

Philippines - Beyond 'gossip' and 'truth' telling: social history and history from below

Tuesday 27 September 2022, by [TADeM Eduardo C.](#) (Date first published: 15 July 2022).

Most history has generally been written from the point of view of rulers and elites and has little to say about the great majority of the planet's inhabitants.

Contents

- [Integrated body of knowledge](#)
- [Hidden features of society](#)
- [History and power](#)

Filipino historians' assertions that history is synonymous with the "truth" are aimed at the viral comment on social media by a mediocre movie performer that "history is *tsismis* (gossip)." The comment is related to the performer's role in an upcoming movie that seeks to revise common understanding of the Marcos martial law years. An avalanche of heated comments and counter-comments followed.

While my sympathies naturally lie with the historians, the point is to dig deeper into the issue to avoid treating it as mere conflict between truth telling and *tsismis*. Given the current preoccupation with and debates on history and its meaning and usage, it may be opportune to highlight an often-neglected aspect—a "people's history" or "history from below."

Historian Renato Constantino stated that, from the Filipino's vantage point, Philippine history must be a history of the people. In *The Philippines: A Past Revisited*, he wrote that "the principal focus must be on the anonymous masses of individuals and on the social forces generated by their collective lives and struggles."

British historian Eric Hobsbawm identifies as an essential component of social history the "history of the poor or lower classes, and more specifically... the history of the movements of the poor, i.e., 'social movements...'" Social history, however, unlike other branches of knowledge, cannot be a specialized discipline because its subject matter, human society, cannot be isolated.

Integrated body of knowledge

Historians, therefore, need to undertake a more informed investigation of life at the local (e.g., town and village) level. This requires reconstructing the life histories of common people and accounts of their personal encounters with external agents as represented by the state (local and national) and various forms of capital intrusions. What will emerge is a social history of local societies straddling the cusp of modernization efforts, which will provide the missing elements in explaining local cultures, practices, and behavior.

The various aspects of a human being can only be studied in relation to one another – the social, political, productive (economic) activities, as well as ideas and concepts, all of which form one integrated body of knowledge. As Hobsbawm puts it: “The intellectual historian may (at his risk) pay no attention to economics, the economic historian to Shakespeare, but the social historian who neglects either will not get far.”

A history of the common people is basically “grassroots history” or history from below. Most history has generally been written from the point of view of rulers and elites and has little to say about the great majority of the planet’s inhabitants. In the Philippine context, historian Reynaldo Ileto dissects the problem thus:

“All around us, we hear of the need to define the Filipino personality, style of politics, and social system. Yet aside from their presence in idealized portraits of rural life or quaint non-Christian tribes, the masses are hardly encouraged to participate in defining this tradition. It is the elite, particularly the middle class, that puts its imprint on everything – from culture to national development.”

The rare times when common people become a factor in major political decisions and events have been during rebellions, popular uprisings, insurrections or major revolutions that threaten (and sometimes overthrow) the established order.

Hidden features of society

In Ileto’s view, history from below must also delve into “cultural values and traditions” in order to “reveal hidden or unarticulated features of society.” At the same time, one has to search for “opportunities to study the workings and structure of the popular mind” as it bears “the stamp of popular consciousness.”

Thus, a people’s history seeks to uncover elements of “popular reasoning” by looking at local people’s alternative and seemingly “irrational” and “aberrant” meanings and perceptions of concepts and practices such as “land ownership,” “land markets and transactions,” “property rights,” “natural resource utilization,” “subsistence” and voters’ preferences. Ileto concludes that such alternative meanings and their attendant practices represent (consciously or unconsciously) the people’s attempts to upset the social and political “equilibrium.”

Looking specifically at rural life, American sociologist James Scott adds that “the most valuable work on rural society ... draws on elements of popular reasoning of rural people about their environment, about economic and political justice, about markets, about agricultural practices, about household structure and family life, about violence, about customary law.”

Ileto states that a history-from-below framework departs from models of behavior “built upon either/or oppositions” and uncovers instead “partial allegiances, guarded accommodations, shifting identities, and changing definitions of authority and salvation.” In the context of the May 2022 elections, the search for alternative perceptions from below could help uncover the ‘rationale’ of the Filipino electorate’s disturbing choices for their new leaders, choices that go against conventional logic and sound political reasoning.

But mere descriptions and explanations are insufficient. American sociologist Charles Tilly sees the need for a theory that seeks “to explain how, why and with what effects people fashion standard stories”—a challenge that is “worthy of a lifetime effort.” For Hobsbawm, what is needed is a model, a coherent picture in which, as in a jigsaw puzzle, the bits and pieces of information are assembled

into a “lucid and consistent system of behavior and thought ...”

History and power

On the current debate between “history as truth” vs. “history as gossip,” historian Vicente Rafael begs to differ from his colleagues, arguing that to naively counterclaim that history is gospel truth “begs the question of what is truth, what or who determines it and under what conditions.” He elaborates thus:

“Why claim that history is about truth? It is not. History is about power. It’s about who controls the archives and the evidence and narratives they yield and the truths they produce. How do we know which version of history to believe? The history that matters, that in the end ventures towards truth (though never quite reaches it) is the history that opens up to the possibility of justice.”

All these bring up critical questions and challenges that historians must confront. Have they depicted and highlighted the histories and struggles of the deprived and dispossessed many as against narratives of the self-absorbed, overindulgent lives and excesses of the political and economic elites and the overprivileged? Have historians been able to listen to and reproduce “the voices of the non-famous” in what American anthropologist Roxana Waterson sees as a “gigantic act of reparation ... to the marginalized, disempowered and uninvestigated”?

Finally, have historians made bold attempts to rescue and reconstruct the forgotten and excluded stories of common people from what British historian E.P. Thompson calls the “enormous condescension of posterity”? These ultimately constitute the real test of a historian’s worth and value to society. The historical realities that unravel in the process are probably the only truth that matters.

EDUARDO C. TADEM

P.S.

- CoverStory. JULY 15, 2022:
<https://coverstory.ph/beyond-gossip-and-truth-telling-social-history-and-history-from-below/>
- Sections of this piece were taken from Chapter 2 of the author’s 2006 PhD dissertation at the National University of Singapore, “Peasants and Outsiders: Change and Continuity in Three Rural Villages in the Philippines.” —Ed.