

READING THE TEXT OF THE FEBRUARY "REVOLUTION" IN THE PHILIPPINES

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Manila's February Revolution, if it can be called a revolution, lends itself to semiotic analysis because it wrested state power from an aging despot and installed a popular president with a moral commitment to democracy in a confrontation carried out at the level of signs, while teetering on the brink of war. In this paper, I describe pertinent events of the "People Power" Revolution, identify cultural objects or practices that were transformed into political signs, and discuss how politics was manipulated without physical violence, through signs.

By February, 1986, the Philippines had been ruled by the dictatorship of President Ferdinand E. Marcos for more than a decade. In yet another fraudulent election, Marcos was stealing the presidency from Corazon Cojuangco Aquino, the righteous widow of the recently martyred opposition leader Benigno S. Aquino, Jr. The whole world was witnessing, through the electronic media, Filipinos risk themselves against Marcos' thugs to protect the sanctity of the ballot boxes. Popular outcry threatened the Marcos regime, and on 22 February 1986 Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile and Vice Chief of Staff Fidel V.

Ramos defected. Archbishop Jaime L. Cardinal Sin called on the people of Manila to protect the defectors, and thousands crowded onto Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (E.D.S.A.) near military headquarters, placing themselves in front of advancing and finally immobilized Marcos loyalist troops. Having lost control of the army as well as of his image of legitimacy, Marcos fled the country on 25 February, and Aquino, having taken the oath of office earlier that day before a defecting Supreme Court justice, assumed the duties of President.

Exchange between four sources of power, the state or government bureaucracy, the army, the Church, and the people, took place in an historically charged situation where the background theme was the long-standing Filipino struggle against the former colonial power, the U.S.A., and its continuing world-historical dominance. For the purposes of this paper, however, the events of the four days in February will provide the focus. Nor should those events be underestimated. What happened spontaneously and semiotically at E.D.S.A. was in many ways more potent than the organized nationalist movement,

whose most radical sectors were marginalized because of their decision to boycott the elections, which they were sure would be a sham. The unplanned events of a few days had greater significance to Philippine politics than years of strategizing. I hope semiotics can provide some insights as to why this was so. I do not pretend to objectively present Philippine politics; rather, I herein describe things significant to my own political project. How did the Snap Revolt so efficiently depose Marcos while limiting the revolutionary potential of people power?

Traditional signs of authority, such as the vote, the soldier, and the rosary, invested the crowd with the righteousness of the established order, and thus prevented the Snap Revolt from developing into a social revolution of deep structural upheaval. In one sign essential to this simultaneous fomenting and taming of people power, the opposites of revolt and military authority were united: by its defection the Enrile-Ramos faction became a metaphor for revolt, while at the same time it signified military authority by metonymic relations with the army camps. This contradiction made the February Revolution a festival for those whose world is construed by the traditional symbolic order, that is, the liberal democratic middle

and upper classes. Meanwhile, at the President's Malacanang Palace, members of the urban poor, the proletarian underdog championed by the Philippine revolutionary movement, defended the pathetic fascist. Ironically, the manipulation of signifieds behind the Enrile-Ramos sign was transparent to the urban poor. Revolutionary expectations were turned upside down as each class read its own meanings from heterogeneous possibilities, and traditional authority reigned in a revolution named for people power.

Whereas the slogan "people power" comes from Ninoy Aquino's *Lakas ng Bayan* (Power of the People) parliamentary party, activists prefer "people's power" to indicate revolutionary power in the people's own interest.¹ "People power" disarms "people's power" by reducing the noun people, the source of the power, to an adjectival modifier.² A sociologist writes that the Revolution united people to rectify an unfair election rather than divided socioeconomic classes.² He says that the Revolution did not come about because traditional elites mobilized their client.⁴ Another writer suggests that the E.D.S.A. revolutionists were moved by traditional symbols of authority

¹Bennagen 1986.

²Garcellano 1986, 19.

³Carroll 1986, pt. 2, 7-8.

⁴Ibid., pt. 1, 10.

based on a feudal and colonial history.⁵ At the February Revolt, then, people power was unleashed in defense of fair elections, synecdoche for liberal democracy, not by conflict of socioeconomic forces (people's power) but by transcendent cultural signs.

Urban poor people loyal to Marcos reasoned that they would rather listen to a Filipino than to American and foreign muckraking reporters-of-fortune, diehard sightseers in Asia's reputed showcase of democracy.⁶ With an instinct for survival and for personal integrity, they said it was ridiculous to become human shields for the military at E.D.S.A.⁷ Ironically, the Revolt was for those who obeyed the symbolic order governing middle and upper class life, like Tingting Cojuangco and other Manila jet-setters who brought "chic to the barricades."⁸

By blocking the ten-lane avenue to traffic and to the Marcos forces with their bodies and with buses parked in the intersection,⁹ Filipinos reclaimed public space. By filling space (with their bodily

presence) they took control of the rights of movement and assembly long denied (absence) by dictatorship.¹⁰ The blockade forced civilians to notice the anomalous, bristling, and parasitic presence of the twin army camps on a well-travelled civilian highway — and then made citizens feel it was their choice that the military installation be there. For Cardinal Sin and the reformers exploited the "endearingly Filipino"¹¹ hospitality code by asking the people to bring food to the besieged soldiers. The E.D.S.A. revolutionists could not refuse: a cultural obligation was transformed into a sign of political alliance.

While Minister Enrile and Lieutenant General Ramos acted as if by defecting from Marcos they were placing themselves in the hands of the Filipino citizenry, the mass of civilians who surrounded Camps Aguinaldo and Crame in a protective human barricade, Enrile immediately notified the U.S. Embassy of his plans.¹² The former colonial power was the authority Enrile and Ramos consulted behind the curtain before they, rebels, as they were

⁵Beltran 1986, 41.

⁶Gamalinda & Parcel 1986, 12. Characterization of the reporters my own.

⁷Enrile transferred to Camp Crame across the street from his own headquarters not only because it was strategically easier to defend Crame but because he wanted to go to the side of Ramos, an officer of upstanding reputation, and to walk through the crowd like Moses through the sea. For photograph of Enrile's transfer protected by the crowd see Mercado (1986, 154).

⁸Caption of photo in Mercado (1986, 190).

⁹See Penaranda (1986, 14).

¹⁰Ruiz 1986.

¹¹Constantino 1986, 127.

¹²*Ibid.*, 134.

called by the U.S. media, stepped out to face the crowd which was cheering for people power.

Following Barthes (1957), Enrile, Ramos, and company can be seen as a first-level signifier, their defection, the first-level signified. Thus they are the sign of revolt which, when supported and articulated by Cardinal Sin and Cory Aquino, iconic signifiers for patriarchal authority, Church, liberal democracy, and Mother Mary, signifies the myth of revolution and people power: the transcendent voice of the nation. That's what the crowd was cheering for.

Rather than revolting against state power, the two military men were reestablishing their official legitimacy as the Marcos regime faltered. Enrile, Ramos, and the troops calling themselves reformist pinned small Philippine flags upside down to their uniforms' shoulders, with the red side up as flown when the country is at war. That is, the Enrile faction claimed to be the legitimate army of the state, baptised New Armed Forces of the Philippines by the crowd which welcomed frightened soldiers with the illocutionary speech act: "Mabuhay ang mga bagong sundalo

ng Pilipinas" (Long live the new soldiers of the Philippines).¹⁴ These signs of people power, invested with U.S. imperialist power, state, and army power, rendered Marcos, elected to the Presidency twenty-one years earlier and only recently reconfirmed by election, the impostor in power.

Marcos' elaborate electoral charade was not enough to signify his Presidency's legitimacy because the vote is not as emotive a signifier in Philippine civic culture as the soldier.¹⁵ Alternatively, the snap elections lacked legitimacy because Marcos' most important backer, the U.S. government, in particular the State Department, discredited them. Note the collapse of the diachronic dimension, history, into the present system¹⁶ as the U.S. government, originator of Philippine presidential elections and of the Philippine Constabulary earlier in this century, again manipulates Philippine politics, this time with modern delicacy, mediated by signs.

During the Snap Revolt, Marcos used the government-controlled media to project his claims to stability and strength. Marcos appeared on T.V. with his generals and acted out an obviously rehearsed dialogue in which he

¹³ See photos in Mercado (1986, 112-13 & 147).

¹⁴ Gamalinda & Parel 1986, 7.

¹⁵ Opposing sides in political festivals struggle within a common code, here good citizenship (Jameson 1981, 84). In the Manila Times 25 February (p. 9) the National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections ran a full page advertisement pointing out the fraud in the election in legalistic prose, trying to beat the official Commission on Elections at its own game.

¹⁶ History without events, only repeated signs. Cf. Mehlman (1977, 13).

resisted Chief of Staff Fabian C. Ver's suggestion to disperse the crowd with heavy artillery. The clumsiness of their conversation showed that it was a threat — a message intended for the referent, for the crowd at E.D.S.A., not for the addressees

Most media continued reporting business as usual. Even the oppositionist *Malaya* carried an advertisement for a raffle of kitchen appliances on the front page 26 February above the headline "Marcos Flees." Like commercial products, information is commodified and subject to control.

Only Radio Veritas, whose institutional power base, the Catholic Church, allowed it to report its own version of truth, broadcast reports of the rebellion to the rest of the country. Still, the radio station had to transmit its signals from a secret location to avoid Marcos' troops who sought to smash their equipment.¹⁷ As with God, the voice of Veritas was heard everywhere (omnipresence) but the source itself seen nowhere (absence).

The radio announcer fulfilled the role originally played by the Hispanic town crier in an oral-oriented culture, linking organizers with organized, disorganized, and unorganized.¹⁸ Noting that the confused crowd at E.D.S.A. needed direction, the always shrewd Enrile

told the Catholic broadcasting director, "Radio is what we need! The people in the streets — they don't know what to do! All their direction comes from radio!"¹⁹ The revolutionists deliberately used culturally defined or full signs, here the town crier, for political ends.

After Radio Veritas mistakenly announced that Marcos had fled the country, the President and his family appeared on government owned Channel 4 T.V. to prove they were still there 24 February — only to be vaporized into the airwaves as rebel troops took over the station. The next day, Marcos' inauguration ceremony was wiped off Channel 9 as that too was taken.²⁰ When the major television stations aired stories from E.D.S.A., people held television sets in front of the soldiers to show them the size of the crowd and the extent of the revolution. That is, some participants could not see what was happening beyond the gates of the army camp. What mattered was the media package.

News during the Revolution was made by the media itself, no longer directly reporting on events, which were often obscure or secret. On 25 February the *Manila Times* stated that Channel 4 T.V. had reported that the parliament had nullified Marcos' election, and the next day that U.S. Air Force television and

¹⁷Reuter 1986, 23.

¹⁸Beltran 1986, 42.

¹⁹Reuter 1986, 23. Italics original.

²⁰Constantino 1986, 127-28.

Voice of America radio had reported that Marcos had fled. At Cory Aquino's inauguration, the P.A. system was so weak that the audience in the Sampaguita Room itself listened to A.M. radios to hear the oath-taking.²¹ Although the event was taking place before their eyes, people had to hear it from the press to know it was true.

In relying on television to reproduce his image on every screen in the country, Marcos subjected himself to the control of technology, to the speech of the camera and film maker. No longer the speaking subject, the President no longer decreed the presence or absence of the President. The viewers, themselves cinematic creations or spoken subjects, saw only the screen — fight for control of the station took place out of the scope of the camera.

The media during the Revolution united the opposites of traditional culture, the collective ritualistic effervescence of the festival at E.D.S.A., and electronic technology, an objectifying medium. These two signifiers characterize Philippine life, and more generally signify the neocolonial mode of production with its manifold contradictions (Debord, 1967). How appropriate that Marcos, a petty despot who prostituted his country to the imperial interests of the likes of the World Bank and its transnational allies, should fall prey to the

modern "free" press, another Third World dictator well spent.

Throughout its existence Marcos' dictatorship had depended on control of the media: "Martial Law was declared against mass media."²² Marcos himself appeared in and faded out of absolute power as he appeared on and faded off the television screen. In submitting to the power of the electronic image, Marcos created a distinct opposition between the official and the authentic.

Consider two historic events which were not reported by the media: the 1978 noise barrage in support of the Ninoy Aquino parliamentary candidacy and the 1983 murder and funeral of Ninoy Aquino.²³ The reported event is official imagery, false, while the non-reported is authentic, with mass participation. Compare the non-appearance (absence) of Cardinal Sin from E.D.S.A. during the Revolt of which he was a principal (moral principle, prince of the Church) initiator. The unadvertised 1978 appearance on T.V. of Ninoy Aquino from his jail cell, defending himself against what virtually all established Filipino statesmen recognized as trumped up murder charges, mediates between the reported falsehoods and the authentic non-reported.

Absence again indicated presence during most of the Snap Revolt

²¹Mercado 1986, 235.

²²Reuter 1986, 21.

²³Ibid.

while the inspiring force, Cory Aquino, was in hiding in a nunnery. Cory Aquino, until the 1983 assassination a mere metonymic extension of her husband Ninoy, was transformed into a grieving widow, a metaphor for the suffering woman who personifies the nation *Pilipinas* in the patriotic tradition, and a living metaphor for Saint Mary. Support for Cory at E.I. S.A. was made more poignant by her absence, as the woman herself sought refuge after retrieving her youngest daughter from a downtown shopping excursion, in the Carmelite Convent outside of the city of Cebu, while the rest of her campaign party found equally appropriate sanctuary in the American consulate in the southern province.²⁴

The crowd at E.D.S.A. brought together the themes of patriotism, democracy, and the ever-present U.S.A. through the songs they shared: "Ang Bayan Ko" (My Country), a revolutionary song from the turn of the century and an unofficial national(ist) anthem, and "Mambo Magsaysay," a campaign jingle for C.I.A.-backed 1953 anti-insurgency presidential candidate Ramon Magsaysay. At the height of a tear gas attack on the crowd, Radio Veritas played the National Anthem.²⁵ Finally, at Cory Aquino's inauguration, a brass band played "Tie a Yellow Ribbon 'Round the Old Oak Tree," an

American song for a Filipino homecoming. Common cultural background united the revolutionists in singing songs whose significance transcended their own lyrics to encompass the heterogeneous tendencies of the mythic People Power Revolution.

The events leading to the triumph of people power in Manila during four days in February, from the 22d to the 25th, were carried out symbolically, stopping short of military violence. People stopped tanks by holding their rosaries in front of them, and oncoming soldiers were halted as statues of saints were placed in their way.²⁶ Stereotypically superstitious Filipinos say that the crucifix formed by the crowd at an intersection on E.D.S.A., named for a nineteenth century patriot who in turn was named "Epiphany of the Saints," warded the attacking Air Force away. Constant recitation of "Hail Mary" calmed the frightened mass, invoking the ritual practice most present had been taught to worship since childhood. Impassioned faith in the Church and its amulets, full icons and symbols, overpowered steely-armed might.

Wielding the substantial weight of the Roman Church in a country eighty-five percent Catholic, Cardinal Sin, personal confessor to the Marcos couple and close adviser to the devout Cory Aquino, made the

²⁴Quijano 1986, 84.

²⁵Mercado 1986, 211.

²⁶Photos in *ibid.*, 265 & 182.

best of it. As soon as Enrile informed him of the defection, Cardinal Sin instructed three contemplative orders of nuns to fast and pray with outstretched arms before the Blessed Sacrament: "I said I will tell them why later."²⁷

Soon Our Lady of the Rosary appeared at the helm of the Revolution, as people brought out statues and images of La Naval de Manila, who protected the Spanish Philippines from Dutch invaders in 1646.²⁸ When protesters were repelled from Malacanang Palace by a volley of hurled stones, it was nuns bearing an image of Our Lady of Fatima who led the crowd in, like a religious festival procession.²⁹ People fell in line not behind armed revolutionary ideologues, but behind historically significant religious icons. Here are more. People cut barbed wire from martial law roadblocks and fashioned them into crowns symbolic of Lent.³⁰ White robes of the clergy, especially nuns and seminarians (women and children or rank-and-file in the patriarchal church), became the uniforms of the "NAMFREL (National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections) marines."³¹

A photojournalist has framed a sign in the *Sunday Times Extra* of 23 February in a picture which

resolves the army versus church opposition in what might be called the altar of the jeep: an image of Our Lady of Fatima stands on a jeep's hood, while three candles on the ground in front of the vehicle are lighted.

Secular symbols also figured. Yellow, Cory Aquino's campaign color, signified support of the rebels and invoked the memory of Bengino Aquino, who, instead of being welcomed with yellow ribbons as planned, was shot dead at his homecoming on the airport tarmac. Yellow also took significance from what it was not. It was not red, white and blue of Marcos' K.B.L. (New Society Movement) party, and not red of BAYAN (New Nationalist Alliance). An "L" formed by thumb and forefinger meant LABAN (fight), the name of the late Senator's party.

While the late Aquino was an *Ilustrado* (member of the old Philippine elite) and a statesman by birthright, Marcos and his wife Imelda Romualdez Marcos were of more humble origins. Madame Marcos was the illegitimate child of an *ilustrado* father, trying to transfer the aristocratic identity to herself. The Marcoses legitimated their pretensions to royalty with lavish displays of wealth, which an

²⁷Ibid., 105.

²⁸Ibid., 151.

²⁹Gamalinda & Parel 1986, 14-15. Photo of Our Lady in Malacanang in Mercado (1986, 286-87).

³⁰Photo in Beltran (1986, 46).

³¹Mercado 1986, 88.

angry and curious mob would defile soon after their flight from Malacanang Palace.

Marcos' gravest mistake was to authorize the 1983 assassination of Aquino and thus violate the honor code of not killing one's "brother" in the elite, showing that Marcos in fact was not of the blue blood he claimed.

Like his first cousin the President, General Fabian C. Ver started at a low rank in life. On the other hand, Lieutenant General Ramos, a West Point graduate, was the quint-essential professional soldier. The Marcos Cabinet was all show. Only Minister Enrile, the bastard son of a prominent father like Minister of Human Settlements Imelda Marcos, was wily enough to dissociate himself from the regime which he had originally engineered. (Of course, Enrile legitimated himself with a

Harvard degree.)

Despite the individual differences in the above cast of characters, all are members of the Philippine ruling class. They are distinct only in relation to each other. For example, as shown by his recent resignation, Enrile was on Cory's side only in opposition to Marcos. Through the February Revolution, a spectacle in the sense of Debord (1967), the different sectors of the ruling class, liberal democratic and military authoritarian, were made to seem separate (56). The upper class had a festival as legitimacy of state power was passed from one sector of the elite to another. At the same time, the unreal unity of the spectacle naturalized the contradictions of the capitalist world-system, while the crowd at E.D.S.A. obeyed traditional signs of authority which directed them to revolt.

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