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Migration Revolution: Philippine Nationhood and Class Relations in a Globalized Age

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The central argument made by Filomeno Aguilar in *Migration Revolution* is that overseas migration, as it is occurring since the 1960s, has brought about important social, cultural, and institutional changes in Philippine society. The migration of Filipinos overseas has become a crucial economic factor because of the enormous remittances that they have generated every year. Migration has accordingly reconfigured class structure, transnationalized social relations, and engendered legal and discursive shifts pertaining to migrants' political participation and inclusion in the Philippine state. It has also rekindled a sense of nationhood and national identity among migrant Filipinos, contributing to a profound reinterpretation of the national narrative. *Migration Revolution* offers us a thorough examination of these changes and their consequences.

Contemporary cross-border migration has enabled the Philippine nation to envision itself within a plurality of nations, pushing the Philippine state to reorient its foreign policy and redefine the boundaries of both citizenship and the nation across borders. It has also important emotive implications. The public outcry caused by the execution of Flor Contemplacion in 1995, for example, marked not only a traumatic moment pointing at the vulnerability of overseas labor migrants, but also produced unprecedented surges in Filipino transnationalism.

The book is a collection of essays written by Aguilar over the past decade and a half, mostly during his sojourns outside the Philippines. He focused on Filipino migrants because "the situations described here¹⁾ are somehow internal to, albeit not identical with, my own life experiences

1) Here, Aguilar writes about migrant Filipinos in the United States and Filipino contract workers in the Asia-Pacific region.

as one of them” (p. 174). An important strength of the book—and of Aguilar’s scholarship in general—lies in his positionality as an itinerant scholar. Aguilar has generated precious data from his field research among migrant laborers and professionals in Southeast Asia as well as the United States throughout his academic career. This research enabled him to draw important comparisons and analyze migrant transnationalism in its various manifestations. The result is an empirically grounded work that has greatly contributed to the exploration and discussion of migrant transnationalism, challenging some of the findings in academic work on migrant transnationalism that emerged in the early 1990s. For instance Aguilar notes that the same group of migrants is either considered as reneging on patriotism and thus “lost” to the nation, or described as the newfound transnationalists, thus identifying an academic discourse in the South that runs counter to that in the North (p. 175).

The tensions generated by the execution of Contemplacion in Singapore in 1995, where Aguilar was employed at the time, led him to the study of Philippine labor migration. His empathy for overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) is strongly evident in his writings, and his interest in labor migration from the angles of social class and nationhood reveals his concerns for questions of status, belonging, and place as they relate to sentiments of nationhood and shame. In exploring these relationships, Aguilar looks back to the nascent nationalism among young *ilustrados*²⁾ in Europe, drawing an interesting parallel between Jose Rizal’s and his comrades’ reaction to colonial racism and its shaming of the nation-cum-race, and today’s sense of shame experienced by educated middle- and upper-class Filipinos for the nationality they share with low-status OFWs. Underpinning these sentiments is not merely exasperation over being stereotyped, but also the Filipino elite’s discontent with having lost control over the international image of the nation.

While labor migrants are being labeled as “shameful export” (p. 87) by the more privileged segments of the Philippine diaspora, they have been lauded as the nation’s new heroes by the state by virtue of their enormous economic contributions to the national economy. Forming a pool of affordable, flexible labor and filling in the needs for care in advanced economies, OFWs have enabled the expansion and subsistence of a middle-class in both receiving and sending countries. Despite their low status origins, numerous OFWs have turned into petty capitalist landowners and entrepreneurs back home because of their savings and investments.

This “progress” has led OFWs to simultaneously occupy two contradictory class positions: that of migrant proletarians overseas, and petty capitalists back home. Thus, Aguilar argues that class structures and class relations in a globalized world cannot be understood without reference to state borders and national frames. Rather, the social structures of societies are intertwined, with the migrant worker entangled in these transnational class relations.

2) The *ilustrados* were a group of Filipino intellectuals during the Spanish colonial period in the late nineteenth century.

While the class structures of migrant sending and migrant receiving societies connect beyond borders, citizenship regimes continue to regulate individuals' legal status and access to various rights and privileges within a given territory. Receiving societies have made use of the presence of the immigrant "Other" to underscore the boundaries of the nation and to reinforce sentiments of national belonging among their citizens.

Simultaneously, globalization has profoundly transformed the concept of citizenship, and thereby also the rules defining formal membership in a given state. The criteria for categorizing people as either "aliens" or citizens have changed over time, due to mutable ideas of who belongs to the nation but also because of pragmatic state interests. State pragmatism has enabled overseas Filipinos to hold dual-citizenship, and the variability of categories has considerably changed to ideologically validate the formal inclusion of overseas Filipinos.

Mass migration has thus led to the reconceptualization of the nation beyond territorial borders, but also allowed the state to bring overseas Filipinos back into its fold by granting them dual citizenship. The discursive and formal inclusion of overseas Filipinos also contained hopes and assumptions about their economic investments and participation in the politics of their "homeland." Unfortunately, the invitation to become politically involved has had very few takers ever since voting rights were granted to OFWs in early 2003.

As a result of this, Aguilar argues that the assumption that all migrants engage in transnational practices or maintain transnational ties is a fallacy. Rather, transnationalism still needs to be proven. In investigating this, scholars must note that transnational ties vary in nature, with numerous migrants disinterested in political participation from afar. It is better to examine the issue by recognizing that there exist multiple and contradictory visions of the nation among migrants and non-migrants. One of Aguilar's original contributions in this book is thus the discussion and comparison of elite-nationalism and the discourses by public intellectuals over the transnationalism of different groups of Filipino migrants overseas.

However, the book says very little about the impact of technological advancement in communications, and the improved availability of devices that enable real-time updates and information exchange though the World Wide Web. Online media has become an important element in the study of migrant transnationalism as it introduces new possibilities for negotiating family relationships across borders (cf. Madianou and Miller 2012), and provides new ways of constructing and reinforcing a sense of national identity among migrants (cf. Ignacio 2004).

Moreover, Aguilar's brief examination of Filipino-foreign offspring remains limited to a particular group of Filipino descendants, many of whom have North-American or European parents, and who seem to epitomize today's *mestizo* and his/her association with modernity and privileged lives. However, Philippine state policies and individual initiatives have led to affective and sexual relationships which produced offspring who are regarded with greater ambivalence. For example, children of Filipina entertainers and Japanese men have been condescendingly called "the products

of summer flings and mostly out of wedlock relations . . .” (Amor 1992) when their births were first picked up as an issue by journalists, or “one-night babies” by the director of one NGO (Kyodo News Int. 1992). Since 2005, the migration of Filipina entertainers to Japan has starkly declined. However, the lingering association of this migration with sex-work continues to affect a number of Japanese-Filipinos who report about scathing comments by classmates and about being bullied for having a Japanese father (DAWN 2010).

These reactions go back to the issue of shame that Aguilar explores in chapter 3. The children born of this “shameful” migration (to Filipinas who worked in Japan’s entertainment districts) are viewed as evidence of the nation’s feebleness to foreign money and power. The children of former entertainers and Japanese men also “haunt the nation” (p. 197), but in ways far different from how Filipino-foreign offspring born under other circumstances are regarded.

A singular achievement of this well-organized work is its synthesizing of the many strands arising from the profound changes that followed from the massive emigration of Filipinos. To someone who has studied these issues, some of its arguments are not entirely new. But for readers with limited familiarity with the Philippines, *Migration Revolution* is a major introductory text to deepen their understanding of the complicated relationship between migration and nationalism.

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