

REVIEWS

B O O K

Remembering/Rethinking EDSA

Edited by JPaul S. Manzanilla and Caroline S. Hau
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The thirtieth anniversary of the February 1986 People Power uprising occasions a timely recollection and reassessment of this event. Standing as a landmark episode not just in the recent political history of the Philippines, but also in the history of democratization across parts of the world, it has spawned, since the 1980s, numerous books and articles that have analyzed, memorialized, critiqued, and often enough romanticized the event. No doubt after three decades this momentous event deserves another look which this edited volume gives us.

Remembering/Rethinking EDSA is a compilation of articles of various types: academic essays, reflective or op-ed-like short pieces, personal reminiscences, and creative writing. One might wish that all contributions could have been in the form of rigorously developed academic essays—analytical, substantive, and well-documented. But the articles in various formats are invariably insightful in their own right. In addition, they allow for a wider range of views and sentiments that, one could argue, befits the multifaceted and emotive character of the memories of EDSA.

The book is divided into three parts: fifteen contributions under the heading “Revolution Across Generations”; ten under “Creative Critique”; and, eight under “Class and Ideology, Technocracy and Technology, Culture and Revolution.” The articles are wide-ranging not only in length, tenor, and form but also in the extent to which the writers have made EDSA the focal point of analysis, remembrance, or reflection. That said, there are a number of themes discernible amid the diversity of this collection.

First, the complexity of the EDSA uprisings. Right from the start, the nature and meanings of these events were contradictory and contested. Soon enough, however, there developed dominant discourses surrounding EDSA that simplified, mystified, and/or idealized it, in the process privileging certain narratives while suppressing or overshadowing others. One good thing about this book is that it reiterates the multidimensionality and intricacy and the contentious nature of this event. Filomeno Aguilar's "People Power: Deception and Truth in a History-Changing Event", for instance, painstakingly demonstrates the "dissimulated" and "deceptive" character of key events that constituted the EDSA uprisings in February 1986. It was spontaneous and complex such that "in the final analysis," he notes, "many could make sense of it only in terms of transcendence" (69).

Second, cynicism and disappointment run through numerous articles, regardless of the format, and irrespective of the political or ideological position upheld by the writers. Palpable is the sense of loss: unfulfilled hopes of turning the country around and improving the life of Filipinos after 20 years of plunder by the Marcoses and their cronies, and a missed opportunity for the revolutionary movement to further strengthen their cause. The latter is quite obvious. Lualhati Milan Abreau's "Naging Mabunga Sana ang EDSA Para sa Kilusang Rebolusyonaryo" (EDSA Could Have Been Fruitful or Advantageous to the Revolutionary Movement, 137–153) echoes loud and clear the lament shared by some of the other writers. As for many others, Angela Stuart-Santiago's declaration that "EDSA itself was a spectacular success. . . It was post-EDSA that was the failure" (213) captured the broadly shared sentiments.

Third, despite the very notable efforts to make EDSA complex, as noted above, such complexity is restricted to the domain of history as written by the victors. It is very difficult to miss the virtual lack of enough voices from the opposite side of the political fence, i.e., those who view Marcos and the Marcos years in a more positive light. Joel David ("Grains and Flicker", 172–187) and Faustino Sabado (translated by Patricio Abinales, 256–271) appear to be the only ones who worked with the Marcos regime; but even they could not be strictly considered as "pro-Marcos".

Despite usually dismissing those who viewed the Marcos years favorably as being "brainwashed", "blinded by propaganda", "misled", and even "stupid" "Marcos loyalists", one cannot deny the possibility that Marcos may have in fact done some things that truly resonated with, and were valued by sizeable sections of the Filipino people, and continue to do so. For these people, what happened in EDSA in 1986 could have very different meanings; and any recollection or reassessment of EDSA thirty years later could never be complete or fair without their views. The stunning victory of Rodolfo Duterte and the very strong showing of Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. in the recent elections will remain misunderstood as long as the memories and meanings of the EDSA uprising are treated as the exclusive domain of the advocates of what is called "yellow" politics.

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the impetus for the book emanated from the unease and worry over the supposedly blatant historical forgetfulness of Filipinos of the Martial Law period, the Marcoses and their cronies, and the Marcos years in general. Not only have the Marcoses and their “minions” been forgiven, so goes this lament; not only “have [they] come back with much vengeance” (1). They have also been embraced, even adored by many, as shown in the results of the recent vice presidential elections. Remembering EDSA, as this book aspires to effect, would ostensibly help refresh people’s memories of the atrocities and excesses of Marcos and the Marcos years. But, a potential problem with this analytic frame lies in the presumption, apparently held by the majority of the writers in this book, that their negative memories of the Marcos years comprise the only legitimate and accurate history of the period. In so doing, they mistake the contrarian memories held by other people for the forgetting of history. By dismissing such alternative memories as a form of historical amnesia or an indication of how effective the Marcos propaganda was, they miss the opportunity to see how complex and ambivalent the Marcos years were, beyond the restrictive black-and-white, good-versus-evil frames propagated by hegemonic discourses. They also forego the chance to interrogate the politics of their own positionality. Memories, just like history, are by nature selective, and people tend to select based on what really matters to them. Their recollection of EDSA thus may be as politically self-validating as the alleged forgetfulness of the people they critiqued.

Without taking anything from the intrinsic value of this book as a recollection of, and as an attempt to rethink the 1986 People Power, additional value lies in a number of articles where EDSA is not really central to analysis or reflection. To mention a few: Eulalio Guieb’s “Pag-Aakda”, for instance, is remarkable for its profound meditation on the nature of authorship. Vicente Rafael’s analysis of “messianic politics” and the use of the cell phone is also very noteworthy. Patrick Flores’s ruminations on film history and the nature of the political (“A Cinema in Transition”, 359–376) as a platform to take a swipe at “decadent democracy” (372–373) and the “endless demonization of Marcos” is both perceptive and scathing. Several others deserve mention. The editors, who likewise provide a comprehensive introduction and afterword, deserve praise as well for putting together this disparate but invariably insightful collection.

REVIEWER

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