

“Di ka naman tunay na aktibista”

Reflections on Philippine Leftist Exclusionism

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When I was an undergrad, I had to fight so many people to allow my voice and opinions to be heard. The central point of my struggle as a young activist then was to get formally organized activists to realize that speaking up is a form of action, too; that not being part of any organization or not being as physically and publicly active in political struggles as they were didn't mean you weren't one; that just because someone isn't doing activism and radicalism the exact same way the established Left does, doesn't mean they aren't activists or radicals.

At the time, I was a middle-class kid tied to my meager-for-a-middle-class-kid allowance, my home life, and my mental health struggles. I couldn't leave our house as much even if I tried because I didn't have the money to, nor did I have parental permission to go to faraway (anything beyond Quezon City was far to my Marikina-based family) political events that typically last into the night. I also had to deal with crippling anxiety—I used to have attacks at least once a week, and having an attack in public where I knew no one well enough who could help me or send me to safety would not have been a good situation for me. These attacks, growing frequent around 2013 when I started university, lasted well into 2016–2017, when I started becoming more visible at protests and the general political sphere.

I figured people would say that there's a way to circumvent all these issues, and one of those ways was to be a member of a mass organization. They could lend you money or carpool or something. They could ensure your safety. They could do so many things to alleviate my worries. But in the Philippines, they say, *kung ayaw may dahilan; kung gusto may paraan*. ["There will always be a reason not to do it if you don't want to do it," akin to the English-language idiom "where there's a will there's a way."] And there was a personal reason I held back: I *really* didn't want to be a member of any mass org I knew of.

I didn't want to join because they made me and the people I cared about feel unsafe, judged, and othered.

I've been doing some reflecting this morning and I realize now more than ever that the reason I was so hellbent on recognizing even mere expression as activism, and the reason I was so hesitant to join more largely-recognized and collective forms of activism, was because of the elitism and exclusion I and other people I encountered experienced at the hands of Philippine political circles.

How could I say activism here is elite and exclusive? My experiences crystallized in the following reflections.

People refused to see speaking up and doing what you could with what you have as enough to qualify to be part of the struggle.

And I didn't want anything to do with those kinds of people.

People think that just because you're a middle-class kid, you have no excuse of limitation or oppression, and that being privileged, you had to be empowered enough to go out of your way to do Activist Things. But as I mentioned above, I'm not from a well-off-enough family (I lived in a single-parent household with four siblings); I'm also the eldest child, and a woman at that, meaning I had to be an active and emotionally available mother to my siblings as our own mother couldn't be (at some points during university, even during exams, I would have to stay up until 4 or 5am to care for my baby sibling, leaving me with an hour or two to sleep and study); and I have been suffering mental health issues that get triggered in social situations.

Having been limited back then due to these factors, learning more, speaking up and sharing what I thought, what I knew, and what I learned were the least that I thought I could contribute stripped of any other resource but knowledge and platform. I knew what I was good at, and I knew what I had and didn't have. I was good at reading, writing, and talking people's ears off. And even though I didn't really have the resources necessary to frequent mass mobilizations, I was privileged enough to go to university. I had a good reach online.

So I did what I could with what I had. I was a sociology major, so I kept reading everything my professors gave me and kept up-to-date on current events of my own volition. I processed what I learned and talked about it with friends and relatives who would listen, and posted and tweeted my reflections about these things online. I called out mistakes and wrong conclusions, back when I took active part in call-out culture, before it had a name. I called for support for different causes and advocacies — against tuition hikes, against militarization, for the lumad¹ march, for the farmers — and redirected people to resources and other people who knew more about said issues than I did.

In 2016, I took part in a little personal protest my friends did. It was an idea that my friend started. We carried it out, and I posted about the protest and my experience doing it online. Unexpectedly, this protest caught attention, went viral and extended beyond the reach I originally had. We gained more platforms to talk about the issues we were concerned about. We had more chances to point to the roots of the various problems we faced.

I spoke out not only against the administration but questioned inconsistencies with more progressive actors as well. Bringing to light a critique about the current attitude of certain actors of the Left, however, also brought me vitriol. At the time, part of the Left supported the current president both during his campaign and after his election due to his promises for the marginalized and his self-identification as a socialist. I wondered aloud about the relative silence of the Left (at least, in my circles) regarding extrajudicial killings under the president's only policy, the War on Drugs.

The only responses this got were direct, albeit “templated,” rebuttals to my claims, and personal attacks questioning my self-identified and publicly-bestowed “activist” label. A lot of Leftists wondered how I could consider myself an activist when I wasn't part of a mass organization or present in any protest and mobilization, the latter hurled at me despite my attendance in a handful of mobilizations they organized and which I photo-documented to use online to raise awareness and support.

I marveled at the height of the bar I had to measure up to just to become an activist. I also wondered how others who do not and cannot have access to the privileges I did can become activists themselves, in spaces where mass organizations are too far, too few, or unrepresentative of specific sectors, or where the kinds of protests that are considered “proper” may be ineffective, expensive, or altogether dangerous. Apart from the seeming binary of activism which was organizer/organized, could anyone else become an activist? Could *anything else* be activism?

The short answer, where I stood, was no. At least, not if I'm coming from where these “official, real” activists come from. (It should be telling that a dichotomy arises, between “official, real” as in “organized and active” activists and “unofficial, fake” as in “everyone else who doesn't fit the mold”.)

So I gave up trying to get people to accept me and what I did, and instead did my best to help others — those similarly not accepted and finding different ways to be radical — to realize that they deserved to carve out spaces of their own and that their voices and efforts mattered, whatever other people said.

I experienced discomfort and eventually some form of trauma from discrimination and harassment in activist spaces, predominantly from encounters with “progressive” or “radical” men.

I didn't really have anyone do that for me—no one in the political sphere really reassured me that I was doing fine as an activist and that what I was doing, what I could do, mattered. I had to work up the security and confidence to realize that myself, or find other ways to learn that what I was doing was really helping.

¹ Lumad denotes the non-Muslim indigenous peoples of the island of Mindanao. They are often dispossessed of their land.

What I did have were Leftists who were telling me that I was fake or a reactionary, or that I didn't have the right to critique their organizations and methods even as they critiqued mine.

I distinctly remember one man from the red side of things telling me that I was a *dilawan*² for wanting to participate in the EDSA Day commemoration event at the People Power Monument, telling me that being a sociologist, I should know that my mere presence there means support and legitimization for the Aquinos. I met this man through Bumble, back when I was bored enough to use dating apps. I also felt extremely uncomfortable talking to him, with nicknames and backhanded compliments as the norm when he used to hit me up. Unsurprisingly, I learned a few years after that he has manipulated, lied to, and solicited sex from other women in radical spaces, amongst many other deeds. I heard the only thing his organization did about him was to warn him to limit his encounters with women or to stop doing those things.

Yet another man from the red side of things asked me very personal and intrusive questions, such as if I masturbated and how. This same man called what my friends and I did "intellectual masturbation," and to him what we did contributed nothing to the struggles of the people.

I also remember another man from the yellow side of things getting mad at me and, consequently, at a friend because I publicly criticized an event they organized for false advertisement and many other things. He would later ignore a few attempts I made to help out in their campaigns.

I know someone, too, who hates both sides as an active part of the Left. He mansplains to me and other women quite often and talks over us whether he is aware or not; inserts himself into conversations that don't need him; brings up his personal preferences about sex and romance in situations that may tackle the topics but don't ask him of it; and subscribes to the idea that political conversations anywhere other than the spaces he deems valid and with anyone other than the people he considers the only oppressed are nothing but *kaburgisan*³—essentially excluding anyone who does even just a little bit better than the working class (and what even is a clear-cut definition of the working class at a time of economic ambivalence and precarity?).

I could go on, I realize. This is the first time I'm sitting down and specifically thinking about *all* the uncomfortable situations I have been confronted with when with "radical" or "progressive" men. The casual objectification they show when they talk about other women with me because they think I'd understand as queer and "one of the boys." The unacknowledged homophobia and transphobia. The speed and ease of things descending to physical violence when one gets offended.

It all points to a hypermasculine, overexaggerated performance that, although not exclusive to the political sphere, when mixed with ideas of activism and radicalism somehow allows men to believe they are shielded from any and all criticism. As if being an activist or radical by name is enough to make them immune to both being sexists, misogynists, homophobes and transphobes *and* to being criticized for being sexists, misogynists, homophobes, and transphobes. It's not impossible to hear these men's voices in my head say, "How could *I* be a misogynist? I fight for equality for all!"

(Tell that to the girlfriend you cheated on with someone else in your mass org. Tell that to the women in your collective you solicit sex from. Or, well, I'm sure you did; and your fellow men in the collective did nothing but baby you, defend you, and coddle you.)

But sure, people like me aren't "real" activists or radicals because we go to less protests or choose not to expose ourselves to these kinds of things.

Our idea of activism is still classist, ableist, and sexist.

When men like *that* not only exist but even *thrive* in activist spaces, you get a sense of how unfree and unfreeing our idea of activism really is. Broad, genuine, and truly inclusive representation and

² "Yellow," a color associated with a political bloc, party, or side that leans closer to liberal democracy.

³ "Bourgeois," with the root word *burgis*, a Tagalization of the word.

action cannot exist in spaces where people are made to feel used or unsafe, in spaces requiring specific experiences to be considered, in spaces where people cannot physically or even remotely participate.

Even today, people can't just get up and leave their homes, however much we want them to do that. There are harassers to confront. There are children to be fed. There are homes to be guarded. There are disabilities to consider. This begs us to ask: what are the ways we can make radical spaces safer and braver? What are the ways we can make activism and mobilization more accessible, kid-friendly, and inclusive?

Maybe we could have designated spaces near or outside, say, protests or meetings to care for children. Maybe there are acts of activism that can and have been done at home or elsewhere from protest sites that we didn't recognize as acts of activism before, like free schools and care work. Maybe we have to think of ways to recognize that the PWD community has power but will have to express it differently.

Or maybe we have to reassess and rethink our spaces altogether, see how they are hinged and founded on the discomfort, unsafety, nonparticipation and oppression of many of the people we claim to fight for. Maybe we have to drastically change how we organize our collectives. Maybe we have to consider infrastructures, language, and interactions. Maybe we have to instill self-awareness, unlearn harmful behaviors, and learn better ones instead of pointing fingers, blaming anyone else but us.

Power-together, that is, *our* power as *the* people, isn't supposed to be monolithic and unchanging, only expressed the exact same way it was done 40 years ago by coming together in Luneta or PPM to publicly protest. Creativity needs to come in to ensure our power isn't stagnant or exclusive. An important thing to remember is that reproductive labor (better worded as *care work*, or how we ensure the physical, mental, emotional, and developmental needs of people are being met) sustains our power, too. Besides, I think there are other forms of activism that may have the same effects as — if not deeper, more personal, and more immediate than — what we call mass mobilizations.

Our idea of activism is still highly exclusive, as if activism was something people performed to be included in a Cool Kids Club rather than something anyone could participate in, whoever they are, in any way they can.

Enshrining activism in the form of placards, publicity, and protests leads to the tendency to equate activism with just these factors, and equating activism with these factors leads to the belief that doing these things and these things alone is what makes you an activist. Two unfortunate consequences: those who seem to only aspire for the clout are accepted into the fold as is without pushing them to be better, while those who work hard to live the principles of radical progressivism in different ways — in ways they have access to and ways they learn how to — are overlooked, kept out, and even demonized.

This is related to my earlier point of the lack of inclusivity in our idea of activism. I'd also like to bring up a very important point: the seeming importance of public performance (language, presentation, attendance) over personal effort (self-awareness, treating others better, taking their own steps when they can) in activist spaces creates such an unsafe and unaccepting environment. People — and men in particular, cis or not, based on my experience — seem to think that being this label or that means they're automatically safe from being any type of wrong. I've met one too many manipulators, abusers, and perverts from the Left. I've met people who get mad and attack you personally because you dared to be dissatisfied and asked for better. I've met people who call you a know-it-all, only to turn to Twitter and call others out for one mistake, however tiny, and hurl orthodox Marxist vocabulary at them for not knowing better. Oddly, more often than not, these people are either highly respected, protected, or really coddled by their activist groups and spaces.

Meanwhile, people who are just stepping into the world of political discourse and exploring their own ideas, opinions, beliefs, ethics, and stances are either eaten up by the costume party of the activism or called out and rejected for not doing activism the way others do. People who might be more radical than we would care to admit aren't recognized as able to contribute or already contributing because we think "contribution" requires a membership subscription, be it to an organization, an ideology, an event, or a cause.

What's attached to the membership terrifies me, to be honest. I've been to enough mobilizations and educational discussions to see, hear, and feel the near-exact same way people appear, talk, and act in the political sphere.

(It's a little funny because, despite differences, most I've encountered from the Left have had the exact same fatal flaw across colors: their inability to recognize their own mistakes, accept criticism, and own up to and make up for them.)

The uniformity in their use of "scientific" language, the way they carry themselves, their manner of speaking, and their takes on things (which a professor of mine called "templated") terrifies me because sometimes I feel like I'm interacting with soldiers or bots, whatever side of the Left they came from. There's an odd disdain for nuance, too, which I've seen eerily echoed both online and offline and definitely acted on in many cases.

Activists here seem to function on a you're-either-with-us-or-against-us logic which kicks in once you either try to critique them or provide a perspective that considers the context of what they might be going against at the moment. The vision feels very black-and-white, the gray area automatically qualifying as enemy territory if only for the mere fact that it's not the exact same thing they're saying. Even if you clarify that you're not taking the other side, by somehow trying to be more understanding of the Enemy of the Day (or at least, where they're coming from), you're immediately analyzed with a suspicious eye, the Reactionary stamp hovering over you and ready to descend any time.

But almost everyone lives in the gray area. People will not see and perform activism the way "real" activists expect them to because people will have different degrees of reservations, freedom, awareness, and risk-taking. Some may not be as theoretically equipped, but intuitively act more ethically even if they can't explain why. Some may know more than most, but not be as visible because of resources or context. There have also been countless people who have had the "right" opinions on issues but the "wrong" opinions on activism because the reputation of activism — as in marches, rallies, and public demonstrations — has been so historically tarnished in the Philippines (by State anti-communist propaganda, by issues that arise from socially-rooted phenomenon like traffic and bad infrastructure, by problems of the Left itself) that people are bound to hate what we have now. And they're allowed that opinion because those may be rooted in different experiences that are valid.

People are shackled and privileged in different ways, just as people walk different lives. More than changing the ways people might be adding to our repertoires of activism, maybe we should strive to add to our own and get a feel for what might garner more support from people who may not be on board with our other methods. This doesn't mean we should pander, nor does it mean our goals and principles would change; sometimes, we just need to explore the different ways we can deliver a message so that it may be received better, clearer, and more appropriately by the people who might need to hear it.

Other people are doing that at present. Some write, some create art, some talk to people. Many are not affiliated with blatantly political organizations. Some even act through hobby or interest groups. But everyone is still learning, because there *has to be* many different ways to approach our goal.

The point is, activism cannot and should not come from a very specific group of people with clear, non-negotiable, take-it-as-is-or-leave-it political ideologies. Including *only* some automatically excludes *many* others, and there's a saying that goes, "I'd rather be excluded for who I include, than included for who I exclude." If a movement that aspires for systemic change does not make an attempt to include everyone, what's the point of having this movement at all?

***Ano nga ba ang “tunay na aktibista?”* [What even is a ‘real activist’?]**

I feel this question needs to be asked within our circles before we even begin to exclude people. It’s inevitably attached to the larger question of how we treat not only those who are like us, but especially those who are *different* from us.

The name of the game these days is othering and weaponizing identities. We already see this in how Duterte others drug users and pushers; we see this in how Trump others Blacks, people of color, and the LGBT+; are we really going to keep it alive in the spaces that are supposed to be dismantling this system that’s rooted in the oppression of certain groups and sectors? Isn’t it a point of concern that the discrimination we see the State use against its people is the same discrimination we mete out in keeping our movements “pure,” “real,” and “in line?” Isn’t aspiring for “purity” and homogeneity the problem anyway?

The activist and radical I am now — still so different, but more directly involved now than I could be before — is because of all the rejection and negativity I have experienced at the hands of those who positioned themselves at the forefront of the Philippine struggle. I have been working hard for the past few years to learn to be okay with what I am, what I’ve done, and what I want to do; I’ve also been doing my best to help others who feel as rejected and confused to be okay with being different in their political perspectives and activities, too.

I think difference is what drives change and innovation. And minding differences we need to adjust to, adapt to, and include is how we can keep our movements not only safe and alive but maybe even successful, however marginally success may feel in the face of the behemoth that is the Empire. Imagine how boring, stagnant and ineffective we would be if all of us were activists and radicals the exact same way. We’d probably still be fooling ourselves about how we haven’t really lost, even when the enemy has transformed once again, fifty years into an unrecognizable future.

Bandilang Itim
Magkaugnay ang ating Pakikibaka
Towards Anarchy in the Archipelago
Para sa pagpapalawig ng kaisipan ng kalayaan



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Alternate title for English audiences: “‘You’re not radical enough’: Reflections on Philippine Leftist Exclusionism.” Image licensed for reuse by Bro. Jeffrey Pioquinto, SJ.

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