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**Why Read Jose Ma. Sison?**  
**A Review of Building People's Power (2016)**

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*Note: This review was published by Bulatlat.com. It was also read during the book launch and International League of People's Struggle 15th anniversary gathering at the Carillon Tower, Baclaran Church on May 28, 2016.*

Why read Jose Ma. Sison, known by his comrades as Ka Joma, if you're not a red flag-waving activist? Sison's writings are being read in leftist and activist circles. The prevailing consensus set by the establishment and propagated in corporate media has it that the rest of us should have no business bothering with what they say is a "vulgar" and "dogmatic" lot.

For one, incoming president Rodrigo Duterte's openness to resuming the peace talks with the underground movement and offering of four cabinet positions to the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) has aroused public interest on the Philippine Left beyond the "red scare" discourse from which it has been hitherto framed.

But the best answer lies in the fact that whether we think of him as a revolutionary leader, Filipino statesman, Marxist theorist, political writer or poet, Sison has interminably etched his mark on the national narrative that even his most vociferous critics cannot but grudgingly recognize him among the ranks of foremost figures of Philippine history.

The publication of the latest volume of Sison's Selected Writings covering the years 2010-2011 in *Building People's Power* (2016) by the International Network for Philippines Studies reaffirms his place as the emblematic Filipino radical thinker of the last five decades. Contained in this book are Sison's essays, statements, messages, and interview transcripts from the abovementioned years.

No armchair revolutionary, Sison was founding chairperson of both the radical youth group Kabataang Makabayan (KM) in 1964 and the re-established CPP in 1968. He led the resurgence of activism after the decimation of the Huk rebellion led to a decade of relative quiet in the 1950s.

By the time of Sison's arrest in 1977 which led to nine years of imprisonment and solitary confinement under the Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship until its fall in 1986, the CPP and its armed wing the New People's Army (NPA) have already taken deep roots across the archipelago. It became the core of the resistance against Martial Law.

The CPP-led revolutionary movement targets the 3 basic problems of US imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucrat capitalism that have kept the country economically backward and foreign-dominated. It forwards a new democratic revolution that would throw off the yoke of indirect colonial rule, push genuine land reform and national industrialization, and uphold the democratic rights of the Filipino people.

Every post-Marcos administration has declared it the biggest "national security threat" and launched costly counterinsurgency campaigns to decimate its ranks. And yet the revolutionary movement that Sison helped set in motion would continue to thrive and endure. It would undergo setbacks, rectifications, and resurgences to continue the Filipino people's resistance against "imperialist globalization" in the context of the collapse of the former socialist bloc and worldwide retreat of people's movements from the 1990s onwards.

This movement remains relevant in the face of the persistence of extreme inequality, poverty, and social injustices that continue to weigh down a large majority of the Filipino people. A 2015 study by think tank Ibon Foundation shows that there are 66 million poor Filipinos who survive on P125 or less a day even as the wealth of the 25 richest Filipinos equal the combined income of the poorest 76 million.

Sison is often criticized as an outmoded remnant of the "excessive radicalism" of a "bygone era" that is out of touch with contemporary realities. Yet the persistence of monopoly control over land by a few as epitomized by the Cojuangco-Aquino's Hacienda Luisita, systemic corruption and human rights violations, and continuing US military presence in the country which are all touched upon in the latest volume of Sison's writings prove this to be wrong.

Even a cursory reading of Sison's latest writings would show the effort he extends to update the Marxist critique of the world capitalist order. In his message to the Congress of Teachers and Educators for Nationalism and Democracy entitled "Class Struggle Is the Key Link in Revolutionary Social Change" (2010), Sison attacks academic apologists of the status quo who eschew the existence of the class struggle and spurns the revolutionary transformation of society.

He warns against fashionable intellectual currents that limit the sphere of the possible to issues of identity, "civil society" and "micro-politics" while promoting "individualism, narrow family interest, ethnocentrism, religious sectarianism, chauvinism and a pro-imperialist sense of globalization against the national and class rights and interests of the working people."

The international financial crash of 2008 and the global upsurge of protests and unrest in its aftermath doused cold water on the triumphant proclamation of capitalism as "the end of

history”. It also exposed these anti-Marxist trends for being complicit in masking the depredations resulting from the persistence of imperialist-capitalism, especially in its latest neoliberal form.

In the article “Marxian Critique of the Neoliberal Economic Agenda” (2011), Sison situates the rise of neoliberalism as a means to restore falling profit rates in a time of crisis by pushing down workers’ wages. These aims are achieved through the privatization of public services and state enterprises, the deregulation of the economy to give capitalists the biggest profit margins, the liberalization of borders to allow unrestricted entry of transnational corporations, and the denationalization of the labor force.

The neoliberal offensive which began in 1979 sought to reconcentrate wealth in the hands of the ruling classes and reverse the victories won by workers through collective struggle from the 8-hour work day, job security, benefits, and access to social services. Four decades later, global unemployment has surpassed 200 million while 2.7 billion people live in poverty and 808 million people go hungry. On the other hand, over half of global wealth is in the hands of less than 1 percent of the world’s population.

Sison situates the rise of market-centric neoliberalism as a response to the failure of state-led Keynesian policies from overcoming the crisis of overproduction engendered by the inherent dynamics of capitalist accumulation. This emphasis on the neoliberal turn in his appreciation of contemporary issues places Sison alongside related literature by contemporary Marxist scholars like David Harvey, Robert Biel, Costas Lapavistas, Samir Amin, James Petras, among others.

Equally impressive is Sison’s endeavour of providing practical guidance to various people’s organizations on the need to reach, mobilize, and recruit the widest number of people based on his prior experiences in organizing mass movements and resistance. He particularly singles out arrogance against non-members, small group mentality, outright neglect of recruitment, and other subjective tendencies that may hamper the growth of these organizations.

“Bring your Current Strength to a New and Higher Level” (2010) is Sison’s exhortation to the League of Filipino Students where he recalled how the Kabataang Makabayan attracted more members as it initiated larger mass actions. “By the time that the KM had at least 10,000 members in 1969, it was ready to become the spearhead of the First Quarter Storm of 1970,” he said. Sison mentions the same upsurge occurring during the campaign to overthrow the Marcos dictatorship in 1983-1986.

In the “Role of the Youth and Tasks of Anakbayan in the National Democratic Struggle” (2011), Sison stressed the role of big militant street actions in the fast growth of Anakbayan during the Estrada ouster campaign from 1998 to 2001 and its weakening under the Arroyo regime. “It will be a waste if you do not recruit a big number of those who are reached by the agitation and propaganda and join in mass mobilizations,” said Sison who also emphasized the importance of ideological and political education.

This stress on education is made explicit in “Foundation for Sustained Development of the National Democratic Movement in the University of the Philippines” (2010) where he shares how his circle of young activists gained access to Marxists books ordered destroyed by the military that have instead ended up in the UP Main Library basement. He contrasts this to the

ready availability of revolutionary writings on the internet which should make it easier to raise consciousness more people today.

The latest contributions of Sison prove him to be as sharp as ever. This is the same person who wrote the *Philippine Society and Revolution* (1970), *Struggle for National Democracy* (1967), *Rectify Errors and Rebuild the Party* (1968), *Specific Characteristics of our People's War* (1974), *Our Urgent Tasks* (1976), and other founding documents of the national democratic movement in the 1960s and 1970s. These theoretical works were fundamental in concretely analyzing the concrete conditions of Philippine society and laying down the basic tasks of attaining national liberation and genuine democracy.

Overall, Sison's corpus of theoretical and political writings point to the thorough indigenization of the Marxist tradition inherited from the great revolutionaries Karl Marx, V.I. Lenin, and Mao Tse-Tung and its concrete application in the context of Philippine history and conditions. No wonder the name Sison has become a spectre conjured by officials and right-wing demagogues every time they seek to discredit any progressive or patriotic idea, person, or movement as godless, violent, and subversive.

Sison has certainly earned almost universal recognition, by friends and enemies both Left and Right, as the architect of the main revolutionary tradition in the Philippines. Perhaps, whatever differences they may have with him, Sison's writings can now be read as *Classics* that activists and scholars seeking to analyze and transform Philippine society cannot disregard. Indeed, it is because of the continuing necessity to confront the continuing injustices that we are compelled to read him.

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