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Benito J Legarda (August 6, 1926 - August 26, 2020)

The truth, according to Beniting

In his novel *Baudolino*, Umberto Eco argues that literary worlds are exempt from any concepts about truth because the literary discourse “cannot be true or false, it can only be valid in relation to its own premises.” In the case of Dr. Benito “Beniting” J. Legarda, truth is just a matter of fact, as in historical fact.

For we do not live in a literary world.

For instance, his comment about the venerable Fr. Horacio de la Costa’s assignment in Rome for many years in the service of the Society of Jesus (SJ) is typical Beniting, a statement of historical fact with some economic assessment of what is foregone: “It deprived us of much work that could have seen the light of day. Perhaps the Order felt that charity begins at home.”

Legarda helped guide public policy with his early and abundant exposure in the West. He admitted as a historical fact, and realized together with other young economists and statisticians from the government, private corporates, and the academe, that the growing Philippine economy after the war badly needed the production of critical statistics. The Philippines barely had a semblance of this body of numbers to guide public policy. One way of championing this cause was through the formation of the Philippine Statistical Association (PSA) in 1951, 70 years ago.

Two other Central Bank of the Philippines (CBP) officials were with Legarda as co-founders: Dr Enrique T. Virata, the first director of the Department of Economic Research, and his successor, Dr. Horacio C. Lava. Legarda was to succeed as director after Fanny Cortes Garcia.

In many informal conversations with his economic research staff at the CBP, he would narrate that there was limited discussion, much less debate, about the imperatives of economic thought to help guide the difficult task of nation-building. Politics was, without a doubt, dominant. Eleven years after the founding of the PSA, the Philippine Economic Society (PES) was formed from the original informal association called Social Economy Association composed of Legarda, Amado Castro, Quirico Camus Jr., Jose G. Fernandez Jr., and Armand Fabella, all graduates of what Gerardo P. Sicat called the “ancient university in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA.”

Legarda was the third president after Fabella and Castro, after serving as editor of PES’ *Philippine Economic Journal* (PEJ) for a few years. In many of his recollections of these years with his staff at the central bank, Legarda would always stress what he believed to be the solution to many problems of Philippine society: economics. The truth was he contributed to the solution by strengthening the role of economics and the economics profession and its practitioners. Legarda helped by demonstrating the need for building institutions that produced statistics, performed economic planning and economic research, and project development and management.

Invariably wide was Legarda's economic understanding; his intellectual pocket was deep. His *After the Galleons: Foreign Trade, Economic Change, and Entrepreneurship in the Nineteenth-Century Philippines* (1999), a revised version of his doctoral dissertation at Harvard, demonstrated that the Philippines was a sub-optimal colony. The galleon trade did not transform the Philippine economy beyond being an entrepot of goods produced outside the Philippines like silk from China and gems and precious stones from India, a situation that resonates even today when Manila continues to be a transshipment point.

Legarda argued in his book that after the galleon trade ceased in 1815 for the Philippines, Manila started to nurture foreign trade with a domestic base. Economic change happened, and entrepreneurship began to blossom. As Legarda nicely put it: "The nineteenth-century Philippine economy did not start from scratch. The preceding Age of Transshipment dated back to pre-Hispanic times, and, during the centuries when it was in effect, a process of administrative unification and geographic consolidation took place that laid the groundwork for the rise of national consciousness."

This economic history book was considered by no less than Fr. de la Costa as "a patch of solid ground in a mushy landscape." Legarda, in more ways than one, was also an able chronicler of the other key historical contexts in the Philippines. His *The Hills of Sampaloc: The Opening Actions of the Philippine American War* (2001), *Occupation '42* (2003), and *Occupation: The Later Years* (2007) are important additions to the literature.

Truth to Beniting Legarda are the trivial things during the two imperial occupations. In his books on the Japanese occupation based on his columns, for instance, Legarda documented that such consisted of the oppressive Japanese army; economic hardship; modes of transport after all automobiles were confiscated; tales of those who lived through the war.

But it was precisely those little things about the war, trivial to many, that comprised the truth of the period and the season, and to Fr. Miguel Bernad, in his commentary of Beniting's books, "that from a cosmopolitan perspective, are no longer trivial." Indeed, Fr. Bernad was very right; little things cast long shadows.

Beniting Legarda's rare contribution was to cast the light on important timelines of our history from some economic perspective. But the truth is, his devotion to economic history and culture, to be consistent with his forthright assessment of de la Costa's foregone contributions to Philippine learning, ate up his finite time from another equally important facet of his professional life as an economist: his contribution to economic research and monetary policymaking.

We are poorer by what Beniting could have written on monetary policy and its contemporary trends and dynamics.