

## BOOK REVIEW

Lisandro E. Claudio. *Taming People's Power: The EDSA Revolutions and their Contradictions*. Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2013. xiv + 226 pages.

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*“[T]he tendency to treat cultural traditions as invented rather than historical realities has become fashionable in the recent work of anthropologists and historians. Using this approach, scholars have highlighted the fabricated dimension of popular notions of the past. Nevertheless, an attempt to establish legitimacy by inventing tradition is hardly a random or arbitrary endeavor. Whatever is invented must be adjusted to meet various social considerations and cultural conventions. Most of all, the invention must also have an emotional appeal for the general public if it is to be at all viable.” (Jun Jing 1996:68)*

Jun Jing explored this notion of the power of invented tradition in the case of Dachuan, a village in China, during the Maoist campaign of the 1950s, when state-organized violence compelled reactions of “invented tradition” in his book *The Temple of Memories: History, Power and Morality in a Chinese Village* (1996). By the 1990s, invented traditions revolving around the reconstruction, operation, and worship practices in the village’s temple persist, serving as the means to preserve some modicum of what was sacrificed at that time to the Communist regime: descent-based organizations, lineage elders, and ritual management. The new traditions, invented as they are, had traction since these were overlaid onto acceptable cultural practices of Confucian worship and historical education.

Jing’s story of the small village of Dachuan bears striking similarities to Lisandro E. Claudio’s exploration of the “mythology of People Power”, sited in the public monuments dedicated to the event, and with its ‘dark side’ played out in Hacienda Luisita. The popular notions and emotional appeal – the invented tradition – that the People Power evokes is the mythology to which Claudio alludes.

Claudio ultimately breaks the mythology by conveying what he calls the ‘dual tragedies’ of the failure of the People Power narrative “twinned” with the failure of the radical alternative of communist National Democracy. Claudio calls his book a “potentially pessimistic challenge to nationalist hope” (163), subverting the present political landscape onto its yellow past.

Claudio follows Kay B.B. Warren’s argument that “...the challenge of the engaged scholar is ‘to resist becoming complicit in the misrepresentation

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of normative (nationalistic) politics as stable systems” (89). However, Claudio is already predisposed towards this position. Despite admitting that he is armed with a level of academic detachment from the actual event of the first People Power since he was only one year old at the time, he is also closely surrounded by activists who were disillusioned with the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) – his parents Rafael Claudio and Sylvia Estrada-Claudio. This connection gave him the impetus to see out a “middle-class Filipino’s aspirational desire to reconcile personal beliefs with popular opinion” (viii).

Claudio is also aware that his academic background and middle-class position places him literally in the middle of two other classes in struggle – those he calls the rich oligarchic families that run Philippine politics and the farmworkers who suffer landlord exploitation and communist instrumentalization.

Argues Claudio, “[i]t was amidst the fear of another dictatorship that the heir to the Aquino legacy assumed the presidency” (5). Noynoy Aquino’s electoral victory as President of the Philippines, as reflected by his overwhelming win in his family’s seat of Tarlac, was initially explained by Claudio as an act of patronage. Upon returning to Hacienda Luisita in November 2010, Claudio discovered that it was also a matter of weariness of ‘resisting management’ (119). This struggle is a self-sustaining gambit that is reversed and then amplified onto a national stage.

Amplified within the ebullience over the rediscovery of hope and democracy from the tyranny of authoritarian rule is the regression of Philippine politics to a dynastic form where, as Claudio cites Benedict Anderson, “...in the first year of Aquino’s presidency, 130 of the 200 congressional seats became occupied by politicians belonging to ‘traditional political families,’ while 39 were relatives of these families” (11). To date, the makeup of the Philippine legislative body is a playbook of familiar family names that have been present for generations. The failure of the People Power narrative, therefore, is found in its contradictions. For example, “[i]n Luisita, the farmworkers understand that one of the contradictions of the People Power narrative is the deification of its heroes. For them, Cory is not a gentle saint, but a part of one of the country’s most dominant cacique families” (106).

The twin to the People Power narrative also has its dark path. The first People Power in 1986 saw the disengagement of the Left from the mainstream People Power event, which eventuated the fissuring of the group. In the second People Power in 2001, the Left was engaged; however, says Claudio, “...the narrowness of the demands forwarded in EDSA 2 – anti-

corruption and the replacement of a popular but corrupt leader – reveals that the broad Left was unable to define the discourse of the “revolution” (50). The third permutation of People Power was a reappropriation of its narrative into a lower class discourse.

### **And the alternative?**

Our modern-day activists in universities are imbued with the sense of duty to be militant, consistent with Nathan Quimpo’s observation that because of the country’s colonial history, the Philippine Left has opposed ‘imperialism’ and ‘foreign interference’ in the politics, culture, and economics of the country (cited by author, 61). However, in these globalized times where appropriation is common, their militancy is against issues that are unclear on the outset. This nebulosity is ironically evident because the larger student population does not necessarily take part in their protests, perhaps due to busyness with other concerns, utter disinterest or lulling safely into the silent affirmative. Claudio puts it so succinctly: “...a consensus on what to reject is easier to achieve than a consensus on what to espouse.... Thus, the trope of common victimhood while creating a unified discourse may obscure the fact that many of the victims were active social agents associated with specific social causes” (60).

Community organizers, as catalysts for social change within a group seeking recompense or justice, exemplify what catalysts really are: agents which provoke significant action without having to be a part of the group being assisted. They are essentially outsiders who do not seek personal gain or voice. They move a group to take action – they do not lead it themselves. Community organizers are therefore invisible agents.

In Claudio’s investigation of the state of farmworkers in Hacienda Luisita, he found evidence that some community organizers, instead of being invisible agents, were at the forefront of militant protest strategies. There were also instances in which organized groups and their organizers were able to benefit from their protest strategies by obtaining land for themselves and their allies, leaving out the actual farmworkers who tilled the land. Claudio details: “First, they became pawns in the context of the CPP’s alliance building with Ninoy Aquino – an icon of the People Power imaginary. More recently, their struggle for land has been sidetracked not only by instrumentalist thinking, but also the vanguardism and ideological rigidity of the CPP” (150). After a time, this led to disillusionment among many of the farmworkers. Those with whom Claudio spoke claimed “...that rallies led to nothing in the hacienda, only military reprisal, as was the case with the

Hacienda Luisita massacre. Moreover, they explained that the call for agrarian reform was useless” (143-144).

The victory of Noynoy Aquino “...does not just expose how People Power mythology occludes the connections between its key players and patronage politics; it also exposes National Democracy’s failure to present a radical alternative” (151) for “[t]he communists had turned cacique, replicating the same strategies of patronage that landlords deployed. Like caciques, they deployed both coercive and populist strategies in order to attract support” (145).

### **Framework**

These discoveries by Claudio are conveyed through two general sections of the book. In its first half, Claudio uses physical monuments as discursive obelisks around which he explores how People Power is indelibly joined to National Democracy, showing the uncertainty over the organized Left’s contribution to the struggle against the dictatorship. He “...attempted to map the mnemonic dynamics in a place that serves as the exception to the national imaginary, a place where the fragmentariness of memory challenges the cohesion of nationalist myth...” (115). The physical monuments he uses are the Shrine of Mary Queen of Peace, better known as the EDSA Shrine, and the Bantayog ng mga Bayani.

In obtaining information on the grounds of Hacienda Luisita, which constitutes the second half of the book, Claudio recorded his conversations, encounters, and experiences via ethnographic field notes. In so doing, he diminished the wariness that the farmworkers had towards him, whom they initially associated with Imperial Manila and its apparent love for the Aquinos. His informants soon opened up to him, sharing their experiences and calling on others to share their stories. Even wives told their stories in off-the-record conversations after their husbands gave their more formal accounts; this is reminiscent of the typical ethnographic foray where gendered stories are also found.

He tells the insights of his informants in brief, but potent, narratives, interspersing these with insightful explanations of his own, grounding what would have been perceived as idiosyncratic tales into examinations into the human condition, more specifically into how social processes are involved in truth production. For example, Claudio was able to elicit from one of his informants in Hacienda Luisita, Tatang Jimmy, an explanation for the occurrence of the first People Power: “The people who went there didn’t go

because they loved Cory, but because they hated Marcos. They wanted an end to martial law and they wanted democracy” (105).

Despite these efforts, the resulting history of the Left is partial at best, as Claudio was hemmed in by the limitations presented by his chosen subject matter. In attempting to tell the story of the Left, the Left could not fully ‘tell’ its story, as it was in no position of power to overtly contribute to national memory. Claudio enumerates the following reasons for this: not only does the Left have to compete with the prominence of elite memories of EDSA espoused broadly through state machinery, it also has to deal with economic reality; the organizational cracks within the Left due to the bitter rivalry between the Reaffirmists and Rejectionists made collective remembering difficult; “there is a general difficulty in representing the history of a largely clandestine movement” (83); and Claudio argues that memory is “...a class privilege because it is upper classes that can publicly proclaim previous affiliations with revolutionary movements without fear of social exclusion or government reprisal” (82-84).

And so the stories he gathered were incomplete and even conflicting, especially when he attempted to obtain clarification on the true ties between Ninoy Aquino and the New People’s Army on the grounds of Hacienda Luisita. His informants may have opened up to him, but only to a certain extent. This is the *delicadeza* that his informants practiced, as the defensive stance also allowed self-preservation. The resulting story, therefore, is an incomplete patchwork, painstakingly stitched by Claudio.

Claudio’s exploration of the duality of People Power and National Democracy is informative, not altogether unbiased but certainly fearless. However (and Claudio admits this) there is no firm resolution at the end of the book, only because it echoes the continuing discontent of Philippine politics.

### **Ending on a sad note but going beyond**

Philippine politics, both before and after People Power, is not without its instances of violence. This is saddening, but it also tragically proves that People Power and National Democracy did not altogether present a wholesale alternative. How so? June Nash, author of *Mayan Visions: The Quest for Autonomy In An Age of Globalization* (2001), offers an explanation: “Violence is often attributed to the differences brought about by growing wealth differences and the gap between the powerful and the subordinated within the community...” (57). The unresolved tensions between the classes can beget brutality.

Claudio thus suggests the acceptance of this reality by saying, “[i]n the context of a developing country like the Philippines, class inequities must be considered as integral determinants in the construction of historical memory.” (87) The struggle between the classes, and the resulting narratives, whether proclaimed or subverted, all contribute to national memory.

With the analogue to the story of Dachuan, Jing offers a tempering summation to Claudio’s entire exposition: “...inventive use of history and ritual is a classic case of political manipulation, raising interesting questions about the relation between collective memory, the institutional basis of recall and the logic of cultural invention” (Jing, 1996: 67).

At the writing of this review, the 2016 national elections are only a few months away. Interested parties are already positioning themselves at points where they will have the most benefit. Hopefully this benefit will redound to the people they represent; after all, there are still many good people in the world. But it cannot be denied that some part of this benefit is also social capital – an oligarchy masked behind benevolence – that will fuel the failure of the People Power and National Democracy narratives.

This is ending on a sad note, indeed. History has proven that another People Power, with its attendant brand of mythology, will not solve it. We need to free ourselves from political dynasties, class struggles, and covert affairs. Perhaps a new invented tradition needs to be created, which veers away from personality and instead focuses on true merit. Our contemporary times need contemporary solutions; we can certainly learn from our past, but we must attempt to be creative about our future.

### References

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