



STREET, STAGE, SHRINE AND SQUARE: PROTEST SITES AS CONTESTED TERRAIN

BY TERISITA CRUZ-DEL ROSARIO

February 1986 at EDSA: the Epifanio de los Santos Avenue --- an urban highway of six lanes worming its way through six municipalities of Metro Manila, unconvincingly organises the flow of traffic in both directions. A most curious venue to stage an uprising. Yet, twenty five years ago, EDSA set the stage for a people power uprising that toppled the two-decade Marcos dictatorship. No longer neutral, empty territory, EDSA became a charged space, what William Sewell terms “a matrix of power.”

In Argentina, the 70s and 80s was a period of ‘murderous dictatorship’ of the military regime. Public spaces were invisible, the citizenry cowed into privacy and silence. Until fourteen mothers donned white scarves and invaded the *Plaza de Mayo* with their demands to know about the disappearances (*desparecidos*) of their loved ones. Soon thereafter, the square resurrected as *Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*, reconfigured as a protest space, openly demonstrating against a repressive regime.

More recently, in the center of Cairo stands Tahrir Square, a rotunda that witnessed the gathering of Egypt’s disaffected. Wired youths brandished cell-phones in one hand and stones in the other and they spoke to the teeth of power using Facebook. Eighteen days later, curtains came down on Mubarak’s regime.

Protesters world over, wherever they may be found, transform physical spaces and convert them into a kind of political pilgrimage site. There, they undertake a quest for personal and social redemption to find their courage and recover their lives from the grip of fear and prolonged repression.

They trek in large numbers to protect one another, to share a moment when new social meanings are being fashioned out of collective action. They convert these spaces into repositories of collective sentiments, drawing on one other to weave a grand narrative of history-making and nation-building. They are, of a sudden, human agents of history and society.

Public spaces provide opportunities for re-fashioning what political scientist Dag Angkar terms as ‘political architecture.’ Rather than inherently constraining, these places present a crucial resource to apply spatial agency. In these sequestered sites, physical and metaphorical notions of space coalesce, so that what was once a mix of street, floor, and cemented highway meld into symbol, sentiment, and statement. Here is where the silence is broken.

However, protest space is also highly contested terrain. They are sites of social conflict and clashes over symbolic codes. They represent competing claims to legitimacy and control over power, battles over alternative visions of the future, struggles to redraw the boundaries of community and society. Blood spills, taints the pavements and carries the dead.

Remember Bangkok a year ago? In its fashionable Rajdamri district, where street vendors intersect with smart shoppers, the Red Shirts camped out as an affront to the urbanised enclaves of the upper- and middle-class Yellow Shirts. Right there, Major General Khattiya who went rogue for the Red Shirts was shot in the head while speaking to several journalists.

Watch Libya unravel. Benghazi as contested territory has emerged not only as the most visible arena of Libyan resistance, but also as the most potent symbol of the irreversible course of change in Middle East politics. Watch Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria too.

Parallelisms among all these countries are inevitable. Street action among everyday people interacts with formal institutions --- the courts, the political parties, the media, the military, the Mosque, the Church. Where formal and informal processes intersect, political dynamics change. Within days, political careers will ebb and wane, new ones will be forged, and the world will yet again bear witness to another upheaval in human experience.

Above all, what these geographies of struggle provide is the very best application of human agency, of fearless improvisation and a resurgence of creativity, often times without structure and direction, somewhat like collective street-jazz. Yet hope abides in this massive energy that refuses to be silenced. An *illiud tempus* according to theatrical critic David Cole, a time to re-imagine an alternative universe of relationships and thus a place where there is no thought of surrender or defeat.

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