

ABSTRACT

Workshop: "Urban Development in a Globalising World – Overcoming the Formal-Informal Divide"
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Remitting Citizenship: Foreign Aid, Migrant Remittances, and Everyday Governance in the Post-Cold War Philippines

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During the era from 1965 to 1986, the Philippines was the quintessential Cold War client state: a dependable U.S. ally under the control of "America's Boy," Ferdinand Marcos. Military assistance and foreign aid dollars flowed freely to the Marcos regime as successive American administrations in both parties overlooked human rights abuses, widespread corruption, and the declaration of martial law in 1972. The rapid social upheavals of the period from 1986 to 1992—which included the massive People's Power revolution, the end of the Cold War, and the closure of U.S. military bases at Clark Air Field and Subic Bay Naval Station—coincided with new forces in global labor markets that have made the Philippines one of the world's leading sending states for migrants even as the Philippines itself has experienced large-scale structural adjustment, political devolution, and the transfer of much of everyday governance to public-private partnerships.

Typically, that shift has been explained as a move from the realms of the "formal" (dictatorships, armies, foreign aid) to the "informal" (NGOs, migrants, remittances). And while it is undoubtedly true that political and labor experiences of ordinary Filipinos are drastically different now than they were even as recently as 1986, my paper will emphasize continuities and document the historical roots of phenomena that appear to have emerged only after the Cold War.

The essay will largely focus on the implications of migrant remittances for the political culture of the contemporary Philippines. While scholars have measured the macroeconomic effects of large-scale migration on the Philippine economy, too little attention has been paid to the meanings of remittances in the everyday politics of Filipino communities—in Manila, in the countryside, and in the global diaspora. Nor have they fully explored the ways in which state institutions have not only adapted to the "informality" of migrant flows, but have in fact helped to structure them.

I also plan to link my current research with ideas explored in my previous paper for the Urban Planet Berlin Roundtable by looking at the question of local governance in Manila and the ways that "local" and "global," "formal" and "informal" play out as Filipino migrants shape and reshape their working lives and their common political futures. Based on government documents, news accounts, and fieldwork in the Philippines, this paper seeks to join in the effort to break down the formal/informal divide by questioning accounts that explain that divide as a stark historical division.

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