

# SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

<http://englishkyoto-seas.org/>

## <Book Review>

Mark R. Thompson

**Lisandro E. Claudio. *Taming People's Power: The EDSA Revolutions and Their Contradictions*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 2013, 240p.**

*Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 3, December 2015, pp. 611-613.

**How to Cite:** Thompson, Mark R. Review of *Taming People's Power: The EDSA Revolutions and Their Contradictions* by Lisandro E. Claudio. *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 3, December 2015, pp. 611-613.

**Link to this article:** <http://englishkyoto-seas.org/2016/01/vol-4-no-3-book-reviews-mark-r-thompson/>

**View the table of contents for this issue:**

<http://englishkyoto-seas.org/2015/12/vol-4-no-3-of-southeast-asian-studies-2/>

**Subscriptions:** <http://englishkyoto-seas.org/mailling-list/>

**For permissions, please send an e-mail to:** [english-editorial@cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp](mailto:english-editorial@cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp)



Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University

correct, and was to prove the undoing of the Yingluck government. Nick Nostitz's chapter on the redshirt movement provides a useful summary of his views, though there are few surprises for those who follow his regular online commentary pieces on these issues. Andrew Walker's article "Is Peasant Politics in Thailand Civil?" answers its own question in his second sentence: "No." He goes on to provide a helpful sketch of the arguments he has made at greater length in his important 2012 book *Thailand's Political Peasants*.

The book concludes with two chapters ostensibly focused on crises of legitimacy. In his discussion of the bloody Southern border conflict, Marc Askew fails to engage with the arguments of those who see the decade-long violence as a legitimacy crisis for the Thai state, and omits to state his own position on this central debate. He rightly concludes that "the South is still an insecure place" (p. 246), but neglects to explain exactly why. Pavin Chachavalongpong offers a final chapter on Thai-Cambodia relations, but does not add a great deal to his brilliant earlier essay on Preah Vihear as "Temple of Doom," which remains the seminal account of that tragi-comic inter-state conflict.

I would have liked more gender balance among the contributors: there are a number of female scholars who could and should have been included. Overall, this is an extremely valuable book which will be widely read and assigned to students.

Duncan McCargo

*School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds*

### ***Taming People's Power: The EDSA Revolutions and Their Contradictions***

LISANDRO E. CLAUDIO

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2013, 240p.

People power is the foundationalist myth of the ruling Aquino regime which began with the presidency of Corazon ("Cory") C. Aquino who replaced the fallen dictator Ferdinand E. Marcos in 1986 and which continues under the presidency of her son, Benigno ("Noynoy") S. Aquino, III, which will end in mid-2016. The Aquinos and their "yellow" crowd elite supporters claim legitimacy based on a divinely sanctioned popular uprising against an evil dictator re-establishing a righteous democracy. "People power" also gained international prominence as one of the first televised revolutions, with the plucky Cory Aquino defeating the wily dictator Marcos, leading to a heroic transition to democracy. That this piece of political folklore has lost appeal for most Filipinos who remain poor and are now often disillusioned with this once new political order is evidenced by the dwindling crowds at the annual official celebration of people power. The people themselves seem to have abandoned the idea of "people power."

No recent book captures the ambiguous legacy of people power better than the work of the young Ateneo historian Lisandro E. Claudio. What Claudio has done in this book is quite extraordinary. He systematically distinguishes two “discursive formations,” the official, “yellow” narrative and the anti-people power “National Democratic” discourse of the communist left (later in the study it becomes evident that he analyzes a third discursive alternative as well: the subaltern perspective of laborers on the Aquino-Cojuangco owned Hacienda Luisita). Claudio then examines how these discourses are literally “monumentalized” and the message this political architecture is trying to convey. These “material commemorations” of the anti-Marcos struggle culminating in the mass uprising against Marcos that he examines are, on the one hand, the quasi-official shrine of the Shrine of Mary Queen of Peace, popularly known as the “Our Lady EDSA shrine” and the Bantayog ng mga Bayani (Monument of Heroes) of the left.

Beyond this Claudio then undertakes an ambitious and revealing case study of how “people power” is viewed in Hacienda Luisita, the great plantation of the landlord-politician Aquino-Cojuangco dynasty. But he also shows how the role of the communist left is viewed ambivalently by the sugar plantation workers, many of whom were caught up in violence initiated by the strike breaking landlords but also instrumentalized by the left.

The book is well written in a sophisticated, but intelligible “post-modern” style, with key theoretical insights effectively used to clarify Claudio’s discursive approach to recent Philippine history. The result is a study full of more insights about recent Philippine politics than any other I have read in past decade. Claudio constructs a theoretical framework for the book drawn from “memory studies” to reconstruct the “people power narrative.” He invokes Foucault’s “regime of truth,” a “provisional . . . product of the capillary movement of knowledge-power—but may nevertheless coalesce into identifiable discursive formations” (pp. 5–6). Not a mere top-down ideology like the authoritarian developmentalist one of the Marcos era, the mainstream people power discourse was created by the Church hierarchy, middle class activists, big business, and traditional politicians. But Claudio is not content with just analyzing the “official story” which deemphasizes the role played by ordinary Filipinos who overthrew Marcos in favor of the God-given-miracle explanation of EDSA (the major Manila street after which “people power” is often known in the Philippines). Rather, he employs a “multivocal” approach to this narrative, focusing in particular on the relationship with class interests and the way the popular uprising against the Marcos regime is narrated. Not a static approach, Claudio shows the people power narrative evolved from a symbol of national unity seen to have overcome class differences to a divisive elitist discourse that justified the elite-led overthrow of the populist president Joseph Estrada in 2001 in what was dubbed “EDSA dos” or “people power II.” Estrada was an elected president loved by poor voters who rallied to his cause after his overthrow by what was essentially an elitist *putsch*. This led to a third people power event that nearly overthrew the government of president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo who had replaced the deposed Estrada.

It is not surprising that Claudio concludes competing narratives of people power are shaped by class interests. The ruling Aquino regime and the strategic groups that generally back it—big business, the Church, “civil society” activists, and the military hierarchy—have turned the popular uprising against Marcos into a “ruling state ideology,” as Claudio shows. By contrast, the exploited plantation workers in Hacienda Luisita have challenged this elite narrative with a counter-hegemonic discourse which usually goes unnoticed both because it is localized and from the lower classes. Claudio, who very frankly explores his own biographical ties to the left, shows how difficult it is to classify the leftist discourse in class terms. While clearly aimed at achieving social liberation, it is also a discourse which obscures the poor as actors independent of a communist party that always claims to know what is in their best interest, revealing the left’s own hegemonic ambitions. This emphasis on class position makes Claudio’s contribution to memory studies generally and our understanding of the people power narrative in the Philippines in particular unusually valuable.

When one considers the major contributions to post-Marcos understandings of Philippine politics, the predominance of interpretations which stress what Benedict Anderson famously called “cacique democracy” is striking. On the first reading, Claudio’s study appears to be part of this genre (and he does defend Anderson’s categorization against elite Philippine critics who mythologize people power as a symbol of national unity). But Claudio’s position goes beyond this anti-oligarchical perspective by pointing to the evolving nature of an elite discourse that sometimes very effectively “covers up” class interests, capable of winning widespread popular support for its project of democratic and anti-corruption reforms. This was of course evident in not only Cory Aquino’s defeat of Marcos, but also in her son, Noynoy Aquino’s easy victory in the 2010 presidential election in which he effectively revived the people power narrative. Claudio shows why sub-altern perspectives such as those of the workers of Hacienda Luisita are so easily ignored. But he also points to the limits of a left discourse which has its own agenda. (One limitation of the study is the relative neglect of a fourth discourse—the “national populist” appeals made by movie star politicians Estrada in the 1998 and his close Fernando Poe, Jr. in the 2004 election.) Philippine politics is more complex than the “elites versus the masses” dichotomy of the left and the “national unity” narrative of the rightist pro-Aquino forces, with a discursive “truth” to be sought somewhere in between. There is no recent better guide to these ambiguities than this excellent study.

Mark R. Thompson

*Southeast Asia Research Centre (SEARC), City University of Hong Kong*