

Original Article

Labor History amid the Cultural and Linguistic Turns in Philippine Historiography: An Anti-Nationalist Critique

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Abstract

Between 1959 and 1985, only seven studies on the Philippine labor movement were made due to security risks under the Marcos dictatorship. With the fall of the martial law regime in 1986, an upsurge in labor history was witnessed with the vigorous publication of studies on the history of Filipino workers and their labor movement. This paper explored the defining characteristics of labor history in the Philippines by surveying at least fifteen books and articles on Philippine labor published from 1988 to 1998. The literature then was contextualized to the cultural and linguistic turns that took over Philippine historiography after 1986, which in turn was critiqued by adopting an anti-nationalist perspective. The results show that these works can be categorized as “old labor history” in their tradition and were individual in nature due to the absence of collaboration attempt between historians and social scientists. Furthermore, labor history declined at the turn of the twenty-first century as the indigenization movement, particularly Pantayong Pananaw, dramatically shifted the academic focus from political economy towards the study of Philippine languages and culture.

Keywords

indigenization, labor history, labor movement, Pantayong Pananaw, Philippine historiography

INTRODUCTION

Torres-Yu (2011) previously studied Philippine labor history during the martial law period where she delved into the phenomenon of extensive labor militancy in the mid-1970s. She stressed, however, the “lack of in-depth analysis of the many and complex developments in labor organizations” (p. 4) in the Philippines under Ferdinand Marcos. In fact, between 1959 and 1985, only seven studies on the Philippine labor movement were published—five of which were made during the dictatorship. Torres-Yu attributed these unsystematic and few discussions on trade unionism to the security risks of interviewing trade unionists and keeping union records amid martial law.

In the decade that followed the People Power Revolution that toppled Marcos in 1986, there was an upsurge in labor history with the publication of more than a dozen studies on Filipino workers and their labor movement. This is unprecedented and unparalleled compared to the preceding and succeeding decades, which makes the literature worth exploring at a time when Philippine social sciences anchored on conflict theory, i.e., Marxism, was already considered at its impasse by the mid-1980s (Bautista, 2001). More

importantly, it is important to revisit and contextualize what the researcher considers as the peak of labor history when it coincided with the cultural and linguistic turns, also known as the indigenization movement, that went in full swing in Philippines historiography after 1986.

Thus, in this paper, the researcher attempts to build on the previous study of [Torres-Yu \(2011\)](#) in situating labor history in Philippine historiography. With these premises, the researcher attempts to answer the following: (1) What are the defining characteristics of labor history in the Philippines? (2) How did the cultural and linguistic turns in Philippine historiography affect the field at the turn of the twenty-first century? By addressing these questions, this essay attempts to fill the gap in appraising the field of labor history in the country.

The following section surveyed ten books and five journal articles on the history of the Filipino working class and their labor movement, published between 1988 and 1998. These are discussed thematically through an integrative review ([Snyder, 2019](#)) as methodology and later situated in the cultural and linguistic turns in Philippine historiography, which in turn were critiqued by adopting an anti-nationalist perspective ([Claudio, 2013](#); [Hau, 2002](#); [2014](#)). The aim of this work is not to dismiss Filipinization or the indigenization movement in its entirety but to shed light on how its emergence and development contributed to Philippine labor history's unfortunate decline by the turn of the new century.

Labor history in the Philippines: An integrative review

As a subfield of history, labor history is inherently historical in its inquiry and methodology. This means its approach can be chronological or thematic, and its focus can be on a specific geographical location. More importantly, it relies on historical evidence through primary and secondary sources and adopts a particular school of thought, e.g., Marxism, Historicism, Annales School, etc., that can be decisive in the historiography of a labor historian. Labor and industrial relations, meanwhile, are more multidisciplinary in their orientation, exploring the multifaceted, contemporary relationship between employers, employees, labor unions, and the state. Between labor history and industrial relations, the latter has been more dominant in the Philippines. Some of the writings of scholars known in the field, such as [Ofreneo \(1999\)](#), [Binghay \(1998\)](#), and [Viajar \(1997\)](#), among others, provide an overview of trade unions and employees in the Philippines and Southeast Asia during the 1990s. However, in this integrative review, the researcher strictly focused on the works in Philippine labor history during the said decade.

[Guevarra \(1992, 1995a, 1995b\)](#) authored at least three virtually identical books on the history of the Philippine labor movement which all gave a historical overview of more than a century of the struggle of organized labor in the Philippines. Guevarra traced the roots of trade unionism in the country with the *gremios* or workers' guilds during the last decades of Spanish colonialism, the resolve of Filipino workers to build their movement in the face of the reactionary policies of the American colonial government, the continued political repression under the new Philippine Republic; the resurgence of militant unionism under the Marcos dictatorship; and the labor movement's situation under the administration of Corazon Aquino. Likewise, [Ambrosio \(1998\)](#) highlighted the historic role of the Filipino working class in the past century. He argued that the radical origin of Filipino workers is inseparable from the socio-historical structures and aspects that gave birth to the reform and revolutionary movements of the nineteenth century. Throughout the article, Ambrosio excellently surfaced the ever presence of organized labor in different periods in Philippine history: the late Spanish, the American, the postwar, and martial law. More importantly, it manifested how successive Philippine governments—from Aguinaldo to Marcos—repressed the rights of Filipino workers and their labor movement throughout the decades.

Focusing on the American period, [Scott \(1992\)](#) discussed the genesis of the modern Philippine labor movement. Founded in 1902, the *Union Obrera Democratica* (UOD) was spearheaded by Isabelo de los Reyes, who returned to Manila from his Spanish exile, where radical ideas and literature heavily influenced him. [Ofreneo \(1998\)](#) similarly focused on UOD's de los Reyes, whose leadership provided a foundation that marked a new dawn for trade unionism in the country by waging labor strikes after evolving from being mere guilds

and mutual aid societies. While Scott and Ofreneo limited their work on UOD, [Kerkvliet \(1992\)](#) broadened her scope by encompassing its successors: the *Congreso Obrero de Filipinas* (COF), the *Katipunan ng mga Anak Pawis sa Pilipinas* (KAP), and the Congress of Labor Organizations (CLO). She focused on the role played by tobacco factory workers to the development of trade unionism in Manila. The central theme was the efforts of Filipino labor leaders to build a genuine labor federation despite their failure due to internal and external factors—except for the CLO, which had its relative success in labor organizing in the early postwar period. One of Kerkvliet's limitations, however, was her failure to account for the significant role of women members in the Manila unions. This what [Camagay \(2024\)](#) addressed in her important work, originally published in 1995, which tackled the marginalized Filipino women belonging to the burgeoning working class during the late Spanish period. Among them were the *cigarreras* (female cigar makers), the *vendedoras* (vendors) and *tenderas* (shopkeepers), the *bordadoras* (embroiderers) and *costureras* (seamstresses), the *criadas* (female domestic servants), the *maestras* (teachers), the *matronas titulares* (licensed midwives) and the *mujeres publicas* (prostitutes). The *cigarreras*, in particular, launched mass actions to improve their working conditions amid the oppressive and exploitative nature of the nineteenth century.

Meanwhile, [Llanes \(1994\)](#) examined the critical relationship between Felixberto Olalia, as an individual labor leader, and the *Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas* (PKP) as an institution. The article showed how Olalia stepped up his political commitment at a time when confusion and internal contradictions rattled the party. From 1945 to 1948, the CLO, under his leadership, vigorously launched labor strikes, pickets, and protests, among others, until his second dismissal from the PKP due to his association with a faction that went against the party leadership. Due to endless rumors, conflicts, and splits, he veered away from his former comrades in PKP. He maintained his independence as a labor leader until he founded the National Federation of Labor Unions (NAFLU) in 1957. This transition period in the history of the Philippine labor movement became the focal point of [Dejillas \(1994\)](#), who tried to understand the largest labor centers in the country by exploring their trade union behavior, a framework he adopted and appropriated in the Philippine setting from American labor historian Mark Perlman. As an example of the American tradition of old labor history, he analyzed the exogenous and endogenous dynamics of the labor movement's three most prominent groups. Dejillas concluded that the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP) was economic, the Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU) was revolutionary, and the Federation of Free Workers (FFW) was democratic and political in terms of their respective trade union behavior.

[Ambrosio \(1994\)](#) established that KMU's founding was a product of the ebb and flow of the Philippine labor movement during martial law. He identified the initial decline of radical unionism as an immediate aftermath of the severe repression brought by martial law's imposition in 1972. However, this led the unionists to adjust and adapt to the regime's limited mechanisms, and by 1975, labor militancy picked up once again, as witnessed in the La Tondeña labor strike. In the next five years, militant strikes and protests grew in numbers as they became more daring and organized against military rule, and by 1980, the labor movement reached new heights with the founding of KMU. Indeed, [Macaraya \(1988\)](#) recognized the Filipino workers' participation in the People Power Revolution as a culmination of the anti-dictatorship struggle through their trade unions. He looked beyond February where the unprecedented phenomenon of intensified workers' strikes for the rest of 1986 as the trade unions' way of checking the legitimacy of the democratic space under the new Aquino government by way of their right to strike. Moreover, Macaraya sought to address whether the trade unions aimed the intensified strikes to recover their social legitimacy.

Delving more into KMU, [Scipes \(1996\)](#) studied the organizational dynamics of the labor center, particularly its women's membership and regional chapters, which were under constant threat from the Philippine state. Scipes framed the commitment of Filipino workers, who were members of KMU, to challenge and change the impoverished economic situation in the country through social movement unionism. This analytical concept was similarly put forward by [Lambert \(1990\)](#) to explain KMU's new trade union organizing style, which, for him, contributed to its organizational growth. [West \(1997\)](#) also tackled KMU's historical experiences from the 1980s,

when she traveled thrice to different parts of the country between 1986 and 1988, up to the split of the labor movement in 1993 as part of the organizational crisis within the Philippine national democratic movement. Both Scipes and West conducted in-depth interviews and participant observations with the unionists where they included respective book chapters on women workers whose roles were typically understudied. However, they both admitted the limitations of their studies, having the outsider's perspective. Nevertheless, West examined KMU's militant unionism and the Filipino workers' commitment to labor solidarity compared to what she described as the passivity and the lack of political consciousness among the working class in the United States.

The paradox of indigenization

Labor history is concerned with modern industrial society and introduced the concept of the "masses" as the decisive force in historical processes (Fry, 1967). One of its important characteristics is its identification with the history of the labor movement, which includes organization, party, or ideology (Hobsbawm, 1974). Labor history came to prominence in the West during the 1960s and 1970s.

In the United Kingdom, Eric Hobsbawm and E. P. Thompson were two of the most prominent historians deeply associated with the field as founding members of Great Britain's Communist Party Historians Group (CPHG) after the war when they extensively wrote about the history of the British working class. As a Marxist historian, Hobsbawm made Marx and Marxism central to his approach to social history and led the international publications of several Marxist works (Foster, 2014). E. P. Thompson, whose seminal work *The Making of the English Working Class*, published in 1963, became one of the most significant works in British historiography (Saville, 1994). Meanwhile, in the United States, labor history became strictly confined within the academe in the sense that it was based in the history departments of different American universities and was associated neither with a communist party nor any trade unions. Dubofsky (2000) identified David Brody's *Steelworkers in America: The Nonunion Era*, published in 1960, as the impetus for the advent of "new labor history" with its focus on the experiences and culture of American workers as opposed to "old labor history" with its emphasis on institutions and organizations.

From the integrative review above, the researcher contends that the Philippines has its own tradition of labor history. However, the works were more individual and separate contributions in nature, and no organized and collaborative attempt between the scholars was made that would make the field comparable to British or American practices. Some authors were not strictly historians but rather social scientists in terms of their scholarship. Moreover, their works, except for Llanes (1994) and Camagay (2024), primarily focused on Filipino trade unions as institutions; hence, their tradition can be defined as "old labor history" and not too much on the lived experiences of the Filipino working class that is associated with "new labor history." Nonetheless, this makes the period of 1988–1998 the peak of labor history in the country, with the publication of at least fifteen studies compared to merely seven studies identified by Torres-Yu (2011) from 1959 to 1985. This is in contrast with what Bautista (2001) stated that "By the mid-1980s, Marxist influence on Philippine social science had reached its limits, remaining primarily at the level of discourse." She explained this as "understandable" as the "dramatic end of the Marcos regime, and the beginning of the Aquino administration in the mid-1980s opened up a challenging arena of struggle, drawing social scientists and Marxist intellectuals into advocacy, policy or action-oriented work" (p. 103).

However, the peak of labor history in the Philippines after 1986 coincided with Philippine historiography's cultural and linguistic turns. It is notable that, after the vigorous publications in the field during the said period—which Bautista (2001) believed was a continuation and recasting of insights into more pluralist discourses by Marxist-inspired social scientists of the preceding decades—the number would dwindle in the following decades. Some of the notable publications recently included the works on the labor movement and Philippine communism by Torres-Yu (2011), Richardson (2011), Taguiwalo (2011), Nolasco (2011), Chua (2009), and Fuller (2007; 2011; 2015). These are much fewer in quantity compared to the 1988–1998 period, and the

decline happened while the Philippine social sciences, particularly history, largely shifted its focus towards Philippine languages and culture after 1986.

Hau (2002) critically explained the background and implications of these academic trends. Contextualizing the cultural and linguistic turns to the nationalist tradition of Philippine historiography, she took note of the valorization of an official “national culture” and the configuration of the “Filipino people” as a unity that goes beyond class, ethnicity, language, sex, gender, and religion, among others. Although the foundations were already laid in the 1970s during the regime of Ferdinand Marcos—who also advanced a “nationalist” perspective in history and culture to legitimize his authoritarian rule—according to Guillermo (2009), the systematization of the critical perspectives of *Pantayong Pananaw* only came in the 1980s and the 1990s with the publication of significant amount of literature by Zeus Salazar, its founding father.

“Like the mass movements of the time these tendencies also took part in the broad nationalist effort at propagating and developing the national language” (Guillermo, 2008, p. 468). The problem in nation-building projects lies in its tendency to homogenize the “nation” where national integration under the auspices of the Philippine state marginalizes ethnic minorities, such as the Moro, Chinese, and indigenous peoples (Hau, 2005). The same culturalist approach in history not only generates potential ethnic tensions but also mystifies the oppressive and exploitative nature of class relations in the Philippines. One may even ask: Is labor history detrimental to the program of nation-building? Interestingly, when post-1986 presidents Corazon Aquino and Fidel Ramos accelerated the structural adjustments as part of neoliberal economics put forward by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB), “The indigenization tendencies of the post-1986 era appear to have withdrawn almost completely from addressing pressing economic questions and genuinely demur any actual engagement with mass movements” (Guillermo, 2008, p. 469).

That is why Claudio (2013) identified *Pantayong Pananaw* as a case in Philippine historiography in which nationalism has been used to obscure class oppression. To extend it in this study, the researcher asserts that it also contributed to the decline of labor history in the Philippines due to the abandonment of discourses on class struggle, which included the labor conditions of Filipino workers. This is, in part, due to the fatal blindness of privileging “an equally stringent critique of the exclusionary ideologies and practices and the centrifugal tendencies of the nation itself” (Hau, 2014, p. 51). Filipinization, as an academic movement, unfortunately, produced “epistemic violence,” which prevents the poor and marginalized “Other” from letting their concerns be heard (Hernandez, 2016). San Juan, Jr. (2013), as a rejoinder, believed that “No indigenization project in the Philippines will fully succeed unless it includes a program of systematic decolonization, particularly an uncompromising indictment of US colonialism/neocolonialism, together with its complicit transnational allies, in its totality” (p. 88).

Nationalism, nation-building, and Filipinization in Philippine historiography, which are all cultural or identitarian, are aspects related to Fraser's (2003) problematization of cultural politics. What disturbed Fraser is the shift of discourses from economic redistribution to cultural recognition despite (1) the acceleration of globalization that exacerbates economic inequality and (2) increased transcultural interaction and communication. These resulted to the displacement of redistribution struggles and the reification of identities. In Philippine historiography, the excesses of the cultural and linguistic turns are manifestations of their identity politics, which ignore distributive injustice. To make matters worse, Filipinization, as reification, “tends to mask the power of dominant fractions and thus to reinforce intragroup domination” (p. 26).

CONCLUSION

Labor history reached its peak in the Philippines with the vigorous publication of more than a dozen of studies during the period of 1988–1998. Majority of these works can be categorized as “old labor history” in terms of their tradition and were individual in nature because there was no organized attempt of collaboration between the scholars that could have made the local field comparable to the practices of labor historians in the United Kingdom and the United States. The field considerably declined at the turn of the twenty-first

century amid the cultural and linguistic turns in Philippine historiography. While the positive developments brought by the indigenization movement, particularly *Pantayong Pananaw*, to the decolonization of Philippine social sciences must be recognized, it cannot also be denied that these changes were paradoxical as the shift towards the study of languages and culture effectively abandoned the issues of political economy, e.g., labor conditions. The turns proved to be indifferent to class oppression as the historical study of Filipino workers and the Philippine labor movement appears to be detrimental to the project of nation-building.

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Data Availability

Data will be made available by the corresponding author on request.

Declaration of Artificial Intelligence Use

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