

# Gramsci's Cultural Framework for Literary Production

Jennifer C. Bermudez

**Abstract**—This study presents Antonio Gramsci's (1891-1937) concept of the working class' daily struggle for meaningful contextual relationships as medium of education and ascendancy to society. Being possessors of firsthand experiences from the bureaucrat, their capacity for inner consciousness possesses a degree of individuality and credibility, because their engagement with culture is not in illusory terms but in capturing the living sense of a community. The Gramscian framework of literary production where laborers and literati work together will reflect the widely personal and dynamic ensemble of differentiated masses in a highly stratified society. Gramsci's social philosophy can provide the agenda for just such a heterogeneous troupe, where grassroots literature is brought to public fora in order to critique despotic structures.

**Keywords**— culture, working class, inclusion

## I. INTRODUCTION

In a world that has become global and increasingly cosmopolitan, how do we find our identity? Many local versions of Broadway and West End musicals which feature home-grown performers use the same old foreign scripts and songs, and fail to develop the innovativeness of Filipino talents and resources. Local theatrical productions opt to choose the easy way out by adopting foreign musicales that promise to bring in more money - while not giving full equity and opportunity to our budding Filipino talents. In the face of such phenomena, how can we amply build up the Filipino material to make it emerge *from the popular to the popular*, and what decisive role does cultural studies put forward in our development as a nation? In the Philippines, the printed voice of erudite practitioners do not always echo the heterogeneous resistance assemblage of the minorities but who nevertheless constitute the majority of the population. These include the overseas contract workers, working class students, out-of-school-youth, contractual workers, farmers' unions, fishermen's associations, technically skilled workers, blue collar employees, small and medium entrepreneurs, overworked teachers and mentors whose reticent talent are largely spent on educating the burgeoning population of poor illiterate masses and surviving on a meagre daily subsistence.

## II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

David Forgacs, the renowned research professor and adherent of critic Raymond Williams, consider the thought of

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the Italian political scientist and linguist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) as relevant, complex and vital in the continuing efforts of the Birmingham School to widen its circle of influence and to ignite intellectual and practical breakthroughs in the realm of cultural studies across the English Channel. Gramsci piloted the idea of "educative alliances" [1] that rest upon the "minority and subaltern (but not 'unpopular') cultural values and discourses rather than monocultural and scientific/expert values and skills" [2]. Gramsci affirmed the need for the joint alliances of heterogeneous oppositional forces consisting of women movements, unemployed youth, blue collar workers, environmental enthusiasts, technical-vocational students, and community pressure groups, among others - for a new state formation that would constitute a truly promising alternative emergence of the popular right. On further reflection on Gramsci's works, Forgacs posited that culture and politics do in fact fuse and intertwine; if the educative alliances coalesce in such manner as Gramsci had originally foreseen, a united base would likely radiate force and vigour that could deepen and extend the influence of cultural studies far and wide [3].

The country needs to take seriously the clamour for a more profound Filipino personality and a more dynamic cultural distinctiveness. Hitherto the pioneering efforts and achievements of cultural studies practitioners in the country have been impressive and admirable. The works of National Artists Nick Joaquin and Bienvenido Lumbera; of literary critics Resil Mojares and Soledad Reyes; of retired English and Ethnic Studies Professor Epifanio San Juan, Jr.; of History professor Vicente Rafael, to name a few, have taken the discipline of cultural studies to uncharted heights and have contributed in no small measure to the re-shaping of Philippine literary and cultural landscape. The question remains as to how much cultural studies reflect the Filipino culture and national consciousness; how much of them really come from the grassroots?

## III. LITERARY SCENARIO: ANOTHER ELITE IN THE MAKING?

Hoggart and Williams conceived of the whole cultural production including film, music and fashion to be read as *communal, social and collective events* and no longer as mere aesthetic icons removed from their contexts of production, circulation and consumption [4]. Although Filipinos as a whole are growing in consciousness for the need to articulate their personal and collective experiences and become actively engaged in cultural promotions and exploration, much of these projects, activities and discourses have been chiefly academic and confined to the halls of universities, research centres and libraries circulating among today's Filipino literati. Is literary

production only the result of restrictive intellectual disputations that neglect the very voice and material of subaltern groups whom they wish to represent? Referring to his mother country, Gramsci suspected a phenomenon of literary aristocracy far removed from the people-nation.

One need not look far to realize that the country's most popular publishing firms patronize authors linked to particular universities and cater practically to academic institutions to which they have a particular attachment. One has only to peruse the content of literature textbooks for young people in the private and public educational systems to realize that a great percentage of their reading requirements are, for the most part, authored by a highly-select circle of the Filipino academicians and literati [5].

In technical-vocational schools, these readings are totally absent; education is limited to the functional, competent and practical aspects, thereby positioning them from the start to become flaccid subjects to institutional structures, and passive instruments to ideologies that have robbed them of a certain degree of agency power. Naïve and unreasoned, they stand in need of reawakening. Ironically, the lower class has remained alongside the margins of the growing cultured and highly-literate Filipinos. Although this country has and continue to produce formidable tome of cultural analyses and literary works - some of them even prize-winning - the outcomes circulate only within a limited audience who are already well-versed theoretically with the language and representation of struggles, dominations, and resistance, it will not be long before another set of elitist canonists arise from our midst.

Cultural studies practice would always foster the need to feel equal with the working class - and vice versa - to be able to study clearly the progressive struggle for ascendancy.

#### IV. GRAMSCI'S CULTURAL FRAMEWORK

The reason for giving weight and import to Gramsci's strategy of educative, collective alliances with the inclusion of peasants and lower classes is to combat the prevailing perception that literature in English is fashionable only among the hands of exclusive groups - thereby amplifying further the class distinctions. Moreover, production of texts and other forms of culture continue to be exercised among students and graduates who have had the fortune of being mentored by experts in the field who come from the country's top universities. Nowhere is there a booming literary production among the working classes; few heed their voice; still fewer undertake to help them rise from cultural mediocrity. We are aroused to look at them with interest only insofar as they have consumption power of the growing elites' literary commodities. Already they are positioned as mere subjects and interpellated to become subjugates to the creative output of the middle and upper middle class. The result could be a burgeoning gap among the classes, with a wide body of literature arising primarily from among the educated middle class and circulated roundabout, but failing to reach the lower masses who remain incapable of expressing themselves, of making meaning, of interpreting

structures and modifying ways of living in their own creative fashion. This situation finds echo in the scenario described by Gramsci when he referred to Renaissance Italy, but which might well be true in the Philippines:

Neither a popular artistic literature nor a popular production of 'popular' literature exists because 'writers' and 'people' do not have the same conception of the world. The feelings of the people are not lived by the writers as their own, nor do the writers have a 'national educative' function: they have not and do not set themselves the problem of elaborating popular feelings after having relived them and made them their own [6].

There is no better portavoz than the working class themselves but, being limited and uneducated, it is easy to resort to exclusion and conclude that a literary destiny is not theirs to undertake. Timid but not servile, the working class is composed of men and women who have been conditioned to preserve their primitive sense of idealism amidst often-harsh situations and whose silence does not necessarily mean "consent" to the hardships of day-to-day living. In a highly-structured paradigm, they suffer suppression of identity, earning their hard-earned money at the cost of life and limb for a measly hand-to-mouth existence. They are the uneducated peasant and landless farmers who have one thing in common: they are unable to verbalize fully, let alone rationalize, their predicament; because their education has been limited to the practical, mechanical, technical, for the utility of the state. Yet they are children of the revolution who stand in need of securing some literary education and cultural literacy if they are to become part of the national popular

#### V. THE UNTAPPED SEGMENT IN LITERARY PRODUCTION

In a technopolis, the talents of the working class remain dormant; their energies spent and exhausted, as it were, for the efforts of physical survival. But they have a cutting edge in that they are possessors of firsthand experiences from the bureaucrats. Their capacity for inner consciousness and agent-power break through and potentially bestow to their future literary undertaking a certain degree of individuality, dignity, and credibility. Such can be an application of the educative alliance that Gramsci proposes through the promotion of a "cultural literacy" characterized by a) reading exposure to published works of leading contemporary writers whose stories have plots/themes/motifs that the working class can identify themselves with; and b) writing exercises to document their personal, social, political and labour experiences, hardships, and triumphs.

To reduce the working class into object specimen of examination would be to mythicize them, "to remove them from the unique density of fact and contingency which is the life of the individual in history" [7]. They are literally at the forefront of battle that is the field of contestations. It is precisely this unique and combative position that the working class could harness their identity as agents. They validate cultural analyses with real cultural practices. They give relevance and legitimacy to cultural studies and hence justify the otherwise utterly

cerebral, conjectural cultural conversations and purely academic discourses.

Unlike the middle class who is typified as holding a set of increasingly progressive views on societal issues such as gender equality, political activism, and class competition, nothing distinctive can be gleaned about the perspectives of the lower working class. Given their tight work schedules and meagre resources they are chiefly concerned with survival than with competition, with rebellion than with political activism, with egalitarianism than with gender equality. Yet it is right there where they are that tensions brew, where a vibrant class struggle is taking place, and where cultural studies may be most effectively produced and applied not in illusive terms but in actuality. Their manual work is not always a symbolic reinforcement of subjugation; their very survival is an act of refusal and resistance [8]. As workers cum survivors they have the capacity to affirm themselves in the rapidly-changing structures brought about by an ever-increasing industrialization; their small victories against the monoliths of destruction are forms of life-inspired stubbornness that constitute their day-to-day existence; in a word, of their very culture.

Since the process of formation, spread and development of a unified national language occurs through a whole complex of molecular processes... it helps to be aware of the entire process... in order to intervene actively for the best possible results. [9]

Gramsci's strategy of a multi-class alliance can find parallel in the Philippine landscape with the farmers, working class, small and medium scale entrepreneurs, and the middle class intelligentsia working together. How can these classes gel as a national front to resist hegemony and resolutely define the nation themselves? By unlocking the potentials of the popular working class groups and youth as prospective producers and future writers capable of engaging in a discourse of their personal struggles. Literature will faithfully reflect the widely personal ensemble of differentiated masses amidst a highly stratified society by

... acknowledging the contributions of diverse voices and communities on earth to the collective enterprise of shaping a non-alienated global ecumene. In this way the ideal of a transformative knowledge in the services of social justice and popular freedom for practitioners of the humane sciences... becomes more accessible [10].

Gramsci envisions the inclusion of working class into the loop of cultural production-and-consumption, for they are in a position to authenticate the relevance of the studies being undertaken by culture critics and intelligent analysts. If no substantiation from the proletarians takes place, the latter would run the risk of vanishing into empty rhetorical discourse lacking in deeply-felt authenticity. To allow the workers to gain entry into the production loop of national literary history would be a way towards rectitude and self-validation of their works; for then they shall witness the narrative recounting of the works of semi-literate workers not from the sidelines but from within streams of consciousness.

## VI. CONCLUSION

A cultural alliance would not only mark a new stage in the development of literary history but arouse hopes among the marginal groups to find a voice. No one particular group or class of people should dominate literary production; its consumption should not be confined among members of the same context in which the work was produced without handing it over to the situations, cultures, and ideologies and the whole ensemble of culture and people that made the work possible. Gramsci himself provides the model:

The premise of the new literature cannot but be historical, political and popular: it must work towards the elaboration what already exists... What matters is that it sinks its roots in the humus of popular culture as it is, with its tastes and tendencies and with its moral and intellectual world, even if it is backward and conventional [11]

Unlike epic heroes, the working class did not choose their fate: extremity descended upon them – but still they possess of indomitable power agency that needs to be tapped and activated. Their stark tales could show that there is no aspect of Philippine life that cannot be faithfully depicted in local literature [12]. Philippine literary and cultural studies shall confer it with a holistic, more enriched understanding of how successful a class struggle can be.

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