



BRILL

Book Reviews



Mark R. Thompson and Eric Vincent C. Batalla (eds.), 2018. *Routledge Handbook of the Contemporary Philippines*. Routledge, 474 pp., USD 27.48 (electronic book). ISBN 9781315709215.

In 2018, the Routledge Handbook of the Contemporary Philippines was launched at the annual Philippine Political Science Association conference. At 474 pages and thirty-seven chapters, with a list of well-known Filipinists as chapter contributors, the book is nothing short of impressive. The aim of the book is to provide an extensive overview of the Philippines' present-day political, economic, social, and cultural issues. A country with a long history of democratic institutions, the Philippines provides scholars and students a cacophony of cases, contradictions and complexities. Editors Mark Thompson and Eric Batalla along with other Philippine specialists conceptualized the handbook to serve as an “interdisciplinary resource” for students, academics, and individuals engaged in policy making. The book allows readers to enjoy a compilation of chapters written by scholars who have shaped the discourse of Philippine politics, economics, and civil society. Those who come from the complementary fields of history, economics, and sociology should consider this handbook as a good resource. The book provides useful material for understanding the persistence of political, social, and economic problems in the country. For those engaged in Southeast Asian studies, this volume is beneficial when thinking about the suitability of comparing cases in the region. The authors are scholars who have a deep knowledge in the study of the Philippines and have done comparative work as well. Covering domestic politics, foreign relations, economics and social policy, cultures, and movements the book delivers on its promise to look in to the contemporary challenges of the Philippines and its “troubled transition to democracy.” There is no doubt that the handbook serves as an excellent volume for Political Science students and academics.

The book is composed of four major parts. The first part provides chapters on domestic politics. This section, consisting of eleven chapters, gives the readers the classic Philippine political landscape. Covering the various issues of clientelism, clans, corruption, and compromised institutions, this section serves as a good introduction to past and present Philippine concerns. This section familiarizes the reader with the various pathologies of political institutions that persist in the Philippines. If the editors wanted to unpack the reason why the Philippines remains a “poor country democracy”, the chapters in part one, along with part three (economics and social policy), can provide some of the strongest explanations for the poverty and the flawed democratic institutions of the country. For those engaged in the study of social sciences, the chapters provide a good introduction to the persistence yet changing nature of Philippine political experience at the national and local level. The chapters of Masataka Kimura and John Sidel illustrate manifestations of clientelism in the Philippines across time. The chapters on political dynasties by Julio Teehankee, political parties by Allen Hicken, pork barrel by Ronald Holmes, and the legislative branch by Diana Mendoza and Mark Thompson are crucial for political scientists and policy analysts to understand that while democratic structures in the Philippines need to be examined on its own, it also needs to see it in relation to the larger political-economic challenges of a relatively old democracy in the region.

Recent developments such as the Philippines’ unplanned pivot to China makes part two of this volume necessary to understand the country’s foreign policy and external relations. With only four chapters, this is probably what the foreword was alluding to in terms of the “unevenness of coverage.” While it is the thinnest part of the entire compendium, this section covers the major foreign policy concerns and partnerships of the Philippines. This section also includes a chapter entitled “Diaspora Diplomacy” by Joaquin Jay Gonzalez which is both relevant and timely given the increasing number of Filipinos working overseas in the last ten years.

The third section of this four-part handbook covers economics and social policy to address not just the persistence of poverty in the Philippines but more important recent economic policies that have led to growth. Sustaining that growth is one of the key points that Batalla tries to address in his chapter “Bypassing Industrialization”. The attempts of the government to decrease the wide gap of inequality and its varying levels of effectiveness is likewise covered in this third part of the book.

The fourth and final part of the book on cultures and movements is also the longest with thirteen chapters in this edited volume. Putting together a wide range of topics from Filipino Catholicism to the Moro insurgency, this part of

the compendium tries to give an overview of the Philippines experience that shape both the problems and potential solutions to the kind of political and social challenges of the country. The chapter on the middle class by Temario Rivera and the two separate chapters on non-governmental organizations by Gerald Clarke and Ben Reid is a necessary read for those interested in examining state-society interactions in the Philippines.

The editors of this multiauthor volume had the difficult task of putting together a ready reference book that illustrates the different facets and dimensions of the political, social and economic challenges of the Philippines. That is no small feat given the contradictions and paradoxes that come with understanding the Philippines. The attempt to cover the breadth of topics under one volume can explain why some of the chapters can at times seem too short. With the specialization and expertise of the contributors, it would have been good to see some expound further on their arguments and key points. As a book of “classics”, with some of these prominent scholars revisiting their work, some chapters could also have provided new insights on Philippine politics to shed light on recent developments such as the rise of populism, the seeming public satisfaction for an illiberal democracy, historical revisionism, and the rehabilitation of the Marcos family. And while the cover of the handbook shows the kind of campaign posters that are ubiquitous during Philippine elections, the volume was lacking on having a chapter or two on the electoral process. But a handbook has its limitations. And both authors and editors cannot be faulted for these. A more comprehensive discussion would have made the book too long. And perhaps, less accessible for a wider audience. As a ready reference, the handbook serves as a good tool to understand Philippine politics, economics and society. Hopefully, it encourages younger researchers to probe further into the works of the various authors and open new paths of inquiry that can contribute to Philippine studies. This compendium is a contribution not just in the study of the Philippines or Southeast Asian studies but also for the different disciplines who care to use the case of this “poor country democracy.”

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