Like a Kite Flying in a Hurricane
Democracy in the age of misery

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Context

- Building Back Better: Participatory Democracy in a Post-Haiyan World
- Funded by the Australian Research Council
- Discovery Early Career Research Award (DECRA)
- How to build democratic process back better?
- Manuscript – one of the deliverables
Framing

- Philippine social imaginary
  - Disasters
  - Democracy
- ‘As a form of ethics and politics, democracy must now measure its success not only against tyranny but also against misery’ (Appadurai 2007: 33-34)
- How to build a defensible theory of democracy in the age of misery?

- Book starts with the big picture of the Philippines’ social imaginary – disasters and democracy
- Large scale disasters like Haiyan, however, prompt reflection on democracy’s relevance in the age of widespread misery.
- For the most part of social and political theory, democracy has been framed as the antithesis of authoritarian power but as Arjun Appadurai argues, ‘as a form of ethics and politics, democracy must now measure its success not only against tyranny but also against misery’ (Appadurai 2007: 33-34). After all, what use are free and fair elections to a family starving to death? How important are dense networks of civil society organisations if they fail to alleviate the suffering of vulnerable populations? The quality of our democracy cannot be assessed by focusing on the vibrancy of the empowered citizenry without foregrounding the condition of its worst off. Our democracy is only as good as our weakest link, to paraphrase Zygmunt Bauman.
- This book aims to develop a ‘defensible theory of democracy’ in the age of misery.
- The focus is on regions most affected by Typhoon Haiyan in Central Philippines although the hope is to draw broader insights on the prospects and limitations of democracy, particularly is deliberative variety among communities of misery.
- Both empirical and normative questions are asked: How can democracy speak to the experience of people living under severe hardships, threats of dispossession and the slow violence? Can democratic politics give voice, enliven political agencies and build capacities to aspire among suffering communities? In a world increasingly defined by global risks, emergencies and disasters, are we beginning to see a ‘tightly coupled’ deliberative system that leaves little room for interrogation, contestation and reflexivity.
while depoliticised voices of technical rationality, compassion and humanitarianism are privileged? What core virtues of democracy, if any, could and should be defended in the face of unspeakable anguish?
The age of misery?

- Misery has been one of the (implicit) themes of classical sociological theory
  - Suicide
  - Universal suffering of the proletariat
  - Disenchantment

- Modernity’s mixed legacy
  - From the most murderous century on record to most peaceful and prosperous time in history
  - Liquid modernity, age of the Anthropocene, return to the gilded age

- Constructivist view of misery

- The claim that we live in ‘the age of misery,’ of course, is one that warrants systematic unpacking.
- Human misery has been one of the central yet implicit themes in sociological theory’s description of modernity.
- Emile Durkheim’s account of suicide—the ‘rising flood of voluntary deaths’—calls attention to the normative pathology that defines modern times (Durkheim 1951: 369).
- Karl Marx puts forward a comparable diagnosis of modernity’s ills, focusing on capitalist exploitation that transforms the proletariat into an emptying vessel of suffering.
- Max Weber uses the concept of ‘disenchantment’ to refer to the despair brought about by the iron cage of bureaucracy’s rationalised, impersonal and predictable impact on human experience (see Wilkinson 2013). While scientific progress served to free misery from its traditional interpretation as a matter of fate hinged on the providence of the Divine (Halpern 2002; Chopp 2007), it simultaneously created a ‘deeply unpleasant’ experience in human societies marked by insecurities, stresses and strains (Wilkinson 2001b: 2).
- Modernity’s mixed legacy in overcoming misery continues in contemporary accounts of social life. Some claim that we now live in an era where human misery has been significantly reduced through various forms of technological and political interventions. Scientific developments—the ‘medicalisation of suffering’ as Martin Pernick puts it—have delivered improved standards of hygiene, nutrition and environmental cleanliness that secured the well-being of large segments of the world. The introduction of anaesthesia supported a democratic worldview which ‘de-naturalised’ oppressive beliefs that certain sexes and races were destined to bear different amounts of pain (Amato
1990: 105). While Eric Hobsbawm (1994) considers the twentieth century as the ‘most murderous century on record’ due to the scale of human catastrophes, the twenty first century, as some historians put it, has been the most peaceful and prosperous time in history (see Pinker 2013; Gilpin 2002).

- This narrative, of course, has not gone uncontested. Competing accounts underscore the increasing vulnerability of our time as unbridled global capitalism takes a toll on our environment and inflicts savagery on human dignity. The world risk society (Beck 1990), the liquid modernity (Bauman 2000), the age of the Anthropocene (citation) and the return to the gilded age (Picketty 2013) are some temporal markers that highlight the fragility of contemporary societies marked by extreme inequality, dispossession and environmental destruction.

- How then can the concept of misery be characterised given these conflicting meta-narratives?

- This book takes a constructivist view of misery, the kind where its meanings are negotiated, contested and reproduced in the global social imagination. Misery is mediated through discourse, which shapes our understanding of who is miserable, who can inflict misery, why misery happens, and what can be done about it.

- Without denying the concept’s materiality—indeed, there are historical periods where there are more bodies buried and more property destroyed—it is crucial to enquire into the structures and practices that render misery relevant as a political concept. A constructivist approach opens space to ask the following critical questions: Whose age of misery is it? Whose misery counts? Whose suffering, deliberately or inadvertently, is left invisible?

- This line of enquiry becomes significant in substantive sections of the book, where visual and textual representations of suffering become the subject of politicised public deliberation. Instead of theorising the temporal distinctiveness of the early twenty first century as ‘the age of misery,’ this book focuses on particular experiences of misery that shape the distribution of voice, political agency and deliberative capacity among specific communities. Misery may be a universal human experience but how it is articulated, enacted and negotiated unfolds in distinct temporal, geographic and demographic contexts.
How then can I empirically situate misery?

We see manifestations of misery in the immediate aftermath of disasters but the approach I am taking hopes to go for the long view.

I support the argument that much of the misery made visible by spectacle-driven corporate media tends to fulfil the imperatives of a visual culture that prioritises the aesthetics of horror and the spectacle of human pain. But much of human misery is routinized. It has an invisible quality because it has been normalised, taken for granted and experienced in mundane practices of everyday life (Kleinman, Das and Lock 1997: xiii).

Rob Nixon refers to this as ‘slow violence,’ the kind ‘that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.’ The misery that erupts from slow violence is ‘neither spectacular nor instantaneous but rather incremental and accretive.’ (Nixon 2011: 2). Examining misery in the context of slow violence responds to Hannah Arendt’s challenge of examining society from the perspective of banality and ‘prosaic triviality’ for it is the ordinariness of human misery—the kind that is missed by our ‘flickering attention spans’—that its insidious legacies take root (Arendt and Jaspers 1992: 62; Nixon 2011: 6).

In the case Haiyan, what warrants close investigation is the misery that unfolds as ‘parachute journalists’ return to their home studios, humanitarian agencies pack

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**Slow violence**

- Spectacle-driven misery versus slow violence
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up and set their sights on new disaster zones, publics return to their usual routines, and, indeed, social researchers find the next fundable project. For Nixon, the tendency to venerate the spectacular poses the political question of how to give visibility to slow moving disasters whose casts are not venerable heroes but unidentified bodies and catastrophes that are not cinematic enough for a sensation-driven public sphere.
How does misery relate to democratic politics?

One possible answer is there is democratic rollback – our democratic ways of life are compromised.

There are two ways to think about it.

One, disasters create conditions of anomie. Disasters evoke a sense of urgency to pre-empt widespread disorder, therefore justifying drastic actions that diverge from practices of ‘governance as usual’ (Boin and ‘T Hart 2007: 42).

Giorgio Agamben (2005), among others, refers to this as the ‘state of exception’—a period marked by overwhelming threats to ‘life-sustaining functions’ that warrants the revocation of constitutional guarantees.

The deployment of combat-ready troops in downtown New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, imposition of curfew as a precautionary measure against looting and the forcible evacuation of at-risk populations from tsunamis are some examples of heavy-handed responses that work against the logic of democratic governance but are legitimised in emergency situations (see Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski 2006). Decision-making is sealed in hermetic spaces of power justified on the grounds that an emergency is ‘abrupt, unpredictable, abnormal and brief’ (Calhoun 2004: 375).

Crises, however, are not only moments of anomie where the coercive apparatus of the state are called to put things under control. Emergency situations can also result to strong social solidarity. Building on Agamben’s work, Didier Fassin and
Paula Vasquez (2005) call this the state of ‘humanitarian exception’ where the rollback of democratic procedures is supported instead of denounced by the public. Studying the 1999 tragedia in Venezuela where massive landslides occurred due to heavy rains, Fassin and Vasquez observed overwhelming emotions of compassion in an otherwise politically divided society. The ‘gaze that brings people together and through which one feels compassion,’ was the same gaze that built national consensus on Hugo Chavez’s militarised disaster response where special commandos wielded extensive powers in affected areas.

- Reiko Shindo shares Fassin and Vasquez’s observations in his study on the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011. Shindo observed that raising concerns about radiation ‘became, and continues to be, a taboo subject among the survivors’ (Shindo 2014: 30). Leaving Fukushima due to fears of radiation was labelled an act of desertion, such that anything that disrupts the sense of unity among Japanese communities is an act of disloyalty to the nation. Discourses that evoke fear instead of hope were heavily criticised. A magazine cover featuring a member of the Japanese Self-Defence Force holding a new-born baby amidst the rubble was held in high esteem, in contrast to a magazine bearing the headline ‘Radiation is coming’ with a man wearing a mask as front cover. While the former communicates positive images of rebirth and hope, the latter received numerous complaints such that the magazine was forced to issue an official apology. Those who disrupted dominant narratives of unity were labelled ‘hikkokumin,’ a loaded concept in Japanese referring to traitors or ‘anti-citizens’ during the Second World War.

- While findings from the Venezuelan and Japanese cases cannot be extrapolated beyond their specific contexts, both examples give a preview of how norms of public discourse are negotiated in times of crisis. Rituals of coping and demonstrations of togetherness are deemed necessary to ‘affirm the community in the face of tragedy’ (Hawdon and Ryan 2011: 1367; Collins, 2004: 55) while practices that give life to democratic politics such as critique, dissent and contestation are stigmatised as divisive and insensitive to suffering. The disciplining quality of the state of exception, therefore, is both coercive and discursive. It is not only marked by the government’s withdrawal of democratic guarantees but also underpinned by ‘affective foundations’ based on universalist ethic of care and compassion (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010: 16). In other words, the combination of humanitarian consideration and trust in emergency lends legitimacy to the state of exception.

- Forthcoming article in Current Sociology (Shhh... Tumulong ka nalang)
• All, however, is not lost. The bleak state of democracy described in the previous section does not definitively capture the range of scholarship on disasters. Both critical theorists and empirical researchers have been at the forefront in identifying spaces in which democratic politics can take root, in spite of limitations brought about by widespread suffering and demands to maintain social order. In some instances, crises, particularly the case of disasters, can prompt collective action that puncture the fantasy of an inclusive public sphere and create paths to democratic renewal.

• On the part of critical theory, Butler’s work on grief and suffering illustrate a vision of how devastating conditions can give rise to the creation of new publics. While grief is often considered a private and solitary experience, Butler argues that it can also ‘furnish a sense of political community of a complex order’ by exposing relational ties of dependency and ethical responsibility (Butler 2004: 23). Feminist theorists have established this line of thought in their classic discussion of care ethics. Contrary to the state of humanitarian exception where virtues of solidarity and cohesion lead to a depoliticised voice of compassion, care can be transformed to a political concept when the question ‘who cares for whom?’ is asked. The distribution of caring tasks—the politics of ‘giving and receiving’ care—reveals how those in the position of suffering are structurally defined along the lines of race, class and gender while those with the capacity to provide care come from the position of relative privilege (Tronto 1993; Myers
Integral to the creation of new publics, therefore, is what Selma Sevenhuijsen refers to as ‘moral deliberation’ inspired by the feminist demands for dialogue, communicative ethics and situated forms of judgment where various agents ‘exchange values and aims relating to care’ (Sevenhuijsen 1998: 29).

• Listening to the voice of suffering expands the potential carer’s moral imagination and broadens the boundaries of one’s imagined communities. Attentiveness to strangers’ suffering is not an insignificant moral achievement, considering the convenience of ignoring the grief of those dismissed as expendable and disposable (Meyers 1998). At best, moral deliberation can create a form of ‘caring solidarity’ — a category of emergency response distinct from the divisive scenario discussed in the previous section where the ‘strong’ sees the ‘needy’ as a looming threat to society. Caring solidarity realises citizens’ moral responsibility to each other as interdependent actors, who, in varying ways and degrees, share the need for care at some point in their lives (Sevenhuijsen 1998: 147; Tronto 1993: 168). Such relationship is critical in deepening democratic citizenship in ‘the age of misery.’ Practising the virtues of attentiveness, responsibility and responsiveness promotes a politics that places perspective-taking and a thoughtful examination of the structural origins of suffering (Tronto 1993). It may also broaden the scope of the public that counts in public deliberation as the inextricably cosmopolitan chains of care are exposed.

• Democratic action is also manifest in the interruptive potential of transforming private suffering into a public matter (Curato, Ong and Longboan, forthcoming). Like Butler, Patricia Lopez and Kathryn Gillespie understand grief not ‘merely a solipsistic act of wallowing in our sorrows’ but a political imperative to ‘resist the differential valuation lives’ (Lopez and Gillespie 2015: 9). Viewed from the perspective of contestatory action, crisis can prompt victims to come together to reclaim their political agencies by expressing their indignation and rendering their suffering visible. For example, in Aceh, ‘barracks camps’ not only served as a temporary relocation site but also space for activism among the survivors of the 2004 tsunami. As Eva Lotta Hedman sees it, the survivors found themselves in a ‘peculiar place.’ On one hand, they ‘lost nearly everyone and everything, and thus perhaps they had little to lose, while on the hand, they had gained renewed recognition as “internally displaced persons”’ (IDPs) (Hedman 2009: 70). The status of IDPs afforded survivors protection from the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. By invoking the ‘universalist’ discourse of rights and responsibilities, survivors contested the arbitrary closure of some camps and asserted their right to voluntary and safe return to their homes. In some instances, large scale demonstrations occurred, as in the case of 2,000 people protesting in front of the office of the Reconstruction Board, which resulted to a negotiated agreement to review the regulations affecting resettlement. Hedman
describes the barracks-protest campaign as one that ‘summoned a bright future in the present emergency,’ because it placed emphasis on ‘opportunities for greater social justice and affirming new socialities forged in the displacement in post-tsunami Aceh’ (Hedman 2009: 71).

- The case of Santa Fe, Argentina presents a similar narrative, where performative forms of political action are used to assert flood victims’ presence in the public sphere. The devastating floods of 2003 resulted to over 130,000 people evacuated in temporary shelters. ‘Disorder, ineffectiveness and negligence’ was a widespread sentiment among evacuees as the state continued to deny responsibility from the disaster. Authorities claimed that flooding was an uncontrollable act of nature—a sharp contrast from the findings of various inquiries which placed blame on the government for its poor management of disaster preparation in mitigation. This accountability vacuum resulted to a movement called the ‘inundanos’ (flood victims). The movement was composed of a heterogeneous group of NGOs and disaster victims, most of whom took part in activism for the first time. Their repertoires were broad, from press conferences, graffiti, documentaries, public demonstrations, and perhaps the most moving of all, commemorations in public spaces. One form of commemoration took the form of building a ‘memory museum,’ which displayed the inundanos’ muddy and dilapidated belongings rescued from the flood. Displaying books, dolls, photographs and other objects in a makeshift tent in the public square rendered disaster survivors visible and underscored their right to be remembered as disaster victims. Using memory as tactic for mobilisation created a ‘polity of remembering,’ a new type of public which not only appealed for moral, social and political recognition of their category as suffering citizens but also maintained levels of indignation necessary to continue demanding accountability (Ullberg 2013: 112).

- E.g. People Surge

- Disaster-affected communities have also used electoral politics to leverage relationships of accountability with candidates standing for election. In the book Blessed are the Organised, Jeffrey Stout presents an alternative narrative of Hurricane Katrina survivors where he found ‘a motley collection of displaced citizens reconstructing the rudiments of a democratic culture on the fly’ (Stout 2010: 79). One of the many stories in this book is the case of the NGO Jeremiah, which used ‘courageous determination to reconstitute the basic social relationships of New Orleans on even terms’ as a ‘sort of therapy for grief’ (Stout 2010: 68). Part of Jeremiah’s campaign is to host an ‘accountability session’ with local candidates running for political office. Held in a cafeteria of a local elementary school, candidates were asked to state their stand on various issues on resettlement while the leaders of Jeremiah presented their proposals to them. Politicians caught fudging their answers had their microphones turned off. Hosting this forum is not an easy feat. By holding the forum in a venue the survivors
themselves chose and following the format that best suits their purposes, they are able to slowly gain confidence as political actors (Stout 2010: 45). These sessions also allowed Jeremiah to identify their allies and create relationships of accountability through the public act of candidates putting their positions on record.

- The examples of Aceh, Santa Fe, and New Orleans, among others, illustrate possibilities for sufferers to reclaim the political and enliven their capacities to take part in politics, whether it is in the form of confrontational protests, performative political practice or electoral politics. Extending rituals of mourning to episodes of indignation allow disaster survivors to put forward a narrative using their own voice on their own terms. They challenge the representation of disaster survivors as grieving victims that live off the compassion of privileged others and subservient to the decisions of technocratic authorities to active political agents with capacities for voice, critique, self-representation and contestation.
The argument

I interrogate the views that the ‘age of misery’ requires sacrificing democratic norms and creates depoliticised forms of collective action. Through empirical investigation, I identify spaces where various actors defend, reconstruct and enact democratic practice while remaining cognisant of the strain crises make to communities’ material, social and political capital.

- This book takes inspiration from the aforementioned studies that narrate the transformation of grief to democratic action. I examine the conditions and discursive strategies that give rise to the voice of the vulnerable in the context of emergency and widespread misery.
- I interrogate the views that the ‘age of misery’ requires sacrificing democratic norms and creates depoliticised forms of collective action. Through empirical investigation, I identify spaces where various actors defend, reconstruct and enact democratic practice while remaining cognisant of the strain crises make to communities’ material, social and political capital.
The perspective this book offers comes from the tradition of deliberative democratic theory. Deliberative democracy has been the major theme in democratic theory and practice since the 1990s (Stevenson and Dryzek 2014). Its theoretical and practical applications have been visible in various scholarly and applied fields, such that the rapid proliferation of the term has placed it in danger of concept stretching (Bächtiger et al 2010). In the subsequent chapters, I use the term deliberative democracy from a macro orientation. By this, I mean three things.

- First, as a normative theory, deliberative democracy envisions a polity where inclusive reason-giving secures a central place in political life (Cooke 2002; Dryzek 2000). Inclusiveness, as typically defined by deliberative democrats, refers to the extent to which all actors affected by a particular issue, or their representatives, have opportunities to shape the course of public deliberation (see Dryzek 2010). An inclusive polity provides space for diverse and multiple publics not only to articulate their views but also to listen and engage the views of others. The primacy given to the virtue of inclusiveness is what makes deliberative democracy democratic, as it is the broad scope of participation that allows a wide range of contesting discourses to be considered in public deliberation.

- The centrality of reason-giving, on the other hand, is what distinguishes deliberation from other forms of political action. The term reason-giving may bring to mind a rigid and systematic exchange of arguments and counter-
arguments but recent iterations of deliberative theory have recognised various ways of claim-making such as rhetorical speech, protests, humour, images and testimonies. What matters is how claim-making adheres to virtues of respect, mutual justification, listening and reflection, instead of coercion, manipulation and deception (Dryzek 2000).

• The normative theory of deliberative democracy has provided a vision for creating ‘real utopias’ in unideal speech situations—from third wave democracies to authoritarian states, deeply divided societies to expert-dominated polities, local governments to transnational bodies. Instead of focusing on neatly designed forums that aim to realise all deliberative virtues, deliberative democrats have increasingly envisaged spaces, repertoires of speech, and institutional settings where norms of deliberation can take root. Overall, the vision of deliberative democracy is to give rise to a polity that:

• Embraces the necessity to communicate across difference without erasing difference, reflexive in its questioning orientation to established traditions (including the tradition of deliberative democracy itself), transnational in its capacity to extend across state boundaries into settings where there is no constitutional framework, ecological in terms of openness to communication with non-human nature, and dynamic in its openness to ever-changing constraints upon and opportunities for democratisation (Dryzek 2000: 3).
Chapters

- Ch1: Digital democracy
- Ch2: Legitimacy of unelected representatives
- Ch3: Contestatory deliberation
- Ch4: Cooperative deliberation
- Ch5: Depoliticized Deliberation
- Ch6: Like a kite flying in a hurricane?
Thank you

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