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Review

Walden Bello looks back on Filipino and global struggles

- Reviews section -

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In *Global Battlefields: My Close Encounters with Dictatorship, Capital, Empire, and Love*, Walden Bello remembers a rich life as a scholar and activist, from agitating against U.S. support for Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos in the 1970s and 1980s to becoming a leading critic of neoliberal globalization to joining the Philippine House of Representatives and running for vice-president.

Global Battlefields: My Close Encounters with Dictatorship, Capital, Empire, and Love, Ateneo de Manila University Press (Philippines), Clarity Press (USA), 2025

As Bello describes in *Global Battlefields*, his life went through very different phases. Only once Bello was already in the U.S. to work on his PhD at Princeton did he jump into political activism. Quite literally; in April 1970, as the U.S. was expanding the Vietnam War into Cambodia, he passed by a crowd blocking the entrance of the Pentagon-linked Institute of Defense Analysis. As he saw police breaking up the human chain in front of the entrance, “something snapped,” and he joined the protestors, “linking up with two people that I later learned were Arno Mayer, a distinguished professor of diplomatic history, and Stanly Stein, an equally prominent professor of Latin American history.” It makes one wonder which Ivy League professors today are willing to engage in such civil disobedience.

The making of an activist

Joining the anti-war activists might have been a snap decision but it did not come out of nothing. In the early chapters of *Global Battlefields*, unfortunately left out of the U.S. edition for reasons of space, Bello remembers being a budding existentialist and atheist at the deeply Catholic Ateneo de Manila University. At this university, a breeding ground for conservative members of the elite, Bello was all too conscious of his “middle-middle class status.” For much of his life, Bello was somewhat of an outsider, going on to become a Filipino activist, and a member of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), in the United States. During the 1990s and early 2000s, he was a prominent spokesperson and intellectual in the alter-globalization movement that opposed the extension of the neoliberal model, especially as it was forced upon countries in the Global South. Differing from the quasi-anarchist sentiment that was, at least in Western countries, so prevalent in this movement, Bello always saw politics and states as not only parts of the problem but also as parts of potential solutions.

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European and U.S. audiences are probably most familiar with the work Bello did in the period of the alter-globalization movement. Building on his work investigating the role of the World Bank in supporting the dictatorship of Marcos in the Philippines, which he wrote about in *Development Debacle: the World Bank in the Philippines* (1982), Bello became an analyst and critic of the role of supposedly non-political international institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. Such institutions played a key-role in the neoliberal globalization that had its heyday in the two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Bello wrote influential studies of what were then called the “Newly Industrializing Countries” (NICs) in Asia: South-Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong. Common to all these countries was that their economic policies were not those of the unbridled free market recommended by neoliberal ideologues.

The state and its willingness to intervene in economic development was crucial to enabling the economic growth seen in these countries. The rapid economic growth of South Korea, for example, sharply contrasted with the

stagnation in the Philippines, even though the latter was once seen as one of the most “promising countries” in Asia. Bello writes how IMF- and World Bank-style policies such as “cutting wages, reducing government spending, devaluation and export orientation” led to economies becoming stuck in a “low-level trap” of low investment, low wages, and reduced growth, effectively locking countries in as suppliers of cheap resources and cheaper labour for an international market. To escape this trap, Bello writes, “what you needed was an external agent, the state, to counteract the systemic logic leading to stagnation.” This was probably always the weakest part in Bello’s analysis: the state is hardly an external agent in implementing neoliberal policies, starting with Pinochet’s dictatorship in Chile. One needs only to think of its role introducing market mechanisms where those did not exist before and most of all of its role in repressing social protest and disciplining labour.

Crossing borders and generations

Not just the record of the engaged life of an impressively productive activist-intellectual, Global Battlefields provides a valuable, “border crossing” perspective. It is the perspective of an anti-imperialist from the Global South for whom the struggle against the U.S. War in Vietnam was a formative experience. Bello’s political trajectory also crossed movements that can be considered emblematic of their time. Being based in the U.S., Bello joining the resistance against the regime of Ferdinand Marcos meant agitating against Washington’s support for the Philippine dictator. As part of this movement, Bello joined the CPP.

Leaving the party

The CPP embodied some of the best and worst characteristics of the kind of Marxist-Leninist movements that dominated much of the Left in the seventies. It was clear-eyed about the need for deep-going social-economic transformation for the Philippines to break free from imperialism. It had deep social roots and consisted of committed revolutionaries. Bello emphasises the kind of dedication this movement inspired. In the Philippines it meant a willingness to risk torture and death. He seems unsure that new generations are able to fully grasp this kind of political faith.

The flip-side of the CPP’s conviction was a stifling dogmatism and authoritarianism. Based on a largely mythical view of Soviet and Chinese history, the Maoist CPP thought that revolution meant its own coming to power, not the emancipation of the popular masses. When history refused to follow its supposed laws, and, for example, the allegedly powerless liberal opposition revived in the Philippines in the early- to mid-1980s, the CPP found itself sidelined. The party had no role in the 1986 protests that brought down Marcos, the so-called “EDSA revolution.”

Upon hearing the news that Ferdinand Marcos had been brought down, Bello rushed to the Philippine Embassy together with John Cavanagh of the Institute for Policy Studies, the progressive think tank for which he worked at the time. “The two of us took possession of the building, ordering the stunned and dejected staff to leave.” The police did not intervene as a growing group of opposition supporters celebrated with champagne and cigars in the ambassador’s office.

Whereas the CPP was convinced that it had discovered “the laws of history,” the alter-globalisation movement around the turn of the century was characterised by a deep questioning of the paradigms of much of the socialist Left. The movement was a healthy break with the false certainties of a Left that thought it had deciphered the laws of history. With its lack of not only an alternative vision but also of a strategy, opting instead for conjunctural meetings of the so-called movement of movements, the movement quickly became exhausted.

Important to Bello’s decision to leave the CPP was his study of the internal party purges that ripped through the movement in the 1980s. Up to two thousand party members and sympathizers were killed by their own comrades in a witch-hunt for government spies. The use of torture led to a disastrous dynamic: under duress, prisoners said

whatever they thought their tormentors wanted to hear, naming names and coming up with new “revelations.” Bello wrote a study of this murderous episode, pointing to the movement’s instrumental view of people, its poor procedures for dispensing justice, and its lack of “guidelines for the preservation of common sense” as its causes.

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Supposedly, a lesson the CPP learned from it was the need to respect human rights. Its assassination campaign against former CPP leaders and activists from other left-wing groups in the early 2000s and its initial alliance with Rodrigo Duterte give the lie to this claim. The CPP leadership, in which after his release from prison in 1986 founding chairperson Jose Maria Sison once again would play a domineering role, used torture and killings as a political cudgel. It attributed the overwhelming blame on cadres who had become dissatisfied with the CPP’s strategy and attempted to explain both “purges” and “deviationism” from Maoism as expressions of “petty bourgeois impatience.” Bello does not make it explicit but the quotes from Sison he provides show the founding chairperson himself was exceptionally “impatient,” severely overestimating the chances of victory in the near future.

In 2004, the CPP published a list of supposed counter-revolutionary individuals and groups that named Bello as well as the organisation with which I work. Despite this Bello included Sison among the people to whom he dedicated Global Battlefields. That can be taken as speaking to Bello’s generosity as the argument that Sison did not play a decisive role in the CPP’s sectarianism is not very convincing.

In an attempt to make the reader understand the CPP’s appeal, Bello quotes from an article he wrote in the early 1980s, when the CPP was nearing its peak and it seemed to have figured out the laws of history. Briefly, after the famous Battle of Seattle protests, it seemed the alterglobalization movement was carried along by the winds of history. “From Seattle onwards,” Bello writes, “I felt myself as a participant in a movement that was on a roll. Those years passed by like a long, hot summer.” In the words of Bello, the two main movements that he was part of, the CPP and the alterglobalization movement, both “crashed.” Global Battlefields attempts to show that both movements were not total failures, from the CPP building the opposition to the Marcos dictatorship to the struggle against the dominance of neoliberal development models.

Adventures in Philippine politics

Less well known outside the Philippines might be Bello’s political career in the country. In 2007, Bello became a member of the Philippine House of Representatives. He was elected on behalf of the party-list Akbayan. The Philippine Party-list reserves 20 percent of seats in the House of Representatives for election on the basis of nation-wide proportional representation. This system allowed the Left to win some representation but in recent years party-list elections have become increasingly dominated by capitalists.

The decline of the CPP inevitably gave birth to a process of questioning and reorienting. Akbayan was formed by the coming together of different social-democratic and socialist groups. A significant part of the new organisation had its political roots—like Bello himself—in the Communist Party of the Philippines.

In 2010, Benigno Aquino, the son of former President Corazon Aquino, was elected president of the Philippines. Aquino was carried along by a wave of nostalgia for the enthusiasm that had been called forth by the mass protest that brought down Marcos in 1986. The “people power uprising,” many hoped, would make a more democratic and just society possible. The ensuing decades proved a disappointment. Aquino’s campaign, promising a strengthening of democracy and especially a fight against corruption, seemed for many a chance to finally fulfil the potential of people power. Akbayan was among those who joined the government camp.

In the House of Representatives, an institute dominated by the representatives of the wealthiest families of the country, Bello once again was something of an outsider. “I am not much into decorum,” he writes. When former president Gloria Arroyo, under whose administration political killings and corruption had reached new peaks, was elected to the House, Bello did not pull his punches in a speech in which he described her as a role model on “how to behave to impunity” and as someone who should be hauled to jail. Bello’s “colleagues were shocked, demanding that the remark be deleted from the record.”

Eventually the Aquino government became bogged down in scandals. Aquino himself was seen as detached and arrogant, not surprising for a scion of one of the country’s most patrician families. More fundamentally, the benefits of economic growth were distributed highly unevenly and corruption remained pervasive. Rather than a failure of the state-system, a symptom of its “weakness,” the systemic intertwining of economic wealth and political power is a constitutive element of capitalist rule in the Philippines. As Bello’s fellow party-member Nathan Quimpo put it, Aquino followed an “untenable strategy fighting corruption through patronage” that brought the “country back to the old politics of patronage and privilege of the oligarchic elite.” This, Bello writes, “went back on the foundation stone” of the coalition between Akbayan and Aquino’s Liberal Party. In protest, Bello resigned his seat in 2015, a unique step in Philippine politics.

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The following year, Bello again showed he is not afraid to go against the tide. The disappointment caused by the Aquino administration played a significant part in the rise of popularity of Rodrigo Duterte. Rather than progressive reforms, Duterte promised authoritarian leadership and violence against scapegoats, especially drug users. What is not always well remembered is that Duterte initially also claimed to be of the Left and used social demagoguery against U.S. imperialism and for workers’ rights to gather support. A significant part of the Left in the Philippines went along with this, most of all the National-Democratic movement that takes its political line from the CPP. Used to substituting their organisations for the emancipation movements of the popular classes, leaders of this movement accepted Duterte’s invitation to serve his government in an opportunistic grab for resources.

Undeterred by the criticism and attempts at intimidation by supporters of Duterte, Bello on the other hand was among the early voices sounding the alarm. Duterte’s rise was prepared by the ‘deadly combination of elite monopoly of the electoral system, the continuing concentration of wealth, and neoliberal economic policies and the priority placed on foreign debt repayment imposed by Washington’, Bello writes. Having studied far-right movements in other countries, Bello was aware that such figures can enjoy genuine support. At the end of Duterte’s term, tens of thousands of people had been murdered in the so-called “war on the drugs.”

In 2022, Bello, not satisfied with “teaching, writing books, or enjoying meals with a 20 percent seniors’ discount,” as he wrote at the time, ran for vice-president under the presidential campaign of Leody de Guzman of the socialist Partido Lakas ng Masa. This campaign broke new ground: it was the first openly socialist presidential campaign in Philippine history. Despite its ultimately disappointing electoral result, it brought socialist ideas to a broader audience and provided valuable experience for the future.

One does not need to agree with Bello’s views—for example, on the collapse of the Soviet Union, which he refers to as “socialist”—to be informed and entertained by Global Battlefields. One of Bello’s most charming characteristics is that although he takes politics seriously, he also finds joy in the struggle. From dressing up as Kermit the Frog in front of the IMF headquarters to occupying the Philippine embassy or bluntly declaring “fuck you Marcos” on prime time television to then candidate and now President Marcos Jr. in 2021, Bello has a flair for the dramatic. When police came to arrest him in 2022 after the Duterte camp filed libel charges, Bello insisted that police put handcuffs on him,

the seventy-six-year-old former congressman.

Apparently Walden Bello needed some convincing from friends before deciding to write his memoirs. It is good that they convinced him.

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Source: *Tempest* "[An internationalist looks back](#)".

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