

# Crosspoints: Exchanging Perspectives on **Culture** and **Diversity**

*This article was drawn from a month-long online discussion among cultural activists and artists on the Korakora listserve.<sup>1</sup> Though several women and men participated in the online debates (totaling sixty plus pages in printouts), we feature the exchange between Fatima Lasay, WIA issue editor and Ewa Charkiewicz of Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN).*

**FATIMA:** I'd like to welcome Ewa Charkiewicz and thank her for accepting our invitation to join us in the discussions. I'd like to direct attention to her notes on global feminist advocacy published in the previous issue of *Women In Action*<sup>2</sup>—and it would be good to be able to discuss further her critique of global NGOs and feminist activism. Ewa's keen on debates on these issues with UN NGOs.

Ewa's with DAWN<sup>3</sup> and was with the Institute of Social Studies in the Hague (I hope I got that correctly!).

And since we're on the issue of cultural diversity, it might be good to start with

how problematic the situation really is with regards to how policymaking that uses the "cultural diversity" sloganeering actually destroys and commodifies culture. (Which is why I asked May also about problems, I like problems ;- ) because it demands of us to take analytical positions, develop theoretical tools for problem solving, etc.).

Ewa mentioned in her notes that "the challenge for feminism is to produce an analysis that can help us name the enemy (the new scary thing without a name) to provide tools to problematise subjectivities of resistance, and to reflect on the transformations in relationships between I and Thou and "The Matrix."

**EWA:** Thank you, Fatima, for inviting me to the discussion. I am in Poland now, engaged in the project which I call "the Factory." The purpose is to make a feminist sense of transition from state socialism to neo-liberalism.

My analytical effort is grounded in a specific case study, of a construction factory, located in downtown Warsaw. The factory was closed in the early nineties, and several thousand people lost their jobs. (The net loss of jobs in Poland since 1989 was 2 million, and the economic activity rate is only 46%, which means that 54% of people in the so-called productive age are unemployed. At the same time, the GDP keeps growing as people's livelihoods decline). To come back to the factory. Today the factory looks like a war zone. The machines, the windowpanes, bricks, everything is slowly taken to the scrap yards. The remaining buildings are used as a squat. Occasionally, there are alternative art performances taking place in an abandoned hall. The last one was a grrrls punk group playing for the Women's Day on the 8th of March.

In 2000 and 2002, two young men were electrocuted in the factory, because the utility company (which was being privatised at the time), did not bother to switch off the high voltage transformer station after the factory was abandoned. One of them was a young photographer, who documented Polish transition by making pictures of abandoned factories, workers sport clubs, and dilapidated buildings.

The factory is surrounded by businesses in the new knowledge economy, in particular insurance and marketing, and

trading companies. A new-gated apartment block is close by. The factory was privatised before the privatisation laws were passed in Poland, and it's not clear what the ownership structure is now. That's why this area has not been developed yet. The city designated it for the financial center, and the real estate is worth circa 50 million euro.

I am doing life-history interviews with all different people involved, as well as researching on the politics and economics of restructuring in Poland. I would like to make sense of relationships between the macro politics of restructuring and people's lives, and how power relations and subjectivities were reorganised.

Under state socialism, the society was organised on the model of the factory. The political rationality of the system was human security. People's lives were conducted in authoritarian grids. Today the state and subjectivities are reorganised on the model of the market. Freedom became a disciplinary technology to make citizens free and responsible for themselves. Neo-liberalism coincides with de-industrialisation, the IT-related transformational effects, and the new financial stage of capitalism. The system does not need people as soldiers, or workers, as it did under industrial capitalism, when added value was generated out of human labor and time. The biopolitics of the welfare state (caring for and regulating the lives of citizens) are superseded with necropolitics, politics of death as means of control over the redundant people that the system does not need any more

for the multiplication and securitisation of capital. But it needs to secure access to resources, hence perhaps the new imperial wars... (I have read an interesting article by Mbembe on SAPs in Africa as necropolitics. The concept draws on the work of Foucault and Agamben.)

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In this project, I want to break down the boundaries between political philosophy, social science and art. I envisage my sociological report will be a part, an element of a multimedia project, in which the analysis will appeal to minds and hearts. The reorganisation of power, and its consequences, and new forms of control, how we are defined from the outside, will be made visible, so that they can be challenged.

**FATIMA:** In the Philippine situation, there does not appear to be a radical change in power relations for the past

500 years, only a change in hand of colonisers and now of the big landlords and "captains of industry." The economy is semi-feudal (from serfdom introduced by friar/monastic power 500 years back, to turn of 19<sup>th</sup> century feudalism carried on by the Americans). Well, maybe the Catholic church position was a significant change, from mechanism of exploitation during the early Spanish colonial period to cornerstone of moral and political power today.

But what is particularly significant now is the Diaspora (starting during the American period, then a surge in the seventies, and now that export labour is the largest dollar earner for the Philippine government, making up to 9% of GNP). The government always campaigns big time to get the overseas job openings. There are economic gains but the social costs of this is tremendous, the brunt of which we will experience in the next 10 to 20 years.

Apart from the physical movement of people (and goods), the movement of information services now also seems to be radically changing socioeconomic order. Two to three decades back there were the export processing zones, now here are the technology parks, most of them production facilities for outsourced informational goods and bases for call centres. This is where the intellectual work force is going (i.e., English teachers getting out of schools and going into call centres, doctors going out of local hospitals and back to school to become nurses and caregivers for jobs overseas, etc.). That's about 14-15% of workers of Philippine semi-feudal society (about 75% are peasant farmers; their children

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are more encouraged to go overseas to work there, since they see little or no future in the colonial history of land tenancy).

However, sometimes when I read Spanish account of the Philippines from 17<sup>th</sup> century, I feel like I am reading today's headlines of poverty and social inequality (especially the high society section of newspapers). Land struggle accounts since 17<sup>th</sup> century sound so much like recent Hacienda Luisita massacre of farmers.

You mention making visible re-organisation of power, and its consequences, and new forms of control, how we are defined from the outside. The striking thing is that we define ourselves through the eyes of our own oppressors, so we might also need to process a new more powerful urgent language. For example, mass media is so powerful. So many people now speak with the conceptual language of popular films, or of the plots and structures of reality TV shows, video games, or of the appearances and press statements of celebrities, etc. So we try to reciprocate through media too (censorship, positive

images of women and men, knowledge channels, etc.). Or we reciprocate through critical analysis of media, media literacy, etc.

In the above situation (no real change or re-organisation of power or social relations in Philippine society, i.e., no class war but only *hacienda/rancho* competition resulting to centuries-long violence against the people), this might mean that no radical change in the language of negotiation in conflict has been developed. However, the diaspora/migrant labour situation might mean a different turn. Correct me if I am wrong—Polish Solidarity movement in the seventies was not expressed in political parties. I am curious if this was a significant turn of power or social relations or a radical change in the language so to speak. It seems that in a structurally oppressive system (such as the Philippine political system as well as the colonial education system), most efforts to enable people to change society and views of society and to assert their rights is muted when brought into the political system. I am not so sure if this is “civil society” now, but I was thinking that the diaspora/migrant labour as social change is also muted as it increasingly is brought within the power of the state (sometimes called “being given a voice in the political arena”), which actually is less democratic in terms of ensuring people's autonomy because they become mere tokens and later transformed into (unknowing) mouthpieces for political interests inimical to the people. However, I also see the movement of people outside the country and later on their return, as

having significant symbolic as well as socio-economic power, one that we must be able to anticipate into a means for change before it is muted by the influence of the state and the *hacendados/rancheros*.

Interestingly, H.P. Lovecraft's miscellaneous writings are best "deconstructed" when viewed within the age and culture that they were written (1920s-30s Europe), that era shortly before the World Wars, had the most powerful belief that it was pushing for world peace by raising into hagiography the supremacy and patrimony of technology and human dominance and intelligence, and the subsequent meaninglessness of life that ensued after the World Wars. So reading closely, it seems that H.P. Lovecraft's rhetoric and ruminations deny if not ignore the concept of "*bisa*" or life, nurturable/nurturing force, or the yang (the female principle) in the dominantly patriarchal global modern culture. As the man who also wrote that gothic horror story "The Reanimator," H.P. Lovecraft infused the dead with life through a serum, the male principle impregnating itself, so it is no wonder he believes that:

Universal suicide is the most logical thing in the world—we reject it only because of our primitive cowardice and childish fear of the dark. If we were sensible we would seek death—the same blissful blank which we enjoyed before we existed.

And it is within this same "blissful blank" that he defines "kindness" and "all the most necessary things in life—the tolerance, patience, and regard and love of neighbour"—as things that "every man owes to his fellow."

Between this and the other (Eastern) concepts of "suffering" and "emptiness" (which is always imbued with the processes of "germination" and "takes maternal care of the awakening and the answering"), it is quite clear which is more bound to nihilism although the positive "aims" or "effects" of both (and maybe even their processes) can appear to be the same. So it might be a useful little exercise to, as you say, "know how to characterise the difference."

**EWA:** First on taxonomies. The Chilean neuro-psychologist Maturana claims we think by brain patterns by pre-established combinations of neurological synapses. On the other hand, there is evidence to the contrary; for instance, in the thoughts shared on this listserv. Among the people who do think against the dominant patterns is Michel Foucault, the French political philosopher, who developed an alternative analytic of power to show that power is associated with truth and (scientific) knowledge; power is productive not prohibitive; it operates by disciplining, enticing, and seducing subjects; these micro-practices of power that operate on bodies and subjectivities are related to macro forms of power such as market and state.

One of the conceptual devices that Foucault developed to make visible forms of disciplinary and normative power is biopolitics; in chapter 5 of the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault explains that the effect of biopolitics is the adjustment of bodies to the forms of accumulation of capital. His ideas have been taken forward by many researchers, including feminists (e.g., Rankin on women and microcredit in Nepal, Vavrus on development and

feminist modern, Rose on government through freedom and responsabilising subjects). These authors show how the construction of fit, empowered, flexible, entrepreneurial, costs-benefit calculating women and men is a part of global neo-liberal restructuring, one of the vehicles, through which this restructuring is produced.

In one of his books (can't remember which one), Foucault quotes Borges and the Chinese Encyclopedia, which construct a different taxonomy: pigs are associated with railroads, and one-eyed monsters with daffodils....

The European nation state as the community of blood is racist through and through; European racism was originally (de Gobineau and Lundenberg) directed against the Southern European, the Jews, and the Slavs. This kind of racist taxonomies created at the time was about conquering territory, and killing off others to the Nordic and Anglo-Saxon self. Much as I like Foucault, his thesis is hardly applicable to the conquest overseas. There was a much more sinister combination at play of military, religious, and economic interests operating simultaneously to kill life of the dangerous Other and to cultivate and exploit life as a

resource. (Re: Fatima on Philippines: In this context I have loads of problems with the imperial alignments of the Catholic church with the state power, too).

I think western taxonomies (and racism at the core of them all) have to be constantly challenged. However, with this new stage of 'capitalism,' which makes people redundant, this kind of struggle has to go together with the emphasis on how to provide alternative means of livelihood.

Last year I was doing research on Mattel Inc. (the Barbie doll producer). In the 1980s, they closed factories in the Philippines to open a new computer-assisted manufacturing production in Malaysia. Obviously, much less people were employed in the new plant). In the 1990s, Mattel moved factories from the US to Mexico only to downsize the two plants into one last year; downsizing reached the corporate level, too.

Another angle of the same story: in so many countries extractive industries destroy livelihoods while no new jobs are offered to replace them. Meanwhile neo-liberal global governance gives voice to NGOs without influence, and operates in the manner of a vacuum cleaner capturing energies of resistance.

Good night.

#### **Endnotes**

1 See: <http://kurokuro.korakora.org>

2 See: <http://www.isiswomen.org/pub/wia/wia2-04/ewa.htm>

3 See: <http://www.dawn.org/fj/>