanted to achieve. In order to contextualize the framework in the Philippine condition, Umali tells us to revisit the ancestral social tradition of "mutual cooperation, complementation, and solidarity." He considers this necessary to achieve the goal of defeating colonialism and central authority.

an anarchist discourse and build, together, an internetwork of adversarial friendship?

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actions deriving from the center.”[16] Bas Umali’s alternative anarchist proposition can be seen as a reaction to the statist perspective of the Maoist Philippine Left.

There are two particular problems I see in Umali’s response. First, Umali’s proposition to reject the Maoist Left strategy and replace it with an archipelagic confederation of decentralized municipalities does not question democracy and its evil twin, sociality (a dialectical abstraction of the individual). Therefore, it still rests on grounds that are to the argument of the Maoist Left.

Secondly, Umali’s veneration of anything precolonial, indigenous, and local can be exploited by right-wing currents that the localism to notions such as ethnic segregation and conflate autonomous societies with “organic nations.” There is a worrying trend of postcapitalist far-right radicalism and revolutionary traditionalism, including green-anarchist groups and permaculture movements. This is not to conclude that Umali and his followers fall into this camp, but we require a critical discourse about the paths of anarchist practice in the archipelago. One crucial aspect is that there are many of them, rather than only a singular consensus. We require the importance of dissensus, difference, and affinity to achieve a quality of discourse.

Cuevas-Hewitt’s essay “Sketches of an Archipelagic Poetics of Postcolonial Belonging,” included in the introduction to this book, asks the following question: “Would it at all be possible to find belonging or construct community in a ‘territory without terrain’?”. What Cuevas-Hewitt hinted at was particularly the possibility of a social space and political relations devoid of any essentialism, a “coming to terms” between different individuals without dialectically transcending oneself into abstraction (society or democracy). As a poetic approach to articulate this type of relationship, Cuevas-Hewitt utilizes the metaphor of the sea and its flows rather than the sedentary terrestrial terrain of the archipelago to describe a social space that constantly changes.

In our current state of affairs, uncertainty is considered unproductive. Many would rather subscribe to the foregrounding of consensus over dissensus as the central pillar of political relationships (democracy). Only this, they believe, can provide a solid terrain to stand on. Many anarchist groups – from green anarchists to anarcho-syndicalists to right-wing anarchists – replicate this modus operandi as a means to an end. This austere approach could lead to disaster; a tragedy very much familiar to us. So, I would like to ask a question similar to that asked by Cuevas-Hewitt: Would it at all be possible to critically embody the archipelago in

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[16] Ibid., 403.

Umali describes “direct democracy” by following Murray Bookchin’s theoretical concept of social anarchism. But what is social anarchism? It is a dominant form of anarchism that emphasizes the communitarian and cooperative features in anarchist theory, stressing the importance of the social over the individual. In his 1995 booklet *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm*, Bookchin defined social anarchism by inventing a contrasting term: “lifestyle anarchism.” This dichotomy was to distinctly define social anarchism from anti-social anarchists (“lifestyle anarchists”). Social anarchism as a movement upholds the tenets of “municipal confederalism, opposition to statism, direct democracy, and ultimately libertarian communism.”[2]

The dichotomy invented by Bookchin discredited other anarchists, especially those who were not socially committed enough to follow Bookchin’s orthodox definition of anarchism. Authors such as Bob Black reacted adversely and responded with polemics. Black saw identity politics implied in Bookchin’s dialectics and an agenda of schism in social anarchism. He suggested to his readers to find their own escape routes from the anarcho-leftist fundamentalism that had dominated North American anarchist discourse for centuries. Black described his own position as “post-Left anarchy” and stated: “Post-leftist anarchy is positioned to articulate — not a program — but a number of revolutionary themes with contemporary relevance and resonance.”[3]

In my understanding, the key to finding your own escape route from the shadows of Leftism, especially as someone coming from the Global South, is to demystify democracy, which is fundamental to all shades of Leftism in Southeast Asia, i.e. Third World nationalism, indigenism, and national liberation movements. But it is erroneous to suggest that democracy is championed exclusively to the Left. Most right-wing radicals, or even plain gangsters, also subscribe to the concept of democracy. The significant number of Philippine people who support the grizzly “War on Drugs” by gangster-president Rodrigo Duterte uphold democracy firmly. To demystify democracy in this sense means to reveal the reality that the majority is not always right.

There is no such thing as “direct democracy,” because the notion of democracy demands that all individuals surrender their autonomy to a greater collective. That was why, back in early-nineteenth-century Europe, “direct democracy” was a pejorative term, as it referred to people who would steal the autonomy of others for

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[2] Murray Bookchin, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm* (Oakland: AK Press, 1995), 60.
[3] Bob Black, *Anarchy after Leftism* (1997), quoted from https://lib.anarhija.net/library/bob-black-anarchy-after-leftism.

the sake of the collective and social good. In the reality of democracy, transcending the individual to an abstraction of itself is fundamental to a coherent society. This abstraction is represented by a privileged few who have "a modicum of free time […] needed to participate in political affairs."[4] Liberals, leftists, and rightists all adhere to it.

Max Stirner understood the individual not as an abstraction of itself, or as an expression of some dialectical super being such as society. To him, subordinating the individual to the will of the majority made democracy contradictory. Accordingly, if we apply this contradictory notion of democracy to anarchy, social anarchism becomes dubious. Democracy becomes an abstraction, expressed by the precedence of the social over the individual. But, by referring to the ancient Greek notion of democracy, Umali firmly agrees that bringing democracy to the community level, it will enable people to directly and independently resolve structural social problems. Yet, how do we know that this ideal democratic process does not exclude those who do not have the luxury of being able to join "democratic" meetings without somebody else representing them?

This question reveals much about the contradictions of democracy articulated and practised by the Athenians in the past. Athens was a city (*polis*), where about 40,000 Athenian men enjoyed the privilege of citizenship, mostly slave owners with the time to participate in a popular assembly called *ecclesia*. Based on an ideology that emphatically prioritized the social over the individual, slaves and non-citizens were excluded from participating in democracy, prioritizing "the city first and the individual nowhere."[5]

Following Bookchin's idealization of the ancient Greek polis as a model for social anarchism, Umali considers it fitting to reference the form of social organization in the archipelago prior to the coming of the colonizers. This social organization, exemplified by the precolonial barangay, was a peculiar political system that developed from the maritime trading tradition of Southeast Asia. Originally, it consisted of a network of dispersed coastal settlements that had complex social structures adopting to the geographical characteristics of the archipelago and maritime trade.

Umali does not elaborate on the characteristics of the precolonial barangay in relation to maritime trading, which developed peculiar polities that some researchers believe to be a precursor of oligarchy and plutocracy in Southeast Asia.[6] Rather,

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[4] Murray Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism* (Oakland: AK Press, 206), 62.

[5] Black, *Anarchy after Leftism*.

[6] See, for example, Laura Lee Junker, *Raiding, Trading and Feasting: The Political Economy of Philippine Chiefdoms* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000).

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A Tactical Conclusion Is an Epilogue!

Comparing Umali's theoretical imagination to Philippine reality suggests that democracy is a common denominator of both the nation-state and confederated localized states. Thus, when democracy was first introduced by the Americans it worked well with the long tradition of decentralism in the Philippines. The interdependent localist tradition inherent in the political structure of the country reproduces nation-state structures. The interdependent relations between different local autonomous native elites and the national capital region is cemented by access to patronage resources. This flawless interdependent network describes a complex political ecosystem misunderstood easily as a coherent nation-state. This misunderstanding is intentional, not accidental. It is part and parcel of a modern ideology that imagines a coherent community of diverse people sharing a commonality in religion, politics, or culture.

Benedict Anderson described this as an "imagined community," another word for "nationalism." To Anderson, however, the imagined community is a kind of nationalism that is particularly effective because it unites different people in an apparently coherent community. This is precisely what the *ilustrado* class of the late nineteenth century was trying to do. They were trying to create a Filipino spirit and a coherent Philippine nation-state, independent from the colonizers. Yet, even if different people did indeed come together as a homogenous force against Spanish colonization, the forging of a coherent nation-state did not work. The reason was that "their collaboration was equally motivated by local interests," with some of them being unwilling to be identified as Filipinos. For example, the elites from the island of Negros had a "direct link to the British-dominated global economy […] saw themselves less as nascent Filipinos and more as global citizens."[15] This sensibility was shared by the local autonomous native elites from Sulu, who were more closely connected to Java and Borneo. Thus, they identified as Southeast Asians rather than Filipinos.

To the Maoist Philippine Left, the imagination of the Philippines as a nation-state is very important. To them, a national narrative is imperative for seizing political power as the vanguard of the national democratic revolution. From their political imagination, the local must be subordinated by the national. This is also supported by a nationalist rewriting of Philippine history, which frames people's revolts "as stories that directly affected or were affected by political decisions and

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[15] Ibid., 404.

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politics has been the structure of post-independence Philippine government and bureaucracy. Paul Hutchcroft speaks of "patronage-based state formation."

How does "patronage-based state formation" work? In his research, Hutchcroft observed that the Americans failed to construct a functional modern bureaucratic apparatus (for example, centralized civil services) in the Philippines. But because they had unprecedented success in establishing a political structure and relations motivated by patronage, the autonomy of local native elites (oligarchies) had the power to outsource government functions and the freedom to implement their own policies locally. This political structure also gave leverage to multinational companies accessing local natural resources throughout the archipelago, approved by local autonomous native elites.

The interdependent relations following democratic consensus between local oligarchies also allowed regimes like Gloria Arroyo's to win national elections in exchange for protecting criminal atrocities committed by local elites who would guarantee them votes. For example, local warlords killing journalists under the auspices of politicians such as Andal Ampatuan of Maguindanao remained untouchable by law, as long as the politicians saw to it that votes were delivered at election time. Economically, "episodic patronage dispensed by bosses and politicians […] reinforces the poor's real condition of dependence."[13] In other words, democracy perfectly works for people who have a modicum of time and money to participate in politics. That luxury they enjoy on the expense of the downtrodden.

To political scientist Patricio Abinales, the lack of a modern bureaucratic apparatus simply means that the Philippine nation-state is weak.[14] But the interdependent structural relations of local autonomous native elites and the complex internetwork of decentralized local power structures in the archipelago make the confederate democracy of oligarchs appear robust. This reminds us of Bob Black's warning about the dangers of a "confederation of decentralized municipalities" in Bookchin's social anarchism. Without accounting for democracy critically and recognizing the dialectics behind the democratic notion, a confederation of decentralized municipalities (city-states like the Greek polis) is not different from a "patronage-based state formation" by local autonomous native elites.

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[13] Hutchcroft, "Dreams of Redemption," 422.

[14] Patricio Abinales, "National Advocacy and Local Power in the Philippines," in Kasuyo and Quimpo, *The Politics of Change in the Philippines*, 391–417.

Umali asserts the site-specificity of distinct communities from a geography that describes dispersed and interdependent island and islets. He speaks of a "traditional practice of decentralism that actually proved to be far more humane than the statist model that was imposed by the colonialists."

Yes, the precolonial society of the archipelago was highly decentralized and interdependent, but we need to acknowledge the characteristics of a hierarchical polity that developed from the internetwork of maritime trading ruled by the Majapahit-Sulu and Brunei-Manila empires and tributary states that plundered weak communities throughout Southeast Asia. Otherwise, the understanding of the precolonial Barangay will become a fictional historical reference for a political strategy that essentializes an indigenous past whilst imagining itself as anarchistic and egalitarian.

Additionally, without recognizing super beings (abstract identities) as fundamental to every tribe (collective, community, city, society, nation, party, and state), the essence of the essay only reaffirms Philippine millenarian Leftist and Rightist discourse, aiming for a greater national and social imperative to democracy (democracy, national democracy and social democracy alike). This, in turn, fuels the destructive identity politics of "us vs. them," especially if one does not subscribe to anyone's particular notion of democracy. With democracy and the social coming together, Bob Black saw Bookchin's social anarchism and social ecology as antecedents to statecraft, since "a 'confederation of decentralized municipalities' contradicts 'direct democracy,' as a confederation is at best a representative, not a direct, democracy." Black adds: "It also contradicts 'an unwavering opposition to statism' because a city-state or a federal state is still a state."[7]

Statecraft and identity-making are complementary results of complex social structures that transcend real humans to humanity-as-supernatural. This Hegelian notion of transcendence is the root of anthropocentrism, Marxist dialectics, and right-wing Christian philosophy.

Patronage Politics and the Swarm of Local Autonomists

So far, this text has been rather theoretical, but let us provide a comparative case of the theories discussed above. I will begin with the tradition of patronage politics in the Philippines and compare it to Umali's theoretical imagination and the refer-

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[7] Black, *Anarchy after Leftism*.

ence to Bookchin's "confederation of decentralized municipalities". Umali's own version is that of an "archipelagic confederation," which he describes as "a structure that connects and interlinks politically and economically every community in the archipelago." Theoretically, it is a stateless confederation of autonomous barangays from different parts of the archipelago. But, to compare this theoretical imagination of Umali to what is actually taking place in the country, I would like to refer to Paul Hutchcroft's field study of patronage politics, describing a living tradition of decentralized democracy and statecraft.

First, we need to have a historical understanding of two different political processes that explain why the Philippines have persistently been decentralized and localist. Political historian Samuel K. Tan speaks of the "sultanate process" and the "colonial process."[8]

The timeline of the sultanate process in the political history of the archipelago dates to the Majapahit Empire before the colonial era. Its main feature are the internetworks of decentralized states who were dependent upon maritime trading controlled by the sultanates of Brunei and Sulu. Free trade was at the helm of the political process and diplomacy, prior to any concepts of free trade and market economy developed by Adam Smith and David Ricardo.

The advancement of free trade during the sultanate process turned polities and communities into complex social structures. Each polity had a distinct identity. For instance, polities from coastal communities were headed by chieftains such as *datus* and *rajahs*, and they were more or less oligarchic. Meanwhile, the communities from the Cordillera mountains were headed by plutocrats, either conducting trade or making war. The political dynamics of these polities as decentralized states defined their interdependent local power structures that seemed to develop early politics of patronage – not related to bureaucracy but to partisan loyalty and leverage in maritime trade.

In the beginning of the sixteenth century, the colonial process took over the polities of the coastal areas. The decentralized states in the archipelago gradually came under the autocratic rule of Spain. Consequently, the oligarchy of native elites was replaced by "frailocracy."[9] The power of the church took the archipelago by storm. For three hundred years, the entire political process in the archipelago changed under the influence of civil and friar rule of the Spaniards (except for the territories strongly controlled by the Sulu sultanate). This led to the formation of

early bureaucracy, but the most important consequence was the production of an *ilustrado* class (elite-educated natives), who would later establish the Philippine republic that ended Spanish colonial rule. But, contrary to common belief, there was no single republic during the downfall of colonial Spain. There were many republics; that of the Tagalogs, which later claimed to be the Philippine republic, was only one of them.

The Philippine republic dominated by elite-educated native Tagalogs was immediately interrupted by the coming of the Americans who continued the colonial process. The Americans established patronage politics as their colonial rule and policy. The success of this colonial strategy contributed significantly to the development of the political process in the Philippines.

What is patronage politics? According to the First Amendment Encyclopedia's definition, patronage politics is "the appointment or hiring of a person to a government post on the basis of partisan loyalty."[10] The terminology suggests a mechanism of corruption. For governor William Howard Taft, however, the American colonial policy in the Philippines was "to promote as much local autonomy as possible," replicating what was practised by Jeffersonian Americans at home.[11] Most importantly, patronage politics was an American colonial strategy to keep the native elites of decentralized and autonomous[12] communities from supporting the anti-colonial rebellion. The success of this approach resulted in local native elites to govern their domains under American supervision.

In other words, the expedient success of American colonial rule in the Philippines was built on the power of local municipalities, attracting decentralized local native elites to support the Americans, while they created a central bureaucracy in Manila, which eventually established interdependent relations with decentralized municipalities throughout the country. The interdependent relations were motivated by the access of patronage resources. In the early twentieth century, municipal and provincial elections were held, giving local native elites opportunities to seek electoral office. The national assembly and the senate were formed in 1907 and 1916, respectively. Since independence from American rule, patronage

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[8] Samuel K. Tan, Samuel, "Politico-Diplomatic History of the Philippines" (n.d.), https://ncca.gov.ph/about-ncca-3/subcommissions/subcommission-on-cultural-heritagesch/historical-research/politico-diplomatic-history-of-the-philippines/.

[9] Meaning "rule of the friars," based on the Spanish word fraile. – Note by the editor.

[10] https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/1140/political-patronage

[11] Paul Hutchcroft, "Dreams of Redemption: Localist Strategies of Political Reform in the Philippines," in Yuko Kasuya and Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, eds., *The Politics of Change in the Philippines* (Mandaluyong: Anvil, 2010), 422.

[12] The term "autonomous" is used here in its original meaning and simply describes independence. It should not be confused with "anarchic," since many authoritarians and right-wing groupuscules also use it.