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Chantal Mouffe on the Radical Politics of Rodrigo Duterte

Regletto Aldrich Imbong
Associate Professor of Philosophy
University of the Philippines Cebu
-- and
Senior Research Fellow
University of Vienna
rdimbong@up.edu.ph

Jerry Imbong
Assistant Professor
Visayas State University
jerry.imbong@vsu.edu.ph

Patrick Gerard Torres
Independent Researcher
pgftorres@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper argues that the current scholarship of radical politics primarily bannered by Christopher Ryan Maboloc is a misappropriation of the post-Marxist political project of Mouffe and Laclau. Drawing primarily both on Mouffe's and Laclau's work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* and an interview with Chantal Mouffe herself, the paper argues how the post-Marxist radical political project of Mouffe and Laclau fails to theoretically fit to the style of governance and regime of Duterte. Fundamental to the idea of radical democratic politics is the task of *radicalizing* liberal democracy. However, as discussed in the paper, liberal democracy is a project whose very institutions and processes Duterte and his regime have

undermined and attacked. Under Duterte's regime, radical democracy lost the conditions for its flourishing, rendering its own impossibility.

Keywords: radical democracy, post-Marxism, Duterte, liberal democracy, human rights

An uncommon yet controversial scholarship concerning Duterte's regime of power is the claim that his style of governance is an instance of what Mouffe and Laclau developed as radical politics. It is uncommon as the more dominant scholarship critically interrogates the Duterte regime to be either illiberal,¹ populist,² authoritarian,³ or fascist.⁴ It is controversial as it not only runs against the popular scholarship but also appears to be a wholesale apology of the murderous rule of Duterte. While truth is oftentimes uncommon, unpopular, and controversial, it however distances itself from plain rhetoric and apology and even ruptures and unconceals the theoretical inconsistencies of a seemingly solid yet eclectically constructed discourse. A la Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, it can be said that with truth, everything that has the appearance of solidity melts into thin air.

This uncommon yet controversial scholarship is the misappropriation of Mouffe's and Laclau's notion of radical democracy to describe Duterte's style of governance and regime. Common among the

¹ Mark Thompson, "Bloodied Democracy: Duterte and the Death of Liberal Reformism in the Philippines," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 35(3), (2016): 39-68.

² Nicole Curato, "Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope: Penal Populism and Duterte's Rise to Power," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 35(3), (2016): 95-109; and Ronald Pernia, "Human Rights in a Time of Populism: Philippines Under Rodrigo Duterte," *Asia-Pacific Social Sciences Review*, 19(3), (2019): 56-71;

³ Regletto Aldrich Imbong, "On Transistor Radios and Authoritarianism: The Politics of Radio-Broadcasted Distance Learning," *Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology*, 25(2), (2021): 332-340.

⁴ Walden Bello, "Rodrigo Duterte: A Fascist Original" in *A Duterte Reader*, ed. Nicole Curato (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017), 77-91; and Regletto Aldrich Imbong, "The Fascist Regime: The Rise, Development, and Stabilization of Fascism in the Philippines," in *Security and Democracy: Nexus, Convergence, and Intersections* (Manila: Philippine Political Science Association and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Philippines, 2020).

younger scholars of Mindanao, this scholarship is primarily bannered by Christopher Ryan Maboloc and has been used as a theoretical frame by others, like Arambala and Labastin, to analyze local political contexts. This paper will argue that this recent radical democracy scholarship is a misappropriation of Mouffe's and Laclau's notion of a radical democratic politics. The misappropriation springs fundamentally from an alteration of the meaning of the term "radical" in Laclau and Mouffe's concept of radical democracy. This alteration has serious consequences as to how Maboloc and his interlocutors understand the very meaning of liberal democracy, antagonism, and pluralistic subject positions in Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist radical democratic project. Consequently, such an alteration belittles if not obscures the overcoming of neoliberalism as an important component struggle in a radical democratic project.

The paper primarily draws arguments from Mouffe's and Laclau's work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and an interview with Mouffe herself. The authors are privileged to have been granted by the French political theorist a time and an avenue to clarify certain things about the concept of radical democracy and its (im)possible application in the Philippines under the Duterte regime.⁵ **Distancing herself from the regime of Duterte, Mouffe is worried of how her own concept of radical democracy is used to describe if not justify the illiberal regime of Rodrigo Duterte.**⁶

In revealing how this uncommon yet controversial scholarship of radical democracy misappropriates the post-Marxist political project of Mouffe and Laclau, the paper aims to primarily deny the theoretical link between the concept of radical democracy and the Duterte regime. The misappropriation has provided an unfounded theoretical support for a regime that has not only openly waged a policy of state murder against its own people but has also systematically paralyzed the dynamic life of

⁵ The interview was done through Zoom last July 16, 2021, from 12:00 am to 2:00 am.

⁶ Chantal Mouffe, Zoom interview by authors, July 16 2021.

liberal democracy in the Philippines. It has invited scholars to think through a frame which does not in any way bear semblance to the theoretical resources it claims it is made of. What is needed is not only to discard an erroneously constructed frame but also to liberate minds from the effects of this erroneous framing.

While this paper does not by any means defend liberal democracy as the end of human history in the way Francis Fukuyama does, it rather simply clarifies the role of such a category in the flourishing of radical democracy. While the authors are not really in agreement with the post-Marxist political project of Mouffe and Laclau, the authors rather affirm together with Mouffe that today, and especially under the current regime which is arguably sustains many of Duterte's legacies, what is needed is not to radicalize but to recover democracy.⁷

The Post-Marxist Radical Democratic Project

To understand the radical democratic project of Mouffe and Laclau, it is important to consider the intellectual and political background that provided coherence and system to their claims. On the one hand, this project took as its starting point the difficulties encountered by the Marxist thinkers of the Second International in terms of theorizing what then was considered as a socialist politics. On the other hand, this project problematized the post-war hegemonic political context characterized by commodification, bureaucratization, and homogenization. These intellectual and political themes pervaded across and weaved the various claims raised in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* which likewise cemented the concept of radical democracy.

Laclau and Mouffe mobilized the French post-structuralist philosophy to raise methodological and epistemological critiques against

⁷ Ibid.

Marxism⁸ and to provide an alternative political project anchored on the constitutive role of discourse in the fields of the social and of history.⁹ The alternative paradigm which these thinkers have developed has come to be known as post-Marxism. The latter is a conceptual field produced from the post-structuralist deconstruction of the central categories and claims of Marxism.

One of the key criticisms Laclau and Mouffe raised against the thinkers of the Second International is how they supposedly understood Marxism on essentialist terms. In this supposed essentialism, history, society, and the social agents are believed to be governed by some fundamental essence which “operates as [the respective categories’] principle of unification.”¹⁰ In regard to society, Laclau and Mouffe pointed out a dualist conception of it which distinguishes between an underlying economic structure that determines the rest of society’s superstructural edifice. The unity of society is secured via the economic determination of the superstructure. In this supposed essentialist reading, superstructural autonomy is denied in favor of a mechanical determination of the former by the economic structure. This view is shared, for example, by Giorgi Plekhanov’s understanding of an economic base that, according to Laclau and Mouffe, does not allow for any intervention by social forces.¹¹ For Laclau and Mouffe, this view is also espoused by Louis Althusser who, despite his elaboration of the theory of overdetermination that capital-labor contradiction is never a simple economic determination of a political struggle,¹² ultimately ended up affirming what Laclau and Mouffe described as the “determination in the last instance by the economy.”¹³

⁸ Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Verso, 2001), xi. See also Stanley Aranowitz, “Theory and Socialist Strategy,” *Social Text*, 16 (1986-1987): 1.

⁹ Judith Butler, “Further Reflections on Conversations of our Time,” *Diacritics*, 27(1), (1997): 13.

¹⁰ Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

¹² Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Verso, 2005), 105-106.

¹³ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 98.

Laclau and Mouffe expressed that Althusser's project for a theory of overdetermination did not fully realize its deconstructive effects within Marxism because Althusser's paradigm, from the very beginning, affirms the dualist structuring of society between an economic structure and a superstructure, with the former being the "determinant in the last instance for every type of society."¹⁴

The above essentialist reading of society results and is related to an equally essentialist reading of history summarized by what was believed to be the cornerstone of classical Marxism: historical necessity.¹⁵ The modernist tradition viewed history as a rational unfolding of an inner identity, governed by underlying laws, toward the realization of progress. While Marxism does not literally abhor contingency in favor of necessity,¹⁶ Laclau and Mouffe illustrated how the logic of necessity, which "operates through fixations"¹⁷ to establish *a priori* meaning, supposedly gets rid of the element of contingency.

For Laclau and Mouffe, the element of contingency – i.e., the undecidable¹⁸ – is central to both history and society and to any form of politics. If for Alain Badiou the event – which is also the undecidable in a situation – is the foundational point out from which a political procedure follows,¹⁹ for Laclau and Mouffe contingency is the guarantee of society's unfixity, denying any *a priori* "single underlying principle of fixing"²⁰ thereby securing the unimpeded field of difference. Society's unfixity not

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ One of the latest defense of the notion of necessity in Marxism is Joshua Moufawad-Paul's *The Communist Necessity*. Joshua Moufawad-Paul, *The Communist Necessity* (Quebec: Kersplebedeb, 2014). Cf. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 3.

¹⁶ See for example Friedrich Engels' eloquent treatise concerning the dialectics of freedom and necessity, where the latter is overcome by the former in the "leap from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom." Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Dühring: Herr Eugen Düring's Revolution in Science* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1976), 281.

¹⁷ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 12.

¹⁸ Ibid., xi.

¹⁹ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2012), 173-177.

²⁰ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 111.

only annuls it to any interior and self-defined totality but also constantly exposes it to a contingent exterior which renders as partial every nodal point of fixed meaning.²¹ As Laclau and Mouffe argued, “the irresoluble interiority/exteriority tension” becomes the “condition of any social practice,” making “necessity only [exist] as a partial limitation of the field of contingency”²² and a constant effort at literalization aimed at fixing differences in a relational system.²³ For Laclau and Mouffe, the social is supported by the constant subversion of necessity by contingency.²⁴

The persistence of a contingent exterior brings the social to the task of hegemony, the central category of political analysis.²⁵ Laclau and Mouffe traced the genealogy of the concept and identified historical conjunctures when it realized itself in contingent interventions – e.g., the experience of Russian Social Democracy.²⁶ Hegemony presupposes a certain degree of displacement when, for example, tasks are displaced from their original historic agents and are hegemonically assumed by new subjects. For example, displacement took place when, because of the impotency of the Russian bourgeoisie to carry out its normal task of fighting for political liberty and democracy, the working class decisively intervened to win the struggle.²⁷ Hegemony is not, in the words of Laclau and Mouffe, the “majestic unfolding of an identity” – in the sense that agents follow the logic of their necessary and predetermined historic tasks – but a contingent “response to a crisis.”²⁸ In this case, it can be said that the social and history are not the smooth and linear development of an essence but a product of decisive yet contingent interventions upon conjunctural ruptures and crises.²⁹

²¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

²² *Ibid.*, 111.

²³ *Ibid.*, 114.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 128.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, x.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁹ Politics as a response to a tumultuous crisis is not a new theme in political theory. For example, this has been elaborated by Niccolò Machiavelli as discussed by Gabriele Pedullà. Gabriele

What is the condition of emergence of the social and history? The contingent interventions illustrated above are no mere determination by some economic structure but the overdetermination of the social by the articulation of discursive practices of intervening – i.e., autonomous and plural – subject positions. Overdetermination here points to the unfixity (or impossibility) of social and historical meaning (or totality),³⁰ determined by discursive and articulatory practices. Since post-structural deconstructionism has rejected any essentialism in the social and history, it has supposedly renounced foundational categories that suture society and history to some *a priori* form of (materialist) determination outside the field of discourse.³¹ Post-structuralism and post-Marxism grounds the social and historical to be always inside an articulatory practice, i.e., the condition of emergence which constitutes and organizes social relations.³² Politics is enfolded through the ontological priority of the word.

While deconstructive in its approach towards the social and history, the post-Marxist approach nevertheless did not altogether reject the category of subject. But faithful to its post-structuralist orientation, Laclau and Mouffe's category of subject is still determined by discursive practices. The constitution of subject positions is based on articulatory practices that determine the trajectory of a hegemonic struggle. For Mouffe, there is no subject position in the sense of a (Marxist) class agent,³³ i.e., ontologically and epistemically privileged.³⁴ Subject positions, just like the social and history, are produced by hegemonic discursive practices that articulate new but partial nodal points of social and political meaning. The articulatory and hegemonic practices that

Pedullà, *Machiavelli in Tumult: The Discourse on Livy and the Origins of Political Conflictualism*, trans. Patricia Gaborik and Richard Nybakken (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

³⁰ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 111 and 122.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 177.

³² *Ibid.*, 96.

³³ Chantal Mouffe, interview by authors, July 16 2021.

³⁴ In fact, for Laclau and Mouffe, only when the ontological and epistemic privilege position of a universal class is renounced will it be “possible seriously to discuss the present degree of validity of the Marxist categories.” Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 4.

determine the social and subject positions oftentimes enter an antagonistic relation with a similarly discursively determined social formation and subject positions. Articulation and rearticulation, construction and reconstruction, composition and recomposition characterize the social and the subject positions through the constant overdetermination of discourse. Antagonism, in this case, refers to the impossibility of the closure of meaning, the limit of all objectivity as a result of unfixity.³⁵ It has nothing to do with a political conflictuality characterized by radical abuse and liquidation. The hegemonic and collectivist political project of Laclau and Mouffe is grounded on discursive, as opposed to materialist or politico-economic, conditions of emergence. In grounding the social and different subject positions on the discursive, post-Marxism annuls the identity between social agents and classes and consequently denied the ontological and epistemic privilege of the proletariat.

The post-Marxist conceptual frame was mobilized by Laclau and Mouffe to make sense of the post-war political context depicted by the new social movements. These movements included those struggles that are considered outside the traditionally framed working-class struggles: ecological, anti-authoritarian, feminist, anti-racist, and ethnic, to name a few. For Laclau and Mouffe, these struggles played a novel role in articulating the “rapid diffusion of social conflictuality to more and more numerous relations” of pluralism and difference.³⁶ On the one hand, these movements were seen to be continuities of the democratic revolutions of the past which this time converted liberal democracy to a common sense ideology especially in industrial societies.³⁷ On the other hand, these movements were also regarded as discontinuities since the subject positions concerned were constituted through an “antagonistic relationship to recent forms of subordination.”³⁸

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 160.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.

These recent forms of subordination resulted from the expansion and extension of capitalist relations in various social relations (i.e., commodification), intensification of state intervention (i.e., bureaucratization), and mass production of various cultural forms (i.e., homogenization).³⁹ The post-war political context generated a new commodified, bureaucratized, and homogenized hegemonic social formation that instituted a new form of subordination. This new hegemonic project, identified as liberal-conservative discourse, merely attempted at articulating a defense of the neoliberal free market with its concomitantly anti-egalitarian social and cultural conservatism.⁴⁰ Mouffe saw how the “current social and political regression has been brought about by neoliberal policies.”⁴¹

But unlike Herbert Marcuse who feared that the industrial society merely produced the one-dimensional man,⁴² Laclau and Mouffe saw the explosion of new subject positions in the post-war political contexts of industrial societies as expressions of “resistance against the new forms of subordination.”⁴³ These new social movements, composed by plural yet equivalent subject positions, aimed at transforming the “social relations characteristic of the new hegemonic formation of the post-war period” and absorbed the effects of displacement of the egalitarian imaginary into new areas of social life “constituted around the liberal-democratic discourse.”⁴⁴ The displacement absorbed by the new social movements signals a (counter-)hegemonic movement discursively weaved around the principles of liberal democracy.

Laclau and Mouffe saw in these movements an alternative paradigm from which the Left could reflect. These movements

³⁹ Ibid., 163-164.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 175.

⁴¹ Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (New York: Verso, 2018), chapter 3, epub.

⁴² Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

⁴³ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 161.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 165.

specifically pointed to a political trajectory that not only rendered intelligible the equivalence of different subject positions and deepens the democratic revolution but also aimed at overcoming oppression.⁴⁵ Hence, for Laclau and Mouffe, it is the Left's task to uphold the liberal-democratic ideology, to "deepen and expand it in the direction of a radical and plural democracy."⁴⁶ In other words, radical democracy could only emerge out from a functioning liberal democratic order, one whose discursive practices arranges plural subject positions according to the principles of equality and, most of all, liberty. Only in the latter can the autonomy of different subject positions be guaranteed, for democracy should not only be radical but also plural.⁴⁷ And it is only through the institutional supports of a liberal democratic order can a radical and plural democracy flourish.

Duterte as "Radical Democracy" in the Philippines

Laclau and Mouffe's radical democratic project was supposed to be an alternative paradigm for the left especially within the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s. Being an alternative, it positioned socialist strategy upon a post-Marxist theoretical and political landscape that not only overcome the supposed limits of class essentialism but also secured the political on discursive terms and allowed the discursive to be the determining space for various plural subject positions. Further, this alternative theoretical and political paradigm advanced the claim of how liberal democracy is in fact the very field where democracy grows and matures towards its radical form. However, Laclau and Mouffe warned the left of the two erroneous extreme ideas which, on the one hand, considers liberal democracy as the "enemy to be destroyed in order to create," and on the other sacralizes consensus thus "blurring the

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 184.

frontiers between Left and Right, and the move towards the Center.”⁴⁸ Being a leftist project,⁴⁹ radical democracy fights out a hegemonic struggle for the overcoming of illiberal democracy and neoliberalism and for the proliferation of the plural spaces of dissent. But this struggle is fought out within the space of the liberal democratic order.

As mentioned earlier, three scholars have advanced the idea that the Duterte presidency (from June 30, 2016 to June 30, 2022) is an appropriation of radical democracy in the Philippine context. Maboloc first advanced this argument based on a professed post-colonial reading of political conflict.⁵⁰ According to this argument, Duterte’s upset win over more established national politicians was a hegemonic challenge to the neoliberal consensus, embodied in post-Edsa elite politics.

For him, elite politicians were descended from coopted native leaders whose allegiance was bought by Spanish and American colonizers with the privilege to extract tribute from the subjugated population and accumulate wealth, especially land. This elite passed on their accumulated wealth and power to their descendants establishing veritable dynasties that maintained their privileged positions. By excluding challenges to their rule and monopolizing the extraction of resources, they secured their continued domination of the new Philippine republic but also reproduced gaping social inequalities. Maboloc argued, “the unjust power dynamics that created the oligarchy in the country exists to this day.” He continued that for Hotchrcroft (sic) and Rocamora, the nature of Philippine politics is about “dividing the spoils and expanding the quantity of spoils.”⁵¹ Succeeding presidents – he mentioned Manuel Quezon, Corazon Aquino and most recently, Benigno

⁴⁸ Ibid., xv.

⁴⁹ Even socialism is “one of the components of a project for radical democracy.” Ibid., 178.

⁵⁰ Christopher Ryan Maboloc, “The Task of Ethics in a Radical World: Post-colonial Struggle as the Root of Conflict in Philippine Society.” *PHAVISMINDA Journal*, 15, (2016): 91-06.

⁵¹ Ibid. p.94.

Aquino III – failed to implement agrarian reform and other measures intended to redistribute their accumulated wealth.

Elite control was entrenched because of the weakness of Philippine democracy. Maboloc believed this is because “Filipinos have not matured in terms of civic duties.”⁵² Enmeshed in patron-client ties that they rely on for such matters as medical care, funerals, and weddings, the masses, according to him, are prone to manipulation by traditional politicians who exploit clientelist ties to gain votes and entrench their privileges. He relied on elite democracy theorists such as Michael Cullinane,⁵³ Paul Hutchcroft, and Joel Rocamora;⁵⁴ nationalist historian Renato Constantino; and strong society, weak state proponents Patricio Abinales and Donna Amoroso⁵⁵ to empirically ground his argument.

Curiously, he also quoted Reynaldo Ileto⁵⁶ in his claim that patron-client relations characterize Philippine politics and society. In fact, Ileto had argued in the same work cited by Maboloc that “we should guard against reducing Philippine society to this image” and instead “take into account the innumerable instances in the past when popular movements threatened to upset or overturn the prevailing social structure.”⁵⁷ Ileto later on explicitly criticized the idea that the Philippines’ flawed democracy stems from the inability of transplanting American-style

⁵² Ibid. p. 95.

⁵³ Michael Cullinane, *Ilustrado Politics* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2003).

⁵⁴ Paul Hutchcroft and Joel Rocamora "Strong Demands and Weak Institutions: The Origins and Evolution of the Democratic Deficit in the Philippines," *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 3(2), (2003): 259-292.

⁵⁵ Patricio Abinales and Donna Amoroso. *State and Society in the Philippines* (Pasig City: Anvil, 2005).

⁵⁶ Reynaldo Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press 1979), 9.

⁵⁷ Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910*, 10.

democratic institutions and calls for a more interpretive understanding of Philippine society that discards Orientalism and colonial discourse.⁵⁸

Regardless, Maboloc's view of Philippine social relations is anchored on the ascendance of patron-client ties resulting ultimately in the vulnerability of the masses to exploitation and in the fragmentation of their identification to the nation-state. "Many Filipinos do not feel their obligation in terms of nation-building," he says, "they believe that the state's primary duty is to provide all that is necessary for its citizens to be able to achieve a higher standard of living." Succumbing to particularist inducements because of poverty, voters put politicians from old clans in office expecting to benefit but end up being excluded as politicians advance their own interests. The disillusionment from this exclusion sets the stage for the appeal of a charismatic leader who identifies with the masses in opposition to a privileged elite.⁵⁹

Rodrigo Duterte's election to the presidency played to this narrative of exclusion and anti-elitism. As a longtime mayor from the southern island of Mindanao, a part of the country considered peripheral to national politics, he could credibly present himself as an outsider to mobilize popular dissatisfaction against government inability to handle both everyday problems and systemic post-colonial issues. Duterte eschewed technocratese and appeals to moral abstractions that characterized the language of the other presidential candidates. He employed instead a "grammar of dissent" that rejected the dominant liberal democratic rationality that is the orthodoxy of the post-Edsa era.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Reynaldo Ileto, "Orientalism and the Study of Philippine Politics," *Philippine Political Science Journal*, 22(45), (2001): 1-32.

⁵⁹ Maboloc, "The Task of Ethics in a Radical World: Post-colonial Struggle as the Root of Conflict in Philippine Society." *PHAVISMINDA Journal*, 95-97.

⁶⁰ Christopher Ryan Maboloc, "Situating the Mindanao Agenda in the Radical Politics of President Duterte," *Iqra*, 4, (2017): 3-24.

Here, Maboloc drew on Mouffe to argue that his rejection of the liberal democratic consensus in favor of a politics of passionate anti-establishment antagonism marks Duterte's style as embodying "radical democracy." "Dissent presents a kind of political radicalism," he argues, "this type of radicalism is symbolic of the function of the political that Mouffe describes. It advances the attitude against cultural hegemony."⁶¹ As a Bisaya-speaker whose political career was built far from the Tagalog-speaking capital, he could distance himself from what is portrayed as the Manila-centered elites and capitalize on the serious failures of the previous administration. His provincial origins also enabled him to present himself as bringing the marginalized voices of the provinces, even that of the Bangsa Moro, who received only lip service from the cosmopolitan "ilustrado politicians."⁶²

Dissenting from the liberal rationality, for Maboloc, also meant dissenting from liberal norms. He argues that liberalism's presentation of itself as "the moral solution to our social and political problems" amounts to a "homogenization of moral standards and protocols."⁶³ While insisting that "politics is also about moral virtue and not just about power,"⁶⁴ he maintains "political philosophy, in the mind of Mouffe, must not be confused with ethics." What this means is that we do not "reject morality altogether," only that, "we have to make proper distinctions."⁶⁵ Criticisms of Duterte's attacks on human rights and freedom of the press are "judgements that appear to be impositions of standards that are bred in the West," that are "ignorant of history and context"⁶⁶ because they presuppose a homogenous set of Western values and norms. Duterte's

⁶¹ Ibid., 9.

⁶² Maboloc, "The Task of Ethics in a Radical World: Post-colonial Struggle as the Root of Conflict in Philippine Society." *PHAVISMINDA Journal*, 97.

⁶³ Maboloc, "Situating the Mindanao Agenda in the Radical Politics of President Duterte," *Iqra*, 4, 18.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 102.

⁶⁵ Maboloc, "The Task of Ethics in a Radical World: Post-colonial Struggle as the Root of Conflict in Philippine Society." *PHAVISMINDA Journal*, 99.

⁶⁶ Christopher Ryan Maboloc, "The Radical Politics of Nation-States: The Case of Rodrigo Duterte." *Journal of ASEAN Studies*, 6(1), (2018): 82-96.

“disruptive politics” indicates a boldness to take action because “the troubles of Philippine democracy,” means, “it is the political will of the leader that matters.”⁶⁷ The aggressive willingness to disregard universal norms of human rights and due process is invoked by Maboloc as proof of sincerity to remake, via a supposed radical democratic project, an oppressive political order with its roots in colonial history.

We see here how Maboloc’s radical democracy is at odds with how Laclau and Mouffe originally defined it. On the one hand, the latter viewed liberal democratic institutions as a necessary precondition to the radicalization of democracy. They also located the agency of radical democracy to the emergence of new social movements and civil society, not to charismatic “man-of-the-people” type politicians who are elected into office. Duterte’s “strong leadership,” as Maboloc puts it, is needed “because institutions are weak and undemocratic” reflecting the “pervasiveness of structural inequalities”⁶⁸ but the president really does nothing much to strengthen and democratize these institutions to enable the articulation of plural subject positions. Instead, he personally threatened to kill human rights activists for criticizing his drug war and severely limited the space for civil society with the Anti-Terror law and the establishment of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict.

On the other hand, Maboloc’s radical democracy characteristically illustrates Duterte as an anti-elite or anti-oligarch leader who is supposedly determined to end all forms of Manila-centric elitism and oligarchy. What is notable however, is how despite the appearance, Duterte never really rejected the neoliberal policies that have not only grounded the economic power of these elites and oligarchs but also secured dynastic political power, both in the post-Marcos regimes and in the present Duterte regime. Charmaine Ramos revealingly exposed the

⁶⁷ Ibid., 88.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 93.

paradox of how “Duterte has secured power on the back of development failures of the past three decades, but nevertheless perpetuated the same neoliberal economic strategies associated with these failures.”⁶⁹ This paradox echoes what Mouffe saw in some protests as an open indictment of “establishment elites” but not as an oppositional form of direct rejection of “financial capitalism and of neoliberalism.”⁷⁰ Obvious here is a theoretical disconnect between how Maboloc portrayed Duterte to resemble an anti-elite and anti-oligarch popular leader and how Duterte really simply enables elite and oligarchic rule through an unwavering submission to neoliberal policies.

Two other interlocutors support Maboloc’s radical democracy argument. Arambala utilized the radical democracy view to make sense of local politics in the city of Ozamiz.⁷¹ He too affirmed radical democracy’s critique of the liberal idea of a general consensus but quoted Mouffe emphasizing that radicalization of liberal democracy occurs in a nonviolent and non-revolutionary manner. As an immanent critique, he believes it does not imply a radical break since radicalization can be achieved by profoundly transforming existing liberal democratic institutions. Consequently, instead of focusing on the figure of Duterte, he looked to Ozamiz police chief Jovie Espenido as the one with “radical leadership” that realized a “shift in hegemony.” Arambala also replied to charges of “authoritarianism” levelled at Espenido with the argument that radical means are necessitated and disruption is intended to redirect the course of political arrangements towards bettering the lives of the people in challenging the status quo (sic).⁷²

⁶⁹ Charmaine Ramos, “The Return of Strongman Rule in the Philippines: Neoliberal Roots and Developmental Implications,” *Geoforum*, 124, (2021): 310.

⁷⁰ Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (New York: Verso, 2018), chapter 3, epub.

⁷¹ Gerry Arambala, “Radical Leadership in Post-Parojinog Ozamis Politics.” *European Journal of Research*, 11(12), (2018): 75-89.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 76-77.

Following Maboloc, he referred to Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, Hutchcroft and Rocamora, Anderson, Sidel, and Mendoza on political dynasties enriching themselves through plundering public resources being the source of social malaise.⁷³ His interpretation of Quimpo's framework on Philippine politics, however, leans heavily on Maboloc's exposition of the elite democracy framework rather than Quimpo's main claim that the dominance of elites is continually contested by alternative forces from below: "Albert (sic) Quimpo further explains that the main problematic of the country's development bog lies in the Philippines' weakness in its political development. This is because the prevalent political system in the country is patrimonial."⁷⁴

In contrast to Maboloc, Arambala posited "disruption" as a "radical evolution of democratic ideals to happen."⁷⁵ As a result, he peculiarly finds the agency for "radical democracy" on a national police official, who is only following policy guidelines from political authorities, rather than on an elected leader with an independent mandate. Ironically, the charismatic leader whose source of legitimacy is their bonds with a mass following are Espenido's adversaries, the Parojinogs. The police chief himself may be popular with ordinary citizens but popularity has nothing to do with his performance in his role and neither is popular empowerment an intended outcome of his assignment as a law enforcer. Indeed, Espenido would be reassigned away from Ozamiz and find himself among 357 police officials in President Duterte's drug list.⁷⁶ Despite the divergence with Maboloc, we still see nothing of Mouffe in Arambala's variant of radical democracy.

⁷³ Gerry Arambala, "The Return of the Political: Chantal Mouffe and Ozamiz City Politics," *International Journal of Politics and Security*, 1(2), (2019): 56-81.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁷⁶ Eimor Santos, "Jovie Espenido is on Duterte's Narco List, DILG Confirms," CNN Philippines. February 14, 2020, accessed September 8, 2021 from <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/2/14/jovie-espenido-duterte-drug-watchlist.html>.

Another commentator compared Maboloc's reading of the Duterte phenomenon with that of sociologist Randolph David who saw Dutertismo as a form of authoritarianism.⁷⁷ Labastin saw the contrast between the two analyses as two differing visions of democracy in the Philippines. Drawing from Quimpo's contested democracy framework,⁷⁸ he presented David's vision as that of the ruling elite where "democracy is no more than electoral and formal" while Maboloc's radical democracy is substantive democracy: the vision of those "in the peripheries such as the peasants, wage earners, laborers, fisher folks, women, and indigenous peoples," where, "democracy is about the equitable distribution of wealth and the people's sovereignty through popular participation."⁷⁹

Labastin recognized the value of David's view as "a prophetic warning against authoritarianism and as an implicit call for those who aim for substantive democracy to stay in the democratic process."⁸⁰ The authoritarian Marcos regime provided a key historical lesson as it had been established on the similar premise that only strong leadership that overrode obstructive republican institutions could solve the Philippines' difficulties. But he found his injunction to strictly uphold formal democratic processes as problematic as these are the same processes that entrench elite rule. He quoted the study of Walden Bello and John Gershman⁸¹ who found that formal democratic processes are used by elites to screen fundamental challenges to the status quo. Indeed, Labastin observed that the visions of subaltern groups are not fought within democratic processes even if democratic exercises such as elections are resorted to. "The communist insurgency and Bangsamoro

⁷⁷ Benjiemen Labastin, "Two Faces of Dutertismo: Two Visions of Democracy in the Philippines," *Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Special Issue, (2018): 31-54.

⁷⁸ Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, *Contested Democracy and the Left After Marcos* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2008).

⁷⁹ Labastin, "Two Faces of Dutertismo: Two Visions of Democracy in the Philippines," *Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 44.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁸¹ Walden Bello and John Gershman, "Democratization and Stabilization in the Philippines," *Critical Sociology*, 17(1), (1990): 35-56.

struggle,” he noted, “have forced the government to open the negotiating table to resolve ‘historical injustices.’”⁸²

He saw Maboloc’s reading of Duterte as radical democracy appealing to a long history of struggle by subordinate classes for social change. This favorable reading sees “undemocratic ways” as necessary to deepen and substantiate democracy. He pointed to the two EDSA revolts as “living models how extra-constitutional mechanisms changed a corrupt regime and brought back the democratic ideals.”⁸³ Still, he sidestepped Duterte of responsibility in the extra-judicial killings of the drug war as he opined that he “plays his cards well” because “he did not make any explicit declarations or directives” to conduct operations outside the bounds of the law.⁸⁴

For Labastin, David’s and Maboloc’s divergent readings “reveal the deep-seated division in the country.” He acknowledged the importance of deliberation and the absence of coercion but “majority of the Filipinos have grown weary, if not totally discontented with the democratic rhetoric.”⁸⁵ He paraphrases Marx saying that subordinate classes have nothing to lose but their chains making them amenable to measures that do not conform to democratic mores.

He admitted that Quimpo advocates for contestation to occur within the democratic space.⁸⁶ Quimpo himself drew on Mouffe and Laclau in conceptualizing the contested democracy framework.⁸⁷ For Quimpo, the electoral arena is the primary area of contestation by adherents of democracy from below because, “explosions of people power and a strong and vibrant civil society are not enough” if oligarchs

⁸² Labastin, “Two Faces of Dutertismo: Two Visions of Democracy in the Philippines,” *Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 46.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 50.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁸⁷ Quimpo, *Contested Democracy and the Left After Marcos*, 19.

maintain their dominance through control of state offices. Coalitions of People's Organizations and Non-governmental Organizations gaining local government posts and party-list representation is the vehicle for deepening democracy.⁸⁸ The contested democracy approach rejects an "instrumentalist view" which disregards the intrinsic value of formal democratic institutions.⁸⁹ Labastin himself quotes Quimpo's criticism of the Communist Party of the Philippines and its continued aloofness to what the Party considered "bourgeois" democracy.⁹⁰

There is therefore, an evident tension between Labastin's sanctioning of a president's use of extra-constitutional means to supposedly expand democracy and Quimpo's approach which is consistent with Laclau and Mouffe's concept of radical democracy. Unlike Labastin, Quimpo sees the emergent left, embodied in civil society and social movements, as the catalyst for radical democracy. This tension is seen clearly in how they view Duterte. Whereas Labastin followed Maboloc's assertion that Duterte's challenging of dominant elites is a radical democratic struggle for a substantive democracy, Quimpo saw Duterte and his war on drugs as "the return of national boss rule" where the securitization of illegal drugs provides justification for the use of coercion and violence to maintain power.⁹¹

Maboloc himself continued to move towards a more favorable view on Duterte by justifying many of his actions in the name of radical democracy. Responding to various critics on what they claim as Duterte's proclivity towards violence and coercion, he symbolically identified Duterte with the folk hero figure who lives as an outlaw to protect the

⁸⁸ Ibid., 53.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 78.

⁹⁰ Labastin, "Two Faces of Dutertismo: Two Visions of Democracy in the Philippines," *Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 44.

⁹¹ Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, "Duterte's War on Drugs: The Securitization of Illegal Drugs And the Return of National Boss Rule," in *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte's Early Presidency*, ed. Nicole Curato, 145-166 (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017).

poor from their wealthy oppressors.⁹² Maboloc insists that, despite his critics' efforts to paint him as such, the problem is not Duterte but the "elitism in Philippine society" that dismisses Duterte's radical approach as "a form of populism" instead of a continuation of colonial struggles.⁹³

While Maboloc reiterated that "radicalism is not a license to commit any moral wrong" and that "radical democracy cannot be used to bypass or destroy political relations nor seek to dissolve social institutions,"⁹⁴ he insisted that Duterte "realizes the pragmatic reality of Philippine politics" and has to "consolidate his powers to protect himself from any threat from those who may have plans to challenge his position."⁹⁵ This supposed pragmatism also extended to his policy toward disputed territories in the West Philippine Sea. Against the "liberal theorists in the country" who "do not like Duterte," he argues that far from abandoning Philippine territorial claims he does not want to pick a fight against China because he "does not trust America."⁹⁶

Nonetheless, Maboloc conceded "that an iron-fisted president is not what the state needs but functional institutions and the respect for the rule of law."⁹⁷ He also conceded that despite Duterte's promise to get rid of corruption even if it takes bloodshed, political dynasties still hold considerable sway, even manifesting their interests during budget deliberations in Congress. Maboloc admitted that even the Marcoses are

⁹² Christopher Ryan Maboloc, "Between Radical Politics and Duterteism: A Reply to Critics," *Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 5(1), (2019): 1-18.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹⁴ Christopher Ryan Maboloc, "President Rodrigo Duterte and the Birth of Radical Democracy in the Philippines," *International Journal of Politics and Security*, 2(3), (2019): 133.

⁹⁵ Christopher Ryan Maboloc, "The Predatory State and Radical Politics: The Case of the Philippines," *Journal of ASEAN Studies*, 7(2), (2019): 162-175.

⁹⁶ Christopher Ryan Maboloc, "Fighting the Oligarchs: President Duterte and the Argument Against Elite Rule - A Perspective from the Academe," *MALIM: Jurnal Pengajian Umum Asia Tenggara*, 21: 37.

⁹⁷ Maboloc, "President Rodrigo Duterte and the Birth of Radical Democracy in the Philippines," *International Journal of Politics and Security*, 116-134.

now back in power.⁹⁸ In the end, he claimed that “democracy cannot thrive on the traits of one man.”⁹⁹ Again, only when the people are “mature” can systemic problems be resolved.

The fact remains that Mouffe's insistence that radical democracy entails conflict and antagonism is used by Maboloc, Arambala and Labastin to justify the use of violence and intimidation against Duterte's critics and the narrowing of the democratic space. The supposed need to transform liberal democratic institutions is invoked in the overriding of democratic procedures. This visibly disregards the social democratic heritage of Mouffe's radical democracy and Quimpo's contested democracy. Both rest on the generative idea that the bourgeois democratic state can be made egalitarian by relying on free deliberation and popular representation. Instead of deepening democracy Duterte “pragmatically” cut deals with oligarchs and foreign interests, his alleged sworn enemies, to maintain his emerging dynasty in power while maintaining the edifice of neoliberal capitalism, which he had purportedly challenged. There is nothing radical nor democratic here.

Conclusion: The Impossibility of radical democracy in the Philippines

Post-EDSA politics (1986-present) has been widely described as the return of the *new elite* and the consolidation of former ruling elite in society.¹⁰⁰ National and local elections held every six years facilitated in the *elite capture* of which the Duterte administration is no exemption. “Pernicious elite politics”, resulted in a “patchy” and “discordant” Philippine democracy which, as Imelda Deinla and Bjorn Dressel

⁹⁸ Maboloc, "Between Radical Politics and Duterteism: A Reply to Critics," *Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 9.

⁹⁹ Maboloc, "Fighting the Oligarchs: President Duterte and the Argument Against Elite Rule - A Perspective from the Academe," *MALIM: Jurnal Pengajian Umum Asia Tenggara*, 41.

¹⁰⁰ Renato Velasco, "The Philippines," in *Democracy, Governance, and Economic Performance: East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Ian Marsh, Jean Blondel, and Takashi Inoguchi (New York: United Nations Press), 184.

contended, perpetuated institutional weakness and widespread abuse of office.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, with the rise of Duterte in power, the liberal state-society was replaced with “illiberalism” where violence was normalized and “a sustained and concerted attacks on independent constitutional bodies” became the standard norm of the executive branch of the government. “Judicial docility” not only weakened constitutional checks and balances but likewise “further eroded democratic spaces in the Duterte administration.”¹⁰² Hence, Deinla and Dressel are correct in pointing out that illiberal democracies “are generally superficial and hollow adorned with the institutional and procedural trappings of democracy – and have low levels of participation and inclusiveness.”¹⁰³ Both are able to show how illiberal democracy or right populism, which characterizes the Duterte administration eventually evolved into populist authoritarianism. In the words of Damien Kingsbury, the Philippine society transitioned “from a dictatorial to an oligarchic rather than a genuinely democratic model.”¹⁰⁴ The “dynastic democracy” is “much about style as substance” as “family networks or dynasties continue to dominate the political landscape, from the top to the most local levels of government.”¹⁰⁵ If democracy and more specifically democratic processes are almost inexistent in the Philippines, what is there to “radicalize”?

There is a **theoretical disconnect** between contemporary scholarship of radical politics in the Philippines – whose main proponents are Maboloc, Arambala, and Labastin – and the post-Marxist radical

¹⁰¹ Imelda Deinla and Bjorn Dressel, *From Aquino II to Duterte (2010-2018): Change, Continuity and Rupture*. Ed. by Imelda Deinla and Bjorn Dressel (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2019), 1.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 4

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 5

¹⁰⁴ Damien Kingsbury, *Politics in Contemporary Southeast Asia: Authority, Democracy and Political Change* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 131

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 125

political project of Mouffe and Laclau.¹⁰⁶ We will conclude our arguments for the impossibility of a radicalized version of democracy in the Philippines today by answering the following questions: 1) Under what conditions can radical democracy flourish according to Mouffe? and, 2) Why is radical democracy impossible in the Philippine setting according to Mouffe?

In *The Democratic Paradox*, Mouffe defines the goal for her project: “what is the best way to designate the new type of democracy established in the West in the course of the last two centuries?”¹⁰⁷ A clear distinction between “modern democracy” and “ancient democracy,” Mouffe asserts that “modern democracy has to be representative.”¹⁰⁸ Following Claude Lefort, Mouffe insists that a necessary prerequisite for any democratic revolution to take place is the “disappearance of a power that was embodied in the person of the prince and tied to a transcendental authority.”¹⁰⁹ Moreover, with the advent of what she called “unchallenged hegemony of neo-liberalism,” Mouffe sees serious threats to modern democratic institutions specifically in post-industrial, social democratic, and welfare state societies. In Mouffe’s mind, it is clear that the radical democratic project can only flourish in modern democratic countries, i.e., countries that have successfully waged a “democratic revolution” where “the old democratic principle that ‘power should be exercised by the people’ emerges again, but this time within the symbolic framework informed by liberal discourse, with its strong emphasis on the value of individual liberty and on human rights.”¹¹⁰ One constitutive element of modern democracies, Mouffe insists, is the “acceptance of pluralism” which allows for the

¹⁰⁶ Mark Thompson also applied the concept of “illiberal democracy” to Philippine society under the presidency of Duterte. See “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy in the Philippines: Duterte’s Early Presidency”, in *From Aquino II to Duterte (2010-2018): Change, Continuity and Rupture*

¹⁰⁷ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, (New York: Verso, 2000), 1. Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Mouffe, 4

“legitimation of conflict and division”. However, she is quick to point out that this can only take place when individual liberty emerges and equal liberty for all is asserted.¹¹¹ The socio-political conditions by which radical democracy may take place is the occurrence of “difference” which Mouffe brilliantly labels as “radical and plural democracy.” In other words, pluralistic democratic politics precedes and is a requirement of radical democracy.

If one prominent component of modern democracy is freedom and equality of all human beings, then can radical democracy take place in a populist, authoritarian, illiberal democratic country ruled by Duterte? When asked if radical democracy can flourish in a fascist, dictatorial regime, Mouffe commented that for her:

“[radical democracy operating under an authoritarian or fascist regime] does not make sense at all. Because it’s unthinkable. You know the two-way process of radicalization of democracy: you need to have democratic institution. And you know in an authoritarian, fascist regime, you know, you don’t have those. Or dictatorship? You don’t have those democratic institutions. So you cannot radicalize them because they don’t exist. In that case, of course, what you need is to first establish a democratic regime... But... you can’t really think of the process of radicalizing democracy inside an authoritarian and fascist dictatorship. You can’t really fight radical democracy in a dictatorship. What you need to do first is to fight for installing the basis of the pluralism of democracy.”¹¹²

¹¹¹ Mouffe, 18-19

¹¹² Chantal Mouffe, Zoom interview by authors, July 16 2021.

If illiberal democracy is the defining character of Philippine society, then radical democracy would be an existential impossibility. As Mouffe consistently points out, “the idea of radical democracy is radicalization of liberal democratic institutions.” In this regard, a prerequisite is to have “liberal democratic institutions and radicalize them” because the ultimate purpose of radical democracy is to “get rid of all constraints of liberalism.”¹¹³

Mouffe distances herself from the ***misappropriations*** of contemporary scholarship of radical politics in the Philippines. She finds it “extremely dangerous” and a little bit troubling that “some people used [her] work in the Philippines” to justify the rule of Duterte. She adds that it “is worrying” because it is “being used differently on Duterte’s style of government” as “the birth of radical democracy in the Philippines.” She clarifies that “[she does not] suppose that at all.”

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¹¹³ Ibid.

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