

Learning from Dutertismo: Reinvigorating the Philippine Left through a Left Populist Strategy

Kyle Alfred M. Barte

University of Santo Tomas, Manila

Abstract: The failure of the left to generate popular political support in the Philippines signifies that they are out of favor with majority of Filipinos. Without a strong leftist voice in governance, important leftist prerogatives, such as advancing and protecting the positions of the underprivileged and marginalized, may be ignored and un-institutionalized. To revive their program, the left must engage with *dutertismo*—a term I use to refer to the political style of former Filipino president Rodrigo Duterte. While I, along with many scholars, criticize Duterte for steering the political terrain towards the silencing and deadly exclusion of dissidents and individuals linked to the drug trade, I contend, using the conceptual grammar of Chantal Mouffe, that given the former’s ability to muster popular political support far more important democratic advancements can be made if leftists learn and adopt some of his populist political strategies. Indeed, engaging Duterte’s politics through a Mouffean lens leads to the conclusion that the left must execute what Mouffe calls a left populist strategy meant to capture the sentiments of wide sectors of the population and mobilize them towards the radicalization of Philippine

democracy. In other words, while Duterte steered the political terrain to the right, a left populist movement can deploy the same strategy in order to steer the levers of society and politics back to the leftist cause. Thus, a critical approach to *dutertismo*—an approach that tries to learn from its strengths while being keenly aware of its weaknesses—points us to a new approach in Philippine politics, thereby breaking from the false dichotomy between the sterile reformist neoliberal discourse of establishment elites and the exclusionary populism of the right.

Keywords: Mouffe, *dutertismo*, left populism, Philippine left

INTRODUCTION

How can the left generate popular political support in the Philippines? This question, I believe, is crucial for the revivification of a leftist political project instrumental in the struggle for a more egalitarian Philippine society. For the most part of post-EDSA Philippines, the left has fallen out of favor with the Filipino public. The crushing defeats of avowed leftists and left-backed politicians in the 2022 national elections—such as Leodegario “Ka Leody” de Guzman, Walden Bello, Leni Robredo,¹ and the Makabayan bloc—are only the latest attestations of this fact. Unless they can troubleshoot this lacuna, I am convinced that the leftist movement in the country will continue to be bested by establishment elites—with their infamous guns, goons, and gold—and the extreme right which, in the world over, have proven to be capable in capturing the support of the people in liberal democratic societies. Consequently, the absence of a strong leftist voice in governance and statecraft may potentially lead to the failure to institutionalize urgent leftist prerogatives in the Philippines, such as land reform, wealth redistribution, and protecting the positions of the underprivileged and marginalized sectors of society, among many.

A way out of this conundrum is, ironically enough, learning from one of the most notable opponents the Philippine left has had to date: former Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte and his political strategy called *dutertismo*.² Unlike the left, Duterte enjoyed tremendous popular support

¹ I am perfectly aware that Leni Robredo is not considered a leftist in the traditional sense of the term. Indeed, she is often categorized as a “progressive neoliberal.” But, what is also true is that in the 2022 elections, a huge segment of the Philippine left rallied behind her presidential bid; hence, her inclusion in this list. For a more thorough dissection of this topic, see Maria Kristine Alvarez, Joshua Makalintal, and Herbert Docena, “The Philippine Left has an Opportunity to Break the Country’s Political Mold,” in *Jacobin* (01 March 2022), <<https://jacobin.com/2022/03/philippines-social-democrats-communists-election-marcos-duterte-robredo>>.

² The term *dutertismo* was coined by the Filipino sociologist Randolph “Randy” David. A staunch critic of the former Filipino president, David used the term *dutertismo* with a strong negative connotation. Over the years, the term has been widely adopted by scholars to allude to Rodrigo Duterte’s politics in general, without the necessary negativity that David originally used it. In this paper, I use the term *dutertismo* to refer to Duterte’s political

throughout his six-year term. Part of the issue, however, is that the left, including left-leaning and progressive-minded academics, is quick to condemn populist figures like Duterte as dangers to democracy and thus sweep his politics under the rug. Hence, they have dismissed *dutertismo* by shrouding it in various pejorative “isms”: authoritarianism,³ illiberalism,⁴ fascism,⁵ and so on. While their critiques have their merit, I contend that a sweeping dismissal of *dutertismo* does more harm than good for the political prospects of the left in the Philippines. Indeed, I strongly believe that a refusal to engage with and learn from *dutertismo* actually hinder the Philippine left from developing a theoretical and practical political approach that can evoke the active support of the people, something which Duterte enjoyed in abundance. This, by extension, weakens their bid for political traction.

In this light, this study will engage with *dutertismo* with the intention of gaining lessons that could redirect the Philippine left towards a more effective political paradigm. To do so, I will use as a heuristic device Chantal Mouffe’s understanding of populism to flesh out the elements that have made *dutertismo* so effective in mobilizing popular support and, from this, generate insights and strategies that the left can adopt to gain a foothold in Philippine politics. Using Mouffe’s ideas, this study argues that what made *dutertismo* so popular was its deployment of a populist strategy that effectively forged an affective bond with the people. Nevertheless, while it was effective, Duterte’s populist strategy steered the political terrain towards the right, ending in the violent exclusion of people linked to the illegal drug trade and the delegitimization and vilification of leftists

strategy in general. For a discussion of David’s first usage of the term *dutertismo*, see Randy David, “‘Dutertismo’,” in *Inquirer.Net* (01 May 2016), <<https://opinion.inquirer.net/94530/dutertismo>>.

³ Salvador Santino F. Regilme, “Contested Spaces of Illiberal and Authoritarian Politics: Human Rights and Democracy in Crisis,” in *Political Geography* 89 (2021), 1-12. See also, Richard Javad Heydarian, *The Rise of Duterte: A Populist Revolt against Elite Democracy* (Singapore: Palgrave, 2018), 9.

⁴ See Nicole Curato, “We Need to Talk About Rody,” in *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte’s Early Presidency* (Quezon: BUGHAW, 2017).

⁵ See Walden Bello, *Counterrevolution: The Global Rise of the Far Right* (Quezon: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2019).

and activists. This study further argues that the Philippine left can employ the same populist strategy and avoid the path which Duterte's populism took. Indeed, still using Mouffe's ideas, this can be done by executing a left populist strategy meant to capture the sentiments of wide sectors of the population and simultaneously orient their demands towards egalitarian objectives.

I am convinced that this critical approach to *dutertismo*—an approach that tries to learn from its strengths while being keenly aware of its weaknesses—will point us to a radical approach in Philippine politics, one that breaks from the false dichotomy between the sterile reformist neoliberal discourse of establishment elites and the exclusionary populism of the right. This paper, therefore, attempts to think with *dutertismo* against *dutertismo*. I contend that such endeavor is necessary for the left to gain traction once more in Philippine politics and thus strengthen their position in the struggle for a more just and humane Philippine society.

To achieve the goals I set in this paper, its discussion will be divided into three main parts. The first part will provide an exposition of Mouffe's notion of a left populist strategy. This part will also stress the importance Mouffe places in this strategy in the radicalization of democracy, that is, in the extension of liberty and equality to all social relations. The second part will talk about *dutertismo* and, using Mouffe's ideas, flesh out some of the key elements which have made it extremely popular. And the third part will use the insights generated in the previous sections to formulate possibilities for a left populist strategy in the Philippines aimed at deepening and consolidating its liberal democratic ideal of liberty and equality for all.

MOUFFE'S LEFT POPULIST STRATEGY

Let me begin my discussion of Mouffe's views on left populism by laying down the background of her thought. Mouffe took as her starting point the crisis plaguing many 21st century Western European liberal democracies. She points out that decades of neoliberal hegemony in Western Europe have eroded the core ideals of democracy—popular sovereignty and

equality—leading to a condition she calls post-democracy.⁶ This post-democratic backdrop is the key to understanding the proliferation of populist parties and figures—such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Narendra Modi, Rodrigo Duterte, etc.—across many liberal democratic countries today. Indeed, she sees this “populist moment” as “the expression of varied forms of resistance” against the neoliberal structure “that is increasingly perceived as being controlled by privileged elites who are deaf to the demands of the other groups in society.”⁷ While many may lament at this current state of affairs, Mouffe sees this populist moment as a great opportunity for liberal democracies to deepen and consolidate their constitutive principles—liberty and equality for all. For her, this can be done if the left also wields a populist strategy that can capture the support of the people who are weary of society’s neoliberal configuration and mobilize them towards the radicalization of democracy.⁸

Others may look at Mouffe’s argument with scorn especially since the phenomenon of populism has taken on a pejorative connotation in the minds of many thinkers. As a case in point, in the *Philosophy and Social Theory* conference in Prague in May 2019, the phrases “parasitic pathology” and “politics of stupidity” were among the characterizations some of the participating intellectuals had of populism.⁹ However, Mouffe’s view of populism, which she borrowed from Ernesto Laclau, is stripped of any a priori negative connotation. In *On Populist Reason*, Laclau criticizes the pejorative readings of populism which he says approach the phenomenon from an assumption of rational and moral superiority.¹⁰ Against this, he thinks that there is nothing inherently good or bad with

⁶ Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London and New York: Verso, 2018), 12-13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 18. See also, Chantal Mouffe, *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution: Left Populism and the Power of Affects* (London and New York: Verso, 2022), Chap. 1, epub.

⁸ Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 5.

⁹ Thomas Claviez, “Where are Jacques and Ernesto When You Need Them? Rancière and Laclau on Populism, Experts and Contingency,” in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 45:9-10 (2019), 1135.

¹⁰ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London and New York: Verso, 2005), x.

populism. Rather, it is but a mere exemplification of the ontological process of signification or identity formation.¹¹ Indeed, in Laclau's theory of collective identity formation, the emergence of an identity, understood as an ensemble of differential elements, necessitates a frontier that separates it from a "constitutive outside" through which it is differentially constituted. The identity emerges when a particular element from that ensemble assumes representation of the whole, a process he calls hegemony.¹² In the case of populism, what is at stake is the construction of the identity of "the people" by establishing a political frontier that divides society into two camps: "the people" versus "those in power."¹³ This is why, as Laclau warns us, we should not approach populism from a moral and epistemic high ground from which it only appears as an instance of abnormality, deviance, or manipulation. Rather, he challenges us to expand our viewpoint so that we can begin to see populism for what it is: "as a distinctive and always present possibility of structuration of political life," he wrote.¹⁴

Building upon this, Mouffe thinks that the problem with liberal and leftist thinking today is that they have remained blind to the reality that democratic politics necessarily entails a populist movement. If the existence of "the people" is indeed the precondition for the existence of a democratic society, this means that a political frontier must be established in order to demarcate "the people" from the "them." A "we," Mouffe asserts, can only exist if there is a "them" standing as its constitutive outside.¹⁵ This means that the conflictual dimension of politics, which she calls the

¹¹ Benjamin L. McKean, "Toward an Inclusive Populism? On the Role of Race and Difference in Laclau's Politics," in *Political Theory*, 44:6 (2016), 800.

¹² Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 67-71. See also Anibal F. Gauna, "Explaining Populism beyond Laclau: A Historical-Comparative Assessment of *On Populist Reason*," in *Thesis Eleven*, 140:1 (2017), 41-42.

¹³ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 83.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁵ Chantal Mouffe, "An Agonistic Approach to the Future of Europe," in *New Literary History*, 42:4 (Autumn 2012), 630.

political, is ineradicable.¹⁶ By ignoring this ontology of the political, Mouffe observes that liberal and leftist thinkers have devised a type of politics that envisages a political sphere where conflict is eradicated and fully resolved. Championed by thinkers such as Anthony Giddens and politicians like Tony Blair, this type of politics—which Blair refers to as the “New Politics for the New Century”—claims to be situated in a radical center, a position that transcends what it sees as the atavistic antagonism between left and right.¹⁷ This observation is shared, for example, by another famous post-Marxist thinker, Slavoj Žižek, who refers to this as “post-political biopolitics.”¹⁸ Like Mouffe, Žižek shows that in the absence of big ideological conflicts in the political field, such as socialism versus liberal democracy or left versus right, politics has been depoliticized, reduced to a terrain whose sole concern is the expert management of human life. For Mouffe, this “depoliticization” of politics heralded a polity where the possibility of resisting the dominant power at the center also disappears. Without alternative projects to choose from, everybody is forced to capitulate to the neoliberal socio-political model. In such a state, the people’s role is reduced to approving the “rational” policies of the expert administrators.¹⁹ Hence, their capacity to effect changes in the polity is lost. We see the fullest expression of this post-political terrain in the motto of the Indignados in Spain: “We have a vote but we do not have a voice.” With this in mind, Mouffe warns the left that their refusal to acknowledge the conflictual nature of the political endangers democracy by leaving a void for the extreme right to occupy. Let me state her case in verbatim:

In this increasingly ‘one-dimensional’ world, in which any possibility of transformation of the relations of power has been erased, it is not surprising that right-wing populist

¹⁶ Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 2.

¹⁷ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), 108.

¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 40.

¹⁹ Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 4.

parties are making significant inroads in several countries. In many cases they are the only ones denouncing the 'consensus at the centre' and trying to occupy the terrain of contestation deserted by the left. Particularly worrying is the fact that many sectors of the working classes feel that their interests are better defended by those parties than by social democrats. Having lost faith in the traditional democratic process, they are an easy target for the demagogues of the right.²⁰

An exemplary case of this is provided by the French anthropologist Alain Bertho who shows that the absence of utopias and alternative visions of the world other than the present neoliberal globalization model created the conditions for jihad to flourish even within the West. He explains that the losers of globalization—the “lost children of a terrible era”—have found “meaning and weapons for their anger in jihad” which is now perceived “as the ultimate figure of revolt” against a system that failed them.²¹ This is exactly how Mouffe explains the surging popularity of the right in western democratic states. Without genuine alternatives to choose from, the people frustrated by the neoliberal status quo gravitate towards the right who are oftentimes the only portion of society that give expression to this frustration in the political realm.

The problem with the right-wing variant of populism, as Mouffe observed, is that though it challenges the hegemony of neoliberalism, it mobilizes the people towards paths that are not conducive for the consolidation and extension of the core principles of liberal democracy—liberty and equality for all. She points out that in the name of recovering democracy, right wing populists are restricting liberty and equality to a select few—usually the purported “true” and “authentic” nationals—and

²⁰ Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 7.

²¹ Alain Bertho, *Age of Violence*, trans. by David Broder (London & New York: Verso, 2018), 4, 67.

excluding those groups who they consider as outsiders—usually immigrants.²² Following Mouffe, it is this rigid conception of the “authentic” people that Jean Cohen points as the cause why right populism is not congruent to the fundamental pluralism of modern democracies. Cohen explains that right populists cannot acknowledge the legitimacy of those voices that are not part of their criteria of the “authentic” people, thus they are silenced and pluralism curtailed.²³ This is a real problem for Mouffe who thinks that the main objective of democratic regimes is the radical extension of liberty and equality to all social relations.

For the reasons mentioned above, Mouffe argues that to combat the global rise of the right and their xenophobic and authoritarian regimes, the left must intervene in the populist moment and organize their own populist strategy. The aim of this left populist strategy is the construction of a people and the orientation of their demands towards egalitarian objectives.²⁴ This strategy requires the formation of a political frontier that pits the people against their common enemy—the oligarchy.²⁵ This move acknowledges the role affect plays in the formation and politicization of the people. Truly, for Mouffe, as Marie Paxton explains, “political contestation revives citizen’s passions by provoking them to defend their interpretation and application of values against oppositional ones.”²⁶ This is because, as Mouffe asserts, ideas only acquire mobilizing force when they are connected to affects: “What moves people to act are affects, and while ideas are indeed important, their power depends on being connected to affects.”²⁷ The left’s incapacity to recognize this is the reason why, at present, they are less

²² Mouffe, *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution*, Chap. 1.

²³ Jean L. Cohen, “Hollow parties and their movement-ization: The populist conundrum,” in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 45:9-10 (2019), 1087.

²⁴ Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 22.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁶ Marie Paxton, *Agonistic Democracy: Rethinking Political Institutions in Pluralist Times* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 19.

²⁷ Mouffe, *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution*, Chap. 3.

popular than far-right movements who regularly appeal to the register of emotions and passions.²⁸

In contrast to the xenophobic and exclusionary ends of right populism, the ultimate objective of a left populist strategy for Mouffe is the radicalization of democracy, that is, the radical extension of liberty and equality to all social relations.²⁹ This means that the left populist strategy's goal is the creation of a popular majority and for this majority to come into power in order to make leftist ideals hegemonic.³⁰ Instead of fomenting resentment, left populism seeks the creation of a people and a regime that are sensitive to issues of social justice and the pluralism of democracies. For her, this implies embracing agonism, a type of conflict between adversaries who oppose one another's ideas without questioning the other's right to possess and defend those ideas.³¹ Her point is that since the pluralism of society prevents all groups in the liberal democratic polity from agreeing completely on a single decision, every group must therefore be given the legitimacy to contest popular decisions. Without this agonistic conflict, the dissenting voices of groups marginalized by popular decisions are curtailed. Thus, their potential to attain liberty and equality is jeopardized.

Mouffe is convinced that to radicalize democracy, a left populist strategy must be crafted. But, as I have indicated throughout the paper so far, it is difficult for the left to do so because they see populism as something inherently dangerous. This is why Mouffe, following Laclau's definition of populism, disassociated populism from any a priori negative connotation and advises the left to engage populist figures and parties and learn from them. At this point of the paper, this is exactly what I intend to do. To echo Mouffe's point, I contend that to generate prospects for a left populist strategy in the Philippines, the left must engage with populists in the

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 50.

³¹ Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London & New York: Verso, 2013), 7.

country, particularly former Filipino president Rodrigo Duterte. This brings me to the next point of my paper.

DUTERTE'S RIGHT POPULISM

Since his ascent to power in 2016, scholars of Philippine politics have scrambled to come up with the term to aptly characterize Duterte's political style. He has been called a strongman, a dictator, an authoritarian, a fascist, a radical politician, and so on. But what is perhaps the broad consensus shared by many scholars is that *dutertismo*, as some have labelled Duterte's political style, is a form of populism. It is said that as a populist, Duterte bifurcated Philippine society by drawing a sharp demarcation informed by law and order: the virtuous Filipino citizens on one side and the dangerous other on the other side (the latter, for Duterte, is a collection of rule-breakers, drug addicts, corrupt elites, and leftists).³² This tells us that Duterte's approach to politics was conflictual and he knew, whether consciously or unconsciously, that winning the people's support required pointing a finger at alleged figures responsible for their oppression and precarity. In other words, he was able to establish a political frontier between the Filipino people and their common enemy. With this populist strategy, it comes as no surprise that the Philippines has seen the emergence of a demos with strong libidinal ties to Duterte. Indeed, following Mouffe's line of thinking, Duterte positioned himself as one who truly cared about the people since his conflictual politics was the only (at least visibly) alternative program that challenged a system which has failed many Filipinos for decades.

Through this conflictual style of politics, Duterte was able to separate himself from his competitors. The issues which he centered his

³² See, for instance, Nicole Curato, "Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope: Penal Populism and Duterte's Rise to Power," in *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 35:3 (2016), 94. See also, Christine B Tenorio, Patrik K. Meyer, and Achmad Nurmandi, "President Duterte's Bicephalous Leadership: Populist at Home—Pragmatic Abroad," in *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* (2020), 5.

political discourse around were not new. Disorder, criminality, corruption, poverty, illegal drugs, bureaucratic red tape, just to name a few, have been invoked by other politicians before him. But what made Duterte's approach different was that he abrasively named the people whom he thought are responsible for these issues and vowed to eradicate them. For him, as mentioned above, these are usually the drug addicts and corrupt elites. The outcome is a demos that are so attached to Duterte because he was the only one whom they saw as caring enough to deal with their oppressors. This can be seen through a resident of an urban-poor village in Quezon City whom Cleve Arguelles interviewed in his study of Duterte supporters:

As a solo parent, his topmost worry is the safety of his children [due to the number of drug addicts in their village] who he usually leaves in their house alone. And this, for Gerry, is how Duterte appeals to him: "He talks about [their] suffering" in the hands of neighbors who are drug-dependents that "had long been invisible" to most politicians and the rest of the country. He felt "forgotten" by the previous administration but now found his voice in Duterte.³³

Such ethnographic studies of Duterte supporters reveal just how much Duterte's conflictual politics resonated with the lives of the *masa*. Indeed, as the same person told Arguelles on a different conversation: "I like hearing Duterte speaks ... it is almost like I am the one speaking."³⁴

Looking at this from a Mouffean lens, by engaging in conflictual politics Duterte was able to tap into the people's affective dimension, which further explains their strong allegiance to him. Nicole Curato has already observed this phenomenon in another ethnographic study of urban poor

³³ Cleve V. Arguelles, "'We are Rodrigo Duterte': Dimensions of the Philippine Populist Publics' Vote," in *Asian Politics and Policy*, 11:3 (2019), 427.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 428.

Filipinos. She has expertly shown that the engine that powers Duterte's popularity was a dynamic interplay between a "politics of anxiety" and a "politics of hope."³⁵ While Duterte tapped into the latent anxiety of the public by politicizing their everyday misery, especially from illegal drug addicts and inutile politicians, he also simultaneously provided them hope of a future with better living conditions, one where their oppressors have been expelled from the scene. Curato, though, as a deliberative democrat, viewed this interplay of emotions in the realm of politics with suspicion: we must not forget, she says, that populism is a "pathology of democracy."³⁶ Nevertheless, the concoction of these various ingredients made *dutertismo* a potent weapon for arousing the allegiance of the people. The results speak for itself: Duterte won by a landslide over his rivals and maintained a historically high approval rating throughout his six-year term as president. Yet, while he has indeed provided a blueprint on how to launch a popular political campaign, it would be remiss not to mention the many threats to democracy which his populist politics has posed. His bloody "war on drugs," for instance, has led to the deaths of 6,248 individuals linked to the drug trade, according to the tally released by PDEA on 30 April 2022.³⁷ Some human rights groups, however, citing the Duterte administration's lack of transparency, estimate that the real number of drug war killings is between 12,000 and 30,000 people.³⁸

If further proof is needed for Duterte's right populism, we can look at the state of conflict within the Philippines during his tenure. It can be said that Duterte, contrary to Mouffe's advice for left populists, did not open Philippine politics to the multiple and pluralistic voices of the Filipinos. Instead, he seems to have fixed a certain order of things which happens to be irrevocable. To challenge this imposed order, one risks being

³⁵ Curato, "Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope," 93.

³⁶ Curato, "Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope," 106.

³⁷ "Drug war death toll reaches 6,248—PDEA," in *CNN Philippines* (29 May 2022), <<https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2022/5/29/Drug-war-death-toll-PDEA.html>>.

³⁸ "Philippines: Events of 2021," in *Human Rights Watch*, n.d., <<https://www.hrw.org/worldreport/2022/country-chapters/Philippines>>.

ostracized, persecuted, and even killed. For instance, the Duterte administration's act of labeling its critics as members of the New People's Army (NPA)—the armed revolutionary group of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP)—was a cunning and effective strategy of impeding any type of challenge against Duterte. In the Philippines, this act of red-tagging introduces the recipient to many threats and dangers, some of which have led to actual deaths. To this end, *dutertismo's* overbearing nature bludgeoned many dissidents into silence. It only gave room for submission, not agonism. Thus, some scholars are mistaken when they, also using Mouffe's ideas, claimed that Duterte has radicalized Philippine democracy. Like many right populists, Duterte has instead created a rigid top-down hierarchy where he sits on top and the voices at the bottom, especially his critics, were not heard. As such, he has restricted the space of contestation in society. I, therefore, repeat the words of Imbong et al. with full concurrence: "There is nothing radical nor democratic" in Duterte's politics.³⁹

Be that as it may, the left must understand that Duterte's rise was propelled by a wave of democratic demands from the Filipino people who, for decades on end, have suffered from severe inequality and lack of voice in politics. The left must therefore learn to capture this democratic demand. They must be willing to learn from figures such as Duterte because their current record in politics suggests that there is a disconnect between their political narratives and the demands of the people. This brings me to the last part of my paper.

THE PROSPECTS OF LEFT POPULISM IN THE PHILIPPINES

If the goal is to reinvigorate leftist politics in the Philippines by taking notes from Duterte's playbook, the decisive move must be to secure the people's allegiance to the leftist side of the fence and translate this into electoral

³⁹ Regletto Aldrich Imbong, Jerry Imbong, and Patrick Gerard Torres, "Chantal Mouffe on the Radical Politics of Rodrigo Duterte," in *PHAVISMINDA Journal*, 21 (2022), 110.

success. This does not happen automatically, and in order to create this, leftists must, first and foremost, dissociate themselves from the traditional left—the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed revolutionary group the New People’s Army (NPA). While also oriented towards the leftist objective of social equality and egalitarianism, the CPP-NPA stands out for espousing a Maoist-style deadly guerrilla warfare against a State it deems as an apparatus of imperial dominance. In fact, thanks largely to this deadly approach, the CPP-NPA is extremely unpopular among the Filipino public who perceives them as a terrorist group and a menace to society at large. This is not a simple product of the public’s misperception. As Nathan Guilbert Quimpo shows, the CPP-NPA, in their effort to overthrow the government and obtain state power has often resorted to manipulation and terror. Gross violations of human rights, summary executions of suspected spies, imposition of revolutionary taxes among helpless poor Filipinos, and kidnapping for ransom are only some of the “undemocratic” ways the CPP-NPA employs in its bid for power.⁴⁰ Thus, Quimpo rhetorically asks: “Not yet in power, the CPP already has its hidden crimes, official truths, and official lies. What can one expect of it when it reaches the pinnacle of power?”⁴¹ This is why Duterte’s act of red-tagging was so effective and popular because it landed on the ears of a public that was already frustrated and fearful of the CPP-NPA. No doubt, symbolically distancing from the CPP-NPA is a herculean task for the left today since the Duterte government has launched a deadly campaign against leftists by branding them as members of the NPA. However, no matter how difficult this may be, such a task is non-negotiable if they ever hope to attract the people towards the leftist cause.

But a solidification of a leftist identity stripped of its association with the CPP-NPA will not be enough to attract the people to their side. Like Duterte, this pull can be triggered by creating a political frontier that

⁴⁰ Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, *Contested Democracy and the Left in the Philippines after Marcos* (Quezon: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2008), 76-77.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

separates the people from their common enemy. This populist and conflictual approach is noticeably absent among many of the established leftist groups in the country today whose usual political strategy has been reduced to compromise and consensus. Since the restoration of democracy in 1986, leftist groups often form “big tent” alliances with forces from the right and center in order to aid the victory of politicians they deem as sympathetic to their cause.⁴² The trade-off in this partnership is that the left, according to Emerson Sanchez and Jayson Lamchek, “largely ended up compromising heavily on government policies and becoming part of the electoral machineries of non-progressive politicians.”⁴³ This is not good for their political prospects as this renders them and their project virtually unrecognizable from non-leftists. Moreover, this strategy of establishing tactical partnerships with the political elites disables the left from offering genuine alternative narratives and a consistent critique of the elitist establishment. Indeed, this is what happened with the Akbayan Citizens’ Action Party—a collection of Filipino social democrats—when it entered into a partnership with the Liberal Party headed by former president Benigno “Noy-Noy” Aquino III.⁴⁴

What is lost in this type of political approach is conflict. When leftist groups fail to distance themselves from establishment elites, their capacity to introduce a conflictual narrative against the stranglehold of the latter also diminishes, if not disappears altogether. This is why, according to Mouffe, democratic politics entails a clear “splitting of the summit,” such as a clear split between the left and the right.⁴⁵ For the Mouffean scholar Will Legget, this supposes that there are clearly differentiated policies on

⁴² See *Ibid.*, 167. See also Alvarez, Makalintal, and Docena, “The Philippine Left Has an Opportunity to Break the Country’s Political Mold.”

⁴³ Emerson M. Sanchez and Jayson S. Lamchek, “The year of daring: revisiting the Philippine left’s dalliance with a strongman,” in *Melbourne Asia Review*, 6 (2021), <<https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/the-year-of-daring-revisiting-the-philippine-lefts-dalliance-with-a-strongman/>>.

⁴⁴ Alvarez, Makalintal, and Docena, “The Philippine Left Has an Opportunity to Break the Country’s Political Mold.”

⁴⁵ Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 120.

offer which gives citizens the possibility of choosing among different ways of organizing society.⁴⁶ Failure to execute such conflictual approach also diminishes the left's capacity to gather the people's support to their cause. Indeed, Mouffe's notion of conflictual discourse operates as a "motivational narrative" wherein citizens are emboldened to act politically because they can identify with the narratives that seek to defeat the narratives of their opponents.⁴⁷ The Philippine left should not look far to see this. It is often said that the dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr. was the single biggest recruiter for the left during the 70s and 80s simply because he stood as the latter's clear-cut opponent. This explains why the CPP-NPA slowly fractured and lost its strength after the ouster of Marcos Sr.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the history of Philippine politics is replete with similar examples: the Aquinos became popular political figures because they represented the people's conflict with Ferdinand Marcos Sr.; Joseph "Erap" Estrada was widely popular due to his conflict with the traditional elites; Benigno "Noy-Noy" Aquino III's initial popularity was greatly fuelled by his *Daang Matuwid* (straight or moral path) narrative that counteracted the widely perceived immoral presidency of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.⁴⁹ And, as I discussed in the previous section, the same is also true of Duterte whose conflictual politics became attractive to Filipinos because it presented an alternative, a choice that was different from the established order. If the left would also want to replicate such political popularity, they then must create a political frontier that serves the emergence of a clear leftist "we" as opposed to a non-leftist "them," thereby giving the people a clear vision of the left as an alternative project vis-à-vis the established order.

⁴⁶ Will Leggett, "Restoring Society to Post-Structuralist Politics: Mouffe, Gramsci and Radical Democracy," in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 39:3 (2013), 305.

⁴⁷ Paxton, *Agonistic Democracy*, 86.

⁴⁸ For a more thorough discussion of this, see Quimpo, *Contested Democracy and the Left in the Philippines after Marcos*.

⁴⁹ For a thorough discussion of this, see Wataru Kusaka, *Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality, Democracy and the Urban Poor* (Quezon: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2019).

At this juncture, it would be important for the left to possess a broad and deep understanding of the current dynamics of Philippine politics and society. Recently, leftists tend to antagonize Duterte and his allies as their enemies. I believe that situating the frontier in this way is not a good move for the leftist movement since, as of this writing, Duterte and his cohorts are widely popular among the Filipino public. If the left treats them as the enemy, they would push their supporters away. To circumvent this, the left must again look towards Duterte in order to understand where to position their political frontier. As is widely accepted among analysts of Philippine politics, Duterte's meteoric rise to the presidency was largely fuelled by his antagonism with his predecessor in the presidential seat—"Noy-Noy" Aquino.⁵⁰ By the tail-end of his presidency, "Noy-Noy" became widely unpopular among Filipinos thanks to the many leadership blunders ascribed to him. By making "Noy-Noy" one of his favorite whip boys, Duterte was able to scoop the elements that were frustrated of "Noy-Noy" and bring them to his side. Hence, to learn from Duterte means that the left must create a frontier between the people and a figure which the Filipinos, in all their varied forms, can collectively recognize as their common enemy. This requires the left to be astutely aware of the things which plague the people. For instance, Mouffe argues in her latest book, *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution: Left Populism and the Power of Affects*, that in the West today, many people are anxious about the climate crisis and that left populism can potentially take advantage of this by naming visible enemies responsible for the problem.⁵¹ The same frontier cannot be established in the Philippines given that the context and the immediate problems that plague Filipinos are radically different. Again, the left must be truly knowledgeable of the things which the Filipino people are anxious

⁵⁰ See, for instance, Julio C. Teehankee, "Was Duterte's Rise Inevitable?," in *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte's Early Presidency*, ed. by Nicole Curato (Quezon: BUGHAW, 2017), 52. See also Lisandro Claudio, "The Erosion of Liberalism and the Rise of Duterte in the Philippines," in *HAL: Open Science*, (2019), 1-5, <<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03151036>>.

⁵¹ See Mouffe, *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution*.

and frustrated of—such as endemic poverty, inefficient government agencies, rising cost of healthcare, crippling traffic in urban areas, etc.—and be strategic in their articulation of enemies that could forge a wide array of Filipinos to their cause.

By embracing conflict, this left populist strategy entails coming to terms with the role affects play in popular mobilizations. Presently, the tendency among left and progressive leaning academics and political figures in the Philippines is to embrace the liberal model of political mobilization. Inspired by the deliberative democratic models of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, this paradigm posits that politics is grounded in a rational foundation. In this view, the ideal liberal subject is one who, in the absence of coercion, commits to the ideals and policies of liberal democracy through the natural dance of reason.⁵² This is why another common political strategy during elections in the Philippines is to convince the public to support a given politician by enumerating the qualities which make him the most rational choice among the field of candidates. This rationalistic approach, however, fails to arouse the people's support time and again for it fails to reach into their affective dimension. As Mouffe beautifully puts it:

The belief that one should only use rational arguments and avoid appealing to affects leads to policies with which people cannot identify because they do not recognize in them their own problems, frustrations, and demands. The left spends lots of energy on the elaboration of programmes and on enumerating the great policies that it will implement once in power, but the question it rarely asks is how to get there, how to make people *desire* those policies, as if good policies

⁵² For a more thorough discussion of this, see Victoria Kahn, “Fondly Overcome’: Revisiting the History of the Liberal Subject,” in *Acta Poetica*, 25:2 (2004), 30, <<https://www.scielo.org.mx/pdf/ap/v25n2/v25n2a2.pdf>>. See also Felix E. Oppenheim, “Rationalism and Liberalism,” in *World Politics*, 16:2 (January 1964), 357.

were enough to automatically generate adhesion without the necessity of activating the affective dimension that will produce identification and spur political engagement. Policies that neglect to address those affects are unlikely to find resonance among the people.⁵³

Indeed, in the Philippines, this rational strategy is not only ineffective but, as I have shown in another paper, also problematic for it necessarily creates the widespread perception that other voters are dumb (*bobotante* in Tagalog) for not voting the purported “rational” choice.⁵⁴

Thus, if we listen to Mouffe, Duterte’s “politics of anxiety” and “politics of hope,” to borrow the words of Curato, can become crucial leftist strategies. Like what Duterte has done, the success of a left populist strategy requires that they offer programs that address the sources of anxiety of the people and solutions that give them hope of a better life. Some may call this demagoguery. However, if we listen to Mouffe, we must realize that affects cannot be detached from political life. It is the engine which stimulates and sustains political action. If the left continues to fail to see the import of affect in mobilizing the people, I believe their political strategy will remain impotent in evoking popular support, especially vis-à-vis right populist figures like Duterte who do not hesitate in stirring the people’s passions and emotions.

Finally, staying true to Mouffe, what will make this a specifically leftist populist movement is if its objective is the radicalization of democracy. The aim is not for the left to ascend to power and become society’s new tyrants. Rather, it is the construction of the “us/them” opposition in such a way that does not restrict democracy but deepen it. In other words, for Mouffe, we must construct the frontier “in a way that does

⁵³ Mouffe, *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution*, Chap. 3.

⁵⁴ See Kyle Alfred M. Barte, “Liberalism’s Other: Analyzing the Emergence of the *Bobotante* Signifier in the Philippines using Chantal Mouffe’s Critique of Liberal Political Theory,” in *Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 9 (2023), 161-184.

not foment resentment but seeks to generate affects towards social justice.”⁵⁵ It is here where the left takes a different route than what Duterte’s populism has taken. Indeed, while Duterte created a frontier that mobilized the people towards exclusion and hate against certain segments of the population, the left populist strategy ideally steers it towards an egalitarian direction by mobilizing the “us” against the forces which are seen as threats to liberty and equality.

This is why the possibility of a left populist strategy in the Philippines also depends upon its recognition of the ineradicability of conflict, difference, and pluralism. What is important is that this conflict is not expressed antagonistically (struggle between enemies who want to destroy one another) but agonistically (struggle between adversaries who perceive one another’s existence and ideas as legitimate).⁵⁶ In this way, the left populist strategy presupposes a democratic terrain where a universal consensus is not foisted on everybody to accept; but a terrain where different groups always possess the capacity to contest popular decisions. This realization may block the regression of left populism towards totalitarianism and lead to a vibrant democratic sphere where multiple projects compete against one another in the name of liberty and equality. Truly, the embrace of conflict is non-negotiable for the possibility of a left populist movement in the country.

CONCLUSION

As I have explained in this article, the left can find political success by engaging with Duterte’s populist strategies. Similar to what Duterte has done, the left’s goal must be the creation of a populist strategy whose primary goal is evoking the support of the people. To do so, they must, first and foremost, launch a counter-hegemonic offensive aimed at detaching themselves from any association with the extremely unpopular CPP-NPA.

⁵⁵ Mouffe, *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution*, Chap. 3.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, Chap 2.

Moreover, like Duterte, they must establish a political frontier that would divide the people against their common enemy. Such project requires coming to terms with the crucial role affects play in spurring the people's political engagement.

Yet, while this study recognizes the potential of populism to deepen democracy, it also acknowledges that populism can lead to significant democratic backsliding. I agree, therefore, with Carmina Yu Untalan who asserts that wielding a populist strategy is a slippery slope for it "could also fail its redemptive function when it slides into demagoguery and totalitarianism."⁵⁷ Duterte is a primary example of this. Another one is Evo Morales—the former Bolivian president—who many consider as a left populist but also had the tendency to ignore the plural voices of his constituencies.⁵⁸ Truly, there were times when he pretended to be the only voice of the people. Hence, while learning from *dutertismo* is crucial for reinvigorating leftist politics in the Philippines, they must remain alert and vigilant at the inconsistencies of Duterte's right populism with radical democracy. At the end of the day, the fundamental objective of the left, as Mouffe would have us believe, is the radical extension of liberty and equality to all social relations. Such is not the case during Duterte's tenure where democracy was restricted, not extended. Hence, for this to be a specifically leftist project, the left must execute a left populist strategy aimed at capturing popular support and steering the political terrain towards the ideals of radical democracy. Indeed, despite the potential pitfalls of a populist strategy, I argue that experimenting with it is still worthwhile especially given the neoliberal onslaught that has decimated democratic societies the world over.

All in all, Duterte's politics opens new possibilities for a leftist revival in the Philippines. While the many faults and deadly excesses of his politics must be strongly condemned and criticized, I am convinced that his rise also reveals the excesses and shortcomings of the liberal democratic

⁵⁷ Carmina Yu Untalan, "The Curious Case of the Duterte Presidency: Turning the Demos Against Democracy?," in *Development*, 60:3 (December 2017), 169.

⁵⁸ Carlos de la Torre, "Is Left Populism the Radical Democratic Answer?," in *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 27:1 (2019), 65.

structure of the country. If we ever hope to improve the liberal democratic configuration of the Philippines, its deficiencies, which Duterte's politics brought into light, should be addressed. In this way, *dutertismo* is not a political juncture that must be brushed aside; rather, it must be treated as an ugly enemy from which the left can learn from. Therefore, a critical engagement with *dutertismo* points us to a new type of leftist politics in the country, one which breaks free from the armed revolution of the traditional left and one which shatters the false dichotomy between the sterile reformist discourse of neoliberal elites and the exclusionary populism of the right.

REFERENCES

- “Drug war death toll reaches 6,248—PDEA,” in *CNN Philippines* (29 May 2022), <<https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2022/5/29/Drug-war-death-toll-PDEA.html>>.
- “Philippines: Events of 2021,” in *Human Rights Watch*, n.d., <<https://www.hrw.org/worldreport/2022/country-chapters/Philippines>>.
- Alvarez, Maria Khristine, Joshua Makalintal, and Herbert Docena, “The Philippine Left has an Opportunity to Break the Country’s Political Mold,” in *Jacobin* (01 March 2022), <<https://jacobin.com/2022/03/philippines-social-democrats-communists-election-marcos-duterte-robredo>>.
- Arguelles, Cleve V., ““We are Rodrigo Duterte”: Dimensions of the Philippine Populist Publics’ Vote,” in *Asian Politics and Policy*, 11:3 (2019).
- Barte, Kyle Alfred M., “Liberalism’s *Other*: Analyzing the Emergence of the *Bobotante* Signifier in the Philippines using Chantal Mouffe’s Critique of Liberal Political Theory,” in *Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 9 (2023).
- Bello, Walden, *Counterrevolution: The Global Rise of the Far Right* (Quezon: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2019).
- Bertho, Alain, *Age of Violence*, trans. by David Broder (London & New York: Verso, 2018).
- Claudio, Lisandro, “The Erosion of Liberalism and the Rise of Duterte in the Philippines,” in *HAL: Open Science*, (2019), <<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03151036>>.
- Claviez, Thomas, “Where are Jacques and Ernesto When You Need Them? Rancière and Laclau on Populism, Experts and Contingency,” in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 45:9-10 (2019).
- Cohen, Jean L., “Hollow parties and their movement-ization: The populist conundrum,” in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 45:9-10 (2019).

-
- Curato, Nicole, "Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope: Penal Populism and Duterte's Rise to Power," in *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 35:3 (2016).
- _____, "We Need to Talk About Rody," in *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte's Early Presidency* (Quezon: BUGHAW, 2017).
- David, Randy, "'Dutertismo'," in *Inquirer.Net* (01 May 2016), <<https://opinion.inquirer.net/94530/dutertismo>>.
- de la Torre, Carlos, "Is Left Populism the Radical Democratic Answer?," in *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 27:1 (2019).
- Gauna, Anibal F., "Explaining Populism beyond Laclau: A Historical-Comparative Assessment of *On Populist Reason*," in *Thesis Eleven*, 140:1 (2017).
- Heydarian, Richard Javad, *The Rise of Duterte: A Populist Revolt against Elite Democracy* (Singapore: Palgrave, 2018).
- Imbong, Regletto Aldrich, Jerry Imbong, and Patrick Gerard Torres, "Chantal Mouffe on the Radical Politics of Rodrigo Duterte," in *PHAVISMINDA Journal*, 21 (2022).
- Kahn, Victoria, "'Fondly Overcome': Revisiting the History of the Liberal Subject," in *Acta Poetica*, 25:2 (2004), 30, <<https://www.scielo.org.mx/pdf/ap/v25n2/v25n2a2.pdf>>.
- Kusaka, Wataru, *Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality, Democracy and the Urban Poor* (Quezon: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2019).
- Laclau, Ernesto, *On Populist Reason* (London and New York: Verso, 2005).
- Leggett, Will, "Restoring Society to Post-Structuralist Politics: Mouffe, Gramsci and Radical Democracy," in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 39:3 (2013).
- McKean, Benjamin L., "Toward an Inclusive Populism? On the Role of Race and Difference in Laclau's Politics," in *Political Theory*, 44:6 (2016).
-

-
- Mouffe, Chantal, “An Agonistic Approach to the Future of Europe,” in *New Literary History*, 42:4 (Autumn 2012).
- _____, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London & New York: Verso, 2013).
- _____, *For a Left Populism* (London and New York: Verso, 2018).
- _____, *On the Political* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).
- _____, *The Democratic Paradox* (London and New York: Verso, 2000).
- _____, *The Return of the Political* (London and New York: Verso, 2005).
- _____, *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution: Left Populism and the Power of Affects* (London and New York: Verso, 2022), epub.
- Oppenheim, Felix E., “Rationalism and Liberalism,” in *World Politics*, 16:2 (January 1964).
- Paxton, Marie, *Agonistic Democracy: Rethinking Political Institutions in Pluralist Times* (New York: Routledge, 2020).
- Quimpo, Nathan Gilbert, *Contested Democracy and the Left in the Philippines after Marcos* (Quezon: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2008).
- Regilme, Salvador Santino F., “Contested Spaces of Illiberal and Authoritarian Politics: Human Rights and Democracy in Crisis,” in *Political Geography* 89 (2021).
- Sanchez, Emerson M. and Jayson S. Lamchek, “The year of daring: revisiting the Philippine left’s dalliance with a strongman,” in *Melbourne Asia Review*, 6 (2021), <<https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/the-year-of-daring-revisiting-the-philippine-lefts-dalliance-with-a-strongman/>>.
-

-
- Teehankee, Julio C., “Was Duterte’s Rise Inevitable?,” in *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte’s Early Presidency*, ed. by Nicole Curato (Quezon: BUGHAW, 2017).
- Tenorio, Christine B., Patrik K. Meyer, and Achmad Nurmandi, “President Duterte’s Bicephalous Leadership: Populist at Home—Pragmatic Abroad,” in *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* (2020).
- Untalan, Carmina Yu, “The Curious Case of the Duterte Presidency: Turning the *Demos* Against Democracy?,” in *Development*, 60:3 (December 2017).
- Žižek, Slavoj, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008).