

Sagada Penano

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PWR 2: The Rhetoric of Activism

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Ang Kanilang Kwento, Ang Aming Kwento (Their Story, Our Story)

The Influence of Past Revolutionaries on Filipino Activists Today

“Isang bagsak” means “one down” in Tagalog, the national language of the Philippines. This phrase is yelled in unison at the end of Stanford Pilipino American Student Union (PASU) meetings, as a way of signalling a day of work is done- one down. This closing ceremony isn’t unique to PASU, however, many Filipino organizations across the globe do this at the end of their meetings as well. All of these groups take inspiration from the Filipino and Latino farmworkers who were part of the United Farm Workers movement in the 1960s. The United Farmworkers Movement, popularized by Cesar Chavez, was actually started by Larry Itliong, a Filipino farmworker and labor organizer (Romasanta). In the early days of the movement, Filipino and Latino farmworkers would end the day by clapping to the beats of their heart, and eventually speeding up and getting louder until they all yell “ISANG BANGSAK!” in unity and stomp their feet on the ground. This unity clap didn’t only signal the end of a work day. It overcame language barriers while showing solidarity between the two races. The United Farmworkers Movement was a success, and by 1970, grape growers signed their first union contracts, ensuring better pay, benefits, and protections (Kim). Why then, are activists still shouting “Isang Bagsak” at the end of their meetings? Even though benefits were granted to farmworkers in 1970, Filipino workers and activists today are still fighting for workers rights.

Filipinos have been organizing for workers rights for decades now, and land reform for even longer. Contemporary activists continue the fight, guided by the history and experiences of past revolutionaries.

A History of Revolution

To understand the influence of past revolutionaries on Filipino activism today, we must first understand what they were revolting against. The Philippines has a long history of colonialism, starting with Spanish colonization in 1565. 300 years later, the Filipino people revolted in the Philippine Revolution of 1896. The revolutionary society, the Katipunan, organized an armed struggle against the Spanish colonizers, and other revolutionary leaders were able to build a sense of Philippine nationalism and weaken the Spaniards, eventually cornering the last of the Spanish army in Manila. Conveniently, the Spanish-American war was also at its peak. Rather than admitting defeat by Filipino people, the Spanish secretly negotiated with the United States to stage a mock battle at Manila, resulting in the Americans defeating the Spanish and acquiring the Philippines. Though the Philippines tried to declare independence, the United States refused, and the Philippines once again fell into the hands of colonizers (Gonzalves). However, it wouldn't be long until the Filipino people revolted again.

The Philippine American war is often thought of as a continuation of the Philippine Revolution against the Spanish. The Philippine Army continued to fight against their colonizers, until they were pushed back into the mountains. Even after the army retreated into the mountains, leaders in various provinces continued to attack U.S. troops using guerilla warfare, a tactic also used against the Spanish in the original revolution. The Philippine-American war was merciless and bloody. Roughly 1500 American soldiers died in combat, but 20,000+ Filipino

combatants and 200,000+ Filipino citizens died as a result of the war (Ray). This extremely high number of civilian deaths emphasizes the recurring idea that Filipinos are fighting on their own land, for their own land. They are fighting for their right to live on their land, not for power or control over another country. Filipino activists and revolutionaries fight for issues that are tied to the commonwealth, a core idea that many activists today base their intentions off of. Though the Philippine-American War was unsuccessful in granting the Philippines independence, independence was eventually granted in 1946 at the end of World War 2. Hooray! The Philippines is finally independent! Filipino people can stop fighting for control of their own land, right? Though this is the happy ending that many Filipinos envisioned, it was far from the truth, and the fight would have to continue.

In 1972, Dictator Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in the Philippines. The Marcos Era is often referred to as the “darkest chapter” in Philippine history. Under martial law, the Filipino people had no voice. Anyone who opposed Marcos would be imprisoned and tortured (Sison). From 1972 to 1981, numerous amounts of human rights violations took place, including unlawful imprisonment, torture, and extrajudicial killings of civilians. Filipino people were arrested for any reason, and no reason at all, since Marcos had absolute control over the country. Marcos was also known for working closely with the United States, and many people see this era as a form of United States imperialism (Ramos). Marcos would use the military to force farmers off their land, so that mining corporations could dig for resources. Once again, the Filipino people had to fight for their human rights. The People Power Revolution in 1986 brought the country together. The streets of Manila were flooded with protesters, and when Marcos ordered the military to fire on them, the troops refused (McGeown). It is also worthy to note that Marcos

was evacuated from the Philippines by the American government and taken to Guam in a helicopter (Mydans). Marcos was known to be backed by the United States, and some people see this as an overthrowing of an imperialistic power. Regardless, the Filipino people had successfully united to overthrow a dictator and restore human rights. After Marcos was successfully ousted from government, the people elected Cory Aquino to be president. She promised land reform and a government that supported the people.

Contemporary Issues and Activism Today

There must be a happy ending now, right? The sad truth is, the Filipino farmers never got the land they were promised. To this day, activists are still fighting for land reform in the Philippines. The land of the Philippines is rich in minerals, yet the people are still so poor. This is because extractive institutions, like mining corporations, allow small groups to extract incomes and wealth from the rest of society, and block economic growth when its interests are threatened (Mourdoukoutas). Along with the fight for land reform, many new issues have come up in this era of globalization, such as workers rights, and anti-imperialism. Despite the changing times, activists today still use techniques and rhetoric practiced by past Filipino revolutionaries.

One example of this is the New People's Army (NPA). The NPA is the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines, and defends indigenous land and countrymen from the Philippine government. The NPA uses guerilla warfare to ambush military forces that try to push farmers off their land, a strategy adopted from the Katipunan, the revolutionary force that fought against the Spanish (Wild). Members of the NPA also attack American troops with the goal of expelling all U.S. influence from the Philippines, an idea carried on from the

Philippine-American war. Though the NPA is labelled as a terrorist group, historical influences on Filipino activism can also be seen within less radical groups.

Filipino-American college students play a huge role in Filipino activism as well. Many college organizations like Stanford PASU, San Francisco State League of Filipino Students, and Anakbayan DeAnza organize to advocate for rights of Filipinos all over the globe, as well as promote the idea of anti-imperialism. Filipino Culture Night is a popular event that collegiate Filipino groups organize to showcase Filipino culture through dances, plays, and music. One dance that many groups perform is Maglalatik, which was created by revolutionaries during the Philippine revolution against the Spanish. All practice of Philippine martial arts was banned by the Spanish to prevent revolution, so the Filipino people practiced fighting secretly through their folk dances. Maglalatik involves men putting halves of coconut shells around their shoulders, chest, and waist, and hitting them to the beat of the music while dancing. These coconuts were strategically placed where the weak spots in the Spanish armor were, so that the men could practice hitting in those areas with swift movements. Another dance that revolutionaries used was Singkil. The footwork in Singkil closely resembles that of Kali, an ancient Filipino martial art. Men would have to gracefully jump in and out of four bamboo sticks intersecting on the ground, while people clacked them together. To this day, college students still perform these dances as a showcase of indigenous Filipino culture and advocating a message of anti-imperialism and reclamation of land. Though they are not planning an armed struggle, Filipino college activists still use the techniques of revolutionaries over 100 years ago to address current Filipino issues.

Along with dances, many texts from past revolutions have remained relevant among Filipino activists. For example, Jose Rizal wrote *Noli Mi Tangere* during the Philippine Revolution of 1896 to inspire Filipino nationalism and expose the evils of Spanish colonization. Activists still take inspiration from this text today, and the 1956 Rizal Law even required it to be taught in all Philippine colleges (Ocampo). Another prominent text among Filipino activists is *Touching Ground, Taking Root* written by Edicio de la Torre during the Marcos era. This text heavily emphasized the necessity for unity between the Catholic church and secular reformists (Bello). Many activists today still utilize this idea, since 86% of the Philippines is Catholic (Miller). One of the most well known Filipino texts is *America is in the Heart*, written by Carlos Bulosan to document his immigrant experience in the United States. Though it was written during the 1940s, his message of white oppression against Filipino Americans is still relevant today. Many activists use this text to understand the complex socio-economic relationship between immigration, poverty, and racism, and how it has evolved to adapt to today's standard of living.

Transition The Filipina Women's organization "GABRIELA" takes direct influence from past revolutionaries in the name of their organization. GABRIELA stands for The General Assembly Binding Women for Reforms, Integrity, Equality, Leadership, and Action, but Gabriela was also the name of a prominent revolutionary during the Philippine Revolution of 1896. Gabriela Silang was a military general who took over the fight after her husband was executed by the Spanish, and led the longest sustained revolt against Spanish colonizers (Amodei). Many Filipina women today look up to her strength and matriarchy, and use her actions as inspiration for their fight for Filipina issues today. GABRIELA is now a global organization, with chapters

in multiple countries, including one at Stanford. Members of GABRIELA organize for women-specific issues like women's rights, gender discrimination, violence against women and women's health and reproductive rights. Along with this, GABRIELA is also at the forefront of national and international economic and political issues that affect Filipino women. It echoes the ideas and actions of the Philippine Revolution as well, as members are known to oppose U.S. military presence in the Philippines. While this may not seem like an issue that targets Filipina women, U.S. marines have continually gotten away with abuses against Filipino women, including rape and murder (Raval). To this day, Gabriela Silang inspires women to fight for their rights against imperialistic powers.

Revolution is tied to Filipino identity, and therefore Filipino activism. Filipinos have been fighting for human rights for hundreds of years now, starting with the onset of Spanish colonization. Though it may not always be explicit, remnants from Filipino revolutions are seen in everyday Filipino culture. For example, Filipino culture is known to heavily emphasize singing and dancing. Since colonial times, Filipinos have used song and dance as a way to express themselves and retain their indigenous culture in the face of Spanish oppression. Through Pilipino Culture Nights today, and even the stereotypes that Filipinos are good singers and dancers, the stories of the past revolutionaries are upheld. Another notable trace of revolutionary history in Filipino culture today is the idea of community. Filipinos tend to stick together no matter where they are, and find solace in being surrounded by other Filipinos. This has created the rise of historically Filipino towns all over the west coast, as well as other parts of the globe. Even within Stanford, PASU is the largest Asian-American student group, yet Filipinos are not the largest represented Asian-American group on campus. This need for

community can be attributed to the fact that Filipinos have been encouraged to band together, as seen in *Noli Mi Tangere* and other forms of nationalism throughout the many revolutions.

When Filipino people look back on their identity and history, information on indigenous, pre-colonial culture is hard to find. Most records were kept starting with Spanish colonization, and written by the colonizers. However, Filipino activists today refuse to be defined by their past colonizers and imperialistic powers. In Ruby Ibarra's song *Us*, she raps, "Filipinas are no strangers to wielding our own power ... Your DNA contains building blocks made from the mud of over 500 years of resistance and survival." Filipino activists take pride in past revolutions, and to this day, continue the fight of their ancestors, building off past lessons, and documenting theirs for the future generation of Filipino activists.

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