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Complicity and responsibility: after Arif Dirlik on the Asia-Pacific and China*

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ABSTRACT

This essay pays tribute to Arif Dirlik's critical approach to the Asia-Pacific in the 1990s and to China today. It uses the example of Dirlik's writing as a model for reflecting on transformations that the region has undergone in the last thirty years, with a focus on the historical experience of the Philippines. It draws on Dirlik's analysis of the continuing role of colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism and the legacy of the socialist revolution in China to understand the key features of the Duterte regime in the Philippines, which are both comparable and directly related to developments in China in the context of global capitalism. Finally, the essay follows Dirlik's own moves in seeking what is overlooked and remains politically significant within these various hegemonic geopolitical projects, that is, older organizational systems and kinship networks understood as subaltern forces of both the global metropolitanist economy and authoritarian populism.

KEYWORDS

Arif Dirlik; Philippines; Rodrigo Duterte; China; socialist revolution; global capitalist economy; populism

I met Arif in Spring of 1991 through the introduction of Rebecca Karl. He had organized a symposium at Duke University called “The Asia-Pacific Idea: Reality and Representation in the Invention of a Regional Structure.” I was then in my first year in the PhD program in Literature. Knowing through Rebecca that I was from the Philippines, Arif invited me to discuss my perspective on the emergent idea of the Asia-Pacific. I suppose he was at least intrigued by what I had to say and he invited me to join the symposium and to present alongside a rather stellar group of luminaries, including Harry Harootunian and Bruce Cumings (who are here with us), and the late Masao Miyoshi. I will never forget that symposium not

only because of Arif's generosity and genuine interest in including perspectives from rather more subordinate and peripheral actors in the context of some pretty powerful players (and I don't just mean grad students among full professors, but the Philippines in the company of East Asian powers). Certainly, I owed Arif a great deal for his interest in and fostering of my incipient work. He later invited me to contribute the presentation I gave at that symposium to the collection of essays he subsequently edited, entitled *What is in a Rim? Critical Perspectives on the Pacific Region Idea* (published by Westview Press in 1993), and that essay became the first chapter of my first book, the publication of which, I also

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owe to Arif. So I incurred a lot of debts to Arif very early on.

More than the professional debts, however, were the intellectual debts. The symposium was my introduction to a regional interrogation of a geopolitical and ideological formation in the making—an Asia-Pacific—wide collective critical questioning of the very idea and representation of the Asia-Pacific or the Pacific Rim as an existent or emergent reality. I learned an enormous amount from the brilliance and political intensity that Arif gathered together and brought to bear on what he identified as the central contradictions that were at once fundamental to the ideational construct of the Asia Pacific and suppressed by it. The example of his own writing then and now provides me with important touchstones as I reflect on and try to fathom some of the transformations that the region has undergone in the almost thirty years since then, as viewed from the historical experience of the Philippines.

Today, the idea of the Asia-Pacific has faded beside the blinding specter of China's ascent as possibly the main contender for global hegemon. As in the early 1990s, when he sought to illuminate the ideological and political problems and complex historical, material relationships constituting that geopolitical claim, in his last book, *Complicities: The People's Republic of China in Global Capitalism*, published in 2017, Arif sets his critical sights on the problems and underlying contradictions in the idea of China as a so-called new or specific model of capitalism.

I want to take a few moves from Arif's critical approach to the Asia-Pacific then and China today to make some observations about recent shifts in the regional order, the latest visible sign of which is the recent alliance between Rodrigo Duterte and Xi Jinping. The alliance marks the Philippines' ostensible turn away from the US as its ever colonial, neocolonial benefactor and senior partner in the securing and flourishing of the First World fantasy of

the Free World, the fantasy on which an Asia-Pacific community dominated by the United States, Japan, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, with junior support by the newly industrialized countries, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore, depended.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the hallmarks of a continuing colonialism in the region would appear to be all but forgotten. Arif reminds us, however, that even in the case of the global power of China, the operation of Euro-US colonial power and hegemony has not ceased to have its effects. Similarly, we cannot understand the urgent appearance of Duterte on the scene if we do not understand the role of both colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism in the mobilization underlying and maintenance of his presidential power. "Unlike Mao-era anti-imperialism that demanded withdrawal from global capitalism," Arif argues,

the reform era 'opening' of the national economy has sought to turn the tables on imperialism by exploiting the global economy in the service of national ends. The success with which the PRC regime has accomplished this goal is a major source of attraction in the Global South [...] authoritarianism seems a small price to pay for achieving long-standing aspirations—especially among those who do not share in the basic assumptions of Euro-American democracy, or perceive it with good justification as an instrument of hegemony rather than liberation. (Dirlik 2017, 31)

In the spirit of Arif's insistence on comparison across ideologically polarized geopolitical actors and contexts given "the structural links between contemporary societies and the common political, economic and cultural forces that shape their actions" (Dirlik 2017, 67), I find that there is much that is resonant here for the Philippine context, despite the obvious and presumed differences between China and the Philippines and their respective states.

Arif's understanding of the legacy of the socialist revolution in shaping Chinese

capitalist development inspires my own reflection on the complex legacy of both Cold War counter-insurgency and revolutionary socialist struggle in the Philippines (inspired and supported by China) in the rise of Duterte's regime. We could say for example that socialist aspirations shaped Duterte's ascent in complex ways, as evidenced not only by his socialist rhetoric (his, he claims, is a "revolutionary government"), but also by the Philippine Left's early collaboration with his regime and the progressive hopes placed in his election and in his cabinet. While that collaboration has collapsed (taking from the US playbook, Duterte has declared the communist party and National Democratic Front terrorist organizations and therefore enemies of the state), Duterte continues to capitalize on anti-imperialist, nationalist and anti-oligarchic sentiments, and to speak to the concerns and aspirations of the overseas Filipino labor force, who are among his strongest supporters, promising them protection and care, and an end to their nomadic search for better lives abroad. I would also say, however, that decades of Cold War counter-insurgency and revolutionary socialist armed struggle have also produced the conditions for the proliferation of violence-based, illicit enterprises, the expansion of the police and para-military forces as entrepreneurial agents in the shadow economies, and the nationalization of the provincial metropolitanism of Davao (where Duterte was mayor for 21 years), modeled on the subnational state building and revenue generation through clan politics that has flourished in Mindanao's settler colonial frontier zone.

Duterte's anti-imperialism (also against Manila), like that of China's, seeks to open up Philippine and specifically Mindanao relations to the global economy, especially beyond its dependency on the United States, in the service of local and national ends. His constituency similarly does not share the ideals of liberal democracy, and does rightly see it as an instrument of the global hegemony of its own elites

and their multinational partners and affiliates. Filipinos also bridle most against corruption rather than inequality. Because they do not hold democratic ideals over and above concerns for familial protection and welfare, they see nothing wrong in an authoritarian strongman who offers them both (as uber clan leader) and who might finally be able to cut through the legalized hold that elites have had on the nation and break their rampant graft and corruption and instrumentalization of the state for their own personal, corporate and class ends.

While Arif excoriates the PRC's use of socialism as a legitimation of its nationalist, authoritarian capitalist development, he also highlights two important aspects of the socialist legacy: the first, is the massive organizational structures and capacities put in place by the revolution that has been placed in the service of both economic efficiency and political repression; the second, is the continuing potential of this socialist legacy, of the social goals of the revolutionary past that remain constituents of and resources for the present. I want to juxtapose Arif's emphasis on organizational capacities and political potentials in *Complicities*, with his similar emphasis on a largely overlooked aspect of the regional formation of the Asia-Pacific. In his closing essay, "The Asia-Pacific in Asian-American Perspective," he calls attention to "what may be the most fundamental—and enduring—element in an Asia-Pacific regional formation: the motions of people that have produced human networks that endow the region with a social reality" (Dirlik 1998, 307). These motions and the human networks they have produced, he argues, are also "integrative ingredients," "constituents," of a formation that would appear to be predominantly the consequence of states and capital. He mentions in particular the kinship networks that have shaped features of local and regional life.

Arif's attention to what is overlooked and remains politically significant in these two

geopolitical projects of global capitalism, i.e. older organizational systems and kinship networks, offers a way of thinking about what I see as subaltern forces of both the global metropolitanist economy and authoritarian populism: forces of sociality that are also organizing systems, social networks that are also vital platforms in the global capitalist economy.

The successful development of the Philippines into a major worldwide exporter of labor (with almost 6 percent of its population working overseas in the domestic, care, and service economies as well as in the maritime industry) and into a major site of global Business Process Outsourcing (the largest location for call center services in the world, cornering 16–18 percent of the total of outsourced services globally) has effectively multi-lateralized and multiplied the dimensions of the Philippines' international relations and made the global capitalist economy into a direct, immediate and intimate relation for ordinary Filipinos. Overseas Filipinos do not only contribute the greatest share of the Philippines' foreign exchange earnings with their enormous remittances (third largest in the world next to India and China), they have also become financial investors and entrepreneurs participating in the global metropolitanist economy based on the mediatic valorization of circulation and reproduction, and the capitalizable productivity of life.

The importance of migrants' transnational social kin networks does not lie, however, simply in their measurable financial contributions to the formal capitalist economy but precisely in the unaccounted capitalized means of social production they have created and made part of the financialized capitalist economy and its new forms of valorization. These social/kin networks are after all coordinated channels of information, goods, funds, persons, individual capacities, faculties and actions—organized recruitment systems, credit systems—social mediatic systems for the self-

replenishing and self-renewal of their transnational communities, which employment agencies and states themselves rely on and tap as mechanisms and means of their capitalist industries. I see these networks—elastic relations of social survival shaped by domestic kinship protocols, and dynamic and changing in interface with capitalist platforms—as vital platforms of social reproduction of the serviceable and expendable life on which the global metropolitanist economy crucially depends.

In the last thirty years, the neoliberalization of the Philippine economy has been accompanied by the decentralization and deregulation of the state's monopoly on violence, giving rise to rampant entrepreneurial processes of punitive value extraction (and derivative death enterprises) that are concordant with the new political economy of life. There, too, social kin networks serve as organizational systems that are both state sponsored and autonomous, as evidenced by the police and their subsidiaries in the ongoing financialized *war on drugs* that has killed up to 20,000 people since it commenced two years ago.

Though these distributed social/kin networks operating in the transnational Philippine metropolitanist and shadow economies (subaltern drivers of both) are very different from China's massive state apparatus, they are also crucial parts of the Philippines' insurgent capitalist development and growth.

In this bid, China is seen as a partner and a patron, financing drug rehabilitation centers in Mindanao, providing weapons in the continuing war against terrorism in Marawi, providing financial loans, investment, and technological assistance in Duterte's "Build, Build, Build" infrastructural program, and now collaborating with the Duterte regime on a project of oil and gas exploration in the disputed Western Philippine Sea/South China Sea (not to mention China's informal role in the smuggling of drugs and other illicit goods for the shadow economies).

These are undoubtedly *complicities* in the sense that I make of Arif's critical stance. Whether talking of Western orientalist collaborative relations with China, the congruence of corporate authoritarianism with PRC authoritarianism, or of the educational establishment ideologically laundering PRC propaganda, Arif is showing the complex entanglements of players and viewers in the tectonic shifts in the contemporary global, political and economic order, and calling for both the recognition of commonality and a more complicated understanding of responsibility. It seems to me that this relation of complicity and responsibility applies equally to the subaltern drivers of global transformation as to the dominant state and corporate actors. How we identify and locate the revolutionary potentials in these complex entanglements is of course a pressing political question.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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