

On Patricio Abinales' 'The Antinomies of Petit- Bourgeois Radicalism'

Joel Rocamora

Not too many authors have the privilege of responding to reviews of their work. I have to admit I hesitated to take up this privilege after I read Patricio 'Jojo' Abinales' review. I am used to the attacks of pro-Sison commentators. I have taken embarrassed pleasure at words of praise by friends. But it is not just because Jojo's review is the first 'academic' review of *Breaking Through* that I find myself uncertain about how to respond.

Noting omissions is standard fare in academic book reviews. A comprehensive history of the national democratic movement will have to include a discussion of events and issues that are not in my book: the 1978 debate between the Manila-Rizal and the national Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) leadership, religious radicalism, international work, the party's work in the open labor movement, the peasant movement, among others. The list is not quite endless,

but certainly long. Jojo's list is a good beginning.

I carefully pointed out in the book that I did not consider my contribution in any way 'comprehensive': 'A true history of the National Democratic (ND) movement, whether artistic or merely conventional, will only be written a few years from now when much more documentary and other sources will be available. At this time, what can be done is to sketch out the outlines of that history' (p. 4). I do not therefore feel obliged to defend myself for the many omissions of key events and issues in national democratic history.

Although 'elisions' was not yet in fashion when I went to graduate school and I never mastered its use in academic one-upmanship, I think Jojo means something beyond 'omissions'. He says I tend '...to simplify the political development of a complex and dynamic revolutionary movement.' Also, that I share '...with Sison a

penchant to look at the revolution from above.' The omissions of a book whose ambition is only to 'sketch out the outlines of [national democratic] history' can seem like 'simplification' but if Jojo means more than that he has to do more to clinch the argument.

If nothing else, he has to be more careful with his language if he wants his criticisms to be taken seriously. I would be the first to admit that the 1978 Manila-Rizal CPP debate needed more discussion than I gave it. But the discussion on pages 25 to 26 is not 'nothing'. Within the context of a generally 'sketchy' outline history, this short discussion at least shows that I did not think that the urban struggle was 'a smooth process that stalled only when the CPP failed to develop a coherent strategy in the 1980s.'

Jojo also has to be careful that he does not end up doing the 'simplification' he accuses me of. I challenge him to find the textual proof of my having '...rehash[ed] the old left-wing explanation of an American hand *orchestrating* (my emphasis) the moves of conservative and liberal forces during the BAYAN congress.' I certainly pointed to American efforts to directly influence political developments at that time. But I never wrote about Americans 'orchestrating the moves of conservative and liberal forces during the BAYAN congress'. It would have been useful to have told a more detailed account of the work of CPP united front cadres at the BAYAN congress, but I did say: 'There is also ample evidence of ND

sectarianism and attempts to use superior organizational means to determine the outcome of debates within the congress.'

I could quibble about other criticisms. Perhaps the main point is simply that Jojo just does not understand the intentional modesty of my contribution. I had no intention of writing a brilliant academic treatise. I do not make myself accountable to those standards. I have not even been a CPP cadre 'helping oversee the NDF international section branch [sic]' who has to account for his role to the party or to history. I was a CPP grunt who drew attention to himself because he writes. Jojo does not need to compare me to Joema Sison or Trotsky in order to set me up for his academic barbs. I never set myself that high.

ABINALES RESPONDS: It took me almost five years to finish writing this review of my former professor's book for two reasons. First, I did not want it to be misconstrued as part of a systematic vilification campaign that Jose Ma Sison and his zealots were then waging against Joel Rocamora. Second, it was extremely difficult for me to reconcile the book with the Joel Rocamora I knew. Joel wrote *Nationalism in Search of Ideology: The Indonesian Nationalist Party, 1946-1965*, which remains the classic work on the Indonesian Nationalist Party because of its analytical sophistication and empirical density. *Breaking Through* is the exact opposite. It is sloppy in the use of available

evidence, unclear about what it really wants to *substantively* talk about, and sentimental in its conclusions. It is, in short, uncharacteristically Joel, and this is why the book is a disappointment—intellectually *and* politically.

It still puzzles me that despite the wealth of documents that came out as early as 1986, and the inordinate number of CPP cadres who surfaced from the underground (with some even writing their own evaluation of events), all Joel could only come up with is 'a preliminary' assessment of the CPP. Why? Joel indeed mentions the 1978 Manila-Rizal CPP debates but merely narrates what happened during that significant period in the CPP's life. It is storytelling, not analytical exposition. As for the BAYAN split, here is what he wrote: 'It is clear that the US Embassy had been working hard for months to split the ranks of the anti-dictatorship front. There is evidence that rightwing social democrats and their allies among business people and technocrats had plans for setting up a separate alliance prior to the BAYAN congress' (p. 37). It would be political naiveté on one's part—especially to those who were in that fateful congress—not to notice Embassy orchestration against the Left. But this is, I guess, a matter of interpretation.

Joel is also spending too much time making a leftist presence within cacique politics that I am afraid he has fallen prey to the tendency to focus on people rather than on their ideas. I did not intend to equate my former professor with Trotsky the person (although the comparison is there—they were both expelled by their Stalinist opponents). I was more interested in the genre that *Breaking Through* and *My Life* belong to—those of deposed communists writing about their past.

Joel cannot hide behind the alleged preliminary nature of his work to insist on its limited historical import. He is very much aware that apart from Sison's *The Leader's View*, his is the only other book that tries to come up with an evaluation of the CPP. He is likewise too modest about his former status. After their successful internal coup, the Filipino Ayatollah and his cabal giddily announced in the September-December 1994 issue of *Liberation* that the National Democratic Front (NDF) congress [sic] had expelled Joel and a number of other cadres identified with the NDF's international section. One has to be more than just a 'CPP grunt' to make it to the front page of the NDF's newspaper.