

SOCIAL SCIENCES DIVISION

SOCIAL SCIENCE IN A WAR ZONE

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INTRODUCTION

A much-esteemed professor of mine, Robin Williams of Cornell University, had as a young sociologist serving in the army during World War II, been assigned to work with Samuel Stauffer in doing research for the massive study entitled *The American Soldier*. In his later years Williams recounted how, on Christmas Day of 1945, during the Battle of the Bulge, his jeep got stuck in the mud right within sight of German artillery. Perhaps it was the prayers he said at that moment, or the Christmas spirit, but the Germans did not open fire and he lived to become a leading student of American society and particularly of ethnic relations within it.

Sitting down to write only two days after the violent dispersal of the crowd at Malacanang and Mendiola, and casting a glance at what may lie ahead for Philippine society, the theme "Social Science in a War Zone" comes to mind. I trust that we shall have no more of the kind of bloody confrontation which we saw on our TV screens this week, but the latter does point to a massive and threatening sociological reality, namely the vast gap both economic and cultural within our society; certain elements among the poor are like tinder or gunpowder ready to be ignited by a spark. It points to the possibility of continuing mindless conflict; and to the need for a costly struggle to bridge the gap, not only in order to reduce the possibility of conflict but more importantly to eliminate the massive injustices on which our society has unfortunately been built.

This struggle will not be an easy one, for it will mean dismantling the structures of elite democracy which have dominated the nation for one hundred years; and this may well be, in the much-abused phrase, the moral equivalent for

war. And like war, it will require a national consensus and the united efforts of all social scientists included.

Here I shall attempt to describe, as a I see it, the role of the social scientist in this struggle. And it comes down, not surprisingly, to the pursuit of truth, truth which as we shall see is a many-dimensional, many-splendored thing.

Truth, and Respect for Facts

I trust you will not think that I have mixed up my lecture notes with many sermon notes if I begin with a quotation from St. John's Gospel, the question of Pontius Pilate at the trial of Jesus. "And what is truth?" The question is a most provocative one also, and perhaps especially, today when politicians, public relations consultants and spin doctors have developed the manipulation, twisting and sheer denial of facts into a science in its own right, when "plausible deniability" is required even of certain government undercover operations. During the impeachment trial we witnessed shameless efforts to deny or cover up facts which were evident to all, despite then President Estrada's boast that "those charges will be answered point by point." And in fact it was the politically-motivated vote not to open the second envelope, and thereby hide the facts which it contained, which stirred the nation to outrage and brought down the government.

Again in the election campaign, in the Pilate-like washing of hands by instigators of the violence at Malacanang, in self-serving newspaper ads paid for by government offices and private firms we see similar patterns. Any argument which serves one's purposes here and now is a "good" argument, and any presumed fact which bolsters it is a "good" fact; whether it happens also to be true is unimportant. Conversely, arguments which contradict the case which one wishes to build are to be demolished, and "inconvenient" facts such as the misdeeds under martial law and after of senatorial candidates Enrile, Honasan and Lacson are swept under the rug.

At times I wonder whether this all began with former President Marcos, who had a remarkable ability to look a questioner or indeed the whole nation via TV in the eye, and lie in his teeth. He knew that he was lying; you knew he was lying; he knew that you knew he was lying; and yet the act went on. I remember hearing that he had his own version of the epitaph for the grave of a lawyer which went "Here lies a lawyer who lies no more." Marcos' version was "Here lies a lawyer who lies still."

This lack of respect for objective truth is deeply corrosive of our society and runs counter to the ethos of intellectual seriousness and respect for the facts which is at the heart of all true science. Here I recall the magnificent lecture of Max (1958) entitled "Science as a Vocation" of which I shall quote only these few lines.

The primary task of a useful teacher is to teach his students to recognize "inconvenient" facts – I mean facts that are inconvenient for their party opinions. And every party opinion there are facts that are extremely inconvenient, for my own opinion no less than for others.

I emphasize this point because I believe that it is crucial not only for our personal integrity but also for the future of the nation that we open ourselves to some inconvenient facts. We might begin by admitting that our socio-economic system has been "tilted" in favor of the wealthy and powerful for generations, and that 100 years of elite democracy have done little to bring the ordinary Filipino into the mainstream of national life. Although we do not often state it in these terms, evidence is available in the Philippine Human Development Reports for example, in the National Statistics Office data on income distribution, in studies by the Asian Development Bank, and probably by some in the audience here today.

But rather than citing statistics, allow me to recount a personal experience which for me at least is symbolic. I have been saying Mass on Sundays at Payatas, near the garbage dump, since 1985. On the Sunday after EDSA I, in 1986, as I was passing the *tambakan*, I noticed a groups of child scavengers, aged ten or twelve years, working the dump. And I thought to myself, "Thank goodness, with the departure of Marcos that obscenity is finally on the way out." Today, 15 years later, there are more child scavengers than ever working the dump, and no one knows how many of their bodies are buried beneath the trash-slide of last July. Neither the moral integrity of Cory Aquino nor the workaholic and organizing ability of Fidel Ramos have changed the structures which marginalize the poor.

This may well explain the fierce loyalty of many, perhaps the majority, at Payatas to former President Estrada. Wrongly perhaps, they see him as one of their own: he speaks their brand of street Tagalog, eats with his hands; he visited them after the trash-slide and handed out relief goods. They identify with him, see him as a symbol of what they would like to be – even perhaps in his womanizing, drinking and gambling.

Yet, with all of our public opinion surveys and research projects, how many of us were fully aware of the deep cultural gap within our society until we saw it in the contorted faces of the mob at EDSA III, heard it in their interviews and shouted invectives, noted its evidence in the deliberate vandalism at the EDSA Shrine? Nor has the passion subsided; at Payatas shouts of "Cardinal Sin, mortal sin" assail those on their way to church. There are facts here – inconvenient facts – to be recognized reflected on, studied, and factored into our analyses.

What I am calling for here is the attitude and ethic of the "honest spy" who reports *exactly* what the situation is and not what he or his superiors would like it to be.

In this context it is worth noting that the World Bank's *World Development Report 2000-2001* made use of a new – for the World Bank – methodology.

Without abandoning its traditional economic analysis it commissioned a 60-nation study entitled "Voices of the Poor" which involved 60,000 interviews with poor people. Quotations from the interviews are scattered throughout the volume, but more importantly they served to broaden the concept of poverty which underlies both the report and the recommendations.

Poverty for the World Bank is now seen as not merely the lack of economic assets and opportunities in the broad sense, but equally a lack of security and of the power to affect decisions which determine one's life. Insecurity, i.e. the possibility of losing one's job or becoming ill and having nothing to fall back on, of having nothing for one's family to eat tonight, of having one's shanty demolished, of being hit by crop failure or natural disaster with no one to turn to, is central to the experience of the poor; and powerless is equally central. This too many throw some light on the events of EDSA III and on what lies ahead for our society. And the methodology suggests that we do much more listening to the poor and build their experience into our analysis.

Finally, and this is important, respect for the facts should prevent us from seeing only one side of the reality which we attempt to describe and analyze, from becoming prisoners of our own theories and interpretations. Thus, despite all that has been said above about the continued marginalization of the poor, there are signs of change which should be noted and studied. There are the vast numbers of groups and organizations, people's organizations and non-government organizations which are dedicated to bringing the urban and rural poor into the mainstream. And they have some remarkable achievements to their credit. Right at Payatas for example there is a successful savings club originally sponsored by the Vincentian Fathers but now independent; in the course of five years it had grown to more than 7,000 members with savings of over fourteen million pesos and loans over the years of some sixty-one million; there is now a parallel organization saving precisely for housing, which has on its own acquired three hectares in Montalban where members will relocate away from the stench and smoke of the dumpsite.

On the legislative front there was the passage of the Urban Development and Housing Act of 1992 and the later repeal of President Marcos PD 772 which had made squatting a criminal offense; both of these were achieved by the united efforts of people's organizations, non-government organizations, the Bishops-Businessmen's Conference for Human Development, and the Church. These and other achievements, including the many "summits" organized by President Ramos, indicate that the government was becoming more "permeable" to pressure from the organized poor and their middle and upper-class allies – at least to the extent that such pressure did not threaten too seriously its own priorities or those of powerful vested interests. Moreover, it appears that the *organized poor*, e.g. the labor unions and urban poor associations, participated in EDSA II but not in EDSA III; the mob that attacked Malacañang on May Day seems to have been made up of the *unorganized poor* who saw Estrada as their only hope.

Truth and Understanding

I can imagine you saying at this point that, despite the popular axiom, *facts do not speak for themselves*. They are always embedded in a matrix of meaning; they take their own meaning from a certain frame of reference. Thus, the fact of the arrest of former President Estrada in April is clear; it was recorded by public officials, newspaper people and TV cameramen. Yet to one segment of the population it represents the rule of law, society rising up to reaffirm values which had been grossly violated; to another segment, it represents sheer power, the power of the elite out to destroy someone who dared to identify himself with the poor and oppressed and with whom they could identify.

Thus, once you go beyond the bare fact and attempt to understand it, you are faced with a choice of meanings. In this case the alternative meanings actually stem from two contrasting approaches to reality, approaches which extend far back in the history of social thought. One of these, called consensus theory, sees society as held together by common, shared values and understandings; power in this view, e.g. the power of the police and army who arrested Erap, is used to defend the shared values. The other approach, called conflict theory, sees power as the fundamental reality; values are imposed on society by the dominant group, through the churches, the media and the educational system, as a way of legitimating its power; Erap is singled out for persecution because he is a threat to the elite, while Chavit Singson becomes a hero.

The social scientist then is faced by a choice of theories or meanings which he can use to organize and understand the reality. But here it is important for him to realize that theory is not reality; it is only a tool for studying it, a set of eyeglasses for looking at it. And the reality is always more complex than our theories; to forget this is to convert theory into ideology. Hence we can, without contradiction, look at reality now through the spectacles of consensus theory and again through those of conflict theory. Which spectacles we shall use will depend in good part on what questions we wish to ask and what aspects of the reality we wish to study. And the key question will be *not* "Which theory is true?" but "Which theory is more useful for illuminating those aspects of reality which interest me at the moment?"

It has long been my belief, and here we are coming to the point, that for an understanding of the key issue of contemporary Philippine reality, conflict theory is more illuminating than consensus theory. In other words, we are living in a society in which power rather than any societal commitment to values such as equality and justice, determines who gets what.

Let me illustrate this by an image which has remained with me for many years. Back in the days of President Marcos I set out to visit a barrio in one of the valleys below Tagaytay Ridge in Cavite, where a community-based health program was under way. It was necessary to proceed by trail a mile or two down from the ridge, and as my guide and I tried to make our way down (there was a typhoon

blowing and a driving rain), we found the trail blocked at one point by tons of rock and mud. Moreover, tons more were cascading down the mountainside, making it worth one's lie to try to proceed. We learned that a mansion house for the Fist Lady was being built on the top of the mountain, and that the bulldozers leveling the terrain were simply pushing the debris over the edge, whence it crashed hundreds of feet to the valley below. I learned too that the trail was not all that was being wiped out, though that was important enough as it was the only route by which the small farmers could bring their fruits and vegetables up to market. The rock and mud had covered farmer's fields, destroyed their coffee plants, knocked down coconut trees, and made some of their houses uninhabitable. Thus, for the convenience of the wealthy and powerful, ruin and destruction were pouring down on the poor and the weak. To me this was a vivid symbol of the social system of the time, structured by power without regard for values.

Given the freedom of the press which we enjoy, and the rise of investigative journalism, such blatant abuses of power are probably less frequent today, or at least they are more subtle. Still, the potential is there as evidenced by stories of abuse of civilians in the war zones of Mindanao and the whole range of financial scandals – starting with the *jueteng* the main victim of which is the poor – which were the undoing of former President Estrada.

Truth as a Call

Thus a most fruitful area of research for the 21st Century, it seems to me, would be precisely the interaction between shared values and power in our society, or more precisely the struggle to subordinate power – political power and economic power and the power of the gun – to the values of equality and participation by which our people have chosen to live. And where has the Filipino people made this choice? Most explicitly in the Constitution of 1987, Section XIII where we read "The Congress shall give highest priority to the enactment of measures that protect and enhance the right of all the people to human dignity, reduce social, economic, and political inequalities, and remove cultural inequities by equitably diffusing wealth and political power for the common good." This was followed by sections on labor, agrarian and natural resources reform, urban land reform and housing, health, and women.

But as we all know, "a strange thing happened on the way to the Forum." In the congressional elections of 1987, the traditional elite reasserted itself, much as it had reasserted itself after World War II; the landlord lobby in Congress proceeded to emasculate in relatively moderate agrarian reform bill, and put the other measures on the back burner.

Yet the words of the Constitution are there to haunt us, much as the words of the American Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal" and that they are "endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" haunted the United States

through a hundred years of slavery and a bitter civil war. For as Gunnar Myrdal (1970) intimated more than 30 ago, and our own experience EDSA I and EDSA II confirms, values are important social facts when they are deeply embedded in the culture of a people, institutionalized in its major symbols, and supported by organized movements.

It does not take prophetic powers to anticipate that the warzone in which the social sciences will function in this century will be dominated by this struggle between the values of equality and participation on the one hand and sheer power on the other. From the history of other nations we have an idea of who are likely to play the key roles here: the State, reforming politicians, new-style political parties truly representing the poor, the Church, a reformed judicial system and police, the media, a better informed electorate, civil society groups, labor, peasant and urban poor organizations, involved social scientists. The process and the actors will be most fruitful areas in which the social scientist can usefully continue his or her pursuit of the truth. And certainly the fruits of the research should be fed back systematically to those who will be playing the key roles, and to the public at large. For policy to be effective must be based on serious, objectives research and analysis.

Here, you will have noticed, I am proposing that the pursuit of truth is itself guided by certain values, the values of equality and participation in this case. This in way detracts from the objectivity of the honest spy. Rather it identifies the facts that are of interest to the spy, and the purposes which the spy intends to serve by his or her report. A war zone is no place for research that simply satisfies idle curiosity or lies unused on library shelves; nor is the honest spy indifferent to how the war goes. Rather by the effort he or she exerts and the risks undertaken (for the life of a spy is not always a comfortable one) as well as the honest reporting of inconvenient facts and even responsible advocacy of certain courses of action, the spy contributes to the war effort. With C. Wright Mills then, the social scientist of the 21st Century Philippines should be able to say "I have tried to be objective. I do not claim to be detached." And the truth which he or she is seeking is not simply the empirical facts about our society, what is, or even what it all means, but what *should be*, what Pope John Paul II calls "the truth of the object," that to which it is called, its vocation.

If we pursue this line of thought and action long enough, we may arrive at the ultimate answer to Pilate's question, in the words of Christ Himself, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." And indeed, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

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