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'Philippine Sketches' by Agnes Smedley from New Masses. Vol. 7 No. 1. June, 1931.

Tuesday 20 August 2024, by [SMEDLEY Agnes](#) (Date first published: 10 August 2024).



Agnes Smedley with three vignettes of political life in the Philippines, including a visit to a Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas rally addressed by Crisanto Evangelista.

Cognao And Revolution —

Four of us sat in a Chinese restaurant in Manila, a Filipino newspaper man, a Chinese physician, an Indian professor, and myself. We drank diluted cognac in cracked ice and, under its influence, related our secret sorrows which, in Asia, are nearly always political. The Filipino declared that the Islands are kept ignorant and isolated from world thought by the big, corrupt Filipino politicians who support the Americans in fact if not in theory; that these politicians imprison Communist labor and peasant leaders, but have themselves never read one book on Communism. "Not one has read a line of Marx's Capital!" he angrily declared, banging the table.

"Have *you* read Capital?" asked the Indian.

"I have skimmed through the first part of the first volume."

"Ah ha! You may as well tell me you have skimmed through differential calculus!"

"But Capital is very hard to read!" the humbled man defended himself. "And then, you must at least admit that I am sympathetic."

The Indian poured himself some more cognac, swallowed it all in one gulp, and continued. "Now I'll tell you another thing: last year you wrote that Trotsky was the Bolshevik Minister of Foreign Affairs

and advocated the economic cooperation of capitalist nations with Russia.”

“Well, what’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing — except that not one word of it is true!”

“Well, anyway, I meant well — and you know I’m not unsympathetic.”

The Chinese spoke: “We in China — or some of us — have read Capital and all that comes after it. And now we are having our heads chopped off. The wages of knowledge are death.”

“If *you* read Capital and understand it, you will have your head chopped off also,” the Indian cheerfully assured the Filipino. “But it will be a noble death, for it will be for the revolution!”

The Filipino stared at the Indian and the Chinese for some minutes. Then he dropped his head on the table and began to weep. “I have a wife and three children!” he blubbered.

“It is individualistic to think of your own family,” the Indian attacked the sorrowing man.

But he the sad one, only began to wail louder and louder, crying, “I tell you I don’t want to die! My wife and children! Everybody can’t fight on the barricades...some of us must be left to write about it...” and he cried so loud that two waiters came to see whom we were killing. At our request they summoned a motor car, and we put the weeping and protesting man in the back seat where he sat, his head on the shoulder of the Indian. The Indian sat very straight and determined, asking him to face his fate like a man. But the Filipino bellowed that he was not yet ready to die. Startled pedestrians turned to look after us, and we expected a policeman’s whistle to sound any minute. At last we threw the wailing man on the bed in his home. There we left him, crying as if his heart would break, sobbing that he was not yet ready to die but that he was not unsympathetic to Capital.

A Philippine Babitt —

A white-clad Filipino youth sat across from us in a third-class railway compartment. He was round, fat, and smiling, and looked like an American dollar. He had just passed his university law examinations and knew everything. As he chattered, I began to realize that I was listening to one of the choice blossoms of the farfamed American educational system in the Islands.

The economic crisis in the Philippines, he cheerfully assured me, was due to the perversity of the rich people who do not use enough sugar, the chief product of the Islands. True, he admitted generously, the crisis was international, but the international side of it could be settled if President Hoover would but call the conference of “big men” in Washington and give them orders to settle things. In the Philippines, some of the big Filipino politicians (politicians) were urging families to raise chickens in their back yards; but he, himself, was opposed to this method of solving the crisis. “If everybody raises chickens, there will be nobody left to buy — and we have to have someone to buy,” he declared.

Having settled the economic problem, he turned to law in which he was an expert. Yes, there was a law that forbids the publication of the incomes or income taxes paid by rich individuals and corporations in the Islands. That was a good law! Why? He closed his eyes like a villain as he answered. “Because there are a lot of cunning, scheming women who would study the tax reports and scheme to marry the richest men — that law is to prevent this!” Then he beamed brightly at me again.

The legal question settled, he turned to literature. He had just joined a dramatic club down in his

little home town to the south, and, being an educated man, the Club at once asked him to produce a Filipino tragic drama. He had read no novel or drama in his life except some of Shakespeare's plays in high school; so he decided to use the Shakespearean dramatic form. Would I, perhaps, recommend a tragic novel that he could read to get a theme for his drama. "I don't care what kind of novel it is, but it must be so tragic that it will make people cry," he said. "I suppose you have read all the tragic novels and can tell me the most tragic...how many novels have you read?...Have you read five hundred?"

He then turned to world travel. His dream was to go to America where every man worth anything could become rich and own at least a Ford. But he heard there was a big army of unemployed threatening a revolution, and he would postpone his trip until things were settled so he could have a good time. Germany, he knew, was a country that had had a Kaiser and it had had a War. Soviet Russia, he read in the press, was a country populated with Bolsheviks with beards and bombs; they were Reds. Yes, there were some Reds in the Islands, but they were being locked up. He had never seen or heard one, and did not know what they were about; but he was certain they were up to something against law and order. Even down in his town they had just locked up a Red. This Red was a peasant and belonged to the Peasants Union. Why? Well, this Union does not want peasants to pay 50% of their crop as rent to the landlord. But he himself comes from a small landlord family, and his family want the peasants to pay *more* than 50%. "There are five of us children in school and we need more," he said. "Of course the peasants also have children, but then they are ignorant and do not know what they want." So the peasant leader was imprisoned, and my fat young friend returned to Manila to begin his career as a lawyer.

Crisanto Evangelista-

We were in the Provinces, driving at night toward Manila. In a fisherman's village on the sea-coast our car was blocked in a street by a crowd that overflowed from a big open space at the left. On the outskirts of the crowd stood uniformed military police, armed with guns and bayonets. At the end of the big vacant space we saw a big white streamer lighted by a solitary electric bulb. On the streamer, written in red letters in the Tagalog language were the words: "Proletarian Labor Congress. National Confederation of Peasants. Philippine Communist Party."



This was a mass meeting. We got out of our car and went forward to listen. Under the electric light stood a slender figure of a man in white, and, on the bare earth at his feet, sat row upon row of dark-faced fishermen. There were perhaps fifteen hundred of them, with a few hundred men standing on the fringe of the crowd. The solitary electric bulb cast the rows into dim relief, revealing strong, weather-beaten faces.

The slender white figure under the electric light was speaking in a voice broken by an occasional tubercular cough. This was Crisanto Evangelista, laborer and Communist leader of the Philippines. He had come from prison this very day, released on heavy bail, and against him stood two charges for sedition. From prison he had gone directly to this meeting, and for the speech he was making now, he would be re-arrested tomorrow and again put into prison, to remain there unless some one could furnish bail for him the third time.

Evangelista's face is very dark and thin, with high cheek bones. He could be either Malayan or Cantonese. As I listened to him now, and later when I spoke to him in his humble, austere home, it seemed I was meeting one of the strangest and most interesting characters in Asia. In his voice, his bearing, his manner, is a gentleness and wistfulness that inspires devotion and love in the hearts of the workers. He is a man now beyond forty. His father, a peasant, was killed fighting in the revolution of 1896-98; as a printer apprentice, at the age of ten, little Crisanto learned to read and write by himself, and to make his own living. He is perhaps the only Filipino Marxian theoretician. Between working for his daily bread and maintaining a large family in the austere style of Filipino workers, between earlier work in the independence movement, he has still been able to accumulate and read hundreds of works on the social sciences, and he possesses the only Marxian- Leninist library in the Philippines. Into prison and out of prison this frail, wistful figure goes.

He stood this evening before two thousand fishermen, and taught. He is no agitator, no demagogue. He would read from a book, a document, a pamphlet; lay it down, and talk. He was teaching the fishermen of the causes of the revolutions against Spain, of the workers and peasants who fought in the revolution-and of the compromise signed between the American military invaders and the Filipino leaders, a document of the betrayal of the revolution. He taught them of the workers'

movement in various European countries and in Soviet Russia, and of the theories of Socialism. Through his Tagalog language came such words as "Karl Marx," "Lenin," "surplus value," in English. For three hours he taught, earnestly and without any demonstrativeness- and the only movement in the audience was when some man would arise from the hard earth to rest his legs for a moment.

Evangelista then asked for questions, opinions, discussion. What did they, the fishermen think?

Then a fishermen's conference began. Men arose, their dark, strong forms dim in the light. What did this or that point mean? they asked. What could be done about this or that problem of the fishermen? They thought this, they thought that. One fisherman said this program put before them they liked, it was a proper program for fishermen. They would like to join this movement, yes, right now. Could they pay their monthly five centavos Party dues tonight? Evangelista squatted on the earth as they spoke, answering questions, giving opinions. He told them of what suffering would be in store for them if they became Communist Party members. They laughed, deeply amused. They did not know-but Evangelista knows.

Manila, Philippine Islands.

[The New Masses](#) was the continuation of Workers Monthly which began publishing in 1924 as a merger of the 'Liberator', the Trade Union Educational League magazine 'Labor Herald', and Friends of Soviet Russia's monthly 'Soviet Russia Pictorial' as an explicitly Communist Party publication, but drawing in a wide range of contributors and sympathizers. In 1927 Workers Monthly ceased and The New Masses began. A major left cultural magazine of the late 1920s and early 1940s, the early editors of The New Masses included Hugo Gellert, John F. Sloan, Max Eastman, Mike Gold, and Joseph Freeman. Writers included William Carlos Williams, Theodore Dreiser, John Dos Passos, Upton Sinclair, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Dorothy Parker, Dorothy Day, John Breecher, Langston Hughes, Eugene O'Neill, Rex Stout and Ernest Hemingway. Artists included Hugo Gellert, Stuart Davis, Boardman Robinson, Wanda Gag, William Gropper and Otto Soglow. Over time, the New Masses became narrower politically and the articles more commentary than comment. However, particularly in its first years, New Masses was the epitome of the era's finest revolutionary cultural and artistic traditions.

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issue: <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/new-masses/1931/v07n01-jun-1931-New-Masses.pdf>

Agnes Smedley

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