

Investigations of Violence and Power

Temario C. Rivera

Dead Season: A Story of Murder and Revenge on the Philippine Island of Negros. BY ALAN BERLOW. New York: Pantheon Books, 1996.

Written like a gripping mystery novel, Berlow's engrossing investigation of a series of killings in a small town in Negros Occidental provides a rich and nuanced material for interpreting Philippine culture and politics. While the book focuses on the peculiarities of Negros society convulsed by perverse social contrasts and endemic class antagonisms, it projects common cultural themes and practices in Philippine society essential to an understanding of the culture of violence, the contested meanings of democracy, and the difficulties of transition from authoritarian to democratic rule in the country.

Berlow's book takes off from his investigation of the 1988 massacre of the peasant family of Reynaldo "Moret" de los Santos in Mambagaton, Himam-

aylan, Negros Occidental. A Scout Ranger team of the Philippine Army, under then Captain Melvin Gutierrez, perpetrated this merciless killing of the de los Santos couple and three of their children, justifying the act as an armed encounter with guerrillas of the New People's Army who were allegedly in the de los Santos house.

Berlow seeks to make sense of the de los Santos family massacre and a number of other killings in the area such as the assassination of Serafin Gatuslao, a big planter, and the mysterious death of Gerry de los Santos, one of the Scout Rangers involved in the massacre. Relentlessly tracking down the key players and informants all over the country, he tries to unravel the complex linkages and contradictions of social structure and personalities in a sugar-planter warlord society rocked by revolution. Such contradictions, for instance, are captured dramatically by the personality of "Moret" de los Santos himself who was perceived variously as a devout Catholic, a communist, and murderer of

Serafin Gatuslao.

In his interpretation of the dynamics of Negros society as sparked by the killings in Himamaylan town, Berlow addresses a number of interrelated themes and contested frameworks about how best to understand Philippine society and culture and its political practices in more particular terms. Through his account of the socioeconomic and political nexus between the de los Santos family and its landlord *padrino*, the Tongsons, Berlow provides interesting data showing the limits of patron-clientelistic ties in explaining sociopolitical behavior. For instance, Moret de los Santos had, until his death, worked at Rogelio Tongson's hacienda and was also employed as a highway foreman through the Tongson's network. Yet this did not prevent him from getting actively involved in the militant Basic Christian Community (BCC) movement initiated by the Catholic Church in his area.

PATRON-CLIENT TIES

At what point do patron-client ties break up? What existing political opportunities trigger and heighten this process? In the Negros case, one can point to the severe economic crisis generated by the decline of the price of sugar in the world market and the inability of the planter class to modernize production technologies. As discussed by Berlow, what makes the Negros experience instructive, however, was the emergence of distinctive political opportunities represented by the militant Church through its BCCs and the revolutionary alternative posed by the communist-led New People's Army (NPA) in the context of the economic and political crisis. Berlow attributes the initial success of the NPA as follows: "...residents of rural barrios came to rely on the NPA to

maintain a semblance of law and order and to deliver justice, however imperfect, where there had never been any."

It is no wonder then that Moret de los Santos was most likely murdered together with his family because he was seen as a leader of the BCC movement which, in turn, was viewed by the military and the planter class as supportive of the communists. Nonetheless, it is true that economic misery, per se, does not automatically lead to revolutionary challenges and thus the breaking up of patron-client ties. For these changes, one needs new political opportunities and alternatives which, in turn, can lead to new ways of looking at the world and challenging the status quo.

One of the confounding realities of Philippine social life has been the extraordinary resilience of its elites, particularly of its traditional big landed class. In the NICs of Asia, the landed class was destroyed or transformed by either war or revolution (in the NICs, by revolution from above). As Berlow documents quite well, the Negros planter class, so far, seems to have weathered the most compelling challenges to its rule: the Church-led challenge through the BCCs and the revolutionary upheaval mounted by the NPA. Fortunately for the planter class, the state was largely on its side during these crucial confrontations with popular-based movements.

It still remains to be seen whether the Negros planter class could be transformed by the impact of competitive world economic forces since the state itself has largely abandoned any decisive project of subjecting the huge sugar estates to land reform. Berlow observes that "the little towns and villages in the countryside, places like Himamaylan, look pretty much as they did twenty or thirty years ago...."

Meanwhile, nearly all research and development on improved sugar varieties have ceased and degradation of both soil and water continues unabated.”

REVOLUTIONARY CHANGES

Related to the problem of the resilience of the big landed elites is the failure of any successful revolutionary upheaval, whether in Negros or in the country as a whole. In his treatment of this theme, Berlow explains the decline of the revolutionary movement in Negros to “a combination of Army offensives, infiltration, intimidation, and what might be characterized as the NPA’s self-immolation – the internecine disputes, purges, defections, criminal activities, executions of suspected spies, and a badly flawed reading of both the political and military landscape.” What would have been instructive here is a clearer discussion of what is meant by the changed “political and military landscape” which Berlow implies to have worked against the further advance of the revolutionary struggle.

A more systematic discussion of this changed political landscape would have to address how the restoration of formal democratic rule drastically altered the political opportunities for waging the armed revolutionary struggle in Negros and in the whole country. Berlow further asserts that “unless the government or private investors create work for the exploding population of impoverished Filipinos, the NPA or something similar will reemerge within the next few years.” This is too economic an explanation for the emergence or growth of a revolutionary movement. A more adequate explanation will have to consider the nature of political opportunities that exist for revolutionary challenges. In the Philippine context, this means assessing

how the formal democratic processes that are in place, no matter how flawed, serve to constrain or enhance the possibilities of revolutionary challenges particularly of armed mobilizations.

In the transition process from authoritarian to democratic rule, elections have served as a key legitimizing mechanism for the compact of governance among the various social classes. However, in societies such as Negros where the distribution of economic and political power is so lopsidedly in favor of the upper classes, elections have also become convenient mechanisms for legitimizing anachronistic social and political relationships.

As Berlow stresses, the political system in Negros is a natural offshoot of the relations of power that radiate from the hacienda, virtually shutting off effective contestation of power by representatives of the lower classes except during conjunctural crises when the elites are severely divided. Thus, the Gatuslaos in Himamaylan and the other well-known planter families and their kin and political network continue to dominate most of the towns of Negros. Indeed, the Negros planter environment exemplifies and provides ample proof to the comparative historical evidence that the persistence of an upper landed class is the most consistently anti-democratic force in society.

A former correspondent for the National Public Radio of the United States who lived in Manila from 1988 to 1992, Alan Berlow is the recipient of the Weintal Award for Diplomatic Reporting and an Overseas Press Club Award. His engagingly readable book sparkles with penetrating insights easily appreciated both by students and critics of Philippine culture and politics.