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## RUSSELL IN THE PHILIPPINES

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Ramon (“Poch”) Suzara. *Bertrand Russell to the Rescue: Can the Wit and Wisdom of Bertrand Russell Save the Philippines?* Quezon City, Philippines: Popular Bookstore, 2003. Pp. 114. [Copies available for US\$6.00 from the author at poch.suzara@mailcity.com.]

There are many kinds of books about Bertrand Russell. There are the biographies—Wood, Clark, Moorehead, Monk, not to mention Russell’s own autobiography. There are scholarly studies that address some specific argument he made or cause he championed, such as Gregory Landini’s *Russell’s Hidden Substitutional Theory* (1998) or Jo Vellacott’s *Bertrand Russell and the Pacifists in the First World War* (1981). And there are general introductions for the non-specialist, from A. C. Grayling’s *Russell: a Very Short Introduction* (2002) to Paul Strathern’s less highbrow *Bertrand Russell in 90 Minutes* (2001). But one of the most interesting and yet neglected Russell-related genres consists of popular books aimed at bringing Russell’s ideas to a mass audience. These works present Russell’s ideas as a source of wisdom for coping with today’s problems. Among the more notable examples of this small genre are Lee Eisler’s *Morals without Mystery* (1971) and Peter Cranford’s *How to Be Your Own Psychologist: the Art of Irresistible Influence—Compossibility!* (1980). Now these works are joined by Poch Suzara’s *Bertrand Russell to the Rescue: Can the Wit and Wisdom of Bertrand Russell Save the Philippines?*<sup>1</sup>

Suzara’s approach is simple. He counterpoises articles from the Filipino press with quotations from Bertrand Russell. He does this in a manner calculated to illustrate how irrational much of Filipino politics and society can be and how much the situation could be improved if only people took a page from the book of Bertie. To take one example, Suzara reprints part of an article from the *Man-*

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<sup>1</sup> Both Cranford and Eisler were longtime mainstays of the Bertrand Russell Society (BRS), whose mission centrally involves spreading the word about the Good Lord. It should therefore be unsurprising that Suzara has worked with both the BRS and the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, although today he leads his own Philippines-based group devoted to Bertrand Russell. He also chairs both the Philippine Society of Rational Humanists and the Enlightenment League and Moral Society.

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*ila Standard* depicting the (now deposed) president of the Philippines with some of his cronies. Beneath it, he offers the following line from Russell: “Every man would like to be God, if it were possible; some few find it difficult to admit the impossibility” (p. 85).

At its best, Suzara’s approach can be both entertaining and extremely effective, especially when he is attacking his favorite opponent—organized religion. It makes sense that this cause should be important to him. As Suzara notes at the beginning of the collection, the Philippines is the only Catholic country in Asia, and therefore the only country on the continent plagued by that religion’s peculiar foibles (such as its obsessive opposition to birth control). At times, Suzara can be quite good at skewering the perversities caused by the shadow Catholicism casts on Filipino society. A good example of this occurs when Suzara reprints an article about contemporary Filipinos who reenact the passion of Christ—complete with crucifixion, albeit temporary—and matches it with the following quotation from Bertrand Russell: “when a man tortures himself he feels that it gives him a right to torture others, and inclines him to accept any system of dogma by which this right is fortified” (p. 33). But in other cases, Suzara joins Russell quotations critical of religion to relatively inoffensive articles on the local Catholic Church, as if Russell’s biting wit regarding Christianity automatically proved that whatever the Pope’s followers did was wrong.<sup>2</sup> A little more care in matching quotations to articles might have made his overall polemic against religion more effective.

On balance, however, Suzara achieves the effect at which he aims. Filipino society would surely benefit from a good dose of the Russellian outlook, as this book illustrates. Granted, the book would probably convey this point most effectively to a Filipino reader,<sup>3</sup> but then again the Filipino reader is clearly Suzara’s target audience. Besides, other countries should be producing their own books like this. Still, I cannot help thinking that Suzara could have done more to win people over to Russell’s standard. A reader who finds Suzara’s case compelling may well want to track down the quotations Suzara cites and read the original works containing them. Suzara’s references, however, are sparse. He

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<sup>2</sup> In three cases, Suzara conjoins anti-religious quotations from Russell to articles discussing religion-based protests to social injustice. One concerned the eviction of squatters (p. 52), another government corruption (p. 92), and the third, police harassment of political opposition groups (p. 94). It is unclear if Suzara believes that the religious connection invalidates whatever merits the protests might have.

<sup>3</sup> Many of the articles—all of which are in English, by the way—deal with Filipino politics and current events, and Suzara provides no context for readers with only a passing knowledge of this area. Indeed, in most cases Suzara does not reprint the articles *in toto*, but only enough of them to make his points. This provides a foreign reader with little purchase on what the heck is happening in Manila these days.

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provides only the titles of works—no page numbers—and never indicates in the text whether these are books or articles being cited.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, on three occasions (pp. 56, 76 and 106) his quotations come from articles in *Russell*; he does provide the complete citation for the journal (volume, number and year) but not the article being cited or its author. All in all, Suzara could have made life easier for a budding Filipino Russell devotee.

Whatever the overall effectiveness of Suzara's book, it has the field virtually to itself. Few authors have taken on the task of using Russell's wit and wisdom to save their countries or anything else for that matter. Perhaps this helps explain why there's so much in this world that still needs saving. Russell fans, get busy. You have work to do.

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<sup>4</sup> Suzara does include "A Complete List of Bertrand Russell's Books", but it is not as complete as Suzara thinks. Indeed, on page 63 of the text Suzara cites a Russell anthology not included in his list at the end. Suzara also provides a brief and highly selective list of books about Russell, marred most conspicuously by the claim that Katharine Tait's *My Father Bertrand Russell* was edited by Ralph Schoenman (p. 114).

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