

Interview with Jong Pairez and Bas Umali about Anarchism in the Philippines

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The interview was conducted in 2010 for the German book »Von Jakarta bis Johannesburg: Anarchismus weltweit«. This is the original English version.

In the last decade, a remarkably strong anarchist movement seems to have developed in the Philippines. Can you give us a short overview?

Jong: There have been a number of published writings recently about Anarchism in the Philippines, most of it are reflections and prospects towards an alternative form of struggle and organising that veers away from the traditions of the predominant Philippine Left. The selected writings I could remember was Bas Umali's "Archipelagic Confederation: An Anarchist Alternative for the Philippines" and Marco Cuevas-Hewitt's "Sketches of an Archipelagic Poetics of Postcolonial Belonging". Both articles are looking towards the importance of diversity and decentralized horizontal politics which is commonly overlooked by the Left and Government who are both united towards the aim of building a unified nation-state. As Marco argued, "Nationalism in this sense might even be considered as a kind of 'internal imperialism.'"

However, given that we have these amazing theories, this is not always coherent in praxis. And I simply mean here that the movement who is capable of transmitting an anarchist mindset within various sectors of Philippine society is generally in its infant stage. There are plenty of shortcomings to accept and consider. But on the other hand I see the shortcomings as a positive advantage for the emerging anarchist movement because it provides us chances to creatively experiment and learn from mistakes.

Are there any historical movements in the Philippines whose politics had, from your perspective, anarchist dimensions?

Jong: Compared to anarchist movements in Europe and East Asia, most especially in Japan, the Philippines has no history of modern anarchist traditions and struggle in the late 19th century and early 20th century.

Since late 19th century and during the peak of anti-colonial struggle against Spain and American Imperialism in the early 20th century, revolutionary groups were all pre-occupied by thoughts on National Liberation. But according to Benedict Anderson, in his book "Under the Three Flags", the popularity of 18th century anarchists in Europe had a huge impact on Filipino intellectuals who were students then in Madrid. One of them, Jose Rizal, wrote fiction novels that were important for the history of the Philippine revolution. In Rizal's novel, "El Filibusterismo", the protagonist is reminiscent of Ravachol — a French anarchist who is known for avenging the oppressed workers by throwing bombs targeting Authorities. Rizal symbolically represented this as the desperation of the Filipino people to liberate themselves from colonialism.

However, anarchist theory and praxis never did proliferate in that period as a legitimate revolutionary alternative against colonialism in the Philippines. Yet, not unlike in Japan, anarchism had sown its seeds already during the Meiji and Taisho periods — Japanese anarchists became instrumental in the history of building militant unionism and anti-war/anti-Emperor struggles. But obviously there is a contextual difference between the Japanese and the Filipino experience.

Nevertheless, this doesn't mean that the Filipino experience has no history of anti-authoritarian struggle.

If the pacified Filipino natives, especially the discontented Principalia class, were imagining a nation-state independent from their colonizers, our indigenous brothers on the other side were continuously fighting to defend their egalitarian ways of living in the mountains and other areas from the archipelago remote from colonialism. Quasi-religious insurrections in Philippine history are also attributed to anti-authoritarian struggles due to their nature of preserving autonomy.

Bas: Jose Rizal's novel depicts the oppressive colonial society and his solution to the perennial condition. One could inquire where Jose Rizal derived the idea of exterminating the entire colonial elite by igniting the nitroglycerine hidden in a lamp from? Rizal's long stay in Europe made him aware of the Propaganda by the Deed carried out by the anarchists. At the same time, his campaign for education as one of the key components to freedom is similar to Ferrer and anarcho-syndicalism in Spain.

In 1901, Isabelo de Los Reyes returned home from the prison cell of Montjuich in Spain to face the new enemy that disembarked from the modern warships in Manila Bay. De Los Reyes' frame of struggle was far different from the nationalists we know today as heroes. Firstly, his object of criticism was imperialism. He attacked the American corporations and organized workers and urban poor communities in Manila.

He practiced what he learned from his anarchists cell mates (like Ramon Sempau) in Spain, where anarcho-syndicalism was popular among workers. He organized the Union Obrera Democratica (UOD), the first workers' union in the Archipelago. Direct actions through creative picket lines and strikes launched by workers and communities particularly in Tondo rocked the colonial government and its corporate partners and the local elite.

It seems that in quite a lot of your work you try to relate anarchist ideas to traditional ways of social organizing on the Philippine islands. Can you tell us more about this?

Bas: In my view, since time immemorial, anarchism is has been present in the archipelago; primitive communities from coastal to upland areas flourished and utilized autonomous and decentralized political patterns that facilitated proliferation of highly diverse cultures and lifestyles.

Primitive social organizations continuously evolved until social stratifications formed and became institutions. The archipelago has various tribes with their own self-identity, culture, and socio-political organization. Before authoritarianism infected the revolutionary movement of the archipelago, direct action was already practiced. One example is the incident from the 20th of February, 1872, when seven Spanish officers were killed in a mutiny at the Cavite Naval Shipyards. As a consequence, the Spanish authorities ordered the arrest of creoles, mestizos, secular priests, merchants, lawyers and even members of colonial administration. In order to institute fear in the minds of the people, a brief kangaroo trial was held and three secular priests were garroted in front of forty-thousand people. Six months later, 1200 workers went on strike, setting the first record in the history of the archipelago. Many people were arrested but the administration failed to identify a leader and everyone was released eventually. General Izquierdo apparently concluded that "the International has spread its black wings to cast its nefarious shadow over the most remote lands."

How did the traditional forms or organization relate to the independence movement?

Bas: The propaganda movement basically composed of local educated elite adopted the framework brought by the “Enlightenment” in Europe. Giant names in history like Rizal, Aguinaldo, Jacinto, Bonifacio, Luna, Mabini, Del Pilar, were highly exposed to the nationalism that they used as a basis of uniting the oppressed people.

The elite successfully created the idea of an abstract large-scale community integrating highly diverse cultures. The culmination of the agitation of the propaganda movement was the establishment of Katipunan that later became the earliest government in the archipelago patterned to the nationalist framework of the west. Centralistic, coercive and patriarchal institutions dominated the social relations in the archipelago and undermined the traditional theme of mutual cooperation and diversity. Slavery existed in the form of polo (forced labor), poverty and marginalisation introduced to the local communities that used to be prosperous and live in relative freedom.

Except of the tribes and communities who went into the most remote areas and to southern Mindanao, the entire archipelago became part of the Regalian doctrine and Spanish hierarchy.

What can you tell us about the current anarchist movement in the Philippines?

Bas: Currently, broader non-hierarchical social organization is limited to the indigenous groups that effectively maintain traditional practices. In a general sense, after the disintegration of UOD, anti-authoritarian activism and movements became dormant. Yet, anarchy is fairly strong in many places in Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. The resilience of indigenous communities can be related through their autonomous traditions; for them, they are not part but co-exist with the state.

In terms of activism and movement, anarchy and anti-authoritarianism began to regain its momentum in the Punk scene during the early 1980s. The anti-authoritarian politics initially started as a critique of the conventional character of Philippine society.

During the early 1990s, the community of anti-authoritarians in the Punk and Hardcore scene started to display anti-hierarchical politics and conscious anarchist propaganda. The movement continuously attracted individuals, especially after the anti-WTO riots in Seattle ignited by the Black Bloc – the Propaganda by the Deed of our time.

Numerous collectives have formed in the National Capital Region (NCR), in Davao, Cebu, Lucena and other cities. They have conducted various activities and direct actions such as Food Not Bombs, community-based workshops, picket lines, forums, publications, gigs, graffiti and other activities that are directed against hierarchy.

Jong: Since the turn of the 21st century, activist groups and collectives who identify themselves as anarchists are sprouting like wild mushrooms in the Philippines. Though their historical background didn't take root from the late 19th-century Anarchism but rather from the 1980's Punk phenomenon. I would like to discuss this phenomenon a bit more, in particular its importance for the present emerging anarchist movement in the Philippines.

The Punk subculture came to the Philippine shore as a result of the Filipino diaspora. Its beginnings was attributed to rich teenage Filipinos from Europe and the United States returning

to the Philippines as “Balikbayan” (meaning: “balik” is return, “bayan” is homeland) in the late 1970’s. They brought Punk rock music to the Philippines, which was later popularized by the DZRJ-810 AM “Rock of Manila” radio program. During this time the Military Dictatorship of then President Ferdinand Marcos was on its heights. The media was controlled by the State but a few and small radio stations managed to operate outside the State sanctions. Upon broadcasting the music of the Sex Pistols, The Clash and the Boomtown Rats, among many others, to stunned Manila listeners, the “Pinoy Punk” rock scene was born.

Thereafter, Punk rock music represented the dissatisfaction of Filipino youngsters against conservative Philippine society in the early 1980’s. In the beginning it was simply just another musical upheaval and very apolitical in nature, but later it developed a radical approach in challenging authoritarian Philippine society. Youngsters started to explore the politics of Anarchism and Do-it-Yourself (DIY) associated with Punk rock music.

However, the golden age of the Punk rock scene in the Philippines coincided with Punk’s decadence in the West. After a century of Punk as a threat to mainstream society, the mass media started embracing Punk images and became instrumental to new marketing strategies by big multi-national companies. In the Philippines, softdrink multi-nationals such as Pepsi Cola started sponsoring Punk band contests on Philippine TV during the Marcos Dictatorship’s early period of decline in mid-1980’s. Several years later, after the Dictatorship was replaced by a democratic government under the Aquino Regime, local mass media hyped-up a satanic cult scare to discredit the local Punk scene as a way to cover-up the bloody Mendiola massacre that was perpetrated by the then incumbent regime.

The influx of other musical genres, such as New Wave, Hip-Hop and crossover subcultures came to shore, and it eventually created a divide between Punk and others. Even within the local Punk scene fragmentation was so rampant that it sometimes resulted in a number of groups and tribes/gangs who would frequently clash due to their musical differences. This trend of fragmentation was also seen among the Maoist Left.

It seems like the Left in the Philippines has often been characterized by severe infighting. So, is this beginning to manifest itself in the anarchist movement as well?

Jong: The early 1990’s are considered as the period of the “Great Leftist Split” due to the failure of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) to lead the overthrow of the Marcos Dictatorship. The once strong and cohesive Leftist movement was weakened by a series of factions and infighting among Party cadres and their mass organizations. Worst as that they even killed each other due to their unsettled differences on ideological stands regarding the failure to lead the people’s uprising in EDSA. Apparently, this violent fragmentation is one among the causes of the emerging anarchist movement’s shortcomings and mistakes – the petty claims of who is more anarchist and who is not.

My only hope is to overcome this mistake by embracing our varied differences and be true more to the idea of diversity. And I think the other way to transcend this shortcomings is to learn from the ways of life and experiences of our indigenous brothers and sisters in the archipelago because there is more to learn outside the ghetto of Punkdom. Most especially if we want to be open to dialogue.

The authoritarian Left has always been fairly strong in the Philippines. Why has the space for anarchist politics been limited despite the historical reference points that you have mentioned?

Bas: The influence of the authoritarian Left came to the archipelago after the disintegration of the UOD. From the UOD's remains, a hierarchical party set to grab political power was organized. The influence of Bolshevism facilitated the establishment of the first authoritarian workers' party.

Later, Maoism dominated the revolutionary movement in the archipelago. From a semi-colonial, semi-feudal analysis of Philippine society, the Maoists set up a strategic people's war that was supposed to take off from the countryside relying on the strength of the peasants.

The National Democratic Front (NDF) became the most influential bloc within the Leftist network during the Marcos years. It was directly influenced by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and reinforced by the party's growing armed wing, the New People's Army (NPA) that was able to form battalions in many strategic regions in Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao.

The radicalism displayed by the authoritarian political blocs attracted many sectors, including the youth, and this in substantial numbers. United against the fascists, the popular front continuously gained influence.

The CPP-NPA-NDF alliance, whose primary means of grabbing political power was armed struggle, was pushed aside by the popular bloodless uprising that was successfully led by the elite opposition that installed the Aquino government. In the mid-1990's, the fragmentation of the biggest leftist political bloc commenced and some time later people started to point guns at one another. Various strains of Leftist political blocs formed after the "great debate". They have been thriving in NGOs and in civil society. The most influential within the authoritarian left has been the co-called "reaffirmist" (RA) bloc, the mother organization maintaining the largest resources, including the most active armed wing, until today.

We understand that you are involved in many efforts to connect anarchists throughout the Asia-Pacific region. How effective are your networking attempts and what are the promises they hold?

Jong: The availability of new media technology such as the Internet can be a helpful tool in achieving a de-fragmented form of organising which could result in a web of networks that will work for the advantage of furthering our cause. That is why we are working out the establishment of a journal that communicates our local struggles in Asia-Pacific and beyond. This journal, which we intend to publish online and in print, will also be our tool to share experiences and build a solidarity network.

What are your hopes for anarchist politics overall?

Bas: The ecology is critical to human's survival and existence. During the primitive times, the natural resources were in perfect health and sustainably managed by the communities under the theme of mutual cooperation and the recognition of diverse ways of life. One can always raise the population factor, that is, claiming that the smaller the community the lesser its impact on

the environment; or one could suggest that primitive technology was too limited to exploit our resources and so on. But one could also assert that it has much to do with the intention of the users of a particular natural habitat. If one's desire is to maintain and sustain socio-cultural needs of a community, there's no need to overexploit its resources, especially when this concerns the means to survive.

Mainstream economy is designed to achieve infinite growth by further increasing production and sales; but the very source of raw materials, essential for the entire global ecology, is finite and has defined limits. An economy that encourages activities that seek to extract massive incentives can only lead to massive exploitation of natural resources and human labor (mental & physical). This means poverty of the many who have no control over the means of production and no access to the use of natural resources.

Knowing the potential of humans, a few primitive people armed only with stones and sticks have the ability to wipe out a herd of hoofed mammals. However, since these humans hunt not to acquire wealth and property but to provide needs of their communities, they will only kill the animals they need. Much of this is now out of balance. Take the example of a small community on an island highly dependent on fishing. It used its upland resources of trees to make boats. But since timber got a good price on the market, the community was enticed to harvest all of its forest resources. Now both the island's ecosystem and livelihood is destroyed.

In the archipelago, our ancestors did engage in local warfare and hostilities but not to dominate. They conducted raids, ambushes and conventional warfare but not to establish central power to rule the archipelago in uniformity. Their conflict was due to unsettled debt, revenge, and unresolved territorial disputes.

Deriving wisdom from the autonomous politics and non-hierarchical social relations of our primitive communities is a process of recreating our own future social relationship. The several political exercises in our history proved nothing in terms of addressing critical issues such as poverty, political marginalization, slavery, and resource degradation.

The experiences of the authoritarian Left in Vietnam, Cambodia, China, Cuba, Russia, Germany, North Korea and other socialist states proved that the centralization of power will give special privileges to the few who have access to power.

As human beings we are just a part of the infinitely diverse global ecosystem; we are not above of it. Creating a system that is advantageous only to a single stakeholder will only end up coercing. Anarchy is a social process in which the community directly participates. Conscious effort will lead to the establishment of systems that are designed to accommodate highly diverse interests, views, conceptions and identities in a horizontal manner. It will seek to establish systems for mutual cooperation to facilitate voluntary processes of production as well as collective and direct community management of natural resources.

The establishment of a non-hierarchical society that is free of poverty, coercion, slavery, and patriarchy, while demonstrating a way of life consistent with our ecological system, is very hard to achieve. But it is an aspiration based on concrete experiences and practices of many communities in many places of the globe.

Probably, we will not see this society in my lifetime, as privileged groups will surely exhaust all possible means and resources to maintain the status quo and to defend institutions that reinforce the centralization of power. Education is the key to individual and social emancipation. Our awareness against the state and other institutions that reinforce centralization of political power is very essential in creating a new social order.

Jong Pairez and Bas Umali are originally from Manila. They are active in arts projects and political initiatives such as the Anarchist Initiative for Direct Democracy and the South East Asia Autonomous Network.

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