



The sovereign trickster: death and laughter in the age of Duterte

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The Sovereign Trickster: Death and Laughter in the Age of Duterte. By VICENTE L. RAFAEL. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022. xi, 173 pp. \$99.95 (cloth); \$25.95 (paper).

With the election of Rodrigo Duterte to the Philippine presidency in May 2016 came a flood of academic work on Philippine politics on a scale not seen since the transition from Marcos to Aquino and from dictatorship to democracy in the mid-late 1980s. Alongside investigations by human rights groups into Duterte's murderous 'War on Drugs', and in parallel with a surge of scholarship on 'populism' and 'democratic backsliding' in countries as varied as Brazil, Hungary, India, Italy, Poland, and the United States, this scholarship focused on an urgently unsettling puzzle: why and how could a politician with such pronounced 'illiberal', homicidal, misogynistic, and psychopathic tendencies win election to the Philippine presidency and continue to enjoy not only acquiescence in his authoritarian aggregation of powers at the expense of civil liberties and human rights but also high levels of popularity across the full geographic breadth and sociological spectrum of the Philippine archipelago? But with the end of Duterte's six-year term and the election of Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos, Jr. to the presidency in mid-2022, the unnerving 'anomaly' of Duterte quickly lost its apparent significance, only to be replaced by a new wave of anxiety and analysis focused on the implications of the return to power of the Marcos family for the future of the Philippines and for scholarly understandings of politics in the country.

Against this backdrop, the February 2022 publication of Vicente Rafael's *The Sovereign Trickster: Death and Laughter in the Age of Duterte* might appear to have been somewhat ill-timed. But nothing could be farther from the truth. This brilliant book provides a highly original, illuminating, and insightful theorization, historical contextualization, thick description, and in-depth analysis of the style and substance of Duterte's presidency, reminding readers that politics in the twenty-first century is too complicated and interesting to leave to

political scientists alone. If out of all the books and articles written about Duterte – or about contemporary Philippine politics – we could pick only one to read, save, and teach, this would be it for sure.

Rafael's *Sovereign Trickster* begins with a historical contextualization and theorization of the Duterte presidency. Here Rafael elegantly and effectively synthesizes the work of other scholars to show how elections have served not only to produce and reproduce 'democracy' in the Philippines since the turn of the twentieth century, but also to empower and entrench an oligarchy in government and the commanding heights of the economy, and to domesticate if not formally disenfranchise the broad mass of the population by diverting their mobilizational energies from collective struggles into narrowly constrained forms of electoral competition. He also stresses the importance of counterinsurgency in the origins and operations of the coercive apparatuses of the Philippine state, while situating the contemporary political economy of the archipelago within the global context of neoliberal forms of governance around the world.

But the signature contribution of *The Sovereign Trickster* to our understanding of Philippine politics and society in the era of Duterte and beyond finds its theoretical inspiration elsewhere. Building on the works of Michel Foucault and Achille Mbembe, Rafael couples his close, careful analysis of the grotesque 'necropolitics' of Duterte's 'War on Drugs' with a commensurately critical account of the seemingly more benign 'biopolitics' of the conditional cash transfer (CCT), education, health care, and other social welfare programs of the Duterte administration. Drawing on a diverse range of previous studies and other sources, he shows how a distinctly gendered divide between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor citizens of the country is produced and reproduced in ways which serve to discipline and divide the population, with good-for-nothing un(der)employed Filipinos susceptible to drinking and illegal drug consumption pathologized and punished through arbitrary violence and incarceration, even as overworked – and often overseas – Filipinas are enlisted as primary

caretakers and custodians of the production and reproduction of the family and the household as an economic and social unit. Rafael thus shows how biopolitics, necropolitics, and widespread precarity combined to create what Nicole Curato has termed a ‘politics of anxiety’, enabling Duterte’s election in 2016. Viewed from this perspective, Duterte’s ‘War on Drugs’ – and its earlier iterations dating back at least to the 1990s in the Philippines and much earlier elsewhere – represent not (only) the idiosyncratic obsession of a single (psychopathological) president, but (also) the deeper structural logics of neoliberal governance in the contemporary Philippines and elsewhere.

But, as the title and subtitle of *The Sovereign Trickster: Death and Laughter in the Age of Duterte* suggest, Rafael’s book goes beyond such historical contextualization, theorization, and (post)structural analysis to investigate both the underlying logics of Duterte’s ‘populist’ discourse and the lived experiences of urban poor residents of Metro Manila amidst the violence and mayhem of the so-called ‘War on Drugs’. Rafael shows how Duterte engages in what Achille Mbembe terms an “aesthetics of vulgarity,” indulging in a kind of performative excess, a Lacanian ‘surplus of enjoyment’, which “gives expression to what is at once forbidden and desired” (p. 81) and thus can (only) be (safely) enjoyed vicariously by his supporters. Drawing readers’ attention to the extensive ethnographic research of Karl Hapal, Steffen Jensen, and Anna Warburg in urban poor areas of Metro Manila, Rafael highlights the prevailing power of fear among residents in the face of the extrajudicial killings and extortionate exactions by the police and other subcontracted agents of the ‘War on Drugs’, raising serious questions about public survey results demonstrating high levels of ‘satisfaction’ with and ‘support’ for Duterte throughout his presidency. Thus the book provides readers with much to think about and much to think with, not only for purposes of understanding the Duterte presidency and contemporary Philippine politics more broadly, but also for understanding

‘populism’, ‘democratic backsliding’, and ‘electoral authoritarianism’ under conditions of neoliberal governance and widespread precarity in settings across the world today.

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