Mahar Mangahas: Pioneer in ‘Social Weather Reporting’

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Published online: 1 June 2016

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My father was a satirical columnist and gardener. My mother was a music professor at the University of the Philippines (UP), where I lived from childhood to age 35, by then a UP professor myself. For lack of a campus school when I was 5, my Protestant parents put me into the Jesuits’ Ateneo de Manila (now a university, ADMU) up to high school, after which I went to UP, that gave free tuition to faculty children.

For college, I chose economics with no idea of how to make a living from it. With as much time spent in the billiards hall as in the classroom, I was not a top student, yet did well enough to be offered work at the UP School of Economics (UPSE), two blocks from my home. There I discovered that research and teaching were fun too. I took courses (still on free tuition) in economics and statistics, encouraged by my mentor, José Encarnación, Jr., who counted them equally towards my master’s in economics.

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Two years later, the UPSE offered me a Rockefeller Foundation PhD scholarship for agricultural economics, despite my protest of only knowing how to water plants. My ignorance was remedied by a year at the International Rice Research Institute, under my second mentor, Vernon Ruttan, who got me into the University of Chicago where my dissertation was on diffusion of new rice varieties. I returned to UPSE, taught agricultural economics and econometrics, and turned my research from rice productivity to agrarian reform.

The 1972 seizure of political power by President Ferdinand Marcos distressed many academics, including myself. How could we do research critical of social conditions? One of Marcos's earliest decrees created the Development Academy of the Philippines (DAP), the brainchild of UP political scientist O.D. Corpuz, my third mentor. In the first research agenda of DAP, I saw the phrase 'social indicators' for the first time, and volunteered for it on the hunch that it included monitoring of poverty.

I became the director of the DAP Social Indicators Project, while concurrently a UPSE professor (Mangahas 1976, 1977). The project covered other aspects of wellbeing aside from poverty, of course, including health, education, the environment, political freedom and social mobility. It found many subjective measures to be practical, and tried out self-rated poverty and other indicators in a pilot local survey. This work led me to becoming UNICEF adviser on social indicators in Malaysia (1977/78) and Indonesia (1981).

The social indicators concept was so popular among career government executives that the DAP asked me in mid-1981 to be full-time vice-president for research, and proceed from proposing to actually measuring the indicators. By early 1983, my department had produced a book, *Measuring the Quality of Life: A 1982 Social Weather Report*, based on surveys in Metro Manila, but it was suddenly suppressed from printing. That year we surveyed self-rated poverty for the first time at the national level, that went unpublished too. I told my staff that we had lost our gamble that Marcos could tolerate an open system of social indicators.

At that time, I was a member of the Bishops-Businessmen's Conference for Human Development (BBC)—a civil society organization that also included labor unionists, academics, and priests. I was in its research committee, which was co-chaired by ADMU president Fr. Joaquin Bernas, SJ, and banker Victor Barrios. Vic and I had been high school classmates under Fr. Bernas in Latin. One evening, he told me of a meeting (which I had missed) where the committee had proposed an opinion poll about the Marcos regime, and wanted me to direct and publicly present it. I accepted.

The BBC national survey of 1984 showed two-thirds opposition to Marcos's legislation by decree and detention of persons by fiat. The day after the presentation, I resigned from DAP to save it from retaliation by the regime. My parachute was the Rockefeller Foundation's *Reflections in Development* research award, which sustained me for two years. In the BBC's second survey in 1985, public opinion continued to be anti-Marcos. This time I was not shy about including self-rated poverty.

The survey initiative was continued by Social Weather Stations (www.sws.org.ph), a non-stock, non-profit, non-partisan institute that I co-founded in 1985 with friends. The Ford Foundation pledged support for four national opinion polls to be done by SWS and ADMU. In February 1986, a "snap election" contested by Marcos and Corazon Aquino, widow of the assassinated Benigno Aquino, Jr., was settled when Marcos fled from the world's first People Power revolution. SWS and ADMU partnered in polling in 1986–1987, and then SWS continued on its own.

The self-rated poverty indicator won the 1993 Elizabeth Nelson Award of the World Association for Public Opinion Research. Based on national surveys done semi-annually in 1986–1991 and quarterly since 1992, it is the most rapid system of tracking poverty in the world.

SWS has annoyed politicians by its ability to predict elections. In 2001, it battled legislation to suppress election surveys, and won decisively when the Philippine Supreme Court ruled the legislation unconstitutional. This led to WAPOR's Helen Dinerman Award to me in 2001.

For 30 years now, the Social Weather Reports have covered poverty, hunger, optimism, satisfaction with public officials and agencies, life-satisfaction, happiness, and general public opinion (Mangahas and Guerrero 2008). These are plenty for my weekly column, 'Social Climate'.

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