Capital, Coercion, and Crime: Bossism in the Philippines, John T. Sidel


Oona Thommes Paredes

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/moussons/2774
ISSN: 2262-8363

Publisher
Presses Universitaires de Provence

Printed version
Date of publication: 1 July 2002
Number of pages: 137-139
ISSN: 1620-3224

Electronic reference

Licence Creative Commons
Les contenus de la revue Moussons sont mis à disposition selon les termes de la Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d’Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.
Lives at the Margin ouvre d’intéressantes perspectives, comme l’utilisation du concept de génération (curieusement absent de ce volume), l’éventualité de mener des enquêtes prosopographiques d’envergure, ou la possibilité de se pencher sur des Philippins vraiment ordinaires. La construction d’un État centralisé, souvent mise à mal dans le présent volume, a au moins le mérite de léguer aux historiens de nombreuses sources…

Notes


• Capital, Coercion, and Crime: Bossism in the Philippines,

By Oona Thommes PAREDES

The Philippines, as a Third-World, post-colonial nation, has its share of fairly serious political, economic, and social problems. One of these is the prevalence of political dynasties and warlords who, in league with (or, one and the same as) the deplored “traditional politician,” can be found under virtually every electoral rock in the archipelago.

Sidel opens Capital, Coercion, and Crime by explaining that “bosses” are “predatory power brokers who achieve monopolistic control over both coercive and economic resources within given territorial jurisdictions or bailiwicks” (p. 19). “Bossism” is therefore “the interlocking, multitiered directorate of bosses who use their control over the state apparatus to exploit the archipelago’s human and natural resources” (id.).

Sidel’s terminology is a deliberate critique of models that conflate culture and politics. Analyzing modern bossism in terms of the standard “patron-client” model, he protests, cons us into attributing positive qualities to characters who act purely out of self-interest and rely on brazen violence and fraud to maintain their position. Indeed, the idea that voters support bosses mainly because of their charisma and noblesse oblige is ridiculous when we face the stark reality of boss violence. Sidel is right to be wary of the paternalism and cultural reductionism inherent in essentializing a society’s problems. (Ironically, reductionism is something that ordinary Filipinos tend to do when discussing the nation’s problems.) He emphasizes that “[t]he supply of local strongmen does not necessarily reflect popular demand; people do not, in other words, simply get the government they deserve” (p. 4). This leads him, unfortunately, to dismiss altogether the explanatory relevance of culture – an issue I address further below.

Sidel also presents a critique of the theory that widespread bossism is evidence of a weak state. He challenges this dominant paradigm by arguing, convincingly, that Philippine bossism has festered – he likes the term “flourished,” which, as a Filipino, I find unnecessarily gleeful – within the context of a strong but predatory state. In other words, the system is not broken – rather, it is a runaway success. Such a radical notion will prove jarring to many, but it certainly explains why some politicians in the Philippines cannot seem to help enriching themselves while in office.

The predatory nature of the Philippine state, according to Sidel, has its roots in American colonial efforts at nation-building in the early twentieth century. The Americans “expanded private control over the local coercive and extractive agencies of the state ‘upward’ by subordinating the [underdeveloped and hastily constructed] national state apparatus to provincial- and national-level elected officials” (p. 16). This essentially means that elected officials acquired broad discretionary powers over all local resources (law enforcement, taxes, local appointments, etc.) in the absence of a monitoring or auditing body that could keep their power in check. This provided the “mechanisms for private monopolization of the resources and prerogatives of the state” (p. 19), which encouraged officials to persist in “subordinating, rather than submitting to, the state apparatus in their pursuit of wealth and power” (p. 140).

The body of the text is devoted to the development of diverse and locally specific forms of capital, coercion, and crime.
of bossism in the provinces of Cavite and Cebu. Notable is the description of national “hero” and Katipunero Emilio Aguinaldo as an early Cavite boss, who achieved his political status through his efforts to dominate the Katipunan (the Philippine revolutionary organization established in the Spanish colonial period) with his Magdalo faction. The tragic revolutionary hero, Andres Bonifacio, of the rival Magdiwang faction, was, as we know, Aguinaldo’s most notorious “hit” (pp. 58-61). With clear photographs of bullet-ridden, blood-spattered walls (p. 52), this view of Philippine politics makes even the most violent Mafia movie seem tame. The story that Sidel tells is neither contrived nor sensationalized. No doubt we are shown only the tip of the iceberg, as a detailed pathology of any one of these provincial and small-town bosses would fill volumes.

While the case studies are detailed and irrefutable, Sidel’s arguments regarding the structural basis for bossism are less convincing. The comparative examples presented in the final chapter do not conclusively reinforce his assertions, nor do they show that an alternative institutional apparatus or sequence of political and economic developments would have prevented the emergence of bosses. Bossism has apparently “flourished” in Thailand, despite an institutional history starkly opposite that of the Philippines: no direct experience with colonization, more advanced capitalist development and industrialization, a highly centralized bureaucracy, and a European rather than American model for its system of government. Moreover, bossism is found throughout the world and in modern history. (Sidel refers several times to “Old Corruption” in eighteenth-century England, and alludes to American politics). In fact, when bossism in other countries is considered, the key culprit seems to be, not a particular structural flaw in the development of national institutions, but electoral democracy itself. To wit:

“In Thailand, bosses [...] have emerged with the entrenchment of electoral democracy since the 1980s [...]. Local bossism flourished in Burma during the early postindependence period of parliamentary rule, but faded (at least in Burma proper) with the imposition of centralized military rule in 1962. Similarly, in early postindependence Indonesia, [...] bossism “flourished” [...] under conditions of lively multiparty electoral competition and weak central army command. However, with the demise of parliamentary rule and the onset of martial law in 1957, and the inception of military rule in 1965, a centralized bureaucratic state emerged to subordinate local aristocracies, magnates, and gangsters alike [...]” (p. 151).

A reader might infer from such statements that centralized authoritarian rule, by the military or by traditional elites, is the antidote to bossism, and that it is preferable to an electoral democracy in which citizens might be coerced or duped into electing the wrong people. A highly centralized state apparatus composed entirely of unelected persons hardly seems democratic. Clearly, this is not the author’s intention. But, seen from a comparative perspective, it is clear that electoral democracy and bossism go hand-in-hand. This leads to questions regarding the inevitability of bossism – because it is difficult to imagine a state with an electoral democracy that does not, in some way, place state resources in the hands of competitively elected officials.

Sidel concludes by calling (rather belatedly, in the very last paragraph) on those striving for “democratization” to “examine and encourage challenges to the various forms of local despotism that thrive when there is electoral competition for control over the state” (p. 154). Although an electoral democracy allows bossism to fester, it can also be its downfall. From the Philippine examples, we see that even seemingly untouchable bosses will fall (though sometimes only temporarily) when they lose an election. Of course, whether or not any election is legitimate or truly democratic is debatable. However, there are people who actually vote freely for bosses in the Philippines, no matter how transparently corrupt they are. This brings us back to the problem of ignoring the cultural context within which political events take place.

I know Filipinos who have actually voted, uncoerced, for local criminal “boss” types, simply because they were perceived to be vaguely more powerful than the other candidates, and therefore more likely to win. Perhaps some voters do not want to be on the losing team, and may be attracted to power per se rather than to a candidate’s moral character. Vulgar displays of power (e.g., pp. 102-105) feed deliberately into largely amoral ideas about personal prowess,
widespread in Southeast Asian cultures, that can influence social and political organization at a very local level. And some districts (or “bailiwicks”) include areas too remote to experience the kind of direct intervention and election fraud by local bosses that Sidel enumerates. Knowing this, it becomes entirely conceivable that some bosses remain in power simply because they are legitimately re-elected. Clearly, despite Sidel’s concerns regarding the analytical misuse of culture, bosses do something to generate wider political support from voters. (The Osmeñas, for example, seem to have little use for violence but have managed to maintain power in provincial and national politics.) Even the single most powerful boss in Philippine history, Ferdinand Marcos, could not stay in power when citizens refused to condone the results of his rigged “snap election” and finally dared give him the boot.

Without acknowledging the local cultural context in which a state apparatus operates, the explanatory power of any political theory will be severely limited. In the case of the Philippines, it is clear that certain cultural factors configure social and political relations between bosses and their supporters, as well as within a given network of bosses. Essentialism need not be an issue if we can acknowledge that cultural models do shape material relations, but only within specific historical conditions of political and economic development. By removing politics from its cultural context, even an analysis as insightful as Sidel’s remains hollow, explaining only the “how” but never the “why.” If Capital, Coercion, and Crime strikes some readers as depressing, it is probably because, in the course of relocating the blame for bossism from ordinary people to the state apparatus, the Filipino people disappear from the discussion. However, Filipino voters, with their indigenous cultural constructs, remain the most important locus for change, as it is they who must evaluate and deconstruct this state apparatus in order to effectively contradict, destabilize, and subvert the institution of bossism.

Sidel is to be commended for this highly objective analysis of Philippine bossism, and an honest portrayal of the predation and violence that pervade the electoral system. Capital, Coercion, and Crime is a sober and detailed assessment of what may be the modern Philippine state’s most serious obstacle. And though he does not mention it explicitly, Sidel is obviously troubled by this phenomenon, as are most Filipinos at home and abroad. It is painfully obvious that bossism is highly damaging to Philippine society as a whole, at the very least because it corrupts electoral politics and hobbles the development of a truly representative democracy.

In my view, Sidel’s most important contribution here is showing very clearly that the image of a “weak” Philippine state is a lie. This study of bossism may be far from comprehensive, but Sidel is able to show conclusively that, no matter whose legacy it is, bossism cannot be tolerated as old-fashioned patronage that fulfills the people’s needs where the state is too weak to function effectively. This is because bossism both relies upon and reinforces the deplorable status quo in terms of widespread poverty, inequality, landlessness, lawlessness, and other socio-economic ills. This dependency, in turn, ensures that the Philippines will never rise above this post-colonial mire for as long as bossism remains entrenched. The field of Philippine studies, and Philippine democracy itself, will benefit greatly when others use Sidel’s framework as a point of reference to study modern Philippine politics.


By Proserpina Domingo TAPALES

Most often, historical research deals with major events, big-name statesmen, or heroes of wars and revolutions. Some, however, dwells on smaller aspects of life. In the latter genre, the historian is able to look deeper into situations, people, and locales, and enables the reader to relate specific events to the larger societal picture. This book does just that: It looks into sections of Philippine society affected by the 1896 revolution, describing lives beyond Bonifacio and Aguinaldo, examining inward through the masa (mass), and offering portraits of small pockets of society, whose lives were drastically changed by the revolution, even though they did not assume leadership roles in it.