Constructing a Counter-Memory: A Proposition to Atrocities and Historical Apathy to the Martial Law Experience in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

People construct cultural memory from how they make sense of past experiences through texts, oral tradition, artifacts, or symbols that are passed down from generation to generation. Cultural memory crystallizes people's shared experiences and gives generations a sense of collective identity. But in the Philippines, a spirit of indifference has permeated the current generation, so the long-standing trauma of martial law from Marcos' excesses seems to have become "more tolerable." Democracy advocates were on the defensive as Marcos and his band of supporters reconstructed cultural memories of the martial law era into legitimate ones. This paper argues for the need to create a counter-memory to correct the historical distortions that permeate Philippine society.

Keywords: *cultural memory, Martial Law, revisionism, counter-memory*

Introduction

The National Geographic Society (2023) refers to cultural memory as the created senses and understandings of the past passed down through symbols from one generation to the next. This definition has been echoed by Jan Assman (1996), a pioneer in the field, who states that cultural memory can be expressed in texts, rituals, monuments, celebrations, objects, scriptures, and other media. As embodied symbols, cultural memory serves as a mnemonic trigger to introduce meanings associated with the past shared to others. In doing so, cultural memory becomes a form of collective memory shared by the group.

Cultural memory serves vital functions for society and its people. It has the potential to crystallize the shared experiences of people as it reconnects us to the past. It offers us insight of the events of yesteryears and the ensuant values and norms, creating a shared identity and connection amongst people of the past and present. Hence, Assman (in Meiken, 2013) purports that cultural memory is "the faculty that allows us to build a narrative picture of the past and through this process develop an image and an identity for ourselves." Cultural memory thus safeguards the meaningful institutionalized heritage or legacy which individuals employ to build their own identities and to affirm their membership in a group. This is possible because the act of remembering

involves subscribing to the norms of the group, so that if one wants to belong to a community, one must follow the rules of how and what to remember'.

Assman (in Remmier, 2005) argues that the most powerful cultural memories are those that recall triumphs as well as trauma experienced by people within a group. For example, in Russia, their role in World War II—in which tens of millions of Russians were killed, more than any other nation—is still an important part of modern Russian identity. Thus, because all groups have cultural memory, it can evoke to those who belong to the same group who experienced success, failure or both, the spirit of nationalism, unity, and resistance.

Assman (1996) further proposes that the main function of cultural memory is not to reminisce about the past, or make judgement of whether it was good or bad. Rather, it is to use the knowledge of past experiences to avoid making the same mistakes repeatedly. Assman (1996) calls this "remembering forward" as it enables cultural stability or resiliency among people. It also enables cultures to adapt to new circumstances by doing what worked in the past.

National Memory

French historian Pierre Nora (Legg, 2005) proposes the concept of *les lieux de mémoire* (places of memory) to tackle the construction of national memory in the post-World War II and post-Berlin Wall.

Nora (Legg ,2005) proceeds to discuss the case of France, a country that would be defined by the triumphant character of its people with its monuments, museums and archives, linked to its self-image of heroism and pride. Assman (1996), however, argues because not all countries experienced war victory as exemplified by new nation-states that emerged after 1945 (post-colonial) and 1989 (post-Soviet) these countries are not constituted around triumph but around the trauma generated by past events marked by a history of violence, slavery and even genocide. At present, there seem to be a move by these nations to recall the wounds created by the war to obtain, at present, an acknowledgment of the suffering and abuse their people have gone through. This type of memory, built on traumatic episodes, intensified in the 1990s, when the testimonies of the victims gain ground and several museums and memorials dedicated to symbolically perpetuate the memory of past human rights violations for the world to see. However, is it prudent to derive cultural memory from traumatic experiences? Would it not engender vengeful views, especially directed to perpetrators? Does the trauma of the past make individual citizens more sensitive or insensitive to the violation of human rights or the condition of minorities?

Cultural memory should not be understood as an unhealthy fixation of the past, but with critical eye, a solid background for society to build its future. Hence, Assman further cautions that the negative past, once transformed into memory, must not wake the *revanchism*: "memory can be dangerous and destructive if it digs up anger willing to revise history" (Assman, 1996).

The Martial Law: Source of Traumatic Past

For the Philippines, we see an interesting difference. The declaration of Martial Law, which can be judged as undoubtedly traumatic and tragic, has not been deeply imprinted in the minds of Filipinos. Rather, for many, it has been reduced to just an 'unfortunate event'.

In September 1972, by virtue of Proclamation No. 1081, former president Ferdinand E. Marcos placed the entire Philippines under the state of martial

law. All government powers were assumed by the late president who then had unbridled discretion to jail critics, silence dissent and opposition, create a culture of impunity that excuse human rights abuses, defraud the Philippine economy, and accumulate ill-gotten wealth. De la Peña (2021) divulged that Amnesty International placed at over 100,000 the number of people who fell victim to martial law atrocities from 1971 to 1981. Of these, 70,000 were arrested, 34,000 were tortured, and 3,240 were killed by the military and the police.

Under martial law, Marcos dissolved Congress, transferring all powers to the President, enforced a curfew, banned group assemblies, and authorized the military to arrest individuals on charges of conspiring to take over government even without trial.

Though evidence abound, from a factual event, martial law became a highly contentious socio-political and socio-historical issue in the Philippines issue of late. While survivors and historians call it the "dark chapter" of the Philippines' recent memory, wrought with corruption, brutality, and impunity, multitudes of Marcos supporters and apologists reframed it, valued it favorably, painting a picture of prosperity during his reign and dismissing the deaths as "just like any other war, where there are casualties" (Aning, 2022).

De la Peña (2021) writes that since 2015, attempts have been made to portray the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos as the Golden Age of the Philippines through factual corrections and outright lies. His family, loyalists, and supposedly paid bloggers/bloggers are using social media primarily as a platform to spread their version of history across the country. Marcos' son and namesake won the most votes in the Philippine presidential election, proving that Marcos' sins and excesses no longer matter to 31 million Filipinos. What happened to the collective memory of martial law?

Cultural Memory, Historical Distortion/ Revisionism and the Teaching of History

Martial law, when it was declared in the country, was once seen as generally gratuitous. Half-century later, it has become polarizing, and has led Marcos dissidents and loyalists to engage in mudslinging in many platforms. The latter has become vicious to the point where fear of being shamed in online media has silenced many. On the flip side, the opposition group who are against the legacy of Marcos' regime has become the counter-narrative to the national narrative that promotes the "other side" of Marcos' identity through his authoritarian rule. How did the Marcoses "regain" favors once more? Or have they always been favored, albeit silently?

Scholars point to several reasons. First, the issue of historical distortion surrounding the events became an emerging discussion in recent years. The discourse presenting Marcos' rule as a period of economic prosperity and national unity has even overshadowed the grim experiences of human rights victims at the time. The said narrative is steadily gaining dominance through social media platforms exerting an all-out effort to whitewash and clear the late president and dictator's atrocities (Aguilar et al., 2022).

Revisionism is exacerbated as former president Duterte has publicly expressed his admiration for Marcos, forming a political alliance with the surviving members of the Marcos family which has led to the allowance of the late president's remains to be buried at the Libingan ng mga Bayani (Kadir, 2019). Social media has also been instrumental in propagating historical revisionism via political agenda. Bradshaw and Howard (2017) note that political parties or candidates often use social media as part of a broader campaign strategy" notoriously "spreading fake news or disinformation, or by trolling or targeting any support for the opposition party.

Second, while propaganda is a factor that some consider to be significant, blame was also shifted towards the failure of the education system in adequately educating the youth about the events of martial law (Mendoza, 2019; Bautista, 2018). Different groups point to different aspects of the education system as allowing such historical revisionism to flourish among the youth.

The blame on how history is taught is not without basis. History education is considered important in nation-building as it helps create a national identity, cultivates shared citizenship values, promotes social cohesion and social order, and legitimizes the existence of the nation-state (Chia, 2012; Laville, 2012).

Rote memorization continues to rule the teaching of Philippine history, failing to provide the students an opportunity to understand the spirit and essence of the time period for more appreciation and significance (Carpio, 2016). As a result, Abuso (2019) found that while the Filipino youth is aware of the human rights violations that occurred during the martial law period, they have conflicting views about it. Some students believed that it was a shameful historical event that should never happen again, while some thought that the bloody and violent transgressions were justified or unavoidable. Abuso (2019) further explains that the youth's attitude and opinion about martial law were greatly influenced by textbooks, lessons in the classroom, and school activities such as seminars and symposia. Moreover, the absence of meaningful martial law and human rights education was a significant factor that contributed to the agenda of the Marcos' historical distortion.

The severe consequences of the lack of meaningful human rights and martial law education can affect the youth's capacity to empathize with others. The view that martial law was acceptable since the majority of the Filipinos did not experience transgressions or abuses at that time and that the victims were at fault— either because they rebelled or one way or another got themselves "involved" with the opposition—demonstrate lack of empathetic understanding and connection with the experiences of fellow human beings.

In a time fraught with competing perspectives and versions of history, it poses a challenge for educators to teach their students the correct narratives surrounding the period of the Marcos martial law and to elicit a proper understanding of the circumstances that surrounded that time. The Marcoses returned to the Philippines in 1991 after their long exile in Hawaii following the 1986 People Power Revolution. Before their return, however, events of the martial law were not contested. From 1991 until at present when several members of the Marcos family have started to occupy political power, distortion and revisionism has been observed, culminating in the present where attempts to justify the violence are even pronounced so casually by the former president. There seems to be a tacit reaction, indifference, and approval by his supporters on this matter. Those opposed to it seemed to kept their silence.

In teaching history, historical empathy need to be cultivated as the capacity to view and understand historical events is based on the perspectives and values of people who lived through the circumstances (Cunningham, 2009). Historical empathy is an intellectual disposition of students after learning and reconstructing facts. This is something that could crystallize their knowledge as the understanding is deep-seated as it helps students comprehend history, manage different interpretations, and develop their criticality and sensitivity (Babalis & Lazarakou, 2021). Simply put, it can be a skill or an ability of students to immerse into the conditions, situations, and experiences of people in a given time frame from the past, thus establishing connections between the

past and present (Endacott & Brooks, 2018. Having historical empathy is a protective factor against attempts to distort the truth or revise the events to paint a favorable picture of the perpetrator.

Third, apart from the issue on the lack of empathy, another problem is the omission of martial law from books, textbooks' "selective amnesia" about the horrors of martial law and the trivialization of the events during that time, and proliferation of alternative facts on social media (Educator's Forum for Development, 2020; Go, 2017; Ong & Cabañes, 2018). Without complete narration of the violent years, it is easy for students to dismiss the events as "normal," unimportant, even question their very existence or justify the deaths as something unavoidable just like any war or confrontation with criminals, rebels, and destabilizers of the government of then President Marcos.

Counter Memory to Correct Culture Memory

Historical narrative has been used as a way to revive and retain certain political ideologies and is not just a medium to reminisce the event of the past. It seems that history in the Philippines is fraught with selective remembering or selective forgetting. Selective memory often in historical narrative causes different interpretations and approach to analyze a particular historical event. From the typical lens of *heroes and villains, winners and losers* historical approach, this binary narrative or interpretations of history are often used by the central government as a national (mainstream) narrative to preserve their authority. This has resulted to Filipinos being indifferent to the excesses of the Marcoses. How can this be corrected?

Foucault (1990) offers a solution through the concept of *counter-memory* or the process of remembering in a socio-political context. Foucault interprets memory as a discourse, stressing that it is constructed rather than naturally occurring, and thus draws attention to contexts of remembering. For him, counter-memory is a form of *resistance against the* official discourses of historical continuity, so-called "regimes of truth," and it is exercised by those who are marginalized by power. In *History of Sexuality*, Foucault writes: "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault 1990, 95.). Of importance too is the dynamic of the power relations of the memory process. As with any discursive practice, for Foucault, the primary discourse on memory usually constitutes a "top-down" perspective. The dominant discourse tends to be oppressive and suppressive. Counter-memory, however, highlights the reversed perspective of "bottom-up," representing the process during which different groups and individuals try to influence the existing knowledge and struggle for a recognition of marginalized discourses of the past. Thus, counter-memory serves as an act of democratization, pluralization, and remembering. It is a political act as it aims at influencing the existing power relations.

One poignant example of recent counter memory is found in Villanueva's (2011) study entitled *Using Counter-memory to Build a Historical Knowledge of Struggle.* He advanced the need to undertake revisions of history to include farm workers' voices in their struggles for civil rights. Though silenced by the purveyors, the dominant people holding power while subjugating the rest, there is ample data that sheds truth and light on the real struggles of people.

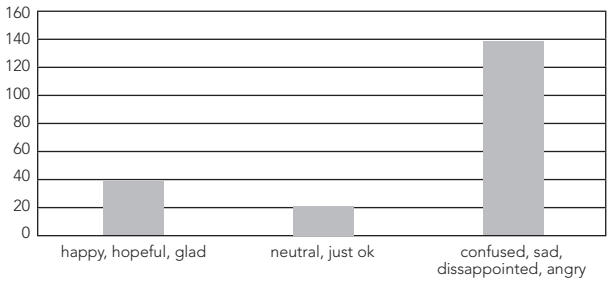
With the return of the Marcoses, the marginalized now are the dissenters, those who side with the veracity of the martial law events. This is difficult because the people at present do not possess personal memories of the traumatic events including correct knowledge of historical events, but are recipients

of discourses of cultural and social memory of the past. The dominant discourse of history for them, therefore, is that of the institutionalized memory after martial law. This rendering of national history is problematic as it perpetuates the distortions.

As such, the counter-narrative version highlighted by the opposition groups tried to revive the social memory of society to the cruelty and brutality of Ferdinand Marcos.

There is hope in the youth as many have expressed opposition to the present narrative, lamenting the results of the presidential election which is interpreted as massive support of the Marcoses. In a quick online survey among 201 respondents right after the declaration of the new president, of which 95% are mostly young people of Dasmariñas City, Cavite, the following sentiments were generated.

Figure 1. What was your immediate reaction when you learned who won in the presidential election



Those who responded they are *neutral* explained that they do not think a lot would change in the Philippine society with the change of leadership. As succinctly expressed by a college student:

> *"Pare-parehas lang naman mangyayari nyan. Mahirap pa rin. Siguro, mahirap na baguhin ang nakasanayang sistema sa ating bansa."* (The same thing will happen. It's still hard. Maybe, it is difficult to change the traditional system in our country.)

Those who felt happy and glad of the outcome mostly recounted that their own families have been supporters of the Marcoses ever since.

The big bulk who had negative feelings expressed many reasons for such. Some expressed disbelief as one senior high school student remarked:

> *"I just can't vision anything right now. I am just so speechless. The only thing I want to say is that "Sana tama kayo, sana mali kami." But still, I am hoping for a good governance and a better Philippines."* (I just can't vision anything right now. I am just so speechless. The only thing I want to say is that I hope you are right and we are wrong. But still, I am hoping for a good governance and a better Philippines.)

Uncertainty was also resonated by many. One student said:

> *"Honestly, with how they performed during the election campaign I really don't know what to expect. They do not attend debates/ forums to answer concerns with the problems in the Philippines. No further solutions are laid out to the people."*

Some students had grim predictions:

> *"Honestly, I expect lot of revisionism and misleading in their part as they will reclaimed their name."*
>
> *"The history will repeat itself. Dictators will rule".*
>
> *"The next six years will be terrible, poverty will rise, there will be hunger. Dark times!"*

But what about the pink masses that contested the declarations of the Marcoses during the 2022 election?

Touted as the pink revolution, as the color pink signified support of then presidential aspirant Leni Robredo, it gained ground judging from the mass of crowds that flocked her campaign sorties. The pink color is an attempt to differentiate herself from the Liberal Party and convey her message that it is not partisanship that should take precedence. Likewise, as the only woman running it is her way of appealing to women. Robredo also has said it was her volunteers who chose the color, which is also a symbol of activism.

Then Vice President Leni Robredo who ran and lost to Bongbong Marcos tried to comfort her multitudes of young supporters by saying that working for the benefit of the country need not end with her losing the election. The "pink revolution" can continue.

True to her word, Robredo launched the Angat Buhay non-government organization (under the registered name of Angat Pinas, Inc.) on July 1, 2022, the day after she stepped down from office.

Robredo is known for being prepared, innovative, calibrated, leveraging personal and institutional goodwill into an initiative that meets an actual need of a disadvantaged sector. This is perhaps the start of a sustained movement.

Conclusion

The activism of the youth gives hope of a counter-memory to rebuild truthful cultural memory. With the youth's vitality to correct the cultural memory soiled by revisionism propagated by the present administration, factual basis for cultural memory can be restored. It would be a steep climb given that the incumbent has all the machinery to propagate wrong narratives to erase what his father has inflicted on the Filipinos. But the 2022 elections, with the precipitous awakening of the Filipino youth's consciousness has given us hope of their astute minds.

The inspiration that Robredo impressed upon the minds, especially among the youth, once sustained can blossom into a full movement; where the motivation is to volunteer one's time and resources for the ultimate goal of helping achieve the illusive change to bring about improvement in the lives of the Filipino people. There is still much to be done, starting with having the conviction to the truth and anything less than it is a dishonor to the bravery and sacrifice of the people who fought long and hard to get us where we are. Similarly, active participation in the activities for the poor not only inspires the beneficiaries, but also creates valuable cultural memories, that people will remember in the future. Hopefully, Filipino cultural memory is based on truth on the real events that in actuality happened in the past.

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