

Economist, historian, and patriot: Benito J. Legarda 1926-2020

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One afternoon about twenty-five years ago, there was a knock on my Harvard office door, and Benito Legarda walked into my life. Ben had written his Harvard economics PhD thesis in the early-mid 1950s and then launched his career in central banking and financial policy. Meanwhile, his thesis on nineteenth-century Philippine trade and development was resting comfortably in the archives, where it was soon discovered by scholars and eventually became widely cited. Upon “retirement” some forty years later, Ben had the good fortune to meet up with Henry Rosovsky, a well-known quantitative economic historian who was famous for his Kuznets-like seminal work on Japan. By the 1990s and their meeting, Rosovsky had been chairman of Harvard’s economics department, dean of Harvard’s Faculty of Arts and Sciences, and had become the retired doyen of the Harvard community. Ben told me that Rosovsky had advised him about retirement life: “Now that you’re retired, Ben, why don’t you return to academic research? Indeed, why don’t you revise your thesis for publication? And if you decide to do so, you should go knock on Jeff Williamson’s door. I hear he has interests in the Philippines that stretch back to his participation in a Ford Foundation teaching program at the University of the Philippines School of Economics in the late 1960s.” Thus, the knock on my door some twenty-five years ago.

It was a perfect marriage. I was then leading a team of quantitative economic historians analyzing the first global century stretching between the 1820s and World War I (Hatton and Williamson [1998; 2005]; O’Rourke and Williamson [1999]; Williamson [2006; 2011]; Bordo, Taylor and Williamson [2006]). Ben’s now well-known *After the galleons* [1999] book fit right in with the comparative assessment of the first global century then ongoing. All I had to do to help transform the thesis to the book was to guide Ben to the more recent literature and offer a few tips on handling the data. As a very skilled writer, Ben had no trouble doing the rest. Oddly enough, I, the younger man, was playing the teacher’s role. I say “oddly” only because of our age difference. But more to the point, I was soon the student since I learned so much about Philippine economic history from

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Ben and thereafter was pleased to cite *After the galleons* in my work dealing with Asian trade and development in the long nineteenth century.

As readers of this short note all know, Benito Legarda's commitment to Philippine history never wavered. Nor did his patriotism, as his subsequent autobiographical memoirs of the Pacific War and Japanese occupation attest. But I was even more impressed by Ben's continued efforts to cultivate a greater interest in the past in young Filipino economists.

In his absence, let me try to carry Ben's torch a little bit farther. To begin with, the young economist should know that the Philippine half-century between 1913 and 1960 is better documented than almost all Asian, African, and Middle Eastern nations due to the American imperialist introduction of what turned out to be excellent, detailed, and greatly underutilized censuses as well as extensive American occupational documents on agriculture, manufacturing, mining, transportation, health, education, prices, wages, labor markets and much more. Furthermore, the published censuses are detailed by barrio and municipality for all provinces.

The young economist should also note that the Philippines was subjected to much huge policy (including independence) and market shocks across the twentieth century, just the thing to help the economist assess causal impact. With the introduction of public primary schooling around World War I, who gained? Which families and which regions benefitted most: rich or poor? Did the rising supply of educated labor lower the white-collar skill premium, the gap between manual skilled and common labor, and earnings inequality two decades or so later? How do the interwar results compare with postwar results before the emigration boom in the 1960s and afterward? Indeed, did those interwar and immediate postwar investments in public schooling contribute to the emigration boom itself? And what about health? We have the mortality, sickness, and disease data as well as anthropometric evidence. So, who gained the most from the public health investments in the interwar and immediate postwar decades? Rich families or poor ones? Rich regions or poor ones? And how will the answers compare with the most recent decades? And what about some long-run evidence on the demographic transition across the twentieth century? Has the Philippines undergone different demographic behavior than the rest of Asia? If so, why? And what about terms of trade shocks induced by world market conditions? Everywhere in what we call the Third World, a relative commodity price boom favored the Third World across the late nineteenth century and up to World War I (In the Philippine case, sugar, tobacco, hemp, and coconut oil). That long-run commodity price boom turned into a massive bust across the interwar years. How did Philippine commodity-producing regions fare compared with their East Asian neighbors and elsewhere? How does this experience compare with the Korean War years or the years from the 1990s to the Great Recession? How has Philippine inequality behaved over the century since 1913? Did the Philippines undergo the same

“great leveling” (in the Philippine case, it could be measured only by earnings inequality) that rich countries did between World War I and the 1970s? Has it undergone the same steep rise in inequality since then as the rich countries? If its experience has been different, why is that so? And what about regional inequality? Did the American investments in health and education reduce per capita income gaps between provinces in the years before independence? (True, there are no provincial per capita gross domestic product estimates for the years before 1960, but the censuses have the provincial data to construct human development indices.) Have the last seven decades since independence seen less? If so, why so?

Answers to these questions would be especially timely given that economic historians are already busy collecting the evidence to answer them for China and the rest of East Asia.

There is no shortage of evidence for the Philippines out there. Why don't we have the answers? If age and mortality were not realities, I believe Ben would be leading the charge. We will miss his voice, but his legacy will live on.

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