

U.S. GENOCIDE IN THE PHILIPPINES AND THE CONTINUING STRUGGLE FOR NATIONAL-DEMOCRATIC LIBERATION

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Except during the sixties when the Filipino-American War of 1899-1902 was referred to as “the first Vietnam,” the death of 1.4 million Filipinos has been usually accounted for as either collateral damage or victims of insurrection against the imperial authority of the United States. The first Filipino scholar to make a thorough documentation of the carnage is the late Luzviminda Francisco in her contribution to *The Philippines: The End of An Illusion* (London, 1973).

This fact is not even mentioned in the tiny paragraph or so in most U.S. history textbooks. Stanley Karnow’s *In Our Image* (1989), the acclaimed history of this intervention, quotes the figure of 200,000 Filipinos killed in outright fighting. Among historians, only Howard Zinn and Gabriel Kolko have dwelt on the “genocidal” character of the catastrophe. Kolko, in his magisterial *Main Currents in Modern American History* (1976), reflects on the context of the mass murder: “Violence reached a crescendo against the Indian after the Civil War and found a yet bloodier manifestation during the protracted conquest of the Philippines from 1898 until well into the next decade, when anywhere from 200,000 to 600,000 Filipinos were killed in an orgy of racist slaughter that evoked much congratulation and approval....” Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* (1980) cites 300,000 Filipinos killed in Batangas alone, while William Pomeroy’s *American Neo-Colonialism* (1970) cites 600,000 Filipinos dead in Luzon alone by 1902.

The actual figure of 1.4 million covers the period from 1899 to 1905 when resistance by the Filipino revolutionary forces mutated from outright combat in battle to guerilla skirmishes; it doesn’t include the thousands of Moros (Filipino Muslims) killed in the first two decades of U.S. colonial domination.

The first Philippine Republic led by Emilio Aguinaldo, which had already waged a successful war against the Spanish colonizers, mounted a determined nationwide opposition against U.S. invading forces. It continued for two more decades after Aguinaldo’s capture in 1901. Several provinces resisted to the point where the U.S. had to employ scorched-earth tactics, and

hamletting or “reconcentration” to quarantine the populace from the guerillas, resulting in widespread torture, disease, and mass starvation.

In *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective* (2003), Prof. Gavan McCormack argues that the outright counterguerilla operations launched by the U.S. against the Filipinos, an integral part of its violent pacification program, constitutes genocide. He refers to Jean Paul Sartre’s contention that as in Vietnam, “the only anti-guerilla strategy which will be effective is the destruction of the people, in other words, the civilians, women and children.” That is what happened in the Philippines in the first half of the bloody twentieth century.

As defined by the UN 1948 “Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide,” genocide means acts “committed with intention to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.” It is clear that the U.S. colonial conquest of the Philippines deliberately sought to destroy the national sovereignty of the Filipinos. The intent of the U.S. perpetrators included the dissolution of the ethnic identity of the Filipinos manifest in the rhetoric, policies, and disciplinary regimes enunciated and executed by legislators, politicians, military personnel, and other apparatuses. The original proponents of the UN document on genocide conceived of genocide as including acts or policies aimed at “preventing the preservation or development” of “racial, national, linguistic, religious, or political groups.” That would include “all forms of propaganda tending by their systematic and hateful character to provoke genocide, or tending to make it appear as a necessary, legitimate, or excusable act.” What the UN had in mind, namely, genocide as cultural or social death of targeted groups, was purged from the final document due to the political interests of the nation-states that then dominated the world body.

What was deleted in the original draft of the UN document are practices considered genocidal in their collective effect. Some of them were carried out in the Philippines by the United States from 1899 up to 1946 when the country was finally granted formal independence. As with the American Indians, U.S. colonization involved, among others, the “destruction of the specific character of a persecuted group by forced transfer of children, forced exile, prohibition of the use of the national language, destruction of books, documents, monuments, and objects of historical, artistic or religious value.” The goal of all colonialism is the cultural and social death of the conquered natives, in effect, genocide.

In a recent article, “Genocide and America” (*New York Review of Books*, March 14, 2002), Samantha Power observes that US officials “had genuine difficulty distinguishing the deliberate massacre of civilians from the casualties incurred in conventional conflict.” It is precisely the blurring of this distinction in colonial wars through racializing discourses and practices that proves how genocide cannot be fully grasped without analyzing the way the victimizer (the colonizing state power) categorizes the victims (target populations) in totalizing and naturalizing modes unique perhaps to the civilizational drives of modernity. Within the modern period, in particular, the messianic impulse to genocide springs from the imperative of capital accumulation—the imperative to reduce humans to commodified labor-power, to saleable goods/services. U.S. “primitive accumulation” began with the early colonies in New England and Virginia, and culminated in the 19th century with the conquest and annexation of Puerto Rico, Cuba, Guam, Hawaii, and the Philippines.

With the historical background of the U.S. campaigns against the American Indians in particular, and the treatment of African slaves and Chicanos in general, there is a need for future scholars and researchers to concretize this idea of genocide (as byproduct of imperial expansion) by exemplary illustrations from the U.S. colonial adventure in the Philippines.

What happened in 1899-1903 is bound to be repeated with the increased U.S. intervention in the Philippines (declared “the second front” in the “war against terrorism”) unless U.S. citizens protest. Hundreds of U.S. Special Forces are at present deployed throughout the islands presumably against “terrorist” Muslim insurgents and the left-wing New People’s Army. Both groups have been fighting for basic democratic rights for more than five decades now, since the Philippines gained nominal independence from the U.S. in 1946. There is unfortunately abysmal ignorance about continued U.S. involvement in this former Asian colony—except, perhaps, during the 1986 “People Power” revolt against the Marcos “martial law” regime universally condemned for stark human-rights violations.

As attested to by UNESCO and human rights monitors, the situation has worsened since then with hundreds of killings of journalists, lawyers, women activists, and union organizers. The current crisis of the Arroyo regime, ridden with corruption and exposed for blatant vote rigging, is renewing alarm signals for Washington, foreboding a repeat of mass urban uprisings sure to threaten the comprador agents of global capital that abet the misery of millions—10 million of 80 Filipinos work as domestics and contract workers abroad—caused

by World Bank, World Trade Organization, and International Monetary Fund policies imposed on a neocolonial government.

The revolutionary upsurge in the Philippines against the Marcos dictatorship (1972-1986) stirred up dogmatic Cold War complacency. With the inauguration of a new stage in academic Cultural Studies in the nineties, the historical reality of U.S. imperialism (the genocide of Native Americans is replayed in the subjugation of the inhabitants of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and Cuba) is finally being excavated and re-appraised. But this is, of course, a phenomenon brought about by a confluence of multifarious events, among them: the demise of the Soviet Union as a challenger to U.S. hegemony; the sublation of the Sixties in both Fukuyama's "end of history" and the interminable "culture wars," the Palestinian intifadas; the Zapatista revolt against NAFTA; the heralding of current anti-terrorism by the Gulf War; and the fabled "clash of civilizations."

Despite these changes, the old frames of intelligibility have not been modified or reconfigured to understand how nationalist revolutions in the colonized territories cannot be confused with the nationalist patriotism of the dominant or hegemonic metropolises, or how the mode of U.S. imperial rule in the twentieth century differs in form and content from those of the British or French in the nineteenth century.

Despite inroads of critical theory here and there, the received consensus of a progressive modernizing influence from the advanced industrial Western powers remains deeply entrenched here and in the Philippines. Even postcolonial and postmodern thinkers commit the mistake of censuring the decolonizing projects of the subalternized peoples because these projects (in the superior gaze of these thinkers) have been damaged, or are bound to become perverted into despotic postcolonial regimes, like those in Ghana, Algeria, Vietnam, the Philippines, and elsewhere. The only alternative, it seems, is to give assent to the process of globalization under the aegis of the World Bank/IMF/WTO, and hope for a kind of "benevolent assimilation."

What remains to be carefully considered, above all, is the historical specificity or singularity of each of these projects of national liberation, their class composition, historical roots, programs, ideological tendencies, and political agendas within the context of colonial/imperial domination. It is not possible to pronounce summary judgments on the character and fate of nationalist movements in the peripheral formations without focusing on the

complex manifold relations between colonizer and colonized, the dialectical interaction between their forces as well as others caught in the conflict. Otherwise, the result would be a disingenuous ethical utopianism such as that found in U.S. postnationalist and postcolonialist discourse which, in the final analysis, functions as an apology for the ascendancy of the transnational corporate powers embedded in the nation-states of the North, and for the hegemonic rule of the only remaining superpower claiming to act in the name of freedom and democracy.

The case of the national-democratic struggle in the Philippines may be taken as an example of one historic singularity. Because of the historical specificity of the Philippines' emergence as a dependent nation-state controlled by the United States in the twentieth century, nationalism as a mass movement has always been defined by events of anti-imperialist rebellion. U.S. conquest entailed long and sustained violent suppression of the Filipino revolutionary forces for decades.

The central founding "event" (as the philosopher Alain Badiou would define the term) is the 1896 revolution against Spain and its sequel, the Filipino-American war of 1899-1902, and the Moro resistance up to 1914 against U.S. colonization. Another political sequence of events is the Sakdal uprising in the thirties during the Commonwealth period followed by the Huk uprising in the forties and fifties—a sequence that is renewed in the First Quarter Storm of 1970 against the neocolonial state. While the feudal oligarchy and the comprador class under U.S. patronage utilized elements of the nationalist tradition formed in 1896-1898 as their ideological weapon for establishing moral-intellectual leadership, their attempts have never been successful. Propped by the Pentagon-supported military, the Arroyo administration today, for example, uses the U.S. slogan of democracy against terrorism and the fantasies of the neoliberal free market to legitimize its continued exploitation of workers, peasants, women and ethnic minorities.

Following a long and tested tradition of grassroots mobilization, Filipino nationalism has always remained centered on the peasantry's demand for land closely tied to the popular-democratic demand for equality and genuine sovereignty.

For over a century now, U.S.-backed developmentalism and modernization have utterly failed in the Philippines. The resistance against globalized capital and its neoliberal extortions is spearheaded today by a national-democratic

mass movement of various ideological persuasions. There is also a durable Marxist-led insurgency that seeks to articulate the “unfinished revolution” of 1896 in its demand for national independence against U.S. control and social justice for the majority of citizens (80 million) ten percent of whom are now migrant workers abroad. Meanwhile, the Muslim community in the southern part of the Philippines initiated its armed struggle for self-determination during the Marcos dictatorship (1972-1986) and continues today as a broadly based movement for autonomy, despite the Islamic ideology of its teacher-militants.

Recalling the genocidal U.S. campaigns cited above, BangsaMoro nationalism cannot forget its Muslim singularity which is universalized in the principles of equality, justice, and the right to self-determination. In the wake of past defeats of peasant revolts, the Filipino culture of nationalism constantly renews its anti-imperialist vocation by mobilizing new forces (women and church people in the sixties, and the indigenous or ethnic minorities in the seventies and eighties). It is organically embedded in emancipatory social and political movements whose origin evokes in part the Enlightenment narrative of sovereignty as mediated by third-world nationalist movements (Gandhi, Ho Chi Minh, Mao) but whose sites of actualization are the local events of mass insurgency against continued U.S. hegemony.

The Philippines as an “imagined” and actually experienced ensemble of communities, or multiplicities in motion, remains in the process of being constructed primarily through modes of political and social resistance against corporate transnationalism (or globalization, in the trendy parlance) and its technologically mediated ideologies, fashioning thereby the appropriate cultural forms of dissent, resistance, and subversion worthy of its people’s history and its collective vision.—(Drafted 1/15/2009)

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Ethnicity in the Postmodern World (Lexington), and Between Empire and Insuregency; The Philippines in the New Millennium (University of the Philippines Press). Forthcoming by September 2016: Learning from the Filipino Diaspora (University of Santo Tomas Press).