

Public Lives

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In a world of images

It must have been one of the many spokespersons of the President. Someone from Malacanang recently made a point of saying that Gloria Macapagal Arroyo is president in “the real world.” The remark was clearly meant to draw a sharp contrast between GMA, a “real” president, and FPJ, an aspirant from the imaginary world of the movies. Any serious student of philosophy however might tell us that the statement, witty as it may be, makes sense only if there is a way of knowing the “real world” except through our images of it. There is none.

Modern science may often seem as if it offers us a more accurate picture of the world “as it really is.” But this picture is just one more image taken from another angle, using some instruments of measurement. In the latest Social Weather Stations survey, for instance, the President received a minus 3 satisfaction rating. That rating depicts her as a non-performing president. Harsh as it is, this is the image that the Filipino public has of her at this time, as seen through the lenses of a public opinion poll.

We get to know reality only through appearances, whether we use our everyday commonsense or the sophisticated methods of science. There is no way, as Nietzsche puts it, of “reaching beyond the image or behind it.” We may oppose what purports to be a more precise image to one derived from commonsense by, for example, drawing a more comprehensive picture of how things came to be. But even this shows only another image, not reality “as it really is.”

All this is to say that we are well advised not to denigrate images of character derived from the movies or television. They are as “real” as the projections that public officials make of their achievements. Perhaps the only difference, if any, is that in the case of the movies, viewers are prompted to suspend belief, whereas in politics there is no such warning. When politicians present their qualifications and achievements on television, they expect us to suspend disbelief.

The consciousness of the poor is as true as their condition. There is nothing false about it. They see the world necessarily from the prism of their own beliefs and values. The habits of thought that constitute the core of their consciousness are products of their specific formation as a human community. Their consciousness may be limited from the standpoint of certain goals, but it is not inferior.

There was a time when I, like many from the Left, uncritically accepted terms like “false consciousness” and “objective conditions.” When people subjected to exploitation and oppression failed to respond to their situation in a revolutionary way, we said it was because they suffered from “false consciousness.” We assumed that what they needed was a correct political education to enable them to see the “objective conditions” of their exploitation and oppression. The patronizing arrogance of this language became evident to me when I encountered the writings of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator. In his work among the poor of Latin America and Africa, Freire insisted that the people must be allowed to “create their own words.”

But the other side of this process is equally important. Those of us who claim to see better and are inclined to teach must also learn the ability to look inward and review our own perspectives. For these may often be colored by unexamined fears and prejudices that prevent us from assigning any value to others’ opinions even before we have understood where they are coming from.

We typically assume, for example, that the voting behavior of the poor is not rational when they choose candidates who do not possess the experience and qualifications that we think are essential to the position they seek. We forget that rationality is relative. People have different concepts of the ideal leader. These are not unchanging notions; they depend very much on people’s perceptions of the situation in which they find themselves at any given moment.

In late 1985, after Marcos suddenly announced the holding of a snap election in February the following year, the public searched around for a presidential candidate who could personify the popular movement that opposed Marcos. Winning was secondary; everyone expected Marcos to cheat. Experience and readiness to discharge

the duties of the presidency were also secondary. The important thing was to offer the nation the complete antithesis of Marcos. That was Cory Aquino, a woman whose husband had been murdered by the regime, a housewife with no previous experience in politics who could tell Marcos -- the consummate politician -- that she also did not have any experience in corruption.

Yet we were not wanting in leaders who could lead the country out of the nightmare of Martial Law. The venerable Lorenzo Tanada, who led countless demonstrations against the dictatorship, was still alive. So was the brilliant Jose W. Diokno. Undeterred by his incarceration in Marcos jails, he articulated the clearest vision of a nation for our children. So was Jovito R. Salonga, the scholar-statesman who led the Senate that closed the American bases in the Philippines and, to this day, continues to fight for a just society. They all stepped aside to make way for Cory Aquino.

Analysts will say that the public's choice of a leader may not always be the right one for the nation. That is a judgment that still proceeds from the specific perspective of a given set of goals and values. In a world of images, we can only look at results from different perspectives. We have no recourse to a neutral or eternal perspective lying outside human affairs.

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