

## **Investigating Postmodern Politics in the Philippines Using Reflexivity Theory**

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**Abstract:** *A usual reading of postmodern critiques of science, progress, and the nation-state, has casted postmodernism as pessimistic, if not apolitical. In fact, it is even read as conservative, as it unintentionally enables a continuation of the status quo by its privileging of local forms of resistance, even as it is critical of grand narratives of resistance. While the privileging of micro-politics in everyday forms of resistance may enable freedom of and subversive acts by individuals, the need for more collective forms of action remains a challenge. This article offers the theory of reflexivity as a template to imagine the possibility of collective action being enabled by postmodern politics. In contrast to the relatively random, unorganized, and individualized form of micro-politics which post-modern theorists argue for, reflexivity theory allows for more organized, coordinated collective action, albeit in domains that are outside of the traditional confines of statist politics, taking advantage of postmodern venues, such as cyberspace. This essay will inquire into the applicability and implications of the theory of reflexivity in the Philippines, particularly on the transformation of random, individualized interventions in social networking sites into becoming a foundation for "cyber-collective action", thereby enabling the creation of new political communities and citizenship in cyberspace.*

**Key words:** *postmodern politics, reflexivity theory, cyber-citizenship, internet*

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## Introduction

A usual reading of postmodern critiques of science, progress and the nation-state has led many to be suspicious of the possibility of politics to emerge from postmodernity. This is rooted to the pessimistic, if not apolitical, stance, which many have ascribed to postmodernism—that an adherence to it would be a form of conservatism, as it unintentionally enables a continuation of the status quo by its privileging of local and disjointed narratives of individual and everyday forms of resistance, while debunking the grand narratives of resistance against a science that rationalizes, a nation that homogenizes, and a state that controls. While the presence of micro-politics, theorized by Lyotard (1984), Foucault (1980) and Derrida (1978 and 1988), who are all suspicious of any totalizing or centralizing form of action or thought, may enable freedom of, and subversive acts by individuals, there is the challenge for more collective action. This is considered by those engaged in social movements as necessary to undermine organized rationality and institutionalized power. This is particularly significant in societies facing crisis conditions, and where there is a strong tradition of collective action, instead of individualistic forms of politics, such as the Philippines.

It is in this context that a more optimistic critique of modernity — one that accepts the premises of postmodernity but is more enabling of collective political action, such as the theory of reflexive modernity forwarded by Ulrich Beck (1994a and 1994b), Anthony Giddens (1994a and 1994b) and Scott Lash (1994a and 1994b) — becomes appealing. In contrast to relatively random, unorganized, and individualized micro-politics which postmodern theorists argue for, reflexive modernization allows for more organized collective action, albeit in domains that are outside of the traditional confines of statist politics and may therefore take advantage of postmodern venues, such as cyberspace. This is appealing for the Philippines, a society which already has a preponderance of de facto postmodern attributes, such as weak, if not absent, grand narratives for nation-building, an equally weak state, a weak science culture, and the relatively high usage of internet social

networking sites, but whose dominant political culture enables, and whose political and economic problems require, more collective action.

This article will focus first on a critique of the deficiencies of postmodern theory in terms of its conservative implications, and then would try to rescue it from accusations of being apolitical by re-visiting micro-politics. It is from here that the theory of reflexive modernization will be offered to fill the gap emanating from the focus of micro-politics on individualized and seemingly random forms of action. The fourth section of the article focuses on a theoretical analysis of the applicability of reflexivity theory to the Philippine context. While empirical groundings may still be scant, the essay will argue on the basis of the possible applicability of the theory with regard to the emergence of cyber-political communities, particularly, how random, individualized interventions in social networking sites have become the foundation for what one can refer to as “cyber-collective action” and the creation of new political communities and citizenship in cyberspace. This will be illustrated in the case of how cyberspace became the locus for action in the aftermath of Typhoon Ondoy in September 2009. Finally, the article will inquire into the implications of this on the future of politics and political theorizing in the Philippines.

### **The Shortcomings of Postmodernity: Disenabling the Grand Narratives of Resistance as a Form of Political Conservatism**

Postmodern theory challenged the power of grand narratives to provide a template for political coherence, not only in the realm of theorizing but also in the domain of policy and action. By unsettling the logic of meta-narratives and by revealing their contradictions, seen when the rationality of science and the controlling state undermine the equally attractive narrative of individual freedom, postmodern theory provided a critique of the modernity project built around the idea of reason and progress anchored on the pursuit of liberation (Lyotard 1984). It is still debatable whether postmodern theory has actually succeeded in undermining statist political science beyond the academic discourses that emanate from critical theorizing. What is clear, however, is the

empirical evidence that supports the postmodern contentions of a weakened state experiencing a crisis brought about by the complexity and contradictions of modernity, a destabilized idea of a nation and a homogenous and all-encompassing polity unraveling in the face of ethnic pluralities and cultural diaspora, and a deconstructed science engaged by an expert community that has grown to be more accommodating of other sources of knowledge. Globalization, ironically, has not cemented the foot-hold of grand narratives which may naturally have been required to establish a global village, but has in fact engendered the dispersal not only of people, but of ideas and symbols across national boundaries, enabled by the information super highway, further assaulting the integrity of the homogenous and ethnic-defined nation-state.

Nevertheless, despite the preponderance of events which lend empirical support to the emergence of a political landscape that is consistent with postmodern imaginations, statist political science is able to address postmodern challenges by using the very logic upon which postmodern critiques are grounded. The preoccupation of postmodernism in showing the failure of grand narratives of modernity to provide authentic templates not only for progress, but also for political action has produced a critical discourse that also problematized grand forms of resistance, such as those that are organized around a single ideological movement like socialism or feminism. While for some, this may be a critique of the flaws of modernity, as it further reveals how politics drawn from the enlightenment ideals of freedom and liberation may not be sufficient in dealing with an increasingly confused and confusing world, it could also be seen as postmodernism's own failure to articulate a coherent form of alternative politics. In fact, postmodernism has been criticized as having acquired an anti-political stance, with its demeaning of grand ideologies for social movements and its inability to provide a coherent prescription of how to rescue modernity from its flaws.

Logically, postmodernity could not be accused of being inconsistent in its critique of grand and totalizing narratives, as it is critical to both the state and science, on one hand, and of grand ideologies of resistance,

on the other. The increasing focus on polyvocality and narrativity has valorized local, even personal, sites for political contestations, and has demystified the role of ideology as a grand text in providing logic to organized forms of political struggle. In this scenario, the act of buying pirated DVDs to circumvent the established norms of capitalism is a political action which is as valid as waging a labor strike or a boycott against the music industry. There also lies the postmodern support to the argument of privileging any type of action as legitimate in the context of its own logic, and the constant problematization by postmodernists of any attempt to bring out a unifying logic in resistive political action as a form of backsliding to a modernist, and therefore, inauthentic response. Consequently, what is revealed is the tendency for postmodern analysis to justify a form of relativism, which justifies uniqueness, and hence, salience of practices that are local, and context-specific, regardless of the nature of their politics. Here, postmodern theory finds it difficult to pass judgment on certain political actions which may have dubious agenda, without compromising its resistance to any attempt to universalize and standardize political norms. Hence, postmodernists may face difficulty to critically analyze certain cultural practices which may be problematic to modernist liberal thinking, such as those emanating from patriarchy, for example, considering that these are equally valid narratives which should be judged on their own terms, and not on some grand template emanating from Western feminist constructs. When confronted with the question of how power is exercised, academic postmodernity, as manifested in non-politicized forms of culture studies, tend to engender an “anything goes” mentality. This may prevent any meaningful analysis for change, as it also becomes suspicious of “grand narratives” of resistance. It may also tend to become politically conservative, considering that critique becomes so pluralized that any potent challenge to the status quo is diminished by an explosion of different voices, each of which should be respected.

However, having said this, it is not also useful to totally dismiss postmodern theory as an aimless critical response to the crisis of modernity that has come to engender a confused state of existence. This article hopes to recuperate and appropriate postmodern politics away

from its relativist strands, and rescue it from being totally absorbed in a state of political stalemate, if not conservatism, that only benefits exclusionary and hierarchical power relations. The challenge is to go beyond the pure postmodern constructs, and force it to adapt to the demands of societies, particularly in times of crises where the need for a political response is compelling, and where engaging in dogmatic postmodernism is a luxury one could not afford.

### **Recuperating Politics from Ordinary and Everyday Lives: Rescuing the Postmodern through Micro-Politics**

This essay argues that postmodern politics is not an oxymoron. The fixation on multiplicity of narratives and the dismissal of the power of grand ideologies may inhibit the deployment of political movements that are aimed at dismantling the state and its associated institutions for establishing political order. However, even without mobilizing a postmodern "revolution", if one is even possible, and if one looks at the existing trends, states are already unraveling in the face of new developments not only in the arena of nation-building, where the idea of a nation-state is still weak or in the process of "becoming", but even in regimes where the state has presumably become a stable template for social imagination. Failed state-building projects, such as those in many countries whose post-colonial configurations are now revealing contentious and deep seated cleavages, such as Sri Lanka, are now increasingly becoming more visible. On the other hand, even in mature political communities, cleavages are emerging along cultural identity templates.

In Europe, the cultural contestations that are created by the process of transplanting diasporic communities from Arab countries into their adoptive countries have led liberal societies such as France to impose cultural regulations on practices such as prohibiting the wearing of the veil in classrooms. In the United States (U.S.), the idea of a cohesive political community built on pluralism is being undermined by the emergence of a new kind of radical and extremist narrative, seen in the

conservative “tea party” movement that posits a new kind of cultural warfare against established political institutions. Here, the battle is no longer waged only in the halls of Congress as it debates legislative reforms such as the 2010 health care bill, but in the production of social meaning and cultural identities embedded in everyday forms of counter-discourse, which are carried in the airwaves courtesy of shock radio talk show hosts and conservative TV networks, and provided venues in real town hall meetings and in virtual conservative forums in cyberspace. The effectiveness by which the cultural divide between “their” America and those they see as “not Americans” has been constructed in popular cultural production of social meaning that even cultural products such as the movie “Avatar” has been contested and labeled by the conservatives as anti-American (Baehr & Snyder 2009). This development could not be confronted by waging “politics as usual”, but should be countered where it breeds its own assault on society—that is, in the domains of cultural production, for which, unfortunately, conventional political theory and practice are unprepared.

It is in this context then that it is not useful to simply dismiss politics in postmodernity as infeasible, if not irrelevant. What is, however, needed is to get out of an “anything goes” template, and argue that there is a postmodern template for political action; that anything, including local and personal struggles, can become political. There is even no need to recast the theory behind postmodern politics, for one has only to revisit the writings of Lyotard (1984) to be able to argue against the criticisms that consider postmodernism as anti-politics. As Leong Yew (2010) has pointed out

...in spite of the anti-essentialist nature of postmodernism, postmodernity as a condition could be noted for its increased sensitivity towards various transgressions that have emerged alongside modernity: exploitation, racism, sexism, colonialism, violence in all forms (physical, structural, epistemic) and the like. One of postmodernity’s attempts at addressing social injustice is ... its treatment of difference, which by subverting dominant narratives seeks out spaces in which the other (in this case the

identities and communities marginalized, elided, or eviscerated by their dominant counterparts) is allowed to coexist. At the same time, postmodernity is anti-essentialist and it refuses to acknowledge identities as having any real or concrete form. By doing so, it forestalls any identity from becoming hegemonic and transcendent (3).

What is needed is for postmodern theorists to argue for the transformation of the "political" away from the usual and grand templates that reside both in state apparatuses and in the social movements that challenge them.

Liotard (1984) and also Foucault (1980) and Derrida (1978 and 1988) all enabled a micro-political form of action in the context of a postmodern framework. They deployed a critique of grand narratives and great political movements, even as they argued for local, multiple, albeit dispersed forms of political action. While randomness and disorganization seem to be the main traits of postmodern micro-politics, the focus should now shift on the outcome of how these strategies are able to undermine the dominant cultural constructs, or how they are able to provide a domain for contestations to engage the emergence of narratives that threaten to provide closures for political spaces; those which have been opened already for the marginalized. While they may not be able to bring forth a revolution, they are strategies that tend to undermine the continuity of dominant narratives, and serve to provide disruptive skirmishes, which sometimes may lead to modest reform. As Agger (1998) writes, postmodern politics is in alliance with critical and feminist theories in that they

... all agree that the personal is political, auguring new social movements that spring from the ground of people's attempts to achieve modest victories in their daily lives—forming unions, improving entitlement programs, achieving educational innovations, creating noncommodified culture, organizing. Political victories are usually small ones, captured in the small stories told by people who do not live their lives according to

metanarrative scripts in which, as Hegel noted, history is the slaughter of individuals (180).

Michel de Certeau (1984) has contributed to the privileging of ordinary forms of resistance as they are able to implant into and undermine the very spaces which breed the logic of the dominant discourse. For example, while capitalist commodity production is celebrated in shopping malls, it is also in these venues where pirated DVDs and smuggled "ukay ukay" clothes are sold along corridors and hallways, as if to provide a representative mapping of power in modern malls where designer products are sold in the mainstream shops even as those that fall through the cracks of "legitimate" commodity capitalism appropriate and colonize the extra spaces at the fringes and margins of the mall. Another example would be the effectiveness by which the gay sub-culture has successfully implanted itself in the modern health clubs and gyms, which are traditionally seen to be shrines for masculine power.

James Scott (1990) has further amplified the disruptive politics which ordinary forms of resistance, which he labels as "weapons of the weak," can inflict on visible power, by describing how ordinary strategies such as feigned ignorance, pilferage, gossip-mongering, and sabotage could deny the dominant an easy victory. Mikhail Bakhtin (1984), through the metaphor of the carnival, has depicted parody and laughter as strategic weapons of the marginalized to provide momentary interruptions to, or if not coping mechanism in the face of, the dominant narratives that are deployed by the elites. Through what Claude Levi-Strauss (1966) has termed as "bricolage", ordinary people are forced to use their creativity to improvise to cope and survive in the context of forces that tend to render them powerless.

At the personal level, a more active engagement by individuals may come in the form of deploying resistive readings of dominant narratives. Here, the ordinary and everyday become spaces by which people negotiate their political identities, either by refusing to patronize objectifying narratives, or by deconstructing and reversing their meanings, and then re-appropriating these in a counter-narrative that

challenges the dominant constructs. This occurs for example, when ordinary people live lifestyles, or adopt embodiments and accessories that blatantly undermine, or ignore ordinary conventions. This type of political action is even raised to the level of cultural production by artists and other cultural workers who use their art to produce counter-cultural products through the songs, movies, soaps and other forms of popular culture that tend to interrupt and/or challenge the otherwise smooth flow of conventional cultural creations.

Yet, while there is a vast array of strategies by which postmodern micro-politics can be deployed, there is still that gap that needs to be filled in terms of going beyond what seems to be dispersed, highly individualistic and anomic activities. The challenge is to show how postmodernity can be used to engender more collective and organized action. This is particularly compelling in situations in which institutional failure, oppression and marginalization are not only individually but also collectively experienced. It is in this context that a new lens has to be deployed to extend postmodern politics beyond disruptive skirmishes to now include collective forms of action.

### **Reflexive Modernization: From Micro-Politics to Sub-Politics, Post-Scarcity and Reflexive Communities**

Reflexive modernization is a theory that goes beyond the political impasse, or the disabling of politics brought about by postmodernity. At the outset, the impression of the absence of, if not tacit opposition to, the political in postmodern theorizing is deeply rooted to the alleged inability of dispersed and individualistic forms of micro-politics not only to provide a template for collective action, but also in how they are unable to provide a coherent blue-print for any social development agenda that would address the social ills which modernity has brought, such as poverty and social inequality. Furthermore, the tendency of postmodern theory to privilege the local, ordinary and everyday cultural narratives is seen as too inauthentic to the needs of societies facing extreme economic, political and environmental challenges. It is against these criticisms that

the theory of reflexive modernization, through the illustrative works of Ulrich Beck (1994a and 1994b), Anthony Giddens (1994a and 1994b) and Scott Lash (1994a and 1994b), emerges to provide a more optimistic blue-print for postmodern politics.<sup>1</sup>

Beck (1994b) raised the possibility for a new form of politics to emerge, which he labeled as "sub-politics" from the plural and local centers of ordinary lives, as it allows for the adoption of self-organization by individuals as they act collectively to deploy oppositional politics operating outside the state apparatuses. This is due to the erosion of the power of nation-states to be the sole source of social order. While they may appear as diverse, and may require minimal coordination, these forms of collective action — with their privileging of human autonomy over dependency, decentralized decision-making over centralized and rigid forms of organization, and open dialogues over top-down conversations — have disorganized the usual structures not only of politics but also of capitalist production. Self-organization is concretely seen in the explosion of self-help cooperatives, community and neighborhood associations, and other local groups that emerge not only to address the local economic and livelihood needs of their members, but also diverse issues ranging from housing, health, human rights, peace and security to environmental protection. Beck argues that key to the process of self-organization is the mobilization of "critical expert specialists" from the "professions" and the "vocations". While one can be tempted to limit this only to academic experts, this essay argues for liberalizing this notion of the "critical expert" in order to engender a new face in the interactions between intellectual labor and political activism, which should no longer be limited only to people from the natural and social sciences from academe, but would necessarily include the humanities and all types of organic intellectuals, from sustainable farmer practitioners, street-level tech-savvy bloggers, to grassroots theater artists.

On the possible backlash against local and small struggles in terms of their being economically untenable in the face of material deprivation, a criticism likely to be raised by those who are concerned about economic progress, Giddens (1994a) argued for a "post-scarcity" order which

recognizes that people are beginning to appreciate values that go beyond the dualism of scarcity and abundance. This occurs with the weakening or total dissolution of the drive towards continuous capitalist accumulation brought about by the inherent contradictions between capitalist production on one hand and ecological stability on the other, what Giddens has labeled as "contradictions of abundance." It is no accident, then, that the changes in the discourse on development away from capitalist accumulation into sustainability have brought with them changes in institutional arrangements that enabled plural, localized and community-based resource management activities, thereby providing a coherent interface between Giddens' "post-scarcity" with that of Beck's "sub-politicization". It is here that collective actions are both enabled and required to provide the emerging global order a new dynamic for action.

The emphasis on collective action is further made by Lash (1994a and 1994b), who valued the importance of communities of understanding through the mobilization of social meaning in popular culture. Lash (1994b) anchors his ideas on three important propositions, namely: (1) that social structures in society have been replaced by information and communication technologies; (2) that social meaning is produced not only in the domain of cognition or understanding, but also in the domain of aesthetics or cultural creation and interpretation; and (3) that individualization in modernity eventually yields to the need for a community. This is enabled by individuals who yearn for affinity at a time when individualizing technologies render them physically isolated.

While modern information and communication technologies such as the internet may appear to enable individualistic behavior, seen for example in internet-based games in which interactions with real opponents are replaced by simulated virtual competitors, the advent of internet social networks is an empirical evidence to the emergence of new domains of interactions found in cyberspace, in its virtual communities. Thus, no matter how physically isolated the modern individual is, the need to identify with collectives becomes even more intense in postmodernity. To address the suspicious stance which

postmodern deconstructionists may have about any attempt to collectivize individual action and provide some foundation for collective action, Lash (1994b) argues for a "hermeneutics of retrieval" which will "attempt to lay open the ontological foundations of communal being-in-the-world" (146) and "gain access to the shared meanings which are conditions of existence" which for him "are the very existence, of the 'we'" (146). In this context, for Lash, the domain for contestations and struggle no longer lies in commodity production, but in the production of social meanings through cultural processes. For him, a community is formed not because of shared interests or shared resources and material entitlements, but due to shared lifestyles, meanings, practices and obligations.

The centrality of communication systems in the theory of reflexivity is emphasized by Lash, as he engages Beck and Giddens in their privileging of expert-systems. Key to this is the argument that in postmodernity, expertise becomes contested in political public spheres as objects of democratic dialogue, and eventually yields to a process of socially constructing reality. It is in this context that institutions become more cultural, as they are semantically produced through images in popular culture. As Lash has pointed out, "an increasing proportion of our social interactions and communicative exchanges are going on external to institutions," (Lash 1994a: 209) and that these occur between "radically individualized" subjects now engaged in "tight networks of small 'morally overheated' affinity groups" (Lash 1994a: 209). The existence of these affinity groups is sustained by a kind of trust that is emanating from what he termed as "semantic worlds and an ethics of care" (Lash 1994a: 211) that naturally exist in communities operating in a culture that is driven by information and communication structures and processes.

It is in this context that this article will now focus on how cyberspace, and the virtual community that it enables, can become sites for postmodern politics beyond individual action, and take on a more collective sense of purpose. By its very structure, cyberspace is a domain for postmodernism in its individualistic manifestation, through personal blogs and personal email accounts. However, cyberspace also enables the translation of this individualism into communication technology-

mediated affinity groups such as chat rooms and social networking sites. Reflexive political action in postmodernity is thus realized when cyberspace transforms individual discourse into collective voices where these affinity groups become conduits for the emergence of virtual interest and pressure groups, albeit anomic in character, but nevertheless may have concrete impacts not necessarily on the state, but usually as an alternative to it.

Cyberspace, through the blogosphere, fosters a nesting ground for everyday forms of resistance aimed not only at ordinary power contestations but even in direct confrontation to the coercive apparatus of the state. This was seen, for example, in Iran during the events which followed the 2009 Presidential elections, where internet social networks like Facebook and Twitter broke through the restrictions imposed by the *mullahs*, and became sources of information to a world used to CNN, BBC and Fox as their sources. Here, ordinary citizens in cyberspace became a virtual community that acquired political character as they challenged the monopoly of two expert-systems: that of the conventional media practitioners who are experts in being the usual sources of information, and of the Iranian authorities who are experts in the art of terror and who had monopoly over the use of violence. A similar development emerged in response to the Egyptian government's attempts to limit, if not shut down, communication systems in February of 2011 in reaction to the political crisis brought about by calls for Hosni Mubarak, who has been ruling the country for three decades, to step down. Telecomix, a cyber-based international group of anonymous activists, used the internet and other new media platforms to inform Egyptians both in Egypt and abroad about their communication options to go around the restrictions imposed on the media. Telecomix has launched the same type of operations in China, Iran and Tunisia (Kanalley & Bialer 2011).

The emergence of "citizen-journalists" that take advantage of the new spaces created by new information and communication platforms is but one manifestation of the increasingly complex terrain by which societies in late capitalism, which is how the postmodern period is referred to by Jameson (1991), are dealing with risk and uncertainties

(Beck 1994b). While science and the state were the conventional sources which provided mechanisms for managing risks during the period of modernity, the increasing complexity of risk regimes — from environmental stresses brought by anthropogenic causes engendered by industrial society to social, political and economic stresses emanating from the contradictions of globalization — has seriously compromised the ability of the state and of science to deal with risks, even leading to a “crisis” in crisis management.

The complexity emanates from the fact that while crisis during modernity was external to the existence of the state and of science, and emerged as objects of management, the risks in late capitalism struck deep at the very core of statist institutions, and even undermined not only the controlling mechanisms of the state, but also compromised the rationality of science to provide definitive explanations. For example, the awakening of identity politics leading to what the Western press has labeled as acts of terrorism has become faceless enemies that escape statist confinement, as it is expressed through a different kind of warfare that is both political and cultural in character. The certainty of science has been challenged by the vexing uncertainty of environmental and technological pressures brought about by internal fragmentation within science itself, where the logic of falsifiability as fulcrum for establishing scientific knowledge, as pointed out by Popper (1963), was transformed into a powerful source of disempowering doubt about its power.

Drawing from Beck’s (1994b) arguments, it is now logical to claim that risks that were external to the state and science, treated as problems to be managed, or enemies to be neutralized, migrated into the core to fundamentally weaken statist control and scientific rationality. This has heightened the risks and dangers since not only are the state and science endangered, but they also now become sources of dangers and risks themselves. Thus, the discourse of uncertainty is heightened, even as politics leaves traditional ideological polarities in the left-right axis to take on a discourse of “others” and “selves”, of being insiders or outsiders in a social body, and of being with or against self-defined and socially constructed templates for identification, hence the centrality of

communities, which in the period of late capitalism, emerged into a complex array of social collectives, from diasporic communities scattered in the global cultural spaces of migration, to virtual communities populating cyberspace enabled by modern information and communication technologies. It is also here that expertise in politics escapes the confines of traditional political actors, even as expertise in science breaks free of its traditional boundaries to include other sources of knowledge and truth.

The proliferation of new forms of political agency and new sources of knowledge to contend with the crises of modernity is enabled by cyberspace, particularly through the social networks. Here, ordinary citizens are able to articulate their critical engagements about a whole range of social issues. This effectively democratizes the process for producing truth and knowledge. Thus, cyberspace is no longer just a domain for the enjoyment of pleasure by ordinary citizens, as they exchange pleasantries through e-mails, maintain their virtual farms, and engage in simulated battles. In addition to enabling social expressions and virtual connectivity, where people establish and strengthen their social affinity groups in the virtual world as both extensions and translations of their real communities, cyberspace open spaces for the expression of social and political critiques, where there is possibility that the individual discourse seeking connectivity in the internet can be translated into collective forms of resistance and citizenship.

The emergence of virtual political communities, heralded by some as the new face of politics (Rodgers 2003), has effectively transformed the nature of the public sphere (Sassi 2001). Contrary to some author's doubts about the radical extent to which the internet can alter the political landscape by arguing that it is just merely another domain for political communication (Corner 2001), Rushkoff (2003) believes that the virtuality of the internet and the new symbolic power that it evokes enable the emergence of new political identities. These identities are both shaped by and enable new forms of political discourse, and consequently push politics to alter its mechanisms, strategies and tactics. This eventually creates a new form of citizenship through the emergence of "netizens"

or citizens on the net, even as the internet provides mechanisms that effectively recuperate the individualized and skeptical citizen in the net and translate the encounter in cyberspace away from being merely for pleasure and entertainment to new forms of cyberspace-mediated collective action. Here, cyberspace becomes a domain for the articulation of innovative mechanisms to input into the political process, as well as of innovative ways to demand changes in how politics is usually done.

### **Applicability of Reflexivity Theory in the Philippines: The Case of Cyberspace-Mediated Forms of Political Action**

This article will now venture into a theoretical analysis of the applicability of Beck's sub-politicization, Giddens' post-scarcity institutional arrangements and Lash's communities of understanding to the Philippine context. There is indication that reflexive modernization may be compatible with the Filipino habitus as theorized by indigenous scholarly narratives. One can safely hypothesize that there is a proliferation of postmodern elements in Philippine society articulating with an array of organic communitarian local narratives. The possibility of sub-politics is enabled by the relative weakness of the Filipino nation-state and the presence of plural, everyday and ordinary institutions in civil society. The seeds of a post-scarcity social order may be teased from the numerous instances in which it may appear that the driving force in ordinary Pinoy lives is not the discourse of abundance being craved for in the face of scarcity, but the non-material symbolic entitlements, ranging from maintaining or recovering stable traditional kinship bonds to protecting ancestral domains. Finally, the presence of reflexive communities is strengthened by the relative strength of family and kinship in contrast to individuals, and where community is more privileged over the self. One can even hypothesize that the complexity of social problems in the Philippines demands collective forms of action, and is not framed in the language of rights and individual redemption but in the language of collectives and communities. As indigenous theorists argue, the concept of "kapwa" is central to Filipino psychology (Enriquez 1978), even as a non-hierarchical conceptualization of the

“other” permeates the local narratives, wherein the “other” is just seen as different, and not as necessarily subordinated. In fact, the relation of the self to the other, in contrast to the Western construct of the latter being marginal to the former, is reversed with the centrality of “kapwa,” a construct wherein the “self” is subordinated to the “other” in the process of building social affinities and relationships, and the non-repressive deployment of the “other” that provides a stable template for the Filipino as we collectively produce our social meanings.

The postmodern elements of Philippine society are deeply embedded in its tradition. Inherent in the theory of reflexivity is the transformation in how traditions are deployed in a post-traditional society. As Giddens (1994a) theorizes, far from being destroyed in reaction to the weakening of traditional institutions, not only of cultural organic institutions but even those associated with traditional politics and traditionalism in modern science, tradition persisted, albeit in two forms. There are those old traditions that are now re-formulated in the context of a plurality of values where they are casted in the new mold of tolerance of differences, even as others are transformed into what can be interpreted as re-emergent forms of “fundamentalism” now being appropriated by groups in defense of their identities. Indigenous academic narratives in *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* (Enriquez 1978), *Pantayong Pananaw* (Salazar 1991) and *Filipinolohiya* (Covar 1991) can be interpreted in the context of these new forms of “fundamentalism,” even as they are forced to contend with the plurality of Filipino identities and values in a globalized environment (Mendoza 2002).

As pointed out in the previous section of this article, the potential of cyberspace to create new forms of citizenship through the formation of sub-political action rests on the communicative structures in which virtual affinity groups are created in social networking sites, effectively transforming individual posts, tweets and blogs into a collective sense of community, albeit issue-specific and may not necessarily be sustained. In the case of the Philippines, the emergence of an issue, or the occurrence of a crisis moment—from natural disasters, to assaults to national pride by radio talk show hosts, or by comments of others in

cyberspace—has proven to be an effective trigger for the outpouring of critical commentaries, leading to the creation of threads, web-pages, and chat-topics which Pinoy “netizens” (citizens on the net) read, follow and actively comment on. While many of these remain at the level of virtual protests, or of anomic pressure quickly dissipating as a new issue emerges, there is also the possibility that such instant and transient communities of understanding can lead to more action-oriented mobilization. Cyberspace can provide a venue for ordinary citizens not only to be informed but also to become information bearers, as what happened during the May 2010 elections (Calonzo 2010), even as it can become a platform to voice out discontent, as what was seen in the protests launched in cyberspace against high rates of electricity (Ho 2010).

The crisis that was generated by Typhoon Ondoy in September 2009, when the worst flooding in the history of Metro Manila in about four decades since 1967 occurred, provided an opportunity for the new found power of the internet to generate a sub-political type of mobilization. Confronted with the inability of state institutions to provide immediate relief, ordinary netizens used cyberspace to create virtual networks of support to flood victims. Ordinary bloggers posted in their websites useful information, such as the one provided by “Jane” in her blog entry on September 27, 2009 entitled “How you can help victims of Tropical Storm Ketsana/Ondoy.” In her blog, “Jane” detailed the places where and ways how one can send money or goods, or where one can volunteer to help in packing relief goods for the victims of the calamity (“Jane” 2009). The global reach of the internet enabled web pages to provide information on how Filipinos living abroad can send their contributions, as exemplified by the thread in the on-line community pinoyexchange.com entitled “How Pinoys abroad can help Ondoy Victims” created by a member “tina11” on September 28, 2009 (“tina11” 2009). Experts also contributed their time to provide useful information outside the context of the usual route or medium for expressing them (i.e. bureaucratic channels, scientific venues), thereby validating the claim made by Beck on the emerging phenomenon of a new form of expertise as a critical enabler of sub-political action. An example of this, as cited by Calonzo (2009), is the case of “KaninLamig,” a techno-savvy blogger

who created an interactive map using Google pinpointing locations where there were reported emergency cases for rescue, evacuation and food relief. Video and still images were also posted in individual blogsites and uploaded in video-sharing platforms such as Youtube showing the extent of the devastation.

Reacting to these interventions by netizens or cyber-citizens, ordinary citizens responded by donating money or their time to volunteer as groups, or individually, through their local community civic groups, schools and offices, or through media organizations which provided the conduit to translate internet-mediated calls for mobilization into actual collective action. Anna Bueno, for example, detailed how she reacted to the posts in Facebook and tweets in Twitter by volunteering her time in packing relief goods in her school (Bueno 2009). On a larger picture, the reaction by ordinary people to the crisis illustrated how

...through clicks, posts, tweets and blogs, Filipinos found alternative means to extend simple acts of help to those in need of them. The "Ondoy" experience showed that the Filipino sense of community really can overcome any storm — with a little help from technology (Calonzo 2009)"

While cyberspace provided a venue for citizen volunteerism during the crisis, it also enabled critical interventions aimed both at the state and at individual actors. Critical comments about the inability of government to deal effectively with the crisis were posted in cyber-community chat rooms and by critical bloggers. Ordinary citizens even became instant investigative reporters, such as the case of the blogger "ellaganda" who provided images of allegedly rotting relief goods in one government warehouse. The case further illustrated how forms of cyber-resistance could be enabled when attempts to block the website were undermined by other bloggers, like "jennieperson" who succeeded in grabbing the images and sharing it in her site, and "lizziebizzie" who even created a thread in pinoyexchange.com on the issue ("lizziebizzie" 2009). A different form of cyber-collective action emerged after a Filipina living in the middle east by the name of Jacque Bermejo supposedly posted an insulting remark in her Facebook page which went like this:

*buti n lng am hir in dubai! maybe so many sinners bak der! so yeah deserving wat hapend! [I'm glad I am here in Dubai. Maybe there are many sinners back there (in the Philippines) so they deserve what happened.]*

This angered many Filipinos and created the equivalent of a lynch mob in cyberspace. This was even translated into an on-line petition letter circulated on the net sent to Bermejo's employer in Dubai condemning her behavior. Eventually, Bermejo issued a public statement which claimed that a poser used her identity (Lopez 2009).

The actions engendered by Typhoon Ondoy may initially appear to constitute individualized forms of interventions from concerned citizens. However, the sub-political element of this cyber-mediated awakening of collective civic-mindedness could not be dismissed. Such forces us to redefine collective action in the context of the emergence of new forms of citizenship, and of new ways by which people "act together." Collective action needs to be redefined as no longer limited to a group of people who act together in "real" time and space, but could also be manifested in a network of individuals linked in cyberspace acquiring a sense of collectivity to act as a "virtual" community in real time. In addition to motivating people to actually and physically volunteer in real spaces to help pack relief goods, or to do relief work in flooded communities, cyberspace also provided a venue for people unknown to each other, most of whom are using pseudonyms or "handles," to act as a virtual collective, exchanging information, sharing their thoughts, and even initiating the writing of petition letters or engaging in cyber-forms of resistance to undermine attempts of the state to censor, or to expose its perceived ineptness and failure to handle the situation.

Outside the context of the Ondoy experience, there is evidence to show that virtual citizenship has also created a new impetus for changes in how politics is engaged in by its practitioners. Conscious of the power of the internet, political actors have adjusted their strategies and now make use of cyberspace in political campaigns and in actual governance, thereby leading to "e-governance" as a new domain by which traditional

political institutions deliver their mandate. Drawing inspiration from Barack Obama's successful use of internet social networks during the 2008 U.S. Presidential elections, the 2010 elections in the Philippines saw a heightened use of Facebook and Twitter by candidates. Traditional politicians are now actively engaging netizens in cyberspace through their own Facebook and Twitter accounts. For their part, civil society activists have recognized the power of the internet to establish communities of cooperation, understanding and even resistance within and across national boundaries on wide-ranging issues, further lending support to Lash's idea of reflexive communities. Citizens, on the other hand, have found in cyberspace a new and faster venue for providing critical commentaries as inputs to political decision-making. The rapid deployment in cyberspace of citizen opinions creates a sense of urgency that leads to quicker reaction from the state. This becomes evidence of the increasing transformation of politics in the postmodern period of late capitalism. This is also enabling the transformation of postmodern politics from a pessimistic to an optimistic pathway of encountering the challenges of a crises-ridden post-industrial society in late capitalism. This is founded not on the breakdown and hopelessness of politics, but on its rescue through the emergence of sub-political action inspired by reflexive communities of understanding taking advantage of a new platform for the creation of social meaning residing in cyberspace.

### **The Prospects for Reflexivity in Politics In the Philippines**

In the period of postmodernity, the breakdown of the totalizing narratives found in a controlling state and a rationalizing science enabled the development of many spaces for contestations. While there is a risk that these spaces may explode into an incoherent, individualistic and apolitical social landscape, this article argued that such may be avoided. The theory of reflexivity allows for a transition from what can be considered as a field of "apolitical" and "anti-political" practices in reaction to the failure of grand narratives, both in their dominant and resistive manifestations, to provide coherent explanations and solutions to the complex challenges of late capitalism. In this context, individualistic

micro-politics and collectivist sub-politics are now being offered as potential alternatives. While the transition from grand political mobilization to micro-politics is driven by the contradictions and failure of the meta-narratives of modernity (Surber 1998), this article has argued that one of the drivers for the transitioning from micro-politics at the individual level towards sub-politics carried out by reflexive groups sharing a communication platform, which may be either real or virtual, is the existence of a specific crisis.

Crises abound in late capitalism and provide many avenues for new risk management schemes to be crafted from a new set of expertise other than those residing in statist politics and academic science. This new expert-system that challenges traditional political and scientific knowledge finds a nesting ground in cyberspace. As one author has pointed out,

The main figures of cyberspace—the cyber-surfer who explores the Web, the cyber-smith who builds its places and founds its institutional sites, and the cyber-evangelist who promotes ideas, invites attention, and lures passers-by—are no longer the stable, coherent and rational selves of the Modern School, but the petulant, playful, multi-centered, disembodied ‘spirits’ of postmodernism. They do not recognize such things as ‘universal truth’ and reject the belief that reason and science offer a stable foundation for knowledge and ethical behavior (Mihalache 2000).

The main challenge, therefore, is how to mobilize the individual cyber-surfer to become a cyber-citizen, or a netizen. This may be a challenging task, considering that those who populate cyberspace are individuals who may be living in anonymity apart from their real selves, and whose primary engagements are driven by pleasure and desire for entertainment on their free time. It is a challenge since cyberspace may be considered as a refuge for those who are tired of or are disinterested in politics. In the virtual world, ordinary individuals live out their fantasies even as some of them may be escaping from the darkness of traditional politics and the gloom of realist identity constructs. Hence, they preoccupy themselves

with simulated battles and virtual farms, as they reconnect with old acquaintances and new friends.

However, tipping points and seemingly unpredictable conjunctures can transform these individualistic pursuits into collective social action, as what happened in the case of Typhoon Ondoy. There were also many other instances where collective outrage was expressed in cyberspace leading to e-petitions being circulated and signed over certain actuations or articulations that offended the Pinoy sensibilities, from a shock radio host vilifying boxing icon Manny Pacquiao, or a U.S. soap opera demeaning Filipino medical practitioners, to Kris Aquino simply inflicting her annoying self to the candidacy of her brother Noytoy; from the President's speech writer making offensive comments about a foreign country, to skyrocketing rates of electricity in the country, to the ineptness of the police during the Quirino hostage taking incident, to the alleged plagiarism of one of the Supreme Court Justices. These become proofs to the enormous capacity of cyberspace to rescue the lost and individualized citizen, and recuperate them to engage in new forms of virtual grassroots politics.

Cyberspace is indeed a very postmodern space, even as it enables the emergence of new forms of citizenship. It is a place where weapons of the weak, sustained by the power of anonymity, can help launch collective action that can be more effective than the everyday skirmishes imagined by De Certeau (1984) and Scott (1990). In cyberspace, communities emerge in the context of shared meanings, and not just shared resources, even as narratives, as Baudrillard (1998) has theorized, become the core logic that binds these virtual collectives. As Mihalache (2000) pointed out:

The 'little' local narratives of cyberspace are mainly personal stories, attempts to explain one's peculiarity, one's unique experiences, one's persistent terrors. In cyberspace, one does not exist except in one's story.

The experience in Typhoon Ondoy illustrated how, in times of crisis when social solidarity is in high demand, and when the state breaks

down, and when scientific rationality takes a leave from providing coherent explanations to an unexpected event, the ordinary Pinoy was able to translate individual virtual spaces through their blogs and social networking accounts into powerful domains of collective political action. Yet, there is still much to be known about this new form of polity. As Nunes (1995) stated:

...(the) Internet might offer a virtuality which resists our attempts to totalize it as a world, presenting instead loci for playing with the assumptions that we have taken for granted in modernity: community, information, liberation, self. In general, virtual communities pose more questions about how individuals construct connections than they answer concerning the ends of achieving electronic democracy.

The challenge, therefore, for political theorizing is to examine closely its concepts, analytical tools and methods of inquiry, and revise these if needed to accommodate these new forms of political interactions. In saying this, one has to go beyond the e-governance discourse, where cyberspace is used by the state and by established institutions to merely enhance their performance, and must also accommodate the more critical need of looking at cyberspace not as an appendage of the state, but as an alternative to it.

The potential role of cyber-mediated social interaction in the Philippines is promising. There is high density of internet use among Pinoys. In 2009, the Philippines was listed as 14<sup>th</sup> for the most number of Facebook users in the world (Eldon 2009). In 2010, the country jumped to sixth in terms of number of users (Dimacali 2010b), and became the highest in social networking engagement in the Asia-Pacific (GMA News and Public Affairs 2010) and fifth in the world (Dimacali 2010c). What is even more remarkable is that the high density of Facebook users in the country, which is already higher than any other Southeast Asian country, is also found to be evenly distributed across the Philippines (Dimacali 2010a).

Furthermore, there is reason to believe that there is a friendly landscape for postmodern political imaginations in the country, seen in

the perceived weak presence of the two grand narratives of modernity, namely the state and science. The relative weakness of the Philippine state has been repeatedly lamented both by academic scholars and by political commentators. The weak presence of science not only as a budgetary priority by the state, but also in the consciousness of the Pinoys, has been written about by some scholars, one of whom is Raul Pertierra (2006). He argued that certain traditional Filipino cultural constructs that have escaped colonization are bane to scientific progress. He posits that:

An emphasis on private family interests, the manipulation of personal interests to achieve collective goals, the autonomy of local structures, a syncretic religiosity and the view of nature as animated are some of the orientations that either escaped or subverted colonial policies. Both religion and science have been adapted to indigenous conditions. The compartmentalized and hierarchic indigenous cultures escaped the imperial designs of both old and new colonial masters. ... But what escaped the colonial project may now be the major reason for the country's poor performance in science and technology (22).

This critique of Pertierra is significant to the operationalization of reflexivity theory, since what has been perceived as societal flaws could in fact become the base from where new types of political discourse can be imagined. What he is describing is in fact the nature of a Filipino habitus that has elements of organic postmodernity, seen in the autonomy of local structures. What he refers to as family-orientedness, when taken in the context of the extended family structures of Philippine society, and the privileging of collective goals over personal interests may be seen as characteristics of a society that is at ease with the prevalence of social affinities, and by extension, for the operationalization of reflexivity in the establishment of communities of understanding. Pertierra laments these as constraints for the advancement of science, but taken differently, these are in themselves deeply embedded and organic postmodern cultural constructs that enable Philippine society to have stronger coping mechanisms when both centralized state structures and totalizing

scientific doctrines are weakened or fail to perform their roles. Enabled by the challenge to deal with the aftermath of Typhoon Ondoy, this was seen in how ordinary citizens, as mediated by new media platforms in cyberspace, filled the gap left by a weak state's failure to act in times of crisis.

Hence, what we have are attributes which offer possibilities for an alternative social order that is creatively radical, and is more than prepared to take on the challenges of late capitalism's complexity. What is now left to be harnessed is for political science theorizing to become part of establishing what Lash (1994b) has referred to as a "hermeneutics of retrieval" and begin to understand that politics exists outside the state, and social order is maintained, not only through the rationality of science, but also from the authenticity and relevance of social meanings relative to those that are supposed to be at the core of politics — the citizen, who is now located not only physically in the real world but also virtually in cyberspace. ❖

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The discussions on the ideas of Beck, Giddens and Lash are based on a reading of their works contained in the volume they all edited. However, further understanding of their arguments was enabled by an internet-based material written by Richard Richter (2003) summarizing the key arguments raised by the three authors.

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