

The Human Tide of History: The Protest Movement from the Aquino Assassination to EDSA

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A Review of

BusinessMirror. (2011). The Human Tide of History: The Protest Movement from the Aquino Assassination to EDSA. Makati City: BusinessMirror.

Ironically, it was a business newspaper that published a photographic collection highlighting the role of the masses in the February 1986 uprising. *Business Mirror's The Human Tide of History: The Protest Movement from the Aquino Assassination to EDSA*, released during the twenty-fifth year anniversary of the event, is a much welcome contribution to the commemoration of EDSA. The book, according to its foreword, "seeks to document in largely pictorial form, for Filipinos, the last three years of the Marcos era." Presenting 120 black-and-white photographs by various photojournalists, Human Tide vividly captures the tumultuous series of protests that finally toppled Ferdinand Marcos.

While two previous collections on the 1986 uprising focused on the nearly violent change of power in Malacañang, this one portrayed massive demonstrations by various groups calling for more meaningful reforms. *Bayan Ko!: Images of the Philippine Revolt* (1986) talked about EDSA as a campaign to save the moderate alternative to the dictator, ending its story with the Philippine Left regretting its lost opportunity to lead a revolution. *People Power: An eyewitness history* (1986), on the other hand, weaved a miraculous story of nonviolent change and frequently cited extra-human powers removing an all-too human leader from power. In *Human Tide*, the awakened masses are at the center stage of political change. The book even orders the Filipino uprising as a precursor to the Middle East revolutions that are taking place twenty-five years after.

Militants and the organized sectors of society are prominently featured in the largest section (“Chapter 3: Protests Across the Land”) displaying peasant marches and workers’ demonstrations. The clarity of their calls, as seen on banners and streamers, foils the appropriation of such pictures by accounts that would discount their grievances. Verbal texts within the pictorial spaces of these photographs such as “End Reign of Terror” and “Dismantle U.S.-Marcos Dictatorship” (p. 67), “Diktadurya’y Lansagin, Nukleyar ay Buwagin” and “Itigil ang Karahasang Militar” (p. 75), “Stop Imperialist Plunder of Ancestral Land” (p. 66), and “Kaunlaran, Hindi Karahasan; Bigas, Hindi Bala” (p. 100) show the broader nature of the people’s problems (having land and food and exercising rights to assemble and speak as it should be to all citizens), how the struggle against Marcos’ tyranny was founded on economic and social concerns and, therefore, removing a dictator necessarily entailed a restructuring of the social order itself. Even the underground Left was presented, showing that opposition to Marcos always had the communist dimension traditionally proscribed from representation: journalist-rebel Antonio Zumel (p. 125) and New People’s Army rebels (p. 115).

There is a clever picture framing a rally with the movie billboard “Iligpit ang Supremo” (p. 64) and others that capture the citizens’ ingenious forms of protest: the banners “Staying Alive” referring to the dictator’s desperate hold on power and “Dapat Ka Bang Mahalin” (p. 79) alluding to the Filipino people’s putatively amorous relation with the president that is to be tested through the ballot box, and the “Exterminate Totally” true-to-life movie production starring Ferdie and Meldy (p. 81). These images express the commanding powers of humor through which the people endured the dictatorship. They also bear out how the *movement* of protesting necessarily implicates the production of images, defacing Marcos’ image by means of the *motion* picture, virtually. There is no more important image than that of the people—in power—demanding to be photographed.

The book strongly demonstrates how the photographic camera makes capturing the people as a mass possible. Within the frame, whether taken from a higher location or directly facing a demonstration, citizens are seen as part of a collective body protesting in public places. Walter Benjamin (2008) identified the fitness of this technological mass mediation of the masses by the camera, where “mass movements are clearly apprehended by the camera than by the eye” (p.54). Through the techniques of zoom-out and framing, EDSA pictures render the people in the mode of formidable collectivity. A student of social movements explains how such unity is established by the physical formation of protest:

By moving shoulder to shoulder, protesters see and feel that their suffering encompasses the broad masses and recognize the national and class character of their shared oppression. Through their collective movement, street protesters realize and demonstrate their capacity to challenge the state's legitimacy and power. Moving with other protesting bodies is empowering (Arcilla, 2008, pp. 44-45).

In many scenes, however, it seems that the struggling bodies of protesters push themselves beyond the frame; they move out of the picture. In a people's march in the countryside (p. 47), peasants and workers almost come from nowhere, and go toward the horizon. Oftentimes the borders of the picture are never enough to contain the movement of bodies, as in photos of massive demonstrations in an urban setting (pp. 84-85, 130-131). Such is the overpowering power of protest actions that they render evident—and challenge—the work of containment intrinsic to the technological and artistic medium that captures them. Photography is a graphic example of this techno-artistic activity.

The verbal narrative within which the pictures are embedded is also important. The first chapter discusses the upsurge of protest actions following the death of Ninoy and details the opposition of people in the business, media, student, farmer, and labor sectors, including the divisions in the ranks of mainstream opposition politicians. All pictures are captioned, informing readers oftentimes of the purposes of demonstration. A danger that any intertextual narrative faces is that the pictures may merely illustrate the written narrative or, conversely, that the story may end up describing and summarizing the visual images. It is respectable that the publication plays out this tension. It may take a long time to revise the view of EDSA as centered on personalities (Ninoy, Cory, Cardinal Sin, Enrile, Ramos) in favor of a perspective that extols the singular role of the masses in the making of a historical event.

The book resembles the two previous photographic collections in periodizing the uprising as beginning at the airport tarmac to the upsurge of protest actions up to the upheaval following the snap elections of 1986. On one hand, it adheres to the dominance of centrist EDSA narratives that favor a political history of uncomplicated substitution of the country's power-holders. In one photograph we see the bespectacled Noynoy and Kris (captioned 'finding identification with the growing ranks of young protesters,' p. 118) who now, jointly, rule over the showbiz-politics state of the nation. Exhibiting the people's demonstrations all throughout, the collection ends with the assumption of Cory Aquino into power (p. 152). On the other hand, the book's photographs vividly display people power in its essence: the power of the collective action of

the people in determining the course of their history. The dictatorship would not have been overthrown had the mass of millions of people been absent. The presence of Edita Burgos (widow of anti-Marcos journalist Joe Burgos and mother of desaparecido Jonas Burgos), now spokesperson for the families of the involuntarily disappeared, perhaps explains the salutary mass-oriented approach of the publication.

These images draw our eyes because they belong to the present much more than the past. How do we think of ourselves as a legatee of those struggles? The publication emphasizes the helpfulness of visuality in the work of memory. There is always a tendency to relegate the images of protest actions to the past and to make them rest in history. Taking pictures in such a light is akin to the capture by an apparatus whose intention is “not to change the world but to change the meaning of the world” (Flusser, 2000, p. 25)—the captivity of a moment immobilized and effectively cut loose from movement. We need more pictures that would demonstrate the activities of people in many regions of the country, the Filipino communities abroad, the indigenous peoples, and the support we receive from the international community of freedom-loving peoples.

At the end of the year when the book was published (December 2011) there was a resurgence of huge protest actions, with campaigns for greater funding for social services, recognition of workers’ rights, land distribution for farmers, and housing for the urban poor. They called for the occupation, this time not of EDSA, but Mendiola near Malacañang where the seat of political power is located. This is perhaps another human tide of history awaiting not simply photographic capture, but attendance and perpetual reproduction.

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