

Call of Duterte

Western Reporting on the Philippines Totalitarian Drift

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2020

“One hates to see Los Angeles go up in flames unless one’s got a camera running,” joked the British anarchist comedian Peter Cook after the 1992 LA riots. A variation on this idea applies to Western state-corporate media, which seldom covers the non-Western world unless it is gripped by disaster.

This is true of the Philippines today and its vicious president, Rodrigo Duterte, whose rule is characterized by a frenzied cocktail of leftish-style populism, state authoritarianism, cynical nationalism, toxic masculinity and, most appalling of all, the government-orchestrated mass-murder of drug abusers and traffickers.

The chaotic and contradictory nature of the Duterte regime is matched by confusion, hypocrisy, and inaccuracy in its coverage by British and American mainstream journalists on all points of a narrow political spectrum (conservative at one extreme through to left-liberal on the other) that is delimited by market pressures and the ideological assumptions of both mega-rich proprietors and the journalists themselves.

The result is that most so-called journals of record in the West offer partial, unreliable explanations for how Duterte’s Philippines came to be, and their vocabulary is bereft of important phenomena such as neoliberalism, US imperialism and Western ethnocentrism.

In his recent book *Duterte Harry*, British reporter Jonathan Miller suggests that poverty and inequality played a role in the public discontent that put Duterte in power in 2016. But Miller’s predilection for a global trade system that benefits Western nations at the expense of the poor world, blinkers him to what is a major material determinant of Dutertismo.

According to the Filipino globalization theorist, Walden Bello, in the last quarter of the 20th century, the US-run World Bank and IMF condemned the Philippines to acute debt and massive poverty by imposing free-market land, trade, industry, and spending policies.

The country was soon lagging behind most of its neighbors with regard to poverty reduction and annual average growth rate. The debt burden resulted in severe under-investment in infrastructure and public services. Alienated from this set-up, millions of Filipinos voted for Duterte’s phony populism.

Most Western commentators are shocked by the rise of Duterte, unprecedented is a favored adjective, but they would not be if they were more historically aware. As the Filipina cultural theorist Neferti X.M. Tadiar observes, self-interested Western policy towards the Third World in the late 20th century laid the groundwork for politicians of Duterte’s strain.

She writes, “The rise of a ‘strongman regime was a World Bank-endorsed response to the growing and intensifying crises felt in the nation as a result of the political and economic system installed by US colonization being pushed to its limits by the acceleration of global capital.”

A different flavor of hypocrisy informs The Guardian’s Tom Smith when he argues sloppily that Duterte is “more of a threat to the world” than Donald Trump. Although Duterte has slaughtered perhaps 30,000 Filipinos, he is incapable of attacking people beyond his own borders, whereas US military actions and embargoes in the Middle East alone since 1990 have resulted in the deaths of millions.

While the *Financial Times*' Michael Peel asserts that another reason for Duterte's ascent is his "mining of a seam of anti-US sentiment," Peel avoids addressing the roots of such sentiment. Similarly, when Miller cites a "short war in 1898" that led to the US colonization of the Philippines for almost—half a century, he neglects to mention that this war involved a grisly racist genocide of up to 1.4 million Filipinos.

The Filipino historian E. San Juan, Jr. notes continuities between these late Victorian US aggressions and its present-day "counter-insurgency maneuvers" against both Islamist and leftist rebels in the nation's archipelago. "US troops are 'recolonizing' the Philippines," he writes, to "preserve its eroded world hegemony" post-Cold War and post-9/11.

When making comparisons with the recent past, these Western writers gloss over the illiberal misdemeanors of Duterte's predecessors, so long as they were nominally economically and politically liberal—as in Tom Smith's baffling proposition that Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (president from 2001 to 2010) is a "good role model" for the progressive resistance to Duterte.

This ignores the fact that Arroyo's administration heavily censored the press, imposed a state of emergency (a limited form of martial law) and was responsible for the extra-judicial killings of over 1,000 and the torture of 1,000 more.

Furthermore, Smith's inclusion of Arroyo in a clique of "strong" elite Filipina politicians whom he hopes will "combat the macho autocrat" Duterte, smacks of a problematic identity politics that is another symptom of the (neo)liberal malaise. Societies so damaged by the local and global historical forces explained above cannot be quick-fixed by a few more women entering leadership positions, especially if these women's politics hardly differ from those of the men now in charge. But to labor under the illusion that such reforms will rescue the day excuses Smith et al from, once again, admitting that the deeper causes of the crisis are related to their own ideological dogmas.

Given the Western media's antipathy to Duterte, you might think it would be keen to report on the popular struggle against him, but it is not. One reason is the moth-eaten Orientalist prejudice about Asians being unable to enact positive social change by themselves. However, there have been thousands of grass-roots protests against the drug war and Duterte's other blunders.

Anarchists, though they are outnumbered by Maoists, democratic socialists and social democrats, have played a role in these events. Groups such as Safehouse and Onsite are taking practical collective action in their deprived communities to address everything from local political corruption to the lack of green spaces for growing vegetables.

The Filipino wing of the autonomous, nonviolent cooperative, Food Not Bombs, have been so vociferous in their opposition to state oppression that four of their members were sadly murdered by police last year under the fake pretext of the anti-narcotics clampdown.

Such self-managed and anti-authoritarian activism is nothing new in Philippine political history; the Revolution of 1896 depended upon a "dense intertwining of anarchist internationalism and radical anti-colonialism," as historian Benedict Anderson wrote.

Ultimately, Western media misrepresentations of the Philippines demonstrate a centrist, neoliberal worldview in crisis; though they castigate the Duterte regime for its aberrant brutality—and brutal it certainly is—they deny Western responsibility for this totalitarian drift in Philippine politics. They overlook any resistance to this new status quo that stands outside the party political process.

Nor do these establishmentarian pundits accept that their own ideology, despite its ostensible support of human rights and "rules-based" international relations, has, as Indian novelist Pankaj Mishra puts it, been an "incubator" for "authoritarianisms" and advocated for "the occupation and subjugation of other people's territory and culture [as] a wonderful instrument of civilization."

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/405-winter-2020/call-of-duterte>
Fifth Estate #405, Winter, 2020

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