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JOSE RIZAL

Liberalism and the
Paradox of Coloniality

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Liberalism and the Paradox of Coloniality

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For Christine

PROLOGUE

Contemporary liberalism is synonymous with moderation. It is a philosophy of mainstream governance and compromise, often challenged by more radical beliefs from populists, socialists, neo-fascists—agitators from all sides of the political spectrum. But this same philosophy was the key radical idea of the nineteenth century, a century birthed in revolution—a time when memories of the French and American revolutions served as calls to liberty across continents and oceans.

To conjure the revolutionary *élan* of the period, we may visit the cradles of these calls to liberty, places like the United States and France. But doing so would not only be a tired project but also fail to grasp the extent of liberalism's appeal. Liberalism spread much farther than Eurocentric versions of its history assume, and the goal of this work is to find liberalism in an unlikely place. Recent work has traced the movement of liberal thought to various places in the Caribbean (Polasky 2015). But how about Asia?

The polymath intellectual Jose Rizal was a novelist, poet, physician, naturalist, essayist, artist, linguist, and historian. His writings inspired the anti-Spanish Philippine Revolution of 1896—the first anti-colonial revolution in Asia. For his nationalism, he is revered as his country's national hero, appearing on the country's money, its monuments, its street signs, its schools. The law requires all Filipino students to read his novels. And debates about the minutiae of his life make nationalist historians apoplectic. Whether or not he retracted his anti-Catholic writings before death, whether or not he supported the revolution—these questions remain central to how historians and citizens of the Philippines view their nation.

Some scholars—the historian of nationalism Benedict Anderson to name the most prominent—have championed Rizal’s relevance to global political thought, and the recent publication of Rizal’s novels as part of the Penguin Classics series has broadened his English-speaking audience. Slowly, Rizal is being ensconced in the world republic of letters.

Within the “Malay” world of Indonesia and Malaysia, Rizal commands a modest following for being a “pride of the Malayan race” (he was a Chinese mestizo).¹ Such a reading of Rizal has expanded his relevance outside the Philippines, but can remain tied to racialist conceptions of politics that, at least in Malaysia, dovetail with Malay state formation.² In any case, Filipinos themselves rarely think in terms of racial categories like Malay, even though Rizal was, at times, prone to racialist, even racist, conceptions of nationalism.

Despite the growth of Rizal scholarship, his influence has by and large been limited to his country, especially in the area of political philosophy. This limited influence is hardly surprising for someone who, by the 1890s, had decided to jettison European readers, seeking to speak directly to his *patria*. Audience mattered to Rizal. His novels—so specific in their setting, lexicon, humor, and political concerns—must be read as Filipino texts. They remain vivid introductions to life in late nineteenth-century Philippines, with Rizal serving as a satirical tour guide of a new nation teeming with revolutionary energy. Through his books, one learns about the hypocrisy of the friar orders, the fecklessness of reforms, and the resentment of a people ready to revolt. These novels also conjure the Philippines as definite place—with its distinct cultural practices, cuisine, patois—albeit centered on Manila and the Tagalog-speaking provinces. How do we draw universal lessons from a man focused on local issues?

Rizal had specific concerns, and his commentary was drawn from a unique milieu: the earliest pro-independence nationalist movement in Asia that was also the last pro-independence nationalist movement within the Spanish empire. It is tempting to view Rizal and his country as exceptional: neither Asian nor Latin American. And nationalist Filipinos may even

¹ Malaysia’s Anwar Ibrahim, both as a member of the administration UMNO Party and as an opposition leader, has spoken fondly of Rizal as a Malay leader.

² This racialist thinking is partly reflected in the thought of Indonesian nationalist Tan Malaka who saw Rizal as part of a “Greater Indonesia” torn asunder by colonialism (Guillermo 2017). But Tan Malaka’s vision of Rizal, unlike those of the Malay nationalists in Malaysia, places more emphasis on anti-colonial solidarity.

entertain some form of pride in the unique nature of the life and times of their national hero. Yet specific need not mean parochial. Rizal was an Enlightenment figure, and while he commented almost exclusively on the events in his country, his ideas drew from a wellspring of transnational political thought.

Rizal's ideas were anchored on the traditions of Republican Spain, the place where the current usage of the term "liberalism" was born. The Spain of the nineteenth century was a center for liberal internationalism, where secret organizations, Masonic lodges, and various conspiracies theorized what were then subversive ideas about Enlightenment. Spanish liberals were inspired by the French Revolution, but they also developed their own liberal heritage.

Rizal's writings, primarily his novels, drew from the world of French Enlightenment: from Voltaire, Dumas, and Hugo.³ And his conception of rights was anchored on the major declarations of the time, from the French Declaration of the Rights of Man (a document he translated from French into Tagalog), the American Declaration of independence, to Spain's liberal Cadiz Constitution. But he was no mere copycat. Despite acknowledging the derivative quality in some of his writings, Rizal was confident that his context gave him a unique voice. Rizal knew that his works would not share the aplomb of authors like Hugo, and he felt a nagging sense that his work lacked the artistic merit of those penned by European masters. His insecurities notwithstanding, he knew that his books were special because they rehearsed the themes of liberty and freedom in a colonial context.

My goal in these pages is to view liberalism obliquely, from a vista rarely explored. What would liberalism look like when seen through the eyes of liberals in the colony? Rizal is one of colonial/postcolonial liberalism's earliest and most prescient thinkers. He may also well be Asia's pioneering liberal. Prior to Sun Yat-Sen or Nehru, Rizal was already thinking about what freedom, liberty, and rights meant in colonial contexts. In Southeast Asia, Rizal would not have an equivalent until the 1930s. Perhaps his closest analogue is the Vietnamese novelist and journalist Vũ Trọng Phụng, who melded the liberal and republican ideals of the French third republic with anti-colonialism (Zinoman 2014). Like Rizal, Vũ Trọng Phụng has

³Rizal was likewise inspired by European (particularly German) ethnology, anthropology, historiography, and linguistics. His ideas on these matters have been discussed in other work (see Thomas 2012; Ocampo 2013, 75–117; Mojares 2013, 126–137; Aguilar 2005).

been belatedly recognized as an exemplary realist novelist, whose use of satire exposed the contradictions of colonial rule.

The tragedy is that many authors and readers neglect Rizal's liberalism, perhaps because postcolonial thinkers find it difficult to view liberalism alongside anti-colonialism. Postcolonial theory, as Vivek Chibber (2014, 618) has argued, exhibits a "boilerplate skepticism" against any forms of "Western" Enlightenment. Hence many recent works have identified the liberal cause with that of imperialism. In the Philippines, which has its own historiographical tradition that trades on the demonization of anything "Western,"⁴ Rizal is barely discussed as a liberal. For how could the national hero of an Asian country be an advocate of an idea as foreign as liberalism?

Although some writers from the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines write of Rizal as liberal, they do so to point out his incomplete political development—his lack of a systematic class-based vision. For Communist Party of the Philippines founder, Jose Maria Sison (1966), for example, "the anticolonial and anticlerical writings of Rizal" stemmed from a "now outmoded liberal cast," despite its influence during his time.

We cannot deny the provenance of liberalism; it was born in Europe in an era of pan-Atlanticism. And the earliest liberal revolutions occurred in places like England, the United States, and France—polities that officially remain committed to liberal democratic governance. And we also cannot deny that many imperial crusades, aimed at spreading "civilization," drew from liberal ideas about linear progress. Yet because liberalism is a philosophy of openness and toleration, it is also the philosophy with the most myriad vectors: a philosophy of openness is likewise open to interpretation. The liberalism of Spain, and certainly that of France or America, would have been different from the liberalism of the Philippines. Rizal was aware of these differences, even as he acknowledged the common Enlightenment heritage of all liberalisms.

How was liberalism interpreted in colonial contexts? The answer is not obvious since liberal philosophy resonates with people advocating different causes. There were, indeed, Western, liberal colonizers who saw no contradiction between their liberal beliefs and imperialism (Mehta 1999). In fact, some of them believed that liberal rights could only be spread to non-Western societies through colonialism. On the other hand, there were liberals who saw colonialism as a contradiction of liberal values.

⁴ See Claudio 2017, 13–17, for a discussion of this movement, which I call the "Diliman Consensus." For an earlier take on the same phenomenon, see Claudio 2013.

I hope to show that the more ethical liberalism was articulated not by those who advocated imperialism, but by those who rebelled against it, by people like Rizal and his cohort of nationalist intellectuals, the so-called Filipino “*ilustrados*” of the late nineteenth century. Through Rizal, I seek to expand my analysis of postcolonial liberalism (see Claudio 2017), and to argue for this liberalism’s relevance in contemporary postcolonies, or what scholars sometimes refer to as “the Global South.” If my earlier work traced the role of liberalism in state formation in the early twentieth-century Philippines, this work looks at liberalism’s contribution to Filipino national imagination in the nineteenth. Both works contend that liberals in the colony understand something about liberty that liberals in empire do not. The experience of colonial oppression affords them special insight into the nature of freedom and rights. In this book, I argue that liberty is more precarious in colonies, and colonial liberals know that freedoms and rights have to be earned through suffering and pain.

Like my previous work, I wish to define liberalism through intellectual biography as opposed to didactic conceptual mapping. Therefore, I will only define liberalism in the broadest terms. I agree with Alan Ryan (2012, 28) who notes that liberalism, in all its guises, has been “a perennial protest against absolute forms of absolute authority.” But unlike anarchism, liberals have sought to find order in freedom. Walter Russel Mead (2013) distills liberal thought as such: “Even though humanity is imperfect and flawed, that does not mean we cannot have constitutional, political, and social arrangements that, given the limits on man’s nature, can at least provide a society where the individual is as unconstrained as possible.”

In other words, there are institutional arrangements that promote individual rights and freedoms. And it is the task of the liberal to scrutinize and test these various arrangements. The institution of colonialism was, of course, a failure in this regard. In the twentieth century, George Orwell would even view it as a form of totalitarianism, akin to the dictatorships of the Nazis and the Soviet Communists. Yet we need not rely on European thinkers for anti-authoritarian/totalitarian attacks on colonialism.

Rizal is the ideal thinker for our purposes, not only because of his prominence, but because he theorized liberty more than any of his contemporaries. Liberalism was the overarching lens through which Rizal viewed politics. And, as we shall see, it was Rizal’s liberalism that led him to his pro-independence position. If he was a subversive in nineteenth-century Philippines, it was because he was a staunch liberal in a reactionary colony.