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The Limits of Survey Research
on the Meaning of Democracy

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There is growing interest among social scientists in the local meanings that people around the world attach to “democracy” or its rough equivalents in other languages. This topic of inquiry is both intrinsically interesting and potentially relevant to, among other things, answering questions like “are people satisfied with democracy?” or “does popular support for democracy vary from one country to another?” While a few studies have examined local meanings using interpretive or ethnographic tools,¹ most work on this topic has been conducted by means of survey research.² The goal of this paper is to draw attention to some problems with the latter approach, and with conclusions to which this approach has lead. I undertake this critique by looking at the results of a 2002 survey conducted in the Philippines in light of my own 2001 fieldwork³ in one Philippine community, where I also investigated how people understand democracy – or more accurately, the Tagalog word *demokrasya* – using interpretive rather than survey research tools.⁴

¹ Brink-Danan (2009), Browsers (2006), Frechette (2007), Karlström (1996), Michelutti (2007), Schaffer (1998, 2006).

² See for instance Abueva and Guerrero (2003, 4), Albritton and Bureekul (2008, 118-20), Al-Jarrah (2007), Baviskar and Malone (2004), Bratton (2002, 5-6; 2009b), Bratton and Mattes (2001, 453-57), Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi (2005, 65-72), Camp (2001, 15-17), Chang and Chu (2008, 91-92), Chu et al. (2008, 10-13), Dalton, Shin, and Jou (2007, reprinted in 2008), Fuchs and Roller (2006, 78-80), Ganbat, Tusalem, and Yang (2008, 143-44), Guerrero and Tusalem (2008, 66), Ikeda and Kohno (2008, 163-65), Lagos (2008, 65-68), Lam and Kuan (2008, 192-93), Levy (1998), Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger (1997), Moreno (2001), Ottemoeller (1998), Shi (2008, 212-18), Shin (2008), Simon (1998).

³ I conducted this fieldwork under the auspices of the Fulbright Scholars Program, and I gratefully acknowledge the support it provided.

⁴ I find it useful to speak in terms of “*demokrasya*” rather than “democracy” since we cannot assume a priori that Tagalog *demokrasya* (or Chinese *minzhu* or Luganda *eddembe ery’obuntu* or Wolof *demokaraasi*, etc.) mean exactly the same thing as English democracy (Schaffer 1998, 140-46). By retaining the original Tagalog word, we are less likely to project

My substantive findings are obviously limited to one small place. I thus do not claim that they are representative of how people in the Philippines in general think about democracy or its rough equivalents. The goal of this paper is thus not to demonstrate that the particulars of my substantive findings hold for people everywhere in that country or beyond. Rather, the aim is to put under the microscope the use of a widely-used survey question as a tool for inquiring about understandings of democracy. I hope to show how problematic conclusions reached by some researchers can be traced back to the ways in which data gathered by means of this question have been recorded, coded, and interpreted. To the extent that the problems I identify are generic to a common set of research practices, my small case study raises general questions about what we should make of survey results on meanings of democracy generated by the same set of practices in other parts of the world. The particulars may be specific to one locale, but the generic methodological problems they illuminate are potentially far-reaching.

The 2002 Philippine survey was conducted as part of the Global Barometer Project.⁵ This project represents the most sophisticated attempt to access local understandings of democracy through survey research. Unlike some surveys on this topic, which present the interviewee with a

onto this term meanings specific to “democracy.” The word *demokrasya* itself derives from the Spanish word *democracia*.

⁵ I received the data files for the 2002 Philippine survey from the East Asia Barometer Project. This project was co-directed by Fu Hu and Yun-han Chu and received major funding support from Taiwan’s Ministry of Education, Academia Sinica, and National Taiwan University. I thank these institutions and individuals for providing access to the survey data. The Asian Barometer Project Office (www.asianbarometer.org) is responsible only for data distribution. I am also indebted to Ramon V. Calleja Jr., Linda Luz Guerrero, and Jeanette Ureta from the Social Weather Stations in the Philippines for graciously tracking down some missing data and generously fielding my technical questions. The views expressed here are solely my own.

menu of pre-determined definitions from which he or she chooses, the Global Barometer surveys pose an open-ended question, which rendered in English takes the rough form of “What for you is the meaning of the word ‘democracy’? What else?” A question of this format, with some minor variations, has been posed as part of the Global Barometer Project or by independent survey researchers in at least 49 countries.⁶ The value of this open-ended format, as advocates of this approach explain, “is that it allows (and requires) respondents to define democracy in their own words. This is a more rigorous test of democratic understanding than providing a list of items which respondents rate as important. Our methodology requires that respondents actively articulate their understanding of democracy” (Dalton, Shin, and Jou 2007, 145).

In the most ambitious attempt to aggregate and make sense of the data obtained by means of this open-ended question, Dalton, Shin, and Jou reached the following conclusion about how democracy is understood around the world:

Strikingly, democracy is broadly identified in terms of freedom and civil liberties. In most nations, these democratic outcomes are what most people think of when they define democracy. Definitions referencing elections, majority rule, and other such democratic procedures and institutions are only about half as frequent as those citing freedom and liberty. People seem to understand that electoral and constitutional democracy is not sufficient. To most people, the real meaning of democracy is in what it produces....Relatively few people define democracy in terms of social benefits (only about a tenth of respondents do so)....These results undercut claims that supporters of democracy really mean they want higher living standards and similar benefits (147).

Summing up the implications of their findings more succinctly, they write that we cannot “assum[e] that democracy is a Western concept, understood only by the affluent and well-educated citizens in established, advanced democracies” since “a large proportion of the public in

⁶ For specific regional variations in how the question has been posed, see Dalton, Shin, and Jou (2007, 154, note 12).

developing nations defines democracy in liberal-democratic terms” (147). More to the point still, they claim that how ordinary people around the world think of democracy is “surprisingly consistent” (154). Among the implications of this finding: scholars can go ahead and meaningfully ask a question like “Why does popular support for democracy vary from one country to another?” – as for instance Chu et al. (2008, 31) do – because public opinion survey questions on “support for democracy” measure the same thing cross-nationally. A good proportion of people around the world, after all, see democracy through the same liberal lens.

Bratton (2009b, 2-6) also looks at the big picture, but is more tentative than Dalton, Shin, and Jou in the analysis he undertakes, noting how coverage of the Global Barometer surveys with regard to the open-ended democracy question is not truly global (missing for instance is the Middle East) and how results vary depending on how data is weighed. Thus while acknowledging that survey results may not provide a truly worldwide snapshot, he nevertheless reaches a conclusion similar to that of Dalton, Shin, and Jou:

The most common meaning of democracy – after “don’t know” (40 percent) – is a regime of civil liberties, which includes freedom of speech, freedom of association, and freedom in general (19 percent). Fewer than 5 percent respond to the open-ended question by referring to democracy as a regime of social rights or economic development. This common pattern of shared meaning across all the world regions offers a *prima facie* justification for proceeding, at least cautiously, with comparative analysis of other survey questions that employ the word “democracy” (7).

The bottom line for Bratton, as for Dalton, Shin, and Jou, is that a plurality of people think of democracy in terms of civil liberties.

Results from the 2002 Global Barometer survey conducted in the Philippines seem to fit neatly within this broad interpretive scheme. The Philippine project coordinator and a co-author

report that “nearly half [of the respondents] associated democracy with freedom and liberty” (Guerrero and Tusalem 2008, 66). Writing with another co-author, and putting the findings of the 2002 survey in the context of other surveys conducted in the Philippines on this topic, the project coordinator similarly concludes that the “first and highest meaning [of democracy]” is “political freedom, civil liberties” (Abueva and Guerrero 2003, 4).

How people in Barangay Commonwealth speak of *demokrasya*, a first cut

To study the meanings of *demokrasya*, I conducted 139 ordinary language interviews in 2001 with the help of two research assistants. The people who we interviewed live in an urban community called Barangay Commonwealth, which is located in Quezon City, the largest city in the Philippines and a part of Metro Manila (the city of Manila itself plus surrounding cities and towns).⁷ Barangay Commonwealth is the largest *barangay* (the smallest unit of local administration) in Quezon City, with a population of about 120,000. The people who live in Barangay Commonwealth are predominantly poor and are demographically similar to people who live in the many other poor communities of Metro Manila. The poor, it is perhaps worth noting in this context, make up the vast majority of the population of both urban and rural Philippines. We conducted all interviews in the Tagalog language – the most widely spoken

⁷ We randomly selected two percent of the roughly 14,000 people listed on the voter registry for four sections of Barangay Commonwealth. 278 people were originally chosen for the sample. In this highly transient area, 107 of them had moved out of the community after registering. Two had died. Of the 171 people who actually still lived there, our response rate was eighty-one percent, thus the 139 interviews. Another 11 non-random pilot interviews were also conducted. Statements from the shopkeeper, which we will encounter later in the paper, are drawn from these pilot interviews. I do not include the pilot interviews in any statistical calculations.

language in the country – or at the interviewees prompting, Taglish, a mixture of Tagalog and English commonly spoken in this part of the country.

Ordinary language interviewing is a shorthand label I use for the self-conscious application of interviewing techniques inspired by ordinary language philosophy as pioneered by John Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein. This interviewing strategy is an interpretive tool for uncovering the meaning of words in everyday talk. The purpose of the ordinary language interview is to look at language in use – to engage the interviewee in a conversation, and within that conversation, to provide the person with occasions to use particular words of interest in ways that reveal their various meanings. While the ordinary language interview is open-ended and conversational, it is nevertheless structured to the extent that it is designed to expose the meanings of words through deliberate questioning strategies.⁸

On the surface of it, it would seem that the ordinary language interviewing we did in Barangay Commonwealth supports the general conclusions of the 2002 Philippine survey – that people think of *demokrasya* largely in terms of freedom in general and civil liberties in particular. When we asked Commonwealth residents what *demokrasya* means and related questions, 76 percent of the people who offered substantive answers articulated understandings of *demokrasya* that seemed to involve, at least in part, something like freedom or civil liberties.⁹ Of particular interest is the fact that 81 percent of this subset of people included somewhere in their answers the word “*kalayaan*” or its adjectival cognate “*malaya*,” which we might translate to mean

⁸ A more detailed description of this method can be found in Schaffer (2006).

⁹ 16 percent of the people we interviewed chose not to answer our questions about *demokrasya* or stated that they did not know what the term means.

“freedom” and “free” respectively (I preserve the original Tagalog because we will return to the meaning of these words later).

There are several types of *kalayaan* that people in Commonwealth identified as being part of *demokrasya*. Among the most commonly named were the freedoms of movement, speech, and religion, as well as the freedom to start a business, choose political leaders, or make choices about one’s lifestyle. Typical were the following statements:

Rag seller: “If there is *demokrasya*....people have *kalayaan* to say whatever they want, to do what they want, to vote for who they want.”

Carpenter: “When there is *demokrasya*, people are *malaya* to do anything they want....Men can go out drinking with their friends whenever they feel like it.”

Unemployed woman: “*Demokrasya* is the *kalayaan* of people to live in a community and not be suppressed by the people in government. For example, you are *malaya* to live, work, express yourself, to serve and worship God.”

Scrap metal dealer: “What I understand by *demokrasya* is that we have *kalayaan* to live our lives. We have *kalayaan* to fight for ourselves.”

If we were to stop our analysis here, it would seem that to many people in Barangay

Commonwealth, *demokrasya* – by way of *kalayaan* – does in fact mean something like “civil liberties” if we mean civil liberties to include things like freedom of speech and religion as well as personal autonomy.¹⁰ One might thus conclude that the equation of *kalayaan*, and thus too *demokrasya*, with civil liberties is fair and justified.

¹⁰ The Freedom House definition of civil liberties, among others, is consistent with this formulation (www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=351&ana_page=363&year=2010).

Three problems

An uncomplicated and unambiguous equation of *demokrasya* or *kalayaan* with civil liberties would, nevertheless, be misleading, at least for the people we interviewed in Barangay Commonwealth. To understand why, it is necessary to take note of three methodological problems – compression, compartmentalization, and homogenization – that attended the 2002 survey (the first two problems are also evident in my intentionally compressed and compartmentalized presentation above of my own fieldwork results). These three problems, not incidentally, are shared by Global Barometer surveys conducted elsewhere in the world.

These problems collectively make the 2002 Philippine survey question in particular, and the Global Barometer survey question in general, less open-ended than they might seem. Recall, in this context, that it is this purported open-endedness that promised to make the Global Barometer question so revealing. But as we shall see, the claim that people had their views captured “in their own words” is less accurate than might at first appear.

1. The Problem of Compression

In the 2002 Philippine survey, and in the Global Barometer surveys more generally, the question about how people understand democracy (or its cognates in other languages) is only one of many questions posed. The 2002 survey, to be more precise, included 143 other questions on topics ranging from trust in institutions to evaluations of current economic conditions to electoral participation. Interviewers, in this context, did not have the opportunity to invite long responses, nor were they encouraged to. The survey form only included a total of three blank lines to record everything the interviewee had to say to the initial open-ended “What for you is the meaning of

the word ‘democracy’?” question as well as to two follow-up “what else?” questions. The actual responses recorded to the first question from the 881 people who gave any answer at all¹¹ ranged from a single word in length to a few clipped phrases. Typical answers were “*kalayaan*,” “*may kalayaan na gumawa/kumilos ng lahat ng gusto mo*” (having *kalayaan* to do anything you want/act in any way you want), and “*kalayaan makapagpahayag ng sariling pananaw/sariling opinyon*” (*kalayaan* to express one’s own viewpoint/opinion).

One can only wonder what kind of information was lost as a result of this compression. From my own experience of interviewing people in the Philippines and elsewhere, I know that people, if they are allowed even small opportunities to elaborate on what they are thinking or to give concrete examples that illustrate what they are trying to say, often express understandings of democracy or its rough equivalents that are multivalent or even on the surface of it contradictory. Consider this short excerpt from a not-so-unusual interview that we conducted with a Barangay Commonwealth middle-aged fish vendor:

Interviewer: Do you remember how it was during the time of Marcos? In your opinion, was there *demokrasya* then?

Fish vendor: Yes, there was.

Interviewer: Why do you say “yes”?

Fish vendor: The prices of basic goods at that time were not as high as they are now. Marcos controlled the prices. Today, prices are so high.

Interviewer: Do you think there is *demokrasya* in the Philippines today?

Fish vendor: I don’t think so. The prices of commodities are getting higher. People can only afford half a kilo of fish today. The less fortunate families can’t even afford to have

¹¹ Responses from an additional 304 interviewees were recorded as “missing,” and responses from another 15 were recorded as “none.”

fresh fish in their meals these days. If they have fish, it is not fresh. Poor families can't afford good quality fish. All they can afford are those sold at 10, 15 or 20 pesos per half a kilo. But is that half kilo enough for their family?

Interviewer: So do you think there is *demokrasya* in the Philippines today?

Fish vendor: Yes. People will go on strike if prices keep going up.

Interviewer: For you, what is the meaning of *demokrasya*?

Fish vendor: It's being able to complain about the price increases. You can hear the complaints of the people. You can even read about them in the papers.

Based on her concluding comment, we might infer that this fish vendor understands *demokrasya* to mean freedom of expression. But there seems to be more to the story given what she says about low prices during the Marcos era, and given her seemingly contradictory reasoning that there both is and is not *demokrasya* today in the Philippines. In fact, she seems to be in the grips of a common form of conceptual puzzlement. *Demokrasya*, like many words from the realm of social affairs, has a complex grammar, with meanings that criss-cross and overlap in complicated ways. There are, as a result, different or sometimes only partially overlapping standards that people can apply when determining whether something "is" or "is not" an instance of *demokrasya*. Most people that we interviewed juggled multiple standards. This woman seems to have two particular standards in mind – freedom of expression and low prices – and applies each of these standards at different moments in the interview.

A shopkeeper that we interviewed seemed to move between two similar standards, as we can see in this interview snippet:

Shopkeeper: *Demokrasya* [is] *kalayaan*, you are free to do what you want.

Interviewer: Is there *demokrasya* in the Philippines right now?

Shopkeeper: Yes, in some ways. Like where we live, if we complain [to the housing authority] that there's something wrong in our unit, they would fix it. When I complained about our bathroom, they fixed it. It's like that, you have the right to complain about anything you don't like.

Interviewer: Was there *demokrasya* during the time of Marcos?

Shopkeeper: There was. They provided loans for the poor, like fishing loans. My father was able to get one from the DBP [Development Bank of the Philippines]....We were able to pay some of it back, but not everything. Because as the sea gets older, the harvest becomes smaller. There was no more catch, and then my father's equipment broke down. But the bank didn't try to collect....For me, it's an example of *demokrasya* because they didn't force us to pay our debts.

For this woman, *demokrasya* appears to adhere in both being free to complain to authorities and in the provision of easy loans.

Indeed many people that we interviewed explicitly linked the same two standards by voicing the idea that freedom of expression only counts as *demokrasya* when followed by tangible results – not only low prices or easy bank loans, but also jobs, secure housing, healthcare, anti-drug programs, or the like. Typical was this excerpt from an interview we conducted with a warehouse custodian:

Interviewer: Do you think there is *demokrasya* in the Philippines today?

Custodian: Yes there is. Some countries don't have *demokrasya* and others do.

Interviewer: Why do you say that there is *demokrasya* in the Philippines?

Custodian: People are given the opportunity to give their opinions. If they have problems, they can explain and something will be done about it. The authorities sometimes listen, but sometimes they just keep on promising and nothing ever happens.

Interviewer: So when the authorities listen to them, that is *demokrasya*?

Custodian: Yes.

Interviewer: If the authorities don't act on the problems presented to them, would that still be *demokrasya*?

Custodian: It would not be *demokrasya* anymore. You have told them what your problem was, so why didn't they solve it? You know how our government is sometimes. Some people there are so good at making promises but then fail to fulfill them.

Interviewer: Can you give me an example from here in Commonwealth?

Custodian: Take illegal drugs. We need a police detachment to protect our community against illegal drugs. We should be able to go to the higher authorities, who should listen to our request to help the community. But they [the higher authorities] never actually do anything about the problem.

Interviewer: But if you are able to voice your needs, isn't that *demokrasya*?

Custodian: No, because the authorities didn't do anything. They didn't act upon the request. Sometimes they just say "yes" and in the end nothing happens. The mayor, for example, sometimes had problems with the finances. The budget would be tight, and they wouldn't start the project and eventually they would completely forget about it.

For this custodian, as for many people that we interviewed, the freedom to voice grievances is a necessary but insufficient part of *demokrasya*. By their view, people need more than the right to simply express themselves. For *demokrasya* to be realized, they also need to be listened and responded to. As a canteen operator put it, "what I understand of *demokrasya* is that they [people in government] should give in to our requests." We might say, then, that *demokrasya* for many in Barangay Commonwealth translates into a more robust notion of democracy than the "*demokrasya* = civil liberties" equation would suggest. For many people that we interviewed, *demokrasya* means that people not only have the right to speak, but also to have what they say acted upon.

In this regard, the accounts given by the fish vendor, shopkeeper, custodian, and others like them traverse distinctions that are foundational to Dalton, Shin, and Jou's analysis. These authors identify "three broad alternatives" for defining democracy. The word can either be defined in terms of (1) institutions and procedures (namely free and fair elections) or (2) as

“freedom and liberty...with democratic institutions as the means to achieve them” or (3) as “social benefits” which “include such social rights as social services, providing for those in need, and ensuring the general welfare of others” (2007, 144-45). It is because many people around the world define democracy within the boundaries of the second alternative, as opposed to the first and especially the third, that the authors claim, as we have already seen, that “a large proportion of the public in developing nations defines democracy in liberal democratic terms” (147). But the fish vendor, shopkeeper, and custodian speak of *demokrasya* in ways that do not fit neatly into this categoric scheme. They do not talk of “freedom and liberty” as “outcomes” of electoral institutions. They see freedom of expression as a means – a means to secure social benefits. Moreover, for the custodian (definitely) and the fish vendor and shopkeeper (ambivalently), it is only when those benefits are realized that *demokrasya* can be said to exist. *Demokrasya* as these interviewees understand it thus fits into both the second and third of Dalton, Shin, and Jou’s categories at the same time.

We might well imagine that had the fish vendor, shopkeeper, and custodian been interviewed as part of the Global Barometer Project, Dalton, Shin, and Jou would have coded their answers as belonging to the “freedom and liberty” alternative. After all, when asked directly what *demokrasya* means, the fish vendor replied, as saw above, “It’s being able to complain about the price increases. You can hear the complaints of the people. You can even read about them in the papers.” When the custodian and shopkeeper were asked the same question, in parts of their interviews not reproduced above, they replied respectively “We have *kalayaan* to speak, express our opinions, explain our problems to the government” and “*demokrasya* [is] *kalayaan*, you are free to do what you want.” But we see that when given the opportunity to elaborate, the

fish vendor, shop keeper, and custodian all articulate ideas that blur the boundary between understanding *demokrasya* in terms of “freedom and liberty” on the one hand and “social benefits” on the other. These people, it bears keeping in mind, were not idiosyncratic in the ideas they expressed. One out of every four people in Barangay Commonwealth who spoke of *demokrasya* as something like “freedom and liberty” also talked of it in terms of social benefits, often in ways that explicitly linked these two sets of ideas.

The more generalized point is that the kind of multi-dimensional thinking evidenced by the fish vendor, shop keeper, and custodian is not likely to be captured in the short-answer, compressed format of the Global Barometer surveys.¹² The informative messiness of how people actually understand *demokrasya* is replaced in the surveys by concise, single-idea, easy-to-write-down-in-a-few-word answers. Complexity, ambivalence, and interconnectedness are displaced in favor of the short, simple, and telegraphic.

2. *The Problem of Compartmentalization*

A defender of the Global Barometer open-ended question might reply that the logistical constraints that make compression necessary are mitigated by the opportunity that respondents had, in the 2002 Philippine survey and other surveys as well, to offer up to three responses to the

¹² In other surveys, the problem of compression is even more severe. A survey conducted in eleven post-communist European countries limited answers to one sentence (Simon 1998, 85) while surveys conducted in three Latin American countries as well as the United States allowed respondents to answer with only one word (Camp 2001, 17, 258). Note that it is from these surveys that Dalton, Shin, and Jou (2007, 154 note 12) draw their data for several European countries as well as the United States.

question “What for you is the meaning of the word ‘democracy’?” Consequently, the argument might go, the survey is in fact able to capture the complexity of each interviewees’ thinking.

The reality, however, is that the non-narrative nature of the recorded responses do not allow us to figure out how they might fit together. For instance, one person, interviewed in Tagalog for the 2002 Philippine survey, answered – or more accurately was reported as answering – that *demokrasya* meant “*kapayapaan ng bansa*” (peace of the country). For the follow up question “what else?” the following answer was recorded: “*may kalayaan na gumawa/kumilos ng lahat ng gusto mo*” (having *kalayaan* to do anything you want/act in any way you want). For the second “what else?” prompt the answer recorded was “*mga police hindi above sa yo*” (the police are not above you). Among other things, we want to know how it is that *demokrasya* can refer to both peace and *kalayaan*. After all, one might consider the two as being in tension – if everyone has *kalayaan* to do what they want, one might imagine the outcome being not peace but conflict. In addition, we want to know how either of these is related, if at all, to police not being above everyone else. Given the disconnected way in which the survey responses are recorded, it is not easy to figure out what the interviewee had in mind.

Indeed, questions about how meanings fit together are not likely to be raised at all, since scholars who use the Global Barometer survey data have not typically made much of the fact that one individual might be the source of different kinds of answers. Or, to put it another way, those who use the Global Barometer survey do not usually take the individual as a unit of analysis. Rather, they code each of the individual’s responses as if they were free-floating and disconnected from each other. For instance, in an Asian Barometer working paper analyzing the results of the 2002 and two other surveys from the Philippines, the authors report that

interpretations of democracy as “political freedom and civil liberties” occurred more frequently than interpretations of democracy “in broad terms like national unity, solidarity, mutual help, a peaceful life, harmony” and the like (Abueva and Guerrero 2003, 4). This compartmentalized way of reporting responses obscures the connections that interviewees might make between the various answers they give and thus forfeits deeper insight into what democracy or its cognates in other languages might really mean to people.

In fact, interviews that we conducted in Barangay Commonwealth suggest that *kalayaan* on the one hand and peace, harmony, and unity on the other are not distinct and separate ways of thinking about the meaning of *demokrasya* (just as freedom of expression and social benefits are also not disconnected). They are deeply interrelated, and to miss that connection would be to fundamentally misunderstand how people, or at least many people in Barangay Commonwealth, understand what *demokrasya* means.

Indeed for some people that we interviewed, *kalayaan* and peace are synonymous, as we can see in this interview excerpt with a housewife:

Interviewer: For you, what is the meaning of *kalayaan*?

Housewife: Peace [*kapayapaan*, from the root *payapa*, which means tranquil, placid, calm, quiet, or peaceful].

Interviewer: What is the meaning of *kapayapaan*?

Housewife: No trouble.

Interviewer: How would we know whether people in the Philippines have *kalayaan*?

Housewife: Sometimes there is a lot of trouble. Sometimes there are crime syndicates creating trouble and there is no sense of direction. Things are not in order. There is chaos.

Interviewer: So are you saying that there is *kalayaan* when things are peaceful?

Housewife: yes, exactly.

An interview we conducted with a neighborhood liquefied petroleum gas salesman reveals a bit more clearly how *kalayaan* and peace are related, and how both are connected to *demokrasya*:

Interviewer: For you, is *demokrasya* good or bad?

Salesman: *Demokrasya* is really good.

Interviewer: Why do you say that?

Salesman: Obviously, we'll have "freedom of speech" [in English]. We can say anything that we want. You can express your feelings without any fear. But if there is no *demokrasya*, you can't do that because you will fear getting arrested or being killed.

Interviewer: What kinds of feelings are you talking about?

Salesman: Well, everything you have to say about what is happening in government or in your community. Anything you would want to say to a politician. An example is when they do something unlawful. If we didn't have "freedom of speech" we would not be able to say anything about that because we'd fear that they would retaliate against us because of what we said. But since we have "freedom of speech" I have *kalayaan* to say that because I'm a Filipino citizen.

Interviewer: Can you say anything you want to the politician?

Salesman: Yes, but it depends on the situation. Sometimes people go beyond "freedom of speech." "Freedom of speech" has boundaries. Our *kalayaan* does not always mean doing all that we want. *Kalayaan* was given for our good and we are given it to use it for good deeds. We should always use our "freedom of speech" with good intentions. We should always remind ourselves that we will always have *kalayaan* to speak, but that we should be in control of it....Does "freedom of speech" mean that we can say awful things about one another? Of course it doesn't. I think that is common sense.

Later in the interview:

Interviewer: The word "*demokrasya*" comes from the Spanish language. Is there a word of Tagalog origin that means the same thing?

Salesman: The meaning of *demokrasya* is *kalayaan*.

Interviewer: What does the word “*kalayaan*” mean to you?

Salesman: The word *kalayaan* means *katahimikan* [literally “quietness,” but often used, as in this context, to mean something like “peace” or “serenity”]. People would have *katahimikan*. That is the only other word I can think of to define *kalayaan*. When there is *kalayaan* there is *katahimikan* among people.

Interviewer: When you say “*katahimikan*,” what do you mean?

Salesman: Everybody would have “peace of mind” [in English]. We wouldn’t have to worry, wherever we go. We would not fear anything. We would not worry about our economy. We would not fear whoever is elected.

Interviewer: Can you give me an example from here in Commonwealth of what you mean by *kalayaan*?

Salesman: If we are *malaya*, there would not be unemployed and out-of-school youths who like to hang out in the streets. There would be no drugs. There would be no swindlers or crooks. There would be *kalayaan*. Our police would be in constant communication with us. Nobody would commit crimes. Criminals could not run and hide in the squatters’ areas because the residents would have communication with the police. But now, there is no such communication so we don’t have real *kalayaan*.

Like the housewife we just heard from, this salesman equates *kalayaan* with peace, or something like it. This peace, moreover, seems to be a direct result of the freedom to speak. It is “constant communication” between residents and police that generates peace, at least hypothetically. In this context it is worth noting that many people in Commonwealth are wary of the police, who residents perceive to be callous, abusive, and unfair towards the poor in their enforcement of the law. The reality taken for granted by the salesman is a world in which poor people do not always feel safe to seek out contact with the police. If people could feel comfortable to communicate freely with the police, there would be peace and lawfulness. Like the vendor, shopkeeper, and custodian, the salesman thus links freedom of expression to its tangible benefits, and sees both as constitutive of *kalayaan* and *demokrasya*.

There is, however, another dimension to what the salesman has to say. The benefit of peace also seems related to what he describes as the self-restraint that must accompany *kalayaan*. People must speak only with “good intentions” and avoid saying “awful things;” people should, in short, “be in control of” what they say. Many people we interviewed similarly held that *kalayaan*, especially in the context of *demokrasya*, means that one can say anything one likes, but only insofar it is decorous, polite, or respectful. As one man we interviewed conceived it, “there is no true *kalayaan* because there are limits that should be respected” (an extended excerpt from this interview is reproduced in Schaffer 2006). Consider too this portion of an interview with a tricycle driver:

Interviewer: For you, what is the meaning of *kalayaan*?

Driver: You can express what you want to say. Nobody would stop you. Nobody would hinder you. You can say anything you want.

Interviewer: You can say anything you want?

Driver: Yes, as long as it’s not bad.

Interviewer: What do you mean by “bad”?

Driver: There are things that shouldn’t be done. For example, you shouldn’t use mocking words. That is not part of human *kalayaan*.

Many people that we interviewed, correspondingly, also expressed the idea that *kalayaan* in the realm of human affairs, and thus too *demokrasya*, requires a good deal of self-discipline. Indeed for some people that we interviewed, the self-imposed limits on how one speaks or acts – behaving in ways that are decorous, polite, or respectful – appear to be a more fundamental part of *demokrasya* than the freedom to act itself. For example, an elderly rag maker who we interviewed first explained how *demokrasya* means that “people are *malaya*” but then went on to

describe how bounded this freedom actually is. “When your child is of the proper age” he said, “and wants to enter a life of marriage, he needs to ask permission from his parents – this is *demokrasya*. If there were no *demokrasya*, he would do anything he wants. He could even go to another country.” A food service worker expressed a similar idea when she exclaimed: “Now even a child can say things against the leaders of our country! What kind of *demokrasya* is that?” For the rag maker and food service worker, the demand for self-restraint inherent in *kalayaan* is so great that *demokrasya* becomes tantamount to respecting one’s parents or political leaders.

Taking the comments of the rag maker and food service worker into account makes it hard to equate *kalayaan* and *demokrasya* with civil liberties. If these two people had associated *demokrasya* with civil liberties then we would have expected the food service worker to talk about the rights of children to speak out against the leaders of the country and we would have expected the rag maker to talk about his child’s personal freedom to decide whether to marry or where to travel. But the food service worker and rag maker say the opposite, and focus instead on limits to individual freedom imposed by a need for respect. The larger point is that it is in part the boundedness of *kalayaan* and *demokrasya* – the requirement of self-restraint – that make *kalayaan* and *demokrasya* so closely related in people’s minds not only to peace, but also to harmony, order, unity, and the like. *Kalayaan* and *demokrasya*, properly circumscribed, make for smooth interpersonal relations.

Returning to the 2002 survey, we can now how “peace of the country” and “having *kalayaan* to do anything you want/act in any way you want” and “the police are not above you” might be related. Indeed these responses may well be short snippets of a larger narrative not so different from the one provided by the liquefied petroleum gas salesman. In this narrative, to put

it crudely, *demokrasya* is constituted by respectful communication that allows people to speak openly with the police, as well as by the peace which results from that communication.

From the interviews we conducted in Barangay Commonwealth, then, we gain some insight into how understandings of *demokrasya* and *kalayaan* are tightly bound up with notions of peace, self-control, and even police approachability. Yet in the 2002 survey, the already compressed “peace of the country,” “having *kalayaan* to do anything you want/act in any way you want,” and “the police are not above you” were coded as alternate, competing conceptions of democracy. It is important to acknowledge this compartmentalization, for it is only by artificially segregating ideas of peace, respect, order, harmony, self-restraint, approachability – as well as things like social benefits – from ideas of freedom that *kalayaan* and *demokrasya* can be so easily equated with civil liberties. But seven out of every ten people in Barangay Commonwealth who spoke of *demokrasya* in terms of *kalayaan* also conceived of *demokrasya* in terms of peace, respect, order, harmony, self-restraint, approachability, or social benefits. Indeed for many of these people, *kalayaan* itself encompassed notions of peace, respect, harmony, or the like.

The problem of compartmentalization, it bears keeping in mind, is not unique to interpretations of the 2002 Philippine survey. It is just as evident in the global analysis of Dalton, Shin, and Chou (2007, 145), who argue that there are “three broad alternatives – institutions and procedures, freedom and liberties, and social benefits – constitute the primary substantive choices in defining democracy.” But as we have seen, at least for those we interviewed in Barangay Commonwealth, positing that understanding *demokrasya* in terms of freedom and civil liberties on the one hand or social benefits on the other constitute alternative choices obscures the multidimensional ways in which people actually think about the meaning of this term. That is,

the more we acknowledge that these “alternatives” are really different dimensions of a larger whole, the less *kalayaan* and *demokrasya* are so easily categorized as “freedom and liberties.” Insofar as those who work with the Global Barometer surveys typically compartmentalize survey responses in similar ways,¹³ we can only wonder to what extent their substantive findings are also an artifact of the way in which they have collected and coded their data.

3. The Problem of Homogenization

Despite the claim that the Global Barometer open-ended question format allows us to hear from people “in their own words,” it does not appear that many actual responses (however compressed and compartmentalized) were recorded, or at least preserved, verbatim in the 2002 Philippine survey. Rather, it seems that those who recorded or compiled the survey data swapped out what many people actually said for prefabricated glosses that they presumably thought would capture the main idea of what the respondent was trying to say. Thus an astonishing 222 respondents interviewed in six different languages were listed as giving exactly the same response: “*may kalayaan magsalita/kahit anong sabihin masasabi mo/kalayaan sa pananalita*” a set of Tagalog phrases that we might translate as “having *kalayaan* to speak/you can say whatever you want to say/*kalayaan* of expression;” 178 respondents were listed as giving the exact response of “*may kalayaan na gumawa/kumilos ng lahat ng gusto mo*” (having *kalayaan* to

¹³ Two exceptions are worth noting: Simon (1998, 97-98) theorizes about “linked responses” in postcommunist Europe, while Shin (2008, 16-20) examines how frequently people in East Asia hold “multidimensional” conceptions of democracy. Not coincidentally, the latter author questions the claim that liberal understandings of democracy predominates in East Asia. For a critique of compartmental thinking with regard to the interpretation of Afrobarometer survey results in South Africa see Zuern (2009).

do anything you want/act in any way you want); and 66 were listed as giving the exact response of “*kalayaan makapagpahayag ng sariling pananaw/sariling opinyon*,” (*kalayaan* to express one’s own viewpoint/opinion). Together, these three responses made up more than half of all responses recorded.

The obvious danger here is that the interviewer or (more likely) compiler may have attributed to the person being interviewed ideas that he or she did not express or smoothed over important differences and nuances. A less obvious danger relates to the language in which the responses were reported. People who were interviewed in Bicolano, Cebuano, Ilocano, Ilonggo, Maranao, and Ibaloy – who together made up more than half of the sample that responded to this question – had their answers homogeneously rendered into Tagalog (with some English mixed in), thereby flattening and obscuring any difference in meaning that might exist between the words actually uttered in these different languages.

More specifically, while respondents may have spoken of “*kagawasan*” in Cebuano, “*wayawaya*” in Ilocano, “*kahilwayan*” in Ilonggo, and “*katalingasan*” in Bicolano, their words were uniformly recorded as “*kalayaan*” or “freedom.”¹⁴ But these Cebuano, Ilocano, Ilonggo, and Bicolano terms do not share a common etymology or have meanings that are identical in range to either *kalayaan* or freedom. *Kagawasan* is built up from a root that in its most literal sense means “to go out from an enclosed area” but can range in meaning from “outside” to “from a foreign country” to “state of being free” to “aside from, except, unless” (Wolff 1972, 261-62).

The root of *kahilwayan* means not only “untrammelled, free to act” but also “well-ordered, well-

¹⁴ Only one person was asked this question in Maranao and only one person in Ibaloy. Neither respondent was recorded as speaking of “*kalayaan*” or “freedom.”

arranged, well-regulated” (Kaufmann 1935, 292), while *kahilwayan* itself in Ilonggo folk cosmology refers to a mythic Eden-like place of peace and quiet (Alegre and Fernandez 1987, 198-99). The root of *wayawaya* can mean not only “freedom” but also “leisure time” or “opportunity” while *wayawaya* itself can mean both “the power to do as one pleases” and “rightness of mind” (Guanzon-Lapeña and Javier 1997, 284-85; Rubino 2000, 642).

Katalingkasan bears specific connotations of being disconnected, detached, or unchained (Balde 2009, 14-15). More has been written on the etymology and meaning of *kalayaan*. Given the frequency with which Tagalog speakers associate *kalayaan* with *demokrasya* – not only in Barangay Commonwealth but in the Philippines more generally¹⁵ – a more extensive discussion of its origins is warranted, a discussion that will reveal additional meanings of the term not yet brought to the fore in this paper.

Interestingly, *kalayaan* is a term of relatively new vintage. Indeed, *kalayaan* made its first documented appearance only in 1867, when, as far as we know, it was coined by a Catholic priest named Mariano Sevilla to render the Italian word *libertà* in his translation of a religious booklet that would become the basis for a psalm sung yearly during the May devotions to the Virgin Mary.¹⁶ Addressed to devotees, the *libertà* in question was the freedom that awaits those accepted into heaven, the freedom to wander about the air, moon, sun, and stars; and between heaven and

¹⁵ Of those people interviewed in Tagalog for the 2002 survey, 67 percent of the people who responded to the question of what *demokrasya* mean to them were reported as using the word “*kalayaan*” or its cognate “*malaya*” in their answers.

¹⁶ The original Italian passage can be found in Muzzarelli (1855, 72). Sevilla’s (1878, 82) Tagalog spelling was “*calaya-an*.” Although the Tagalog edition I consulted dates to 1878, Sevilla began work on the translation in 1863, completed it in 1865, and was granted a license to print it by the Archbishop of Manila in 1867 after a review of its content (Sevilla 1878, 3; Andrade and Yanga 1998, 2).

earth; and to penetrate into the most secret places “without you having the slightest obstacle or slightest fear” (*uala munti mang macahahadlang ni camunti mang catacutan*) (Sevilla 1878, 82).

In translating *libertà*, Sevilla apparently sought a word that also conveyed connotations of its cognate *liberalità* - liberality (Andrade and Yanga 1998, 3-4). Indeed, historian Reynaldo Iletto (1979, 87; 1982, 112-14) has argued that the word *kalayaan* is built up from the adjective *layaw*, the *ka-* prefix and *-an* suffix turning the adjective into a noun.¹⁷ In the 1860s, at the time when Sevilla crafted *kalayaan* out of *layaw*, dictionary writers such as Noceda and Sanlucar (1860, 177) and Serrano (1869, 135) rendered *layaw* in Spanish as *caricias* (caresses, acts of endearment), *halago* (praise, demonstration of affection), *regalo del cuerpo* (literally, “gift of the

¹⁷ While many scholars, including prominent filipinologists such as Kerkvliet (2002) and Rafael (2008), accept Iletto’s account, historian Kimuell-Gabriel (1999, 55-57) disagrees. She finds it more probable that *kalayaan* derives instead from the proto-Philippine word *daya*, which meant on the one hand “rest” or “cessation from work,” and on the other hand “interior land” (Constenoble 1979, 66-67). Since the d and l (as well as r) sounds often alternate in Tagalog, she believes that a connection between *daya* (in the senses of “rest” or “cessation from work”) and *kalayaan* is linguistically more plausible than a connection between *layaw* and *kalayaan*; the transformation of an adjective ending in *-aw* into a noun root ending in *-aa* does not, after all, follow the normal grammatical conventions of the Tagalog language. Still, her hypothesis is less than convincing. Proto-Philippine is an ancient language, reconstructed by comparative linguists, that eventually evolved into modern Philippine languages such as Tagalog, Ilocano, Bicolano, Pangasinan, Kapampangan and the various Bisayan dialects. There is no evidence that *daya* ever meant anything like “rest” or “cessation from work” in the Tagalog language as it has existed at least since the 17th century, when the first substantive Tagalog-Spanish dictionaries appeared. The only remnant of proto-Philippine *daya* in Tagalog is *ilaya*, which means roughly “the interior part of the country” or “the upper part of a town.” Furthermore, *daya* did not carry any meaning even remotely close to “rest” or “cessation of work” in Ilocano-, Bicolano-, Pangasinan-, Bisaya-, Maguidanao-, or Kapampangan-Spanish dictionaries of the mid to late 19th century (see for instance Bergaño 1860, 88; Carro 1888, 97; Félix de la Encarnación 1885, 99; Fernández Cosgaya 1865, 129; Juanmartí 1892, 52; Lisboa 1865, 113; Mentrída 1841, 120; Sanchez de la Rosa 1895, 71). Thus neither Sevilla, nor his Tagalog-speaking audience, nor even Tagalog speakers with a knowledge of other major Philippine languages, would have been aware of the ancient proto-Philippine meanings of “rest” and “cessation from work” that purportedly motivated the choice of *daya* to translate the Italian word *libertà*.

body”), or “*acudir á alguno en sus necesidades*” (to attend to someone’s needs). *Layaw*, as these definitions only intimate, is a term closely associated with the parent-child relationship. A more contemporary translation of the term would be something like “pampered” or “spoiled.” Thus one recent dictionary rendered *batang layaw* as “spoiled child.” (English 1987,793). Given this context, *kalayaan* apparently also carried connotations of pampering or motherly care, and would have drawn on the Catholic Church’s view of Mary as both queen of heaven and mother of the church. The image of *kalayaan* in Sevilla’s mind, to put it more succinctly, may have been the freedom to move about without “the slightest obstacle or slightest fear” under the indulgent but watchful care of Mama Mary above.

The transformation of *kalayaan* into a political term apparently began in the early 1870s. At that time Sevilla was living with fellow student Marcelo H. del Pilar while they were together at the Colegio Real de San José in Manila (Schumacher 1981, 37). It seems likely that del Pilar – who would go on to found with others *Diariong Tagalog*, a Tagalog and Spanish language newspaper that gave voice to the aspirations of reformist, liberal-minded nationalists of the Propaganda Movement – learned of this word from Sevilla at that time.¹⁸ Indeed, del Pilar was the next known person to use *kalayaan* – as a way to render “*libertad*” in an 1882 translation of a Spanish essay written by the most renowned Filipino propagandist, José Rizal (Almario 1993, 116).¹⁹ Leaders of the Katipunan, a lower-class revolutionary Filipino secret society devoted to

¹⁸ On the role of del Pilar in founding *Diariong Tagalog* and in the Propaganda Movement more generally see Schumacher (1973, 94-114). On discussions between Sevilla and del Pilar see Andrade and Yanga (1998, 5).

¹⁹ Indeed Rizal remarked in a letter to his brother a few years later how he learned of this term from reading del Pilar’s translation of his essay (Rizal [1886] 1964). Rizal followed del Pilar’s example, and used *kalayaan* to render the German word “*Freiheit*” in his own 1896

achieving independence from Spain, further popularized the word by adopting it as the name of their revolutionary organ in 1896 (Agoncillo 1996, 82).

According to Iletto, both reform-minded propagandists such as del Pilar and revolutionary Katipuneros such as Andres Bonifacio and Emilio Jacinto used *kalayaan* in ways that played on the familial connotations of *layaw*, thereby allowing them to cast the political project of independence as a kind of family drama played out on a national scale:

Kalayaan, as a political term, is inseparable from its connotations of parent-child relationship, reflecting social values like the tendency of mothers in the lowland Philippines to pamper their children and develop strong emotional ties with them. Childhood is fondly remembered as a kind of “lost Eden,” a time of *kaginhawaan* (contentment) and *kasaganaan* (prosperity) unless one was brought up in abject poverty or by an uncaring (*pabaya*) stepmother (1979, 87).

Where reformist and revolutionary leaders differed was on the question of how to recover this lost *kalayaan*. For reformists, restoring *kalayaan* required establishing a more caring mother-child relationship between Spain and her Philippine colony. For revolutionaries, *kalayaan* could only be regained by severing an irreparably abusive relationship with a foreign mother, Spain, and replacing it with a blissful and caring relationship with the original mother, Filipinas (Rafael 2008, 112).

In its early usage as a political term, then, it appears that *kalayaan* meant freedom of a special sort. For reformists it meant liberality of mother Spain towards her daughter colony. For revolutionaries it was both the liberation from abusive parental control experienced by a mistreated child and the bliss experienced by a child reunited with a loving mother. What both

translation of Friedrich von Schiller’s play, Wilhelm Tell (Rizal 1907).

shared was a conception of *kalayaan* in familial, affectionate terms – it was a kind of freedom that ultimately required the indulgence of a compassionate mother.

That both reformists and revolutionaries writing in Tagalog found the neologism *kalayaan* to be so appealing is all the more interesting insofar as other Tagalog terms already existed that roughly conveyed the idea of freedom. Indeed prior to the 1880s, dictionary writers regularly rendered the Spanish word *libertad* into Tagalog as *timawa* or *kamaharlikaan*.²⁰ Like Greek *eleutheros*, Latin *liber*, Germanic *frei*, and Indonesian *merdeka*, these two Tagalog words find their origins in social status classifications (Lewis 1967, 111-17; Benveniste 1973, 262-7; Reid 1998, 142-46).²¹ The Tagalog words derive, more precisely, from *timawa* and *maharlika*, two related social groups that existed in pre-colonial Tagalog-speaking areas of the Philippines. The *timawa* and *maharlika* were, roughly, “free people” who stood in the middle of the social hierarchy. Above were chiefly *maginoo*; below were debt-bound *alipin*. Unlike the *maginoo*, the *timawa* and *maharlika* did not constitute a ruling group. Unlike the *alipin*, the *timawa* and *maharlika* were free to transfer their loyalty from one *maginoo* to another (Scott 1985, 99-111). Thus the freedom enjoyed by the *maharlika* and *timawa* was, as one historian put it, the “right to shift allegiance from one *maginoo* to another...but they were not free in the sense that they had no chief at all” (100).²²

²⁰ See for instance San Buena Ventura (1613), Santos (1794), and Noceda and Sanlucar (1860).

²¹ In fact, Tagalog *kamaharlikaan* and Indonesian *merdeka* both derive from Sanskrit *maharddika*, which meant rich, wise, eminent, or illustrious (Reid 1998, 142).

²² Sixteenth century Tagalog speakers on the island of Luzon, the largest island in the Philippine archipelago, made a distinction between ordinary *timawa* (people free to make contractual relations with *maginoo*) and aristocratic *maharlika* (military servants of *maginoo*)

Reformists and revolutionaries presumably did not think that the meanings of *timawa* and *kamaharlikaan* reflected the political ideals to which they aspired as well as the new term *kalayaan*, even if they did use *timawa* on occasion.²³ We can only speculate about why they preferred the word *kalayaan*, but it seems reasonable to conclude that the language of familial intimacy (*layaw* and *kalayaan*) better reflected the political imaginary of both reformists and revolutionaries than did the language of social class (*timawa* and *kamaharlikaan*). Nationalists of both kinds apparently saw, or saw fit to represent, the relationship of Spain to the Philippines as having closer parallels to the relationship of mother to child than to the relationship of chiefs to their underlings.

Indeed the parent-child metaphor was central to the nationalist writings of the late 19th century (Ileto 1998, 12; Pambid-Domingo 2006). In one secretly distributed poem from 1888, for instance, the reform-minded Hermenegildo Flores wrote (here translated from the original Tagalog):

Oh, beautiful and generous Mother Spain
where is your loving concern for your child?
It is I, your youngest born, unfortunate Filipinas.

(Scott 1985, 104-106). Well before the late nineteenth century, however, the *maharlika* had disappeared as a social group, and Tagalog-Spanish dictionaries of mid- and late-19th century typically defined the word simply as a “free person.” Thus by the time the nationalists were casting about for a suitable vocabulary, *timawa* and *kamaharlikaan* had become roughly synonymous and may have meant something like “not being indebted or bound to a particular patron or chief.”

²³ Marcelo H. del Pilar, for instance, wrote in his 1889 poem *Sagot nang España sa Hibik nang Pilipinas* (Spain’s Reply to Filipinas’ Cry for Help) “*walang natimawa sa pagka-duhagi, na di namuhunan ng pamamayani*” (no down-trodden people ever attained freedom [*natimawa*] without a starting fund of heroic deeds). Reprinted and translated in Lumbera (1986, 232-33). For two uses of *timawa* by revolutionary figures see Kimuell-Gabriel (1999, 49-50).

Glance at me, you cannot ignore my suffering.²⁴

Other nationalists were less pleading. Bonifacio, the revolutionary leader of the Katipunan, took up Flores' conceit but addressed in his own Tagalog poem a defiant verse to Mother Spain:

We your children stood without support
during the terrible storm of pains and troubles;
all in Filipinas are now of one heart -
you're no longer a mother to us.²⁵

Whether plaintive or angry, nationalists framed the colonial relationship in familial terms. What they sought was either a more caring relationship with mother Spain or liberation from a mother turned callous.

I introduce these historical details about *kalayaan* because current usage of the term among many of those we interviewed in Barangay Commonwealth carries connotations that echo closely the language of the late 19th century. For many in Barangay Commonwealth, as in the 19th century, *kalayaan* requires that those in positions of power (who today include parents, teachers, police officers, bank officials, government leaders, and the like) treat those under their authority with kindness or compassion. Recall, in this context, what the shopkeeper had to say about *kalayaan* and *demokrasya* – they existed because bank officials treated her family with compassion, “they didn’t force us to pay our debts.” Many people that we interviewed, moreover, expressed this idea in an idiom that draws directly from family life. Typical is what a high school

²⁴ From the poem *Hibik ng Filipinas sa Ynang España* (Filipinas' Cry for Help to Mother Spain), quoted in Iletto (1998, 11). Note that Flores had been del Pilar's teacher, and the two men coordinated their writing of Filipinas' Cry and Spain's Reply (Lumbera 1986, 144-45).

²⁵ From the poem *Katapusang Hibak ng Pilipinas* (The Final Cry of Filipinas). Quoted in, and translated by, Lumbera (1986, 234).

social studies teacher had to say about the kind of *kalayaan* that she sees as constituting *demokrasya*:

Interviewer: In your opinion, is *demokrasya* good or bad?

Teacher: It's good because people really want to have *kalayaan*. It's inherent in human nature to be *malaya*, to be *malaya* in oneself.

Interviewer: What do you mean by "to be *malaya* in oneself"?

Teacher: To not be hindered in expressing what you feel. Whatever you are thinking, you can say it out loud.

Interviewer: Say it to whom?

Teacher: Let me focus on the family as an example. Parents shouldn't dominate their children....They should be friendly, so that their children can see their concern, can see that they really care, that they have love there.

Interviewer: And if there are differences, how do they get settled? Who decides?

Teacher: If there is disagreement between parents and children, the parents should be the ones to settle it. It should be the father because it's his responsibility. And the wife should support her husband in making the decision.

What starts off sounding like an explanation of how *demokrasya* entails freedom of speech, an account that on its own might lead us to think she had something like civil liberties in mind, morphs into an explanation of how the *kalayaan* of *demokrasya* requires parents to treat their children with tenderness. It is not the protection of the individual by means of civil liberties that is at stake in the end (let alone the kind of participatory decision-making that one might expect if she had been talking about "democracy"), but the leniency and compassion of those in a position of authority.

To many Commonwealth residents, a major problem with Philippine *demokrasya* today is that people – the poor in particular – are not properly cared for, be it by the police as we have

seen, or by other people in government. When we asked an office worker if he thought that there is *demokrasya* in the Philippines today, he answered this way:

Demokrasya is just hypocrisy....The candidates say [the poor] are the people who need help but they don't actually help them....As a leader in the government you have to help them. The poor are like babies who still don't know how to live. The [leaders] are grown ups who already know how to live. The reason why you are in the government is for you to manage the country because there are still lots of babies.

A street-food vendor explained in similar terms why she did not see much *kalayaan* or *demkorasya* in Barangay Commonwealth, as this interview excerpt shows:

Interviewer: Earlier you said that *demokrasya* is good because "you are *malaya* to do whatever you want." Does everybody have that kind of *kalayaan*?

Street-food vendor: Not really. Some people have options, but others don't.

Interviewer: How so?

Street-food vendor: For example, when you go to the barangay hall, instead of serving you, they get mad. Like awhile ago I came from the barangay. I processed my wiring permit for Meralco [the electric company]. I already came from city hall and they had me go back to the barangay. When I got there, they said "you have to come back again tomorrow." That barangay clearance would have only taken a short time to process. Why would they have you come back when they can just do it now? They are more powerful...People cannot ask for their pity.

In short, by this conception *kalayaan* and *demokrasya* require that those in positions of power treat those under their care, purview, or influence with kindness and consideration, or to use the language of the food vendor, pity. This idea, it is important to note, was fairly widespread among those we interviewed. One in three people we interviewed spoke of *kalayaan* or *demokrasya* in this way.

Many politicians understand well the expectations of kindness held by the poor who, let us keep in mind, make up the vast majority of the voting population (Schaffer 2008, 137-38). We

can thus gain a fuller appreciation of the strategies candidates adopt once elected. One such strategy is the “branding” campaign of former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, known too by her initials GMA. Never popular among the poor and faced with particularly low approval ratings from this class in 2009, she instructed all government agencies to give her personal credit for their social welfare and public works projects (Esplanada 2009). Her “GMA Cares!” logo was emblazoned on countless dikes, bridges, guardrails, rooftops, day care centers, health clinics, and billboards across the country. In this regard, Macapagal-Arroyo was hardly unique. The flagship anti-poverty program of her predecessor, Joseph Estrada, was called *Lingap para sa Mahirap* (Caring for the Poor).²⁶ As well, elected officials throughout the country routinely have their names spray painted on ambulances, benches, waiting sheds, basketball courts, the walls of clinics, and more as a way to claim credit for projects they helped bring to local communities. Not someone to be outdone, former first lady Imelda Marcos, wife of the deceased dictator Ferdinand Marcos, distributed juice packets and cigarettes during a campaign stop during her 2010 bid for a congressional seat. “I’m running not only as a representative, but as your mother” she told the crowd. “I’ll take care of all of you” (Onishi 2010). She won the election by a landslide with 80 percent of the vote.

We can now begin to see more clearly why it is problematic to equate *kalayaan* with civil liberties. Civil liberties exist within or are constituted by a bubble of non-interference enveloping the individual. In this sense, they correspond to Isaiah Berlin’s understanding of negative liberty,

²⁶ My Tagalog-English dictionary defines *lingap* as “protective and compassionate care of someone.”

which he described as “simply the area in which a man can act unobstructed by others” (1969, 122). John Stuart Mill also had something like this in mind when he wrote that:

There is a circle around every individual human being, which no government, be it that of one, of a few, or of the many, ought to be permitted to overstep: there is a part of the life of every person who has come to years of discretion, within which the individuality of that person ought to reign uncontrolled either by any individual or by the public collectively (Mill [1871] 1998, 326).

The essence of civil liberties, in short, consists of non-interference, especially by the government.

To some people we interviewed, the *kalayaan* of *demokrasya* does, to be sure, refer to non-interference, to barriers put up against trespassing. Recall the unemployed woman who defined *demokrasya* as not being “suppressed by the people in government.” But at the same time, other people did not always conceive of *kalayaan* or *demokrasya* in terms of barriers. When the shopkeeper spoke of leniency on the part of bank officials, when the rag maker and food service worker talked of self-restraint, when the salesman spoke of open communication with the police, and when the office worker described political leaders as grown ups and the poor as babies, at issue was not the establishment of a zone of individual sovereignty or a frontier of personal freedom that others are not allowed to trespass. What counted as *kalayaan* or *demokrasya* at these moments in the interviews were the terms of engagement – *when* others should be moved to intervene and *how* that intervention should be regulated. For an intervention to be consistent with *kalayaan* or *demokrasya*, these interviewees seem to be saying, it must be motivated by compassion, kindness, and caring, and be enacted with respect, courtesy, and self-restraint. We might recast this same idea metaphorically, and think of interventions into personal affairs as traffic: if civil liberties are road blocks put up to keep unwanted vehicles out, *kalayaan* and *demokrasya* for many people we interviewed instead establish rules of the road that must be

obeyed. Framing it another way still, the *kalayaan* of *demokrasya* as used by many people we interviewed is a concept premised on the human condition of dependence. It is freedom placed within a larger context of unequal social relations that must be managed.

We see, then, that *kalayaan* has a distinct history that apparently reverberates to this day, a history not shared by its rough equivalents in either English or in other indigenous Philippine languages. Yet survey researchers have homogenized the meanings of all these words. Freedom and *kalayaan* are treated as twins, while any possible occurrences of *kagawasan*, *wayawayaya*, *kahilwayan*, or *katalingkasan* or other similar terms were hidden by reporting all the results in English or Tagalog. It is partially by means of this homogenization that “democracy” in the Philippines gets associated so strongly with civil liberties in interpretations of the Global Barometer survey, as many reported references to *kalayaan* are treated as straightforward instance of civil-liberty thinking.

Expanding this set of reflections beyond the Barangay Commonwealth, and beyond the Philippines, we see that the problem of homogenization is widespread among the various national iterations of the Global Barometer Project. The flattening of differences between languages, for instance, is even more severe in other Barometer surveys conducted in Asia. For the 2006 Thailand survey, interviews were conducted in Thai and Malay, but the results were reported only in English. The same reporting procedure was used for surveys conducted in China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia, and Mongolia, among other places. Even the results of the 2005 Philippine survey were reported only in English. Also common to many Global Barometer surveys is the large-scale recurrence of identical responses. Similar patterns can be seen, to give just one example, in the 2000 South Africa survey. 464 people – 20 percent of the

sample – speaking ten different languages were recorded as giving the homogenized-into-English (and compressed) answer “freedom in general.”

The problem here – to focus only on the language issue – is that research conducted in Asia, Africa, and beyond shows that freedom or liberty and their rough equivalents in other languages do not necessarily mean the same thing (Kelly and Reid 1998, Taylor 2002).²⁷ Inferring references to civil liberties when people around the world use words that coders translate roughly as “freedom” may thus be just as problematic elsewhere in the world as it is in Barangay Commonwealth.

Conclusion

The problems of compression, compartmentalization, and homogenization may perhaps strike the reader as necessary concessions that one must make to generate data that is globally comparable. The reality, however, is that the combined effects of these three problems are consequential. Indeed they potentially undermine the plausibility of the claim that a plurality of people around the world sees democracy or its rough equivalents through the same liberal lens. It thus also puts into question the value of comparative research conducted by scholars who claim that survey questions on “democracy” measure the same thing cross-nationally.

At least one survey researcher arrived at a similar conclusion in a moment of sober reflection. Bratton, who we may recall spoke of “a regime of civil liberties” as providing

²⁷ Nor, for that matter, do the English words “freedom” and “liberty” mean the same thing, as Pitkin (1988) has demonstrated.

a “common pattern of shared meaning across all the world regions” (2009b, 7), wrote in another paper presented only a few months later:

We do not know whether all survey respondents conceive of freedom in the same way. Are they thinking of negative freedom from an overbearing state or positive freedom to exercise inalienable human rights? And, even if people mention freedom more frequently than any other meaning, only four in ten do so (40 percent in 2000, 41 percent in 2005). Moreover, some people can offer more than one meaning of democracy and different people do not always prioritize subsidiary meanings in exactly the same order. Thus it seems presumptuous – even heroic – to base the comparative study of public attitudes to democracy on the assumption that all people understand democracy simply as freedom (2009a, 2).

Bratton, in his own way, is also questioning the value of responses that are highly compressed, compartmentalized, and homogenized.

We have learned, in fact, that by means of compression, compartmentalization, and homogenization, words that have complex grammars have been simplified, domesticated, and falsely twinned with cognate words in other languages. Nuance, ambivalence, multivalence, and difference are flattened. *Kalayaan* – the key term focused on in this paper – is a complex word that can mean not only the freedom to do or say what one wants, but – at least for most people we interviewed in Barangay Commonwealth – also the power to have one’s demands acted upon, peace, self-restraint, and indulgent caring, among other things. *Kalayaan* does not mean precisely the same thing as freedom, nor does either term mean exactly the same thing as words like *kagawasan*, *wayawaya*, *kahilwayan*, and *katalingkasan*. The various meanings of *kalayaan* itself, furthermore, do not constitute contrasting “alternatives.” They are connected and interrelated in numerous ways. But in the highly processed output of the Global Barometer Project, this complexity and these relationships are filtered away. *Kalayaan*, and by extension *demokrasya*, get equated with civil liberties, full stop.

The people we interviewed in Barangay Commonwealth – despite surface appearances – do not conform neatly to the generalization that “a large proportion of the public in developing nations define democracy in liberal-democratic terms,” as Dalton, Shin, and Jou (2007, 147) might have it. More importantly, the misleading equation of *demokrasya* with civil liberties is the result of problems generic to the survey research practices from which this conclusion is derived. What confidence, then, can we have that analogous problems do not exist elsewhere? Do the survey data really support the claim that around the world people’s views of “democracy” are really “surprisingly consistent”? If compression, compartmentalization, and homogenization are manifest not only in the 2002 Philippine survey, but in other Global Barometer surveys as well – as they apparently are – then it could be instead that consistency is the product not of converging worldviews but of specific procedures used to record, code, and interpret interview responses. If such is the case, consistency has not been discovered, it has been subtly but artificially manufactured.

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