

Rezension: Rainer Werning; Jörg Schwieger (Hg.): Handbuch Philippinen: Gesellschaft-Politik- Wirtschaft-Kultur

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Book Review: Werning, R. & Schwieger, J. (2019). *Handbuch Philippinen. Gesellschaft-Politik-Wirtschaft-Kultur*.

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With the election of Rodrigo Duterte in 2016, the Philippines, considered as Asia's oldest democracy, has once again succumbed to a populist authoritarian turn. The three years that have transpired since then are tainted with rampant human rights violations and regressive policies advanced by an impulsive demagoguery, characterized by the political scientist Rainer Werning and other scholars as *Dutertismo*. Werning and his co-editor Jörg Schwieger, a Protestant theologian, together with Filipino and non-Filipino scholars, practitioners, and activists, raise their voices against assorted social ills in this extensive primer on Philippine society, which now includes a variety of analyses of the ramifications of the Duterte presidency. The book is written in German and can be seen as a collection of readings for a German-speaking audience. The contributions of the Filipino authors were likewise translated into German.

The sixth edition of the *Handbuch Philippinen*, dedicated to those who have lived and worked for social justice, democracy, and human rights in the Philippines since the Marcos dictatorship, puts a critical lens on how to view and understand the 'Pearl of the Orient'. Divided into eight sections (regional studies & history, life, people, land & ecology, politics & economy, culture, religion, and East-West perspectives) and 80 chapters, with 35 contributors (13 Filipin@s (both in the diaspora and based in the Philippines) and 22 Europeans), the handbook is not meant to be a travel guide but rather a manual aimed at exposing the realities that affect everyday life in the Southeast Asian country. It also aims at supporting those who want to change the current situation; so it comes as no surprise that the perspective taken by the editors and authors is the everyday life of the people – a perspective from below.

A fascinating aspect about the book is how it accomplishes showcasing how diverse the Philippines is when it comes to the people and their stories as well as the country itself. By doing so, the editors and authors managed to open new perspectives and styles of reading the various book chapters. Starting with some structural data and information about the country's demographics, history, and geography, they highlight how culture, religion, politics, and the economy are interrelated to each other.

"The Philippines is not a poor country, they are a country with many poor people" (p. 53). This quote is both puzzling and illuminating as it shows not only the reality faced by Filipin@s but also the perception of people from abroad. The country is typically known for its white beaches, picturesque landscapes, and dire political situation, especially today. This is, however, a simplistic perception

that sometimes makes one forget that the country has more to offer such as its rich history, people, and traditions upheld since colonial times. Although the editors did a great job in showing the diversity of personal stories they failed to show the differences in perspectives between Filipin@s living in the Philippines and those living abroad. A more in-depth overview of the lives of the diaspora communities is missing.

Compared to the other chapters, such as regional studies & history or culture, the book's section on politics & economics is the most extensive one, despite being overwhelmingly written by the sociologist Niklas Reese, the former co-editor of the handbook, and Werning. It is chronologically and thematically well-structured, starting with an overview of the country's contemporary political and justice system as well as its human rights situation. The substantial focus on the Marcos era and the post-dictatorship regimes are also worth noting, with a sharp and critical analysis of successive governments' policies that have in effect paved the way towards Duterte's rise to power. Werning describes *Dutertismo* as an embodiment of the persona of Davao City's "Punisher", in which he metaphorically interprets his political style as a horse gone berserk in a horseracing event, connecting his behavior to his disrupting the mainstream leadership styles of his predecessors. Though this description does not capture the politics of the strongman in its entirety, considering that his government has also embraced policies of previous administrations, the term can, nevertheless, be further expounded by referring to Nicole Curato's (2017) characterization of *Dutertismo* as something that "disrupts and perpetuates the Philippines' elite democracy, marked by its stark inequalities in political power [...]. His rise to power forces a rethinking of [...] what it means to be a democratic country amidst the global crisis of liberal democracy, and what freedoms citizens are willing to sacrifice" (p. 2).

The section is up-to-date indeed as it highlights the latest key events since Duterte's rise to power, from the failure of the peace talks with the Maoist Left, to the conflict in Marawi and the subsequent imposition of martial law in Mindanao, to the ousting of the chief justice, and the prospects of the 2019 midterm elections, highlighting the involvement of traditional politicians and ruling dynasties. The human rights situation under the current administration deserves particular emphasis, and the book did justice to this by highlighting the fact that Duterte's "war on drugs" is a mass-murder campaign that has taken the lives of over 20,000 people, involving systematic state coordination evocative of ethnic cleansing campaigns. This leads to the suggestion that the current government is perpetrating crimes against humanity.

When it comes to addressing the forces that led to Duterte's ascent to the presidency, Reese's chapter on the middle class is worth noting and commending. The inclusion of a class dimension in analyzing Philippine state and society deserves reiteration since this particular sector of society is seen as the key driver of determining the nation's political prospects, as seen in the "People Power" revolts that ousted presidents Marcos and Estrada as well as the movements behind Duterte's rise to power. This volatility of the middle class, as Walden Bello (2017) puts it, has made them both a force for democracy and a mass base for authoritarianism, citing historical accounts in both the Global South and Global North.

On the topic of resistance against the current administration and the challenges facing social movements in the country, Werning and Reese's dedication of two whole

chapters to the struggles of civil society gives an adequate analysis on the country's vibrant progressive movement as well as the struggles of the Philippine Left, including its spirited and dark history. However, it misses mentioning key events such as the extrajudicial killings of students suspected of being drug dealers and the subsequent protest movements that arose and triggered fresh opposition against *Dutertismo*.

As mentioned, the *Handbuch* is quite well updated, especially when it comes to recent political developments, but some references and statistics nevertheless remain outdated, in particular the section on the media, where the Philippines' notorious reputation as one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists is emphasized. But the crackdown against the free press has intensified under the Duterte administration, with the targeting of the critical news site *Rappler* as well as the arrest of its founder and journalist Maria Ressa (Stevenson, 2019). In addition, Duterte's foreign policy, which is hardly mentioned in the book, is a huge gap, especially when it comes to his hostility towards international institutions as well as his diplomatic inaction towards the South China Sea dispute.

The illustration of the country's various societal, political, economic, and cultural characteristics is indeed evident in the handbook. However, the fact that most chapters (62 out of 80) were written by Europeans might lead to the questioning of the book's potential Orientalist perspective. But despite justified criticisms of a potential Eurocentric bias in the book's narrative, it still warrants some warm approval for highlighting a down-to-earth approach in analyzing Philippine society, focusing on the grass roots level and in particular giving a voice to those at the margins. This deserves a read.

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