

Revisiting and Digitalizing Debate: Philippine Left Review

Tuesday 2 July 2024, by [Third World Studies Center \(TWSC\) of the University of the Philippines](#) (Date first published: 4 June 2024).

Although thirty years have passed since the last issue of *Debate* (Philippine Left Review) was published, it seems that many progressives—old and young—as well as scholars and writers still look for copies of the articles or of entire issues of the journal. Only a few libraries still have copies of *Debate*’s issues, and probably none of them has a complete set.

Debate only had eleven issues (a pilot and ten regular issues), but they were published in the early 1990s, at a time when the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), together with its New People’s Army (NPA) and the CPP-led national democratic (ND) movement, underwent a deep crisis and then a split. *Debate* tackled the very controversies and disagreements that rocked the revolutionary movement in that critical period—from a broad left perspective.

Two significant developments greatly contributed to the deep disagreements within the CPP and the Philippine left in general. The first was the “people power” uprising that toppled the Marcos dictatorship in 1986. By erroneously calling for a boycott of the snap presidential election, the CPP had boxed itself out of the popular uprising after being in the forefront of the anti-dictatorship struggle for well over a decade. The second was the fall of the socialist states in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in 1989–91. This had led to much soul-searching within the Philippine left on the whys of the crisis of socialism.

Beginnings

Debate was initiated by three progressive writers based in the Netherlands—Joel Rocamora, Edicio de la Torre, and Nathan Gilbert Quimpo. They were all deeply involved in discussions and debates of the Philippine left in the Netherlands, which included CPP founding chairman Jose Ma. Sison, a political exile there. The three constituted themselves into a provisional editorial board. Securing some funding for the journal from a Dutch funding agency, X min Y Foundation, and other friends, they put out the [pilot issue](#) (*Debate-P*) of *Debate* in March 1991.

In the [foreword](#), the board noted that few progressive journals—aboveground and underground—existed or had managed to survive in the Philippines, and that the CPP’s theoretical journal, *Rebolusyon*, and other theoretical articles of the CPP and the ND movement “usually already reflected the *result* of the debate.” The new journal, the board explained, was a response to this dearth: “*Debate*, as a journal of the Philippine left, will provide a venue for progressives in the Philippines and abroad to address questions on national liberation, socialism and democracy, and on strategy and tactics.”

Funding from a small, progressive German donor organization, Umverteilen, helped *Debate* go “regular.” Before proceeding with the [first regular issue](#) (*Debate-1*, September 1991), Rocamora, De la Torre, and Quimpo registered Kalinaw Foundation as the publisher of *Debate*, with the three of them again constituting the foundation’s board of directors. They also recruited three more

members to the editorial board: Rene Ciria-Cruz, Rene Ofreneo, and Eduardo Tadem.

The [expansion of the board](#) to six (and eventually ten) members was motivated by the aspiration to ensure representation from various left streams, as well as by the drive to involve more people in writing and soliciting articles for *Debate*. (Article submissions did turn out to be a persistent problem of the journal.) Early on, *Debate* also tried to recruit progressive female writers into the board, but those approached expressed reservations as they were “not convinced that the [then-] provisional editorial board is serious about feminist issues” (*Debate-1*).

The [pilot issue](#) and the [first regular issue](#) immediately dealt with the raging controversies in the Philippine left. In 1986, the critiques had focused mainly on the CPP’s boycott tactic, but over the next few years, the questioning had widened to the party’s overall revolutionary strategy. While long-standing CPP documents stressed the Maoist strategy of “protracted people’s war” some top leaders of the party, mainly coming from Mindanao, had been propagating the Vietnamese version of “protracted people’s war.” The two strategies were actually different, as the Maoist approach maintained the primacy of armed struggle over legal struggle, and the Vietnamese strategy regarded both political and military struggles as fundamental and decisive. By the early 1990s, advocates of the Vietnamese-style “pol-mil” approach appeared to have gained much traction in the CPP’s Executive Committee (EC) and even predominance in the CPP’s Metro-Manila Rizal Committee (MMR), as can be gleaned from their exchange of views in [Debate-P](#) and [Debate-1](#). (Note that the EC chided MMR for putting too much emphasis on the insurrectionary direction of the “pol-mil” struggle.) The EC’s paper contrasts with a document from the CPP Political Bureau (Politburo) published in [Debate-P](#), which contained standard Maoist fare, with no reference to “pol-mil.” The Maoists in the CPP top leadership tended, at first, to regard the revolutionary strategies of China and Vietnam as being the same, and thus did not pay too much attention to the “pol-mil” advocates. They focused their criticism on “insurrectionists”, as can be noted in the document of the editorial board of *Rebolusyon* published in [Debate-1](#).

In *Debate-1*, Quimpo, under the pen name [Omar Tupaz](#), compared the revolutionary strategies of China, Vietnam, and Nicaragua, showing their differences, and argued for a repudiation of the CPP’s Maoist strategy, which he asserted belonged to “a bygone era.” In *Debate-P*, he criticized the CPP’s tactical view of peace negotiations and called for opening up to the possibility of a negotiated political settlement with the government. [Dulce Obrero](#) (pseud.), responded to Quimpo in *Debate-1*, maintaining that the revolutionary forces were open to a political settlement and that negotiations were not just a tactical ploy. [In a much later issue ([Debate-6](#)), [William Pomeroy](#) discussed the experience of the *Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas* (the country’s first communist party) in engaging in peace negotiations with the Philippine government—as a form of struggle—and insights from this experience.]

On why socialist states in Eastern Europe had collapsed, [Rocamora](#) (in *Debate-P*) and [Ofreneo](#) (*Debate-1*) pinned the blame on the Stalinist model of socialism that had developed and become entrenched in Communist Party-ruled states. They equated Stalinism with a repressive “one-party state” and a “bureaucratic-commandist system,” respectively. Both Rocamora and Ofreneo also shared their reflections on the crisis of socialism on left movements in developing countries.

The pilot issue included two articles on a very controversial issue at that time—the 1991 Iraq War—one article by [Sison](#) and the other by the National Democratic Front of the Philippines in the U.S. ([NDF-US](#)). Both papers condemned the U.S.-led war of aggression against Iraq, but the NDF-US piece also deplored Saddam Hussein’s “aggression, conquest and occupation of Kuwait,” while Sison took a neutral stance on Hussein and Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait.

Sison’s article on the Iraq War was the first and only time that Sison consented to have his article

published in the journal. ([Debate-5](#), however, re-published a public statement written by Sison as CPP chairman under the pseudonym [Armando Liwanag](#)). After the pilot issue, Sison and his supporters became increasingly critical of the journal. *Debate* was [denounced](#) as an “unauthorized publication” and “a manifestation of ultra-democracy” that was directed “against the Party and its basic principles, policies and line.”

The Debate Heats Up

Following the publication of the first regular issue, the editorial board hoped to produce *Debate* on a quarterly basis, but two developments upset the journal’s working schedule. The first was the “Quimpo Affair,” an attempt by agents of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency and the Dutch intelligence to recruit Quimpo, *Debate*’s first managing editor, to become an informer on his fellow exiles in the Netherlands (see [Debate-2](#)). Quimpo’s exposé on Dutch TV of the agents’ attempt led to interpellations of the Minister of the Interior by the Dutch Parliament.

The second development was the dissemination of the drafts of two controversial CPP documents “Reaffirm Our Basic Principles and Rectify Errors” and “Stand for Socialism against Modern Revisionism,” both penned by Sison. The two documents asserted that the CPP and the revolutionary movement had made major advances in the Philippines through the years due to adherence to fundamental Maoist tenets on “protracted people’s war” and on socialism, and that the movement had suffered setbacks in the past decade or so due to deviations from these tenets. The main deviations were identified as “urban insurrectionism”, “military adventurism” and “modern revisionism.” Sison called for a “rectification movement” within the party to expunge the harmful influences of these deviations. Filipino progressives based in the Netherlands and their solidarity friends were among the very first to get copies of the two drafts. In the first quarter of 1992, Filipino leftists in the Netherlands became embroiled in tense and heated discussions and debates over the two papers.

In *Debate 2-4*, the first few issues of the journal that were published after the drafts of “Reaffirm” and “Stand” had begun to circulate, there was no direct reference to “Reaffirm” and only a brief reference to “Stand” in [Debate-3](#). The editorial board of *Debate* opted not to publish excerpts from, or comments on, these two long documents as these were still drafts. But Issues 2-4 did mainly address the themes tackled by the two documents.

Strategy was a running, underlying theme. In *Debate-2*, [Ciria-Cruz](#) argued that the Philippine left should abandon revolutionary armed struggle and “take the parliamentary road.” In a book review in *Debate-3*, [Frank Braßel](#) quoted Sven Hansen, who criticized the CPP’s “uncritical acceptance” of Maoist strategy, given that, compared to China, the “stronger influence of capitalism, the long bourgeois parliamentary tradition, the strong central government and the larger urbanization of the Philippines had not been taken into account.” *Debate-3* carried an article of the editorial board of the CPP’s newspaper, [Ang Bayan](#), published in December 1988, which, in stark contrast, called for the formation of NPA “guerilla companies” in Bicol. Over the past few years, the issue of “large military formations” of the NPA had been a running debate between the Maoists and the “pol-mils” within the CPP leadership. The “pol-mils” viewed “regularization” of the NPA as a necessary step in moving towards a strategic counter-offensive (SCO). In “Reaffirm”, Sison accused those advocating larger NPA formations or “regularization” of “military adventurism.” *Debate-4* featured an article by [Virgilio Rojas](#) on the mode of production controversy in the Philippines, which presented contrary positions—countermodes—to the CPP’s long-standing analysis of the country’s mode of production. Sison’s “semicolonial, semifeudal” thesis has long served as the CPP’s justification for its “protracted people’s war” strategy.

The crisis of socialism continued to be a foremost topic of *Debate*. [Isagani Serrano](#) summed up why

socialism in Eastern Europe had become unsustainable: less democracy than promised, a damaged economy and a devastated environment (*Debate-2*). [Sergio Tubongbanwa](#) (pseud.) further deepened the critique of the Stalinist model in terms of its “whole package of economic, political and cultural policies for constructing socialism”, particularly of its “command economy” and “one-party state” (*Debate-2*). [Ken Post](#) pointed out the flaws of the “vanguard party” concept and mulled over how the foundations of a socialist democracy could be laid (*Debate-3*).

The [CPP message](#) to a fraternal party (Communist Party of Japan-Left), authored by Liwanag (Sison) and published in *Debate-3*, contained the gist of “Stand for Socialism against Modern Revisionism.” Liwanag blamed the collapse of the ruling regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989-91 not on Stalinism, but on “modern revisionism,” i.e., that the ruling Communist Parties in Eastern Europe had “for several decades carried out capitalist reforms within their societies, subverted and destroyed socialism and . . . pushed their societies into the ambit of the world capitalist system.”

Debate-2 and *Debate-4* published materials coming from two sources outside of the Philippine left’s immediate circles. One pair of documents was on the disputation within the [Communist Party of the U.S.A.](#) on the events in Eastern Europe, which paralleled to some extent the debate within the Philippine left. Another pair of documents consisted of the declarations of the [second](#) and [third](#) conferences of the Sao Paulo Forum, held in Mexico City and Managua respectively, in which representatives of left parties and organizations from all over Latin America discussed alternatives to neoliberalism.

Debate-3 and *Debate-4* carried articles about the Forum for Philippine Alternatives ([FOPA](#)), “a project of fundamental reform and renewal” launched by activists, mostly based in the U.S., involved in the Philippine progressive movement. One of the conveners of FOPA, [Walden Bello](#), analyzed the crisis of the Philippine progressive movement, citing such factors as intense militarization and counter-guerrilla operations by the Philippine armed forces; the inability of the movement to devise a strategy appropriate to new conditions; and the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe. In his analysis, however, Bello focused mainly on a final reason for the crisis of left: the purging and killing by the CPP-NPA of hundreds of suspected infiltrators within its ranks in the 1980s.

Debate’s first direct reference to Sison’s controversial “Reaffirm” paper appeared in *Debate-5* where it was mentioned briefly in an article by [Rocamora](#) comparing the programs of the CPP and its “united front” organization, the National Democratic Front (NDF). Examining the two programs in terms of their positions on economic and political issues, united front and international relations, Rocamora observed that “the NDF program has been the major venue for the expression of new ideas while the Party program has remained essentially the same.” He described “Reaffirm” as a “hardline counterattack” and part of Sison’s “larger project to force a ‘return to basics’ within the CPP.”

Put initially under “preventive suspension” and then expelled by the CPP for his critical writings in *Debate* and other venues, Quimpo ([Tupaz](#)) excoriated the CPP leadership’s way of applying the Leninist principle of democratic centralism within the party (*Debate-5*). He contended that party leaders were contravening access to information, full publicity and freedom of discussion, especially in instituting the practice of “proper channeling.”

Debate-5 also featured a paper about the world situation written by [Liwanag](#) (Sison) which had been presented to an international conference of Maoist parties in Spain—part of Sison’s efforts to play a leading role in the international Maoist movement. The conference, which adopted a general resolution carrying Sison’s basic positions on international questions, rivalled another international conglomerate of Maoist parties, the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement (RIM), which was led by Abimael Guzman, chairman of Peru’s *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path).

Split

In December 1992, Sison faxed a series of statements to Philippine media in which he denounced several leaders of the CPP of being government agents. Those named were the key unnamed figures being held mainly responsible for “military adventurism” and “insurrectionism” in “Reaffirm.” Through Sison’s “fax attacks,” the split within the CPP-NPA-NDF became public knowledge.

[Rocamora](#) put forward a fuller critique of “Reaffirm” and “Stand” in *Debate-6* in his analysis of the crisis of the ND movement. He also discussed the challenges facing those opposed to Sison’s positions and the prospects for the coming together of the oppositionists with other left forces in a “broad left” coalition. By the time *Debate-6* came out, the CPP-NPA-NDF had already been bisecting into main camps—the “reaffirmists” (pro-“Reaffirm”) and the “rejectionists” (anti-“Reaffirm”)—but the latter camp was further subdivided into smaller groups.

With the return of Rocamora and De la Torre to the Philippines in 1993, *Debate* shifted its main base to Metro Manila, where its last four issues were published.

In *Debate-7*, the editorial board decided to put out a long CPP document that took up a full two-thirds of the issue’s pages: [“General Review of Significant Events and Decisions \(1980-1991\),”](#) originally published in Filipino in the party’s theoretical journal, *Rebolusyon*. While retaining the overall argument of “Reaffirm”, “General Review” contained significant data on the heated debates within CPP leadership that Sison’s paper had glossed over.

Debate-7 also included a critique of “General Review” by [Paco Arguelles](#) (pseud.), who disparaged “General Review”—and “Reaffirm” as well—as being “captive to a metaphysical, scholastic method” and falling into apriorism. Disputing the key points of both documents, Arguelles argued that “our gravest errors and shortcomings sprang from deviations from reality, not deviations from the line.” In defense of “pol-mil”, Arguelles asserted that such a framework “can free the revolutionary movement from the fetters of dogmatism and conservatism which dominated the old mode of revolutionary struggle.”

By *Debate-8*, the editorial board, which had started out with an all-male composition, had expanded to ten members, with the inclusion of four female progressives: Antoinette “Toinette” Raquiza (who had joined as early as *Debate-3*), Miriam Coronel-Ferrer, Maricris Valte and Pi Villanueva.

In the aftermath of the split in the revolutionary movement, *Debate-8* and *Debate-9* published declarations of various groups breaking away from the “Reaffirmist”-controlled CPP. [Party organizations in the Visayas](#) declared their autonomy from the CPP’s “feudalistic and absolutist leadership.” Rejecting “Reaffirm” as a Stalinist document, “white area” cadres from [Western Mindanao](#) called on CPP members to uphold Marxist-Leninist principles and pushed for a “Unity Congress” to resolve the issues being debated by the party. In place of the “rectification movement” launched by the “illegitimate Central Committee,” the [“Democratic Bloc within the CPP”](#) advocated “a movement of democratization and renewal within the Party” and reiterated the call for a unity congress.

Debate-8 featured a commentary of [Patricio N. Abinales](#) to a lecture given by Francisco Nemenzo, Jr., on “Questioning Marx, Critiquing Marxism,” which examined the fundamental issues confronting Filipino Marxists in contemporary times and the causes of the malaise of the Philippine revolutionary movement. Reacting to Nemenzo’s assertion that “Filipino Marxists have contributed nothing of significance to Marxist thought,” Abinales argued that Filipino Marxists had in fact produced “a small cache of radical theoretical works” that addressed a wide range of issues, including “substantive explanations to new developments in Philippine politics and society.” Regarding the

movement's malaise, Abinales drew attention to "the more profound issue of Marxist praxis disengaging itself from Marxist theory, a process that helped bring about the rise and persistence of dogmatism and all other failings of Filipino Marxism."

Questions related to strategy dominated the last few issues of *Debate*. After presenting a point-by-point response to "Reaffirm" charges that CPP leaders in Mindanao had engaged in such "deviations" as "militarism" and "insurrectionism," [Roberto Sibunga](#) (pseud.) maintained in *Debate-8* that the Mindanao experience was "an attempt to develop the strategic framework of the Party based on organic developments in the revolutionary process." In *Debate-9*, [Sibunga](#) called for the adoption of a "new politico-military strategy" in the Democratic Bloc ("rejectionists"), and for the repudiation of the Stalinism and Maoism and their models of socialism.

In *Debate-8*, [Ernesto M. Valencia](#) pondered over the electoral conundrum. He observed that there seemed to be a general consensus within the left in favor of participating in elections. He noted, however, that from the ND perspective, "the central objective is to smash the reactionary state through armed means." What was needed to be defined then was "how electoral struggles fit into the larger process of social transformation or social revolution."

After poring over the "Big Red Book", the compilation of polemical papers and commentaries by "rejectionist" leaders in response to "Reaffirm," [Raquiza](#) wrote in *Debate-9* on the debate on strategy. She concluded that the debate was not really a two-line struggle, but a single-line debate involving the contestation between two different interpretations of the theory and application of the Maoist strategy of people's war. In Raquiza's view, NPA "regularization" and preparations for insurrection perceived by "reaffirmists" as "deviations," were in fact efforts at "indigenization of the party's essentially Maoist strategy."

The last issue of *Debate* featured a belated rejoinder to Arguelles' critique of "General Review." Authored by [Rico Buenconsejo](#) (pseud.), it was the only post-split submission to *Debate* emanating from the "reaffirmist" camp. No apriorism was involved in "Reaffirm" and "General Review," Buenconsejo argued, "because the theory of semi-feudalism and semi-colonialism and the theory of people's war are enfolded in Philippine reality." He dismissed the "pol-mil" framework: "It was tried - with disastrous results." According to Buenconsejo, the CPP's central leadership does own up to major errors and deviations such as the formulation of the strategic counter-offensive, many activities that were insurrectionist in character, and programs of "regularization." These were precisely the reasons, he stated, why the Party had embarked on a rectification process.

Debate-10 also included a commentary of [FATES](#) (pseud.) on two documents explaining the programmatic theses of a "rejectionist" group, Bagong Kilusang Makabayan.

Since *Debate* had been published amid the heated, even acrimonious, polemics and split of the CPP-NP-NDF, the journal's issues tended to focus on the main issues of the debates: revolutionary strategy and socialism. *Debate*, however, did strive to tackle other issues that progressive movements all over the world were grappling with: [gender](#) (D-1), environment ([D-2](#), [D-3](#)), [agrarian reform](#) (D-3), [modern culture](#) (D-9), [liberation theology](#) (D-10); and [development work](#) (D-10). Rocamora's study of the [CPP and NDF programs](#) (D-5) and [Abinales'](#) commentary (D-8) touched on most of these topics too.

The latter issues of *Debate* also contained articles from two internationalists working in close solidarity with national liberation movements. American poet-activist [Sarah Miles](#) wrote a reflective piece in *Debate-7* on "new thinking" among revolutionaries in El Salvador, Nicaragua and South Africa. Nicaraguan historian [Alejandro Bendana](#) shared his observations in *Debate-9* on the dilemmas confronting democratic forces in the transition processes in the same three countries.

Having run out of funds, *Debate* folded up. A greater factor for the journal's end, however, had to do with developments in the "rejectionist" camp. After the split, Sison managed to unite the "reaffirmists" under his leadership, but the "rejectionists" failed to consolidate themselves as the "Democratic Bloc." Different "rejectionist" units became immersed in trying to reorganize themselves into new parties or groups, or to explore possible mergers or coalitions among themselves or with other progressive groups.

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