

# The Struggle for Hegemony: Notes on the Liberative Culture

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EDSA 1986. MORE THAN JUST A POLITICAL event, was a dramatic cultural affair. The festive insurrection that accompanied the Enrile-Ramos mutiny was the most concrete manifestation, the apex, of a cultural ethos hitherto latent and rare in its occurrence in Philippine history. Before that of course, there was first that child-like adulation for Cory Aquino as the presidential candidate and as the widow of a slain senator held with passion by millions of Filipinos whose previously unheard-of vigilance in the polls practically derailed the grand cheating plan of the decades-old Marcos machinery.

Despite this novelty of an insurrectionary event in contemporary Philippine history, it is rather unfortunate that such behavior still begs for a proper reckoning. That while many meticulous Filipino analysts have already split hairs on the most inconsequential detail of the EDSA event, very few ever bothered to go deeply as to why that insurrection happened and why all that festivity in the first place. Fewer still have ventured the questions why of all people, it was the hitherto unorganized and politically passive urban middle class that undertook such a revolutionary act, and hence, what were the *actual* motive forces of that insurrection? Moreover, beyond the interest of mere academic inquiry lies an important lesson that has escaped and still escapes Filipino progressives and revolutionaries—*i.e.* the question of how to harness and utilize this potent behavior for present and future progressive goals.

Strange as it may seem that a cultural event such as EDSA 1986 is yet wanting for a cultural

inquiry when its political and economic dimensions already consist voluminous interpretations, another issue, perhaps more controversial this time, crops up. Consider this: the popularity of the Aquino government is an undisputable reality and this fact is that which essentially triggered the passionate debates raging at present within revolutionary circles. The issue of parliamentarist versus guerrilla strategies revolve around this fact; much in the same way that other issues such as the conjunctural versus structural-essentialist analyses, the classical Leninist versus the Bonapartist conceptions of the State, and even the united front project versus sparrow warfare also contain this fact as a necessary given.

Yet this popularity of Cory Aquino has not even been thoroughly questioned and investigated. Basic questions like what are the *actual* bases of such popularity?, how can a widow capture the imagination of the masses so easily yet so tenaciously?, and what is it in the masses that makes them susceptible to a personality as Cory Aquino? have never really been clarified and extensively tackled. Hence, the crucial problematic of identifying points of possible intervention, integral to a more realistic and effective revolutionary strategy, has virtually been surrendered without a fight.

Had such inquiries been surrendered only to the academe, perhaps Filipino revolutionaries would not have faced practical problems. But sadly, it would appear that the conservative forces of Philippine society are the ones having a successful time utilizing the lessons of such inquiries for their own ends. The plebiscite and

the congressional elections, and the fast spreading anti-communist vigilante groups attest to this success.

The electoral exercises cited above were dismal failures for Filipino progressives and revolutionaries. Therein, their high hopes of translating their mass base support into elective positions were dampened by the impressive victories of conservative politicians; especially those who made it a point to identify themselves with Cory Aquino. "New politics" was trounced

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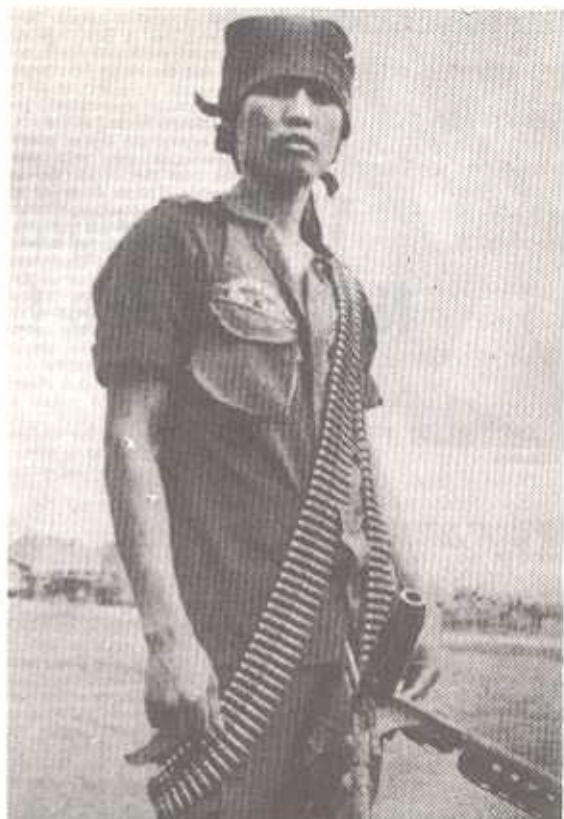
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convincingly and in certain areas considered as controlled by the guerrillas, reports have it that progressive candidates even lost heavily. Not a few were dismayed to view the much-vaunted new Filipino preferring the gimmickry of traditional politicians instead of the Left's campaign of issues and principles.

Still dizzy with that unexpected complete defeat at the polls, Filipino revolutionaries were soon confronted by the worrisome anti-communist vigilantes. Clothed in mysterious religiosity and having the military as their high priest, these vigilantes spread across the islands with amazing speed and popularity, like fire in a haystack. Its strength and potency would later on reach important proportions that national leaders would make it an issue for their political grandstanding. Even President Aquino and Cardinal Sin, perhaps in an effort to endear themselves to these vigilantes who suspect that they connive with the Communists, have endorsed them. Meanwhile, due to these vigilantes' religious preponderance and their effective fanatic-style of fighting, some guerrilla fronts of the revolutionaries were slowly threatened, eroded of support and in the case of Davao, once considered as the laboratory of urban guerrilla strategy, overtaken.

The tactical setbacks that these vigilantes inflicted on the revolutionary movement are scandalous, especially in the light of history. Resembling so much the *Sakdal* and *Pulajanes* millenarian-populist rebels of the American colonial period, these vigilantes, unlike their precursors who fought for progressive ideals, curiously task themselves at present with con-



servative and counter-revolutionary aims. Whereas in the moral dichotomy of the good and the evil, the *Sakdalistas* and the *Pulajanes* ascribed evil on anything Establishment and colonial, these modern-day armed messiahs ironically subscribe to Reagan's anti-communist worldview. And since these vigilantes can successfully generate anti-communist hysteria, they have become integral components of what is now implemented as the 'Low Intensity Conflict.'

Perhaps it would be superfluous at this point to state that what all these indicate is that the national democratic paradigm for Philippine revolution lacks the cultural tools for integrating, much less utilizing, the abovementioned cultural elements. And as such, they were left to be used effectively by the conservative sectors of Philippine society. This paper shall attempt to provide initial inputs as to the objective and subjective reasons why the national democratic 'liberative culture' has failed to reckon for its own use these cultural elements which can be considered to be so crucial that the present slump in the revolutionary momentum can be overcome once they are properly addressed.

#### **Objective Problems of the Counter-Hegemonizing Project**

The cultural struggle is oftentimes equated with the concept of a counter-hegemonizing project. Hegemony represents that situation wherein a

dominant class maintains its rule over society not only through the use of force via the State instruments but primarily through intellectual and moral leadership. In such societies, progressives and revolutionaries do not only possess the classical task of smashing the State structures or breaking up the political society, but more important, they must be victorious *first* on the level of the civil society where that active consent given by the masses to the State exists in its daily form. A revolutionary hegemonizing project therefore must not be constrained by the corporative-economic interests of the revolution if it wishes to be effective and successful in its political strategies and intentions. Otherwise, it is likely to encounter defeat in the civil society and therefore, lose out in the open struggle against the State.

If the project must not be the direct functions of economics and its *sine qua non* politics, where must counter-hegemony be based? The Italian philosopher Gramsci asserts that bases can be found in the masses own worldview, in what is often called as 'common sense'. Theorizing that this mass culture is not monolithically consensual to the ideas propagated by the hegemonic ruling class as such culture contains a variety of elements, some of which may actually contradict the dominant ideology, Gramsci tasked revolutionaries with the responsibilities of making these elements *critical* and redirecting them toward revolutionary goals. In his *Prison Notebooks*, he wrote

Creating a new culture does not mean one's own individual "original" discoveries. It... means the diffusion in a critical form of truths already discovered, their 'socialization' as it were, and even making them the basis of vital action.

The problem of the organic base of the State, under this prescription, then is confronted with an organic solution. Therefore, the moment of actual seizure of State power becomes more of function, a mere consequence or a last episode in the successful cultural struggle.

But of course, in societies where the dominant class does not lead by consent and uses force instead, the strictly economic-based counter-hegemonizing project retains its practical efficacy. In such societies, the project oftentimes becomes a direct apprentice and derivative of the smash-the-State strategy and whose completion is utterly dependent on success of this strategy. Gramsci in analyzing the Russian revolution points out that one of the main reason why Lenin's strategy of directly seizing State power succeeded was because the civil society in Russia at that time was weak and that the State was everything.

And in the case of Philippines, it can be said that one of the major reasons why the revolutio-

nary movement's fate has shifted so radically from an accelerating momentum to a sudden marginalization in the immediate pre- and post-EDSA period is because the recent history of its society also manifested radical shifts in its nature.

Philippine society, especially after the Second World War, can be considered as one of the most consensus-based societies in the Southeast Asian region. While its neighboring countries experienced bitter civil wars and authoritarianism, Philippine society practiced liberal democracy with such ease that it elicited Western flattery as "the showcase of democracy in Asia". Despite the often-exaggerated Huk rebellion of the late 40s, which was generally only a Central Luzon affair, Filipinos entrusted their basic interests to political parties and elected their political representatives into office. Class conflicts, while not resolved, were nevertheless mediated and de-amplified by the mechanisms of Congress. Often their resolution were simply delayed. Reinforced by the Huk debacle, the ordinary Filipino's phobia of violence in confronting the State was translated into trust, albeit pessimistic, for the system.

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Marcos' declaration of martial law in 1972, however, would radically alter this organic base of Philippine state and society. As the traditional ramparts of liberal democracy were destroyed, so were the ramparts of ruling class hegemony also demolished. Though Marcos tried to institute new bases of consensus through the 'New Society' institutions, a vital difference now existed. Whereas in the two-party set-up of liberal democracy, blame was dispersed and whatever merit redound to the whole system, the mere fact that Marcos' authoritarianism singled him out as the sole leader of society and therefore responsible for anything in it, any blame or grievance became his doing. Up to the time when foreign loans brought superficial progress among the masses and when most of his programs have not yet produced their deadliest effects, Marcos enjoyed a certain amount of legitimacy. But when the economic crises of the 80s set in, his administration was put by many Filipinos under grave doubt. Moreover, with the unprecedented militarization of Philippine society, it became

apparent to the masses that the only thing that legitimized the Marcos government was its monopoly of force through its military supporter.

It was during this period that the armed revolutionary movement grew and thrived. As the only effective and serious opposition of the Marcos government, the movement attracted many adherents and sympathizers into its fold. Its daring offensives, economic sabotage, political pressures and tactical military campaigns against the unpopular government became moral issues among the unorganized masses: the Marcos government was using naked force, so the logical and moral response was also force. And at the eve of Marcos' downfall, it was virtually existing as a *de facto* government in many areas that were under its ideological and military clout.

Recognizing the masses' tendency to explain the fight against Marcos from a moral-intellectual standpoint, the movement naturally tried to refocus their attention to the iniquitous political-economic system. By the early 80s when the legal mass movement resurfaced in the urban centers and whose intensity was peaking, it seemed that the underground's capture of State power was only a question of time.

The assassination of Senator Benigno Aquino and the events that succeeded it, however, became the movement's rival locus of anti-Marcos struggle. The assassination was undoubtedly a moral question and hatred for the Marcos regime, however spoken in whispers, grew further.

It was during this period that a noticeable slump in the revolutionary movement's political struggle occurred, as manifested in the tactical organizational setbacks incurred by national democratic mass movement, particularly in the field of coalition politics with other progressive groupings. Simultaneously, the traditional politicians displaced by Marcos's one-man rule resurged. Familiar on how to exploit a moral question, these politicians were able to maneuver and re-position themselves amid the consternation of the common progressive. Even the social democrats, hitherto rendered politically negligible when compared to the ideologically-sound NDs, were able to bolster their ranks, due mainly to their Christian morality-based politics.

The period between the post-Aquino assassination and pre-EDSA therefore became a test of bases of consensus-building — *i.e.* where can the masses be drawn, in the primarily politico-economic or in the primarily moral? It was immensely possible at that time for national democrats to dispel such polarity of choices as history is replete with examples of Marxist-led and Marxist-influenced groups successfully balancing the dialectics between the two. But unfortunately, events would reinforce such polarity. Further attempts at coalition-building

and united front projects with the social democrats, liberal democrats and the so-called 'bourgeois reformists' failed for a variety of reasons ranging from alleged dogmatism and sectarianism to personality differences. Fast being isolated from the then-emerging political mainstream, the national democrats nevertheless sought comfort in their own also-strengthening ranks. A temporary stalemate between the two anti-Marcos camps ensued.

The snap elections and the succeeding events at EDSA would decisively break this stalemate in favor of the moralizers. Cory Aquino became their rallying point, that moral-intellectual leader of the post-Marcos society. This victory of the moral base however, may only have been circumstantial. Some observers note that had Marcos succeeded in militarily defeating the mutinous forces of Enrile and Ramos, then the slated *welgang bayan* insurrection of the national democrats would have enjoyed the fall-out of disenchantment and the moral rallying point would have been them instead of Cory Aquino.

But as the events took their course, the forces identified with the apparently morally-pristine Cory Aquino were able to take over the government. And as the new leaders quickly worked for the restoration of the institutions Marcos destroyed, a society of consensus reemerged, this time more vibrant and possibly for that immediate period, indelible.

Many analysts upon seeing how this government would later squander almost every opportunity at social reform would be baffled as to why the mass of people that instituted that government remain passive and even supportive of it. Their scandalization would be further justified as the elections under this government re-took the personalistic and therefore shallow, form. They note to their amazement that the people even make excuses for this government. But all these observations carry a fundamental incongruence: their critiques are based on the economic-political standpoint yet the object of their criticism mainly revolve around the moral-cultural. The masses of people that carried an insurrection at EDSA were there basically for Cory Aquino and everything therefore revolve around her. While this may sound pedestrian by now, it is an undeniable fact which must be the starting point of any strategy intent on successfully working for social change. And such success lie in precisely confronting and attempting to grapple with this fact.

### Subjective Problems

What barred the national democrats from seeing the revolutionary potentials of this cultural element? What caused them not to foresee their impending possible marginalization in the minds of the masses that participated in EDSA?

The answers can be found in their paradigm of



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revolution which at this point, on hindsight, can be said to have lacked a thorough culturalist perspective. Hence, they were not able to diagnose that crucial shift in the minds of the masses given the snap elections which presented an opportunity for the masses' 'common sense' to be translated as a material force that shall establish a new political system.

Briefly, these are some of the main hindrances in the paradigm that prevented an exhaustive intervention in the realm of culture.

First, the arena of the cultural revolution is seen to be mainly present in the field of revolutionary literature and the arts. While such revolution indeed can be found in these fields, its limitation to these prevents the appreciation of the arena of civil society where day-to-day activities of unorganized masses are guided by 'common sense', an arena where definitely the cultural revolution must commence. A clear example of the flawed tendency such a view engenders is the position held by one Esperanza del Pueblo who, in calling for a new cultural revolution, equated it with a revolution in progressive literary techniques and conventions. That the problem of revolutionizing mass consciousness — obviously a question of *content* — she reduced to a question of *form* may indeed represent an unfortunate progressive tendency. Especially when literary publications (more so, progressive) in the country in general, is inaccessible to the greater majority of the population.

Second, an aggravating factor is the notion of false consciousness, that is, the oftentimes sweeping view of 'common sense' as an ideolog-

ical expression and mystification of the iniquitous economic realities. Many writers, for example, have attacked the so-called 'feudal culture' manifested in the patriarchal-paternalistic relationship between politicians and the electorate, and in the numerous religious rituals and practices that allegedly inspires awe and submission toward the powerful elites. While this is again indeed true, many have forgotten that an essential part of this feudal culture is the tradition of *bandolerismo* (social banditry) and *pamumundok* (literally: going to the mountain, denoting armed struggle), options that the masses historically and desirably resorted to, and options that were not without religious motivations. The history of Filipino millenarian-populist movements which sprouted throughout centuries dispels the view that Catholic icons, rituals and practices have always been tools of colonial and class subjugation, as these same elements can be seen to have decorated, motivated and sometimes, propelled these 'class-in-itself' rebel movements. (An interesting insight: religious elements like statues of Virgin Mary and rosaries were very conspicuous at EDSA during the insurrection.)

Third, and corollarily, is the economic reflectionist view of culture and counter-culture. Since it is assumed that culture is directly an expression of the semi-colonial and semi-feudal politico-economic mode, a liberative culture must therefore be an anti-colonial and anti-feudal one. While indeed this must be the case, what usually happens is that the fixation on these politico-economic purposes generally result to a liberative culture which is basically *reactive*. Following Gramsci's points, such create a new one rather than make critical an

existing culture which is not monolithic and contains a multitude of potentially, if not actually, progressive and revolutionary elements. The anti-communist vigilantes is again a case in point. As of yet, progressive analyses have largely ascribed the phenomenon of the bushfire-like spread of these vigilantes to the counter-insurgency strategy of 'Low Intensity Conflict'. Attempts to analyze them on politico-economic grounds have more or less failed since these vigilantes belong to the peasantry and urban poor. In the case of Davao City, the vigilantes are even former guerrillas and mass sympathizers of the movement. A coincidence is that these vigilantes, whose basic motivation is the moral dichotomy of evil and good, sprouted only after the EDSA events!

Lastly, the positivist social science distinction regarding the areas of human behavior remains unquestioned and is upheld in progressive analysis. This perhaps is the root of all the abovementioned flaws. It has been very common to sharply distinguish the economic activity to the political and the cultural, as if the rigidity of categories exist in the real life of the masses. Worse, cultural activity is ascribed those elements which remain after the economic and the political has already been stripped. As such, in progressive inquiries, cultural activity is assigned the realm of folklores, literature and the arts, and yes, moral values seen as secondary or even tertiary (i.e. after the economic and the political) driving forces of human/mass behavior.

### Conclusion

A note on the present national democratic strategy on the cultural realm in particular, and on the political in general: the movement now has tasked its activists to persist and intensify their efforts at 'exposing' the 'true nature' of the

Aquino government. Specifically, cultural activists in the theater and the arts were held responsible for the task of exposing to the people the fake character of among other things, "reconciliation, reformism, parliamentarism and the popularity of Cory Aquino" as they seek to educate the people on the historical necessities of the armed struggle, the national democratic revolution, and the deceitful nature of the present Philippine state. Definitive forecasts on whether this venture will be successful or not are at this point not justifiably possible as the situation is so fluid and national democratic praxis centered on armed struggle, however flawed it may be politically to many observers, carry with it also the cultural-historical consent of *pamumundokismo*. Moreover, as one of the main strategically significant social force in Philippine society today, it carries with it the self-fulfilling logic of revolutionary praxis.

Therefore a fierce struggle between two hegemonizing projects can now be witnessed. Projections, however, based on trends can be made: that if the Aquino government, established through the active consensus of the citizenry, will be able to hold onto that cultural asset, no amount or perhaps a very large and difficult amount of 'exposing' efforts on the part of the national democrats can delegitimize it on the short term. If it resorts to the rule of force, and triggers another round of serious economic crises, it may follow the exact footsteps of the Marcos regime. And perhaps by that time, the strategic military game plan of protracted people's war of the national democrats will be, like in February 1986, again temporarily made to look irrelevant by another successful people's uprising; this time in their favor. But still, such will depend again on being there at the right time and at the right place. Or more important, on creating it! And this will in turn, depend on how national democrats consider the cultural questions presented.

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