

# **Discontent**

**A Collection of Essays**

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# Foreword

This zine is a collection of essays I have submitted to Transit Dialog, a Facebook platform where people who write in English can have their pieces published. I would like to thank them for inspiring me to write freely (although there's a length limit). I also thank the unnamed graphic artists who added life to my words by creating visuals.

The essays are my way of coping with the events beginning in 2021. More than being therapeutic, writing these essays helped me process my own take on what's happening around me. It helped develop my own informed opinion, as research is required in writing. I had a hard time when I wasn't able to write due to time constraints brought on by work and studying.

I made this print version for people who do not have the capacity to read them online. It's also for those who like to read with tangible materials. With it, I hope to inspire others to write as well and reap the benefits of writing, not to preach but to open one's self to the perspective of others.

Everyone has in them some discontent. Writing those and comparing them with the discontent of others opens to a more inclusive and emphatic world. At some point, discontent with writing itself may come. That is when writing may be accompanied by social actions.

Writing and reading my own writing also helps in showing how much change has happened to society and myself. In layouting this collection, I chose to retain the typos and the wrong grammar structures to remind me how I can be wrong. I now cringe at the way I wrote before, and at how insensitive or imprecise some of my thoughts were. But that is okay because I think people can be better. A line from a series said, "That's why they put erasers on pencils... because people make mistakes."

We can be better by looking at the past. Another important thing in that pursuit is that we continue to communicate with others on our way to betterment, otherwise, our idea of betterment will be limited.

Taks Barbin  
Diliman, Quezon City  
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# Ride To Mobility

23 March 2021

I have been biking since I was a child. I always associated the feeling of riding bikes with freedom, with flying. My friends and I can go to places where it would take us hours and a lot of walking energy to go to. Even the renegade writer from Indonesia, Pramoedya Ananta Toer once described bicycles as humanity's best invention. We could cover distances with only just pedal power as fuel, and with no smoke.

When the pandemic happened, it highlighted a number of inequalities. When public transport was banned, bikes became the reliable companion of anyone who can't afford to buy a private car or motorcycle. Suddenly, bikes became a necessity. In a country where only 12% of the population owns a car, bicycles became the lifeline of many workers.

Bicycle prices sky-rocketed after a few months of the pandemic. It was horrible how profit-minded people took advantage of many buyers. The bike which my brother gave me used to cost around P8,500, but now it's around P15,000. Yet, bikes still are the most affordable and efficient mode of transportation. You can still buy a used bike for a just price.

But bike prices is not the only issue concerning bike-commuters. Safety for bikers hasn't yet been thought of by many road-users and law-makers. Car drivers still open their doors without looking on their left first. Jeepney and taxi drivers still cut bikers just to make sudden stops eventually. Bikers still need to ride alongside 16-wheeler trucks if they want to make it on time for work. And most of them wonder if there really is such a law as the Clean Air Act.

I can't help compare these scenarios with those from developed cities abroad where commuter safety is of number one priority. They take care of their constituents to a point where even if you forgot your helmet or even if you're only using a cheap bike, you're still safe and won't have to die.

Slowly, local governments recognise the need for bike facilities. They recognise that many of their constituents are indeed bike-commuters. But still, most bike lanes in cities are not connected to each other. Some bike lanes are not even safe for biking because of road conditions, or because bikers still share bike lanes with awaiting pedestrians and motorists who think their time is more important than the lives of some bikers. Moreover, many establishments are still without safely guarded parking spaces. Bikes continue to be prone to stealing, making one think twice first before using a bike.

It's a good thing though that some groups pressure the governments to do their jobs. A group in QC made bike lanes by putting colored containers on the side of the roads, sparking a little friction with the Metro Manila Development Authority. Others gave away reflectors and bike helmets to bike-commuters. MNL Moves conducted mappings of bike paths across cities. And in November 2020, the Institute for Climate and Sustainable Cities along with 350.org and MNL Moves launched the Mobility Awards. It recognised the efforts of governments, establishments, and workplaces for being biker-friendly.

As a biker, I volunteered in this effort. As I promoted the Awards in many biking groups, I witnessed how some bikers are bitter with their local governments. Someone even said online that there shouldn't be awards like this because local government don't deserve them. In that, I was quick enough to explain that it was more of an encouragement, a sort positive reinforcement.

More campaigns for bike-commuting were eventually initiated. After the awards, a campaign for safe biking for women was launched. It turns out, biking infrastructures was not the only issue. Many women hesitate to bike because cases of cat-calling and touching are still prevalent. Some men claim that women are harassed because of what they wear. But if we think of it, even in places where women cover their bodies up to their eyes, harassment and rape still happen.

These issues we face in biking communities reveal the symptoms of bigger problems. Harassments will continue as long sexism persists. Who does the government really serve, the majority of the people or the fewer elite who owns multiple cars? And why do people need to steal bikes in order to survive in the first place?

Surely, these problems can't be solved by blaming drug-users, oppositions, or by establishing ceiling prices. Pointing out the existence of bike-communities may be a good first step. Besides, we deserve to be safe. Not only because we pay taxes every day, but because we are humans. If we can't bike in the cities, it means that the cities are not safe.

Recently, I gave my 20 year old bike to my young nephews. That was after using the bike for almost ten years. I did it hoping that my nephews will find the freedom I once discovered in riding bikes. And I also hope it would inspire them to fight for freedom, in all its forms.

These bike-commuting problems will persist if governments and locals continue to lack sympathy. Yet we best not wait for that. Developments in bike-commuting will surely take longer if we wait for non-biking politicians to act for us. There is strength in numbers, and biking communities already have that. Just remember not to ride too close to the gutters. Make sure you are noticed, or those four-wheelers will cut in and ignore you as fast as they could.

*(This essay has been reposted by 350.org on 30 March 2023.)*

# Why Think? Inquiry to Why We Philosophize

7 April 2021

Compared to other students and graduates, I had taken more Philosophy classes in my long years of stay in college. But no matter how many Philosophy classes I took, the subject never fails to make me think and be aware again of the questions about life. But as we observe, the value of philosophy is one that is often put aside in this busy, compartmentalized world.

Wonder is one of the important traits of a philosopher. Yet almost all of us have come to know the world through such philosophical inquiries. Philosophy might sound big, but all of us had the qualities of a philosopher at one point in our childhood. But as we grow old, questions are discouraged. Wonder loses its place in human life. The Socratic method of asking questions signals disorder in a world of constructed order and hierarchy. We are allowed to live in society with some conditions. That is to follow the rules and never challenge its legitimacy. In this kind of world, philosophers are disturbers of peace, as modern philosopher Baruch Espinoza describes.

But, the questions remain. “Who are you and which symbols do you identify with?”, “When do you know when someone is fooling you with words?”, “What is good and acceptable in societies?”, “What is the best way to organize ourselves?” These questions are hardly asked anymore, but one has to ask these questions to be able claim that one has actually lived. Philosophy does not only teach us how to communicate effectively, or be better than English majors in grammar and logic exams. It also teaches us how to react to things, to phenomena, such as death. With philosophy, we prepare ourselves for death by checking out how one has lived. “An unexamined life is not worth living,” Plato quotes Socrates.

And how do we answer these questions? With language, claims Wittgenstein. He pushes for a precision in language, and therefore in thinking. This is because according to him, there has been a “bewitchment of intelligence by means of language”. Fake news, dubious sources, and trolls had been influencing us how to think since the 2016 elections. In this great confusion, Philosophy helps us make informed decisions. And yet, this is only one philosopher attesting to the benefits of philosophy.

As an over-staying student at the university, I was already quite familiar with the major events which contributed to the flourishing of Philosophy. But it was also good to be reminded that the developments in philosophy were largely affected by world events such as the Persian War. Famous materialists developed philosophies of their own to explain what life ought to be. Philosophy was behind every invention and every institution established. Even fascists like Hitler sought out the company of philosophers to artificially legitimize their actions, because they know that philosophy can easily prove them wrong.

How do we deal with our self and others, no other field brings light to this question aside from philosophy. Even the philosopher/soldier Socrates reminded us of the importance of physical welfare to become mentally fit as well. That is why gymnasiums were established in ancient Greece. This reminder that philosophy is a grounded discipline should be reiterated as often as possible.

Children often ask about things they encounter. This search for explanations behind what is perceived starts early and should be entertained early as well. In the book *Sophie's World*, it was pointed out that kids often still have the faculty of wonder, unlike adults. The questions about life might have been too heavy for a child like Sophie, but even she agrees that one should ask these questions about life at least once. Others may not have the same enthusiasm she has for it but one should still ask these questions. Even when our educational system removed subjects like history and humanities in our children's curricula, we need to reiterate critical thinking because this will be their only defence from being slaves, machines, and dogs of people who use their knowledge to deprive others of it.

So, “What's in a name?”, “What do I identify with?”, “Am I only this body?”, “Did the world always exist or did it have a beginning?”, “Is there a God?”, “Did God have a beginning?” These are not easy questions. That's why Sophie at one point avoided the interrogations of her friend Joanna. But people need not hide their curiosities.

We should also be reminded that the task of philosophers is to make every one capable of thinking, of questioning. Nothing is wrong with questioning one's own existence and society. It actually helps us be firm with some things we used to just blindly believe.

In a world of lines, a geometrical shape may be is considered unconventional. And in a world of geometric planes, a three-dimensional object is incomprehensible. But these are questions about reality, about us and our world. These may be hard questions to answer, but the point of asking these questions is already liberating.

# To Vaccinate or Not to Vaccinate

3 May 2021

Since the Dengvaxia scandal in February 2018, confidence in vaccines had understandably dropped. Almost 200 deaths, out of 900,000 kids inoculated, have been associated with the vaccine. We remember how autopsies have been conducted by the forensics chief of the Public Attorney's Office, and quickly claimed that the deaths were due to "complications" caused by the vaccine. Videos of parents crying over the remains of their children were uploaded on Youtube and were all over the news. The Department of Health withdrew its use of Dengvaxia, but was unclear why, sending mixed messages to the public. There was public outrage against the former Secretary of Health and the former administration. And protests were launched with the help of known militant groups.

Weeks later, the Palace and the Department of Health revealed that the forensics chief who conducted the autopsy is not a pathologist, therefore not suited to give an "expert opinion" on the matter. It was also doubtful whether the forensics chief has ever conducted similar types of autopsies before in his career as an attorney and medico-legal officer. Yet, the cases continued. The administration felt no reason to save vaccine confidence among the public. The damage has been done, but in their favor. They went on, until the pandemic came.

A year after the pandemic, with the economy badly hit, the government was desperate to vaccinate the citizens. So desperate that the presidential spokesperson once said that if a million people get to be vaccinated, they plan to re-open the economy. This is even though one million people is just less than 1% of the total population, barely enough to attain herd-immunity.

Yet, present public hesitation was not just about the past scandal. Early in 2021, the government was scrutinized for its seeming favor over the acquisition of Coronovac, the vaccine brand from the government-run pharmaceutical company Sinovac. This is despite its observed low-efficacy rates in other countries like Brazil. The government also withheld information from the public on the costs of the vaccine, citing a Non-Disclosure Order, increasing unnecessary public suspicion. Yet, eventually the prices were revealed.

People were also weary of the vaccine, particularly the one from China because of the maritime disputes with the superpower. Many wonder how this vaccine deal may affect the outcome of the dispute. And then, a month after the first batch of donated vaccines arrived from China, after the president expressed his indebtedness to Xi Jin Ping and the Chinese people and government, a large group of vessels were spotted in a number of islands, shoals, and reefs in the disputed waters. At first the Chinese government claimed that those were fishing vessels taking shelter during a storm.

Weeks later, the areas were confirmed to be infested with heavily armed Chinese coast guard boats.

Even before this, the Chinese government had already been accused of luring Asian nations into debt traps. And as of February 2021 and since the pandemic began, P9.8 trillion has been borrowed from different sources by the Philippine government. For how long each citizen has to pay everyday through taxes to pay these debts, was never cleared. Concerningly, the government has also been trying to decrease the taxes paid by corporations, especially those by foreign corporations. Many things are unclear, except for the fact that vaccines will be paid in debt by the citizens.

On top of these legitimate points of concerns, various conspiracies add up to the reasons why people get weary of vaccination. We all know of the conspiracy about Covid19 being engineered in a laboratory in Wuhan to control the world population, although this was already investigated upon and denied by the World Health Organization. Another claimed that the virus was caused by 5G technology for smartphones. One other conspiracy lurking in private chat groups claims that the vaccines are engineered with a microchip which will be used for either mind-control or surveillance. Another conspiracy strikingly insists that there is no such virus, that the government only uses it to impose restrictions. These are not far-fetched if you talk about governments, but I find it unlikely that all those scientists and doctors are liars. It is also very insensitive to those who lost friends and families because of



Covid19. A more passive type of conspiracy that also spreads through private group chats is one asking questions like, “Will the vaccinating lift travel restrictions?”, “Will the vaccines totally stop the spread of the virus?”, and “Will the vaccines be effective against new variants?”. And then answers each question with a confident and resounding “No!” In total, Alliance for Science claimed in October 2020 that around 1.1 million articles about the pandemic can be considered misleading.

Clearly, these people who promote vaccine hesitancy don’t know that they are risking other people’s lives. A report from Al Jazeera this February stated that the measles vaccine inoculation rate in the country dropped from around 80 to 50 percent in a few years. The report ends with a mother who lost two children because she refused to vaccinate them with measles vaccine. It’s alarming that we might once again experience a spread in measles and polio because of a vaccine scandal which up to now is not concluded to be true, and which did not exist in the 20 other countries which used that same vaccine.

Contrary to the title, this essay does not really intend to tell whether people should get vaccinated or not. Rather it tries to point to the reasons why there is public distrust in vaccines in general. This will even affirm that the choice to vaccinate, or the choice in vaccine brand to be used must depend on the individual’s consent. But it has to be a type of consent that is informed and free of coercion and deception. This also shows how our decisions and emotions are influenced by news that may not necessarily and undoubtedly be true.

Many of us are prone to misleading because of exaggerations and lack of transparency, mostly due to lack of time and knowledge in proper scrutiny. But to fix this health problem in vaccine hesitancy, especially in this time of pandemic, we should learn how to be skeptic of the news. We should always ask: “What do these statements want me to do?”, “Could they be politically motivated?”. What is suggested here is to go deep in times of crucial decisions, to ask why we think the way we do before we decide. It is good to be skeptical but we should also question our own skepticism.

# English Only?

1 June 2021

I asked a friend's daughter, "Ano'ng pangalan mo?" She didn't respond. She was around ten years old. I was told by her parents that she doesn't respond to questions posed in the local language. So, I asked her again in English this time, "What's your name?" And she answered quickly without looking. I told her, "Wow! You're so good in English. You can now be a very good slave for the Americans!" The girl looked at me, frowned, and went away.

Parents of my age tend to teach their young the English language at a very young age. And when I say this, I mean that they teach their kids English alone. To hell with the local languages. The parents may talk to each other in the vernacular, but when they turn to their kids, they almost automatically speak in English. I learned that my friend does this thinking that his daughter will learn the language more efficiently this way.

In talks like these, I try to quickly break the misconceptions. To start with, there are no studies that prove that neglecting the local language at a young age, in favor of a foreign language, guarantees proficiency in that foreign language. I always refer them to Prof. R. Guillermo's video on UPTV entitled *Labintatlong Tesis Hinggil sa Wikang Filipino* (Thirteen Thesis on the Filipino Language). Guillermo is a doctor in Philippine Studies. In the said video, he presents studies that reveal kids who are learned in the local language are easier to learn a foreign language. Good cases in point are the Scandinavian countries. These countries do not teach English at a very young age yet they turn out to be better English speakers than North Americans. Another good case in point is the professor himself. He himself can read, speak, and write in languages like French, Spanish, Bahasa Indonesia, and German, being well-versed in the vernacular language first.

Another common misconception about local languages is that they are not intelligent enough. This is an excuse often used by people who are not good in the language. Yet when they hear highly intelligible words in the vernacular, they either have to ask for its meaning or dismiss it entirely to cover up their ignorance of the language.

People also think that talking in the vernacular means that they should talk entirely in that language without borrowing any words. This is a misconception because, as Russian scholar Ekaterina Baklanova's claims in her article *Types of Borrowing*, Tagalog has inevitably borrowed words and structures from other languages like Malay, Sanskrit, Spanish, Chinese, English, among others. To strictly use only Tagalog words and structures is now an impossibility. The English languages (we say languages because there are a number of types of English) are not exempted in doing these borrowings. American English, for example, borrows a lot of French, Spanish, German, and even Sanskrit.

Some would argue though, that English is the global language. That's why kids should learn it early in life. I agree but what I'm saying is that kids should learn local languages first before learning a foreign language. Not just because it's more effective, but also because kids need to know where they're from. We always say that we are proud as a race yet we look at our languages as inferior to English.

Well, what can we expect from a nation that's named after a foreign king? A school in Manila once took pride in posting, "We are an English-speaking school!" in their school facade. I imagined the words, "We are happy to serve" were missing. It's like showing off how we're so good at mimicking other country's dance moves in an international folkloric dance festival.

English indeed is a global language. Yet when I joined a Southeast summit, I became an outcast because not everyone spoke English. The delegates happily chatted with each other in Bahasa Malay. I was the poor guy who knew only how to speak English. This disconnection with our racial cousins truly saddened me. At that moment, my fluency and pride in the English language failed me in my pursuit of communication, the supposed goal of language.

It is hard to empathize with people who you can't converse with. Learning the local language is also about understanding your fellow people. I wonder how future generations who wouldn't know a single word of their local

language can relate to their immediate neighbors. I wonder how they can appreciate their own culture when the language where that culture lies is unknown to them.

These may be a lot to take in for parents who may not be that into linguistics. But to easily put it, I told my friend that I pity kids who only learn a single language: English. It's pitiful because other kids learn three languages as a kid: Tagalog, English, and another local language. That way, my friend realized that his daughter is on the losing side, learning just one language when she could've learned two or three.

I also reminded my friend that English is just one of the foreign languages his daughter could learn. I'm not saying that we should learn Mandarin instead since the Chinese are closing in with our leaders conspicuously allowing it. I'm saying that kids can more easily learn any other language by becoming *matatas* in their own language and culture.

Language is never neutral. Upon embracing a language, the culture behind that language is always absorbed by the learner as well. In learning American English alone, we also embrace the American culture. Paraphrasing Alfonso Santiago in his book *Sining ng Pagsasaling Wika*, a people that uses the language of the colonizer doesn't have to be colonized territorially to be considered subjugated. Many parents may argue that learning English alone is a progressive move. Although I look at it differently: a decadent move reiterating the supremacy of the colonizers in so-called post-colonial times; or worse, an individualist move to assume the role of the master of a colonized people.

# What Does it Mean to be an Outstanding Iskolar?

13 July 2021

An *iskolar ng bayan* is someone whose education is funded by tax-payers. Excellence, honor and compassion are said to be the values ought to be possessed by an *iskolar ng bayan*. Big words, but what do they mean? Here's my take on what it means for an *iskolar* to hone these qualities.

Honor is exhibited when an individual does the right thing even when no one is looking. An *Iskolar* can exhibit honor in remote learning by practicing academic integrity despite the limited guidance of teachers. For example, an *iskolar* does not commit plagiaristic acts even in the smallest degrees, meaning they do not take credit from the works of others. They are expected to be honest in everything they learn, and from where they learn. Honor is also exhibited in the honesty and transparency of their methods in processing data. This includes how they acquire and interpret data.

Honor can also be exhibited through gratefulness. That is in remembering those who have sacrificed for the *iskolar* to acquire education. I do not mean here the politicians who have been deciding the fate of our lives without our consent, and getting paid for it. I mean those who pay taxes every single day without even noticing it. Honor requires an eye for injustice.

Excellence, on the other hand, can be exhibited in the refusal to be bound by the limitations in informational resources brought about by the pandemic. An *Iskolar* is expected to exhaust every possible source of information in the pursuit of his or her studies. The news is teeming with information that needs deeper analyses.

An *iskolar*, now also has to consider an inter-disciplinary approach in his or her studies, an approach which is not only useful inside the university but also in tackling public concerns like pandemic-response. A different kind of excellence is proposed here, an excellence in working together, a collective excellence. Cooperation from different disciplines, pushing aside bureaucracy, is what could help us get through this crisis.

More than discipline, compassion or *malasakit* can guide us in practicing safety protocols and taking care of each other, even when authorities are not around to punish violators. It is a trait inherent among the Malay race centuries before the Spanish conquest. Its other form, mutual aid, is even argued to be as much a factor for evolution as competition. Compassion is what initiates community pantries, community libraries, and community gardens.

Now, compassion in remote learning can also be demonstrated by being sensitive to classmates and professors who might be undergoing challenges in these tough times. A simple "Kumusta?" before proceeding to working with group mates may express sympathy. Asking the same question to professors who might be facing difficulties during remote teaching should also be thought of, because these times are challenging for everyone. Putting one's self in another's shoe may not be hygienic and safe if thought of literally, but in the figurative manner, it can ease someone's burden, and may even be a solution to the problems of our time, from the ground up.

These values here are what hold the *iskolar* accountable to the people. The *Iskolar ng Bayan* is indebted to the people for his or her learning and achievements inside the university. The cost of education is not free. But in the case of the *Iskolar ng Bayan*, the people shoulder almost every expense for the *Iskolar* to learn.

In the university, an *Iskolar* is trained in acquiring and analysing information in their respective fields. The essential frontline service of a university student for me is to share those same skills and values to the larger public. In this age of technology, people are overwhelmed with outbursts of information coming from all directions. The *Iskolar* can and should be the one to demonstrate the careful and beneficial processing of these information, meaning proper acquisition and analysis.

Various university groups and alumni have quickly exhibited this responsibility and strength during the pandemic. For instance, the independent OCTA research group initiated by UP alumni has voluntarily offered its expertise in data analysis. Professors from the UP Department of Filipino and Philippine Literature have advocated the trans-

lation of complex medical jargons for the public to easily understand them. Initiatives like these are vital for the public to make informed decisions directly concerning their lives.

If the Iskolar has achieved academic excellence, but has failed to exhibit honor, excellence, and compassion by giving back to the public, who have sacrificed their resources for him, it is not an exaggeration to say that he or she has failed as an iskolar. It is not unusual for a university iskolar to achieve academic merits and reach far places. But as the UP hymn goes “Malayong lupain, amin mang marating, ‘Di rin magbabago ang damdamin.” These are the promises a scholar has to fulfil.

*(This essay has been edited from essays submitted as an entry to the UPD Gawad Tsanselor sa Natatanging Mag-aaral 2021.)*

# Why I Registered for the 2022 Elections

27 September 2021

Never in my 30 years as a human being did I register as a voter. At a young age, I was already disillusioned in the electoral process. Genuine societal change was absent even after more than a century of the republic's existence. The rich became richer and the poor became poorer.

Because of this I rallied in the past to boycott elections. I still believe that it's the best way the government robs us of our participation. Imagine, you are voting for a person who will make the decision-making for you. After voting, your decision-making power is not yours anymore. You are not consulted if a bill concerning your life should be passed. Rather a person with a totally different lifestyle will make the decision for you. And you can't do much about it. The person who's said to represent you is put on a pedestal, widening the gap between their lifestyle and yours, the people who they are supposed to represent. So much for representational politics.

This administration is hardly different from all the administrations in the past. Its installment was birthed by the vote of a so-called "majority" which was actually just around 15 percent of the population (16 million of 110 million people). It proclaimed an end to oligarchy while it introduced new oligarchs to the ranks of the old ones. It concerned itself with solidifying its claim to power, rallying draconian laws that denies us transparency and accountability, and threatens critics and dissenters. One considerable difference, though, of this administration with past ones is its readiness to sell-out the country to foreign powers, first by encouraging foreign companies to buy properties in the country, and second, by lacking the will to defend its territories.

The defining difference though of this administration is its excitement to drown its own people in violence. This country did not need the pandemic, its own government were already killing its people. There were tens of thousands of murders recorded during these past years because of the so-called war on drug personalities. Yet, children, senior citizens, persons with disabilities, human right advocates and lawyers also became victims under these dark times.

This overwhelming violence was what made me consider to register. If I, along with other folks, exercised voting in the past election, it's possible that those in power could have dealt with climate disasters more seriously. It's possible that a friend would not have been murdered by the Bulacan police while he was working as a tricycle driver. It's possible that a friend's father would not have been shot in front of their house. It's also possible that a friend's dad would not have died of Covid19. Only if we dealt with the pandemic, climate injustice, and also addiction, in a medical, not a militarized way.

These are my reasons why I wanted to vote this coming elections, my vote could have saved lives. Yet. I still don't think that voting is the answer to all our concerns. I maintain that its practice in the present discourages actual and everyday participation. Yet I also recognize it's potential to diminish the amount of blood that will be spilled in the future.

Some radical friends would claim, though, that we should just let the state continue with its atrocities. That way, people will realize its rottenness faster, that it will hasten social change. This is quite possible, yes, but we have to consider that even Marx's great theory of societal change did not know of the Covid19 pandemic, the internet, political trolls and Tiktok. There is no guarantee that that is what will happen. I also claim that such a stand is insensitive with the people who has experienced the trauma of violence firsthand. To wish for someone else to suffer for a goal to be attained, to my thinking, is akin to dictatorship.

For those who can still imagine alternate possibilities, imagine the time when lives and human dignity still mattered. It could still be helped. Another dictator could still be avoided even if the difference is only a single vote. But voting isn't enough. To top it, we should get more involved in public decisions that influence our lives. We shouldn't be in the illusion that our only responsibility is to vote. We can call out inequalities and abuses in the institutions we belong to, in our workplaces, at the streets, and inside our homes. Society does not only exist politics. To vote could be something active, but voting just by itself could also act as a pacifier.

# The Self-Righteous Roots of Covid19 Conspiracies

11 October 2021

*“Ang naniniwala sa sabi-sabi, walang bait sa sarili.”*

— a popular Tagalog saying

Some people think that human life claims a high spot in the hierarchy of life in the universe. It's so hard for these people to imagine how a tiny virus like Covid19 could threaten human life. For them, the mutation of such a virus, resulting to a number of variants, is unimaginable. So unimaginable that subscribing to conspiracy theories becomes the easiest response. Yet, if we consider evolution with all its physical evidences, it would not be that hard to understand how mutation, which happens even to humans over generations, can manifest in viruses in a minute.

The question that has been bugging me is how come some people find it so hard to believe that such a virus can evolve naturally. I suspect that these people are not really familiar with evolution. It's possible that this is caused by the determinism proclaimed by some religions. Religions that don't subscribe to the material evidences of evolution are susceptible to think that dogs were always dogs, cats were always cats, and cold viruses will always remain to be harmless cold viruses. I even heard a pastor claim once that dinosaurs never existed despite paleontological evidences. Mutation for them is still taboo, despite the observable fact that even humans can mutate, either because of migration, a change in diet or lifestyle, to name a few.

“Absolute truths” like these are dangerous, simply because all they require is faith. Often, these faith groups do not encourage questioning. Testing such “absolute truths” is blasphemy for them. They encourage faith in the scriptures just because they were written a long time ago. Interestingly, this approach is quite similar to how conspiracy theories encourage their audience to immediately act according to conspiracies without advising them to do their own real research.

I mention this because I want to highlight the difference between this faith-based and populist approach with science. It may be true that science offers a similar level of confidence, but it's confidence lies in the idea the past scientific claims could be false. Science knows and admits its faults, even if sometimes these rectifications takes centuries to happen.

On this note, being an expert in a field of science does not guarantee truth. Even trained scientists can commit faults. So how do they test truth? They rely on a community of scientists. They conduct experiments and present findings, and encourages other scientists to prove or disprove their claims. If a scientist discovers something through experimentation, s/he does not claim truth automatically because certain unknown variables could have influenced the results. What they will do is ask others to do similar experiments. If other experiments get the same result, then they have a stronger claim. But they won't say that their claims are “absolute”, not until all scientists in the world, both independent and institutional scientists attest to it. That is why we still only have a handful of scientific laws we accept as true. Examples of these are the laws of gravity and electromagnetism, because these phenomenon are observed by all scientists on Earth, even in space.

If one needs to remember the basics of science, here's a review. We can test a claim by looking at its repeatability, economy, measurability, heuristics, and consilience. Is the proof presented repeatable? Do the proofs presented yield the largest amount of information with the least effort? Are the claims measurable in terms of numbers? Is it heuristic, meaning does it stimulate further studies? And does it have consilience with past studies by many dedicated disciplines? These are questions we can use to discern scientific claims from egotistical pseudo-scientific claims.

Let's consider a few claims and see how they fair with the approaches prescribed. A few months ago, a video went out with the banner “This is one of the MOST IMPORTANT STORIES in my entire 15 YEARS career as a medical journalist”. The video suggested that anti-Covid19 vaccines make our bodies more prone to variants because

the vaccines are designed only to fight only a particular variant. The idea was suggested by Dr. G. Vanden Bossche, a scientist and a vaccine expert. The video is explained by Del Matthew Bigtree who studied in Vancouver Film School. Bigtree explained Bossche's hypothesis by using a football game analogy on how viruses and vaccines act. Yet, no link to the actual studies by Bossche was given, giving audiences no easy way to test the hypothesis. Despite the lack of support or tests by other scientists, Bigtree encourages the public to "immediately share" the video. Notice how he did not encourage the public to study further first. I'm suspecting that he does not want people to study further because that will endanger the "MOST IMPORTANT" story of HIS career. I honestly don't necessarily disagree with Dr. Bossche's claims (I think that other scientist should address the claim), but with the suggested approach on this "story", it makes me weary of its intent.

As I said, most conspiracy theorists don't encourage readers to check the facts more than they want us to share their content (\$ ching ching \$). But some conspiracy theorists fail to hide their sources. For instance, I saw a meme that suggested that the pandemic was planned out by Bill Gates or the Rockafeller. In the meme, you can see a texts explaining such, and alongside it is a book cover that seems to contain the said text. But fact-checking isn't that hard anymore, so, being a fan of scrutiny, I downloaded the featured book entitled "The New World Order" by A. Ralph Epperson. I checked every page of the 300-page book and I saw no such text. It became clear to me that some people would really go out of their way to mislead other people.

I remember asking an acquaintance who rejects the idea of taking vaccines to provide me with material proof for the beliefs that he had been nursing. He believes that Bill Gates is a mastermind behind the pandemic. I answered by saying that it's possible that Gates may have some motives, but accusing him without enough evidence is wrong as well. He answered by saying that proofs are hard to acquire, and waiting for evidences will take long, that we should act now (even if our basis for our actions are unfounded by evidences). But if we follow this logic, then we should also allow the police to arrest anyone due to suspicion and motive, even without a tiny bit of evidence.

So, why do people make such misdirected assumptions, and why are some people eager to share false content? I am not really sure, but I suspect that telling people that they are unconventionally right over others gives them a kick. It could be a manifestation of the desire to have power over someone. Or maybe it's just convenient for them to just accept unfounded far-out claims to make sense of what's happening. I again can relate this to how followers of blind religion and populism find it easier to adhere to questions and answers prescribed within the framework of their faith. It's always easier to follow authority than question it. "Sumunod na lang" is always the mantra of the lazy and ignorant, the mantra that brings one to the hell of a credulously stagnant inauthentic life.



# Sovereignty and the ICC

21 July 2023

I am not a nationalist for several reasons. First, because nations as denominations began as products of Western (post) colonialism, an order bestowed upon us without going through much scrutiny. But since we are already in the age of nations, let's use this paradigm to discuss the controversial issues of sovereignty and international laws, particularly that of the International Criminal Court, of which the so-called Philippines has been a member since 2011 due to the rallying of civil society organizations and human rights groups, with the support of the government.

The ICC has become a household term in the Philippines in the past weeks, with recent news of it rejecting the PH government's appeal to stop the probe on the Duterte administration's so-called war on drugs. The inquiry has been criticized popularly due to two or three main grounds. The first ground claims that the ICC lacks jurisdiction over the Philippines since the country withdrew from the international body as early as March 2018, made effective the following month. This is only weeks after an inquiry for Crimes Against Humanity regarding Duterte's war on drugs has been submitted to the court. The Duterte administration's response was swift but it was a bit too late. The alleged crimes have been committed since 2016 when the Philippines was still a member of the ICC. Hence, the PH government remains liable and should answer the ICC accordingly.

Justice Secretary Jesus Crispin Remulla has been adamant in saying that Philippine sovereignty should be respected regarding this issue, and that the country has its own laws that try to serve justice to the victims. These stand as the second and third grounds for rejecting the ICC's jurisdiction. But does the ICC undermine Philippine sovereignty?

Using the paradigm of nations, I would like to exhibit my disagreement. To be a member of the ICC, a state must first be a sovereign one. In other words, sovereignty is a requirement for joining the ICC. In a sense, the ICC's insistence on its jurisdiction over the Philippines is an affirmation of Philippine sovereignty, because only sovereign consenting states can hold membership to the ICC.

On the notion that the country has its own judiciary, it should be noted that the ICC and the PH government are investigating two different cases. The Philippine judiciary, for one, works on individual cases usually against specific policemen who allegedly applied excessive force during the execution of their so-called duties, or extra-judicially. On the other hand, the ICC investigates whether there is a system or persons behind the state forces that encouraged and assisted in white-washing the nationwide overt application of force.

The Philippine judiciary has never processed a case of Crime Against Humanity. It can never do that since it treats the cases of violence during the war on drugs as "isolated cases" – a term that the police have used to defend its legitimacy against the hundreds of cases filed against them– every time there's a policeman shooting unarmed people such as senior citizens and mentally-challenged individuals, every time there are policemen caught on record planting pieces of evidence, and even when a secret prison was exposed in Manila's Precinct no. 1 holding detainees whose detention were not "yet" documented. Hundreds of these cases were considered "isolated". It roughly translates to saying that there's nothing wrong with the system, there are just some who abuse it. But would we not consider a system flawed if it allows or even rewards abuse?

Capability-wise, the government is also not fit to process such a case of Crime Against Humanity. Even the Philippine Commission on Human Rights continues to receive criticism for merely flagging these excesses. To ask whether the current administration has the political will to do so is another question. With the prime suspect's family still holding power, not just regionally but nationally, the drug war victims who were innocent and their families know that they can not trust their own government to serve them justice.

A common rhetoric during the drug war was *"bakit ka matatakot sa pulis kung wala kang masamang ginagawa"* or "why would you be afraid of the police if your conscience is clean".

Many ask, why can't we apply the same logic now? If the Philippine government and its police are not really as rotten as they seem, and if their conscience is clear, why not just let the ICC in? What are they hiding and who are they protecting? These are the questions one ends up asking. In a sense, the government's attempts to dissuade the ICC fire up more suspicion.

From here, it should be noted that the ICC is not applying foreign laws to the country. What backs the ICC are international laws. And when we talk about international laws, we talk of laws that were agreed upon by many countries including ours. International laws are not foreign laws, because they were ratified by your government. It is a law that tries to serve a sense of universal justice. For what is justice if it is only enjoyed by some? On this note, we can also talk about the military atrocities in Myanmar which the ASEAN nations fail to address due to its policy of non-interference. But that is another issue of foreign policy to be discussed in depth.

In this issue on the ICC and Philippine sovereignty, people tend to be very polar. Some hate the ICC because it seems to attack the politicians they idolize. But would they act the same if in another case, it work could for them? Say, if a foreign country invades us and commits war crimes here, would these people not regret the government's withdrawal from the ICC?

I believe that it is good that we are trying to deconstruct our affiliations with international institutions. That is if we are genuinely seeking independence. But if we are rallying for so-called sovereignty just to protect certain persons, we should start asking if we actually live by certain virtues or if we are just mouthing the intentions of our idols.

# Human Concerns in Israel and Palestine

13 November 2023

Imagine living in Gaza and receiving a note that says “Don’t return to your homes until further notice from the Israel Defence Forces. Leave all public and known shelters in the city of Gaza. Do not approach from the security wall, and whoever does so, is risking their lives!” This is a message advising Palestinians to head south, a logistical impossibility for the two million people there, and not without dangers as the IDF is also bombing southern Gaza. We don’t have to be religion or area studies experts to be concerned about this.

With what’s going on in Gaza, we should note that aggressions from both sides are never unprovoked. The October 7 attack by Hamas may be extreme but not unfounded. For decades, the Israeli state has starved the people of Gaza and the West Bank, depriving them of water, electricity, and work, even calculating and limiting the amount of calories that Palestinians should receive— a form of slow torture. The US and Europe-dominated UN awarding of Israel to the Jews in 1947–48 was monumental in this issue. The following two Oslo Accords also failed to establish peace and livable conditions for Palestinians. It is no wonder that a former legal front under the Oslo Accord-established Palestinian Authority has evolved into a militant group, gaining some local support.

This is not to clear Hamas of the violence they have committed against thousands of Israelis, blatantly opposing the existence of an Israeli state. They mimic those Palestinians who opposed the establishment of a two-state resolution in 1947 which ignited a war, ending with the loss of more Palestinian lands to Israel than was prescribed by the UN.

Now the internet is filled with debates on who started it all— a question that seems impossible to answer now. But now the Israeli state claims a monopoly on violence, with powerful governments like the United Kingdom, USA, France, and Germany continuing to be on their side. They have a claim on who the “terrorists” are. The Israeli military might have killed thousands and might have instilled more terror to civilians than Hamas ever did, but they don’t call their selves terrorists, only a state that practices their “right to self-defense” – rhetoric that has already been used and debunked in the past even by Israeli commanders such as Matitahu Peled.

No doubt, Israel’s allies are instrumental in how it acts now. It is the biggest recipient of US aid, amounting to \$124 billion since 1946 – amounts enough to end global hunger. It has been the US’s outpost in West Asia with the young Joe Biden stating in 1986, “Were there not an Israel, the United States of America would have to invent an Israel to protect her interest in the region.”

This US “interest” has been crucial in the shaping of world history. It is what has ignited our very own much-denied Philippine-American war that killed at least 200,000 civilians. In recent history, the US’s anti-terror campaigns also became responsible for cementing autocratic rule in countries like Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines. This is not to disregard the advancements that the West has contributed to these countries. But where the US hand is present, it seems to spoil more than it aids. These are part of what Noam Chomsky describes as America’s “last phase of colonization”, the US’s way of securing its global hegemony. Israel not only stands as the US’s ally in the region but is also a developer of arms and anti-citizen technologies such as the Pegasus spyware.

Hamas on the other hand is not altogether free of foreign influence. Along with Hezbollah stationed at the northern borders of Israel, Hamas is said to be supported by the Iranian government. Hezbollah is the most heavily armed non-government militant group and is now joining the war against Israel.

With all these said, is the war in Gaza just a proxy war between the US and Iran? Yes and no because the collective torture being committed against Palestinians by Netanyahu, his cabinet, and their Zionist supporters, who call their enemies “animals”, is real: the kicking out of Palestinians to give way to Israeli settlements in Gaza and West Bank, the systematic engineering of poverty and hunger. In a sense, the Israeli state is also responsible for what Hamas has now become.

What's disturbing is that the Israelis who celebrate the killings of thousands of non-combatant Palestinians are convincing their selves that they are good people, following the genocidal calls from the Book of Samuel, acting on the will of God to bring hell unto earth. Their goal is not justice but to "win", a word that suggests their hunger for revenge. The Israeli state, having the upper hand has the clear capability of de-escalating the situation but they chose to punish the unarmed and commit genocide.

Nobody knows how these will all end. But clearly, civilian lives are disregarded by the actions of states. We do not equate Israelis with the Israeli state, and Palestinians with the Palestinian Authority because many times, the citizens are not always aligned with the interests of their governments. We hope that among the citizens under these states (including the West), some still would opt away from violence. We encourage them to take a stand. The solution is not in subduing the other, bombing hospitals, or killing infants. With how things look now, winning will not bring justice, but sincere negotiations might. A similar plea for co-existence is addressed to Hamas as well.

As for the people outside this area of violence, including those in this archipelago, let us be more concerned with what's happening in the world. One of the first to respond to this violence was the people of Marawi, probably because they knew firsthand what it was like to have their houses bombed unnecessarily. Like them, we can go beyond the interest of the local news media outlets which are only concerned with reporting the situation in connection with the welfare of "Filipinos" in the area. If you are human, this issue concerns you wherever you are. Real happiness and peace can't be achieved when you have neighbors being slaughtered.

## **Author Note**

Taks Barbin is a copywriter, performer, and a volunteer for cultural and environmental justice. He is doing his Masters on Asian Studies, plays indigenous musical instruments with the Kontragapi, and volunteers for 350.org. He initiated an infoshop called Safehouse, and he established a tutorial center called Teach Me Tagalog for learners of the Filipino language.

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