

Book Review

Was Rizal a Liberal Until the End?

Jose Rizal: Liberalism and the Paradox of Coloniality, by Lisandro E. Claudio. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. Pp. 89. ISBN 9783030013158.

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Jose Rizal: Liberalism and the Paradox of Coloniality aims not only to introduce Rizal to the “broadest audience possible” but also to provoke readers into thinking “about the horizons and limits of liberalism and its role in colonial/postcolonial contexts” (p. xiii). The author, Lisandro Claudio, does this by viewing liberalism “obliquely” through the eyes of “one of colonial/postcolonial liberalism’s earliest and most prescient thinkers” (p. ix). Rizal, as Claudio argues, “is the ideal thinker for our purposes, not only because of his prominence, but because he theorized liberty more than any of his contemporaries” (p. xi).

Chapter 1 situates Rizal in the context not only of the economic expansion and political awakening of the late nineteenth-century Philippines, but also of the emergence of Philippine liberalism through the creole intellectuals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries who were inspired by liberal movements in Europe. Chapter 2 explores his political writings and letters to sketch Rizal’s vision of liberty as “purified through pain and suffering of colonial peoples” (p. xiii). The author develops this argument through Chapters 3 and 4, which provide introductions to Rizal’s novels with his liberalism serving as a backdrop.

In Chapter 3, Claudio argues that *Noli Me Tangere*, through the character of Crisostomo Ibarra, expresses “Rizal’s contention that selfless patriotism and pain purifies the native liberal’s intent” (p. 53). Chapter 4 discusses how *El Filibusterismo* “is an intentionally ambiguous novel... that refuses to make recommendations about revolutionary violence, but rather poses Socratic questions about how a people

should earn their liberty” (p. 55). The book concludes by exploring the meaning of Rizal’s vision of liberalism for postcolonies and the Global South.

While Claudio admits that Rizal was a complex thinker who availed of multiple lenses, he chooses to focus on, or, better yet, to use his term, “prioritize” Rizal’s liberalism “for both empirical and political reasons” (p. xii). It is not difficult to appreciate the author’s commitment to liberal principles. Claudio writes, “[if] I seek to write into historiography a liberal Rizal, it is partly because a liberal Rizal is necessary at a time of illiberalism” (p. xii). Still, the question remains: How compelling is the evidence for claiming that “[liberalism] was the overarching lens through which Rizal viewed politics” (p. xi)?

The author’s “prioritizing” of Rizal’s liberalism entails the procrustean exercise of ignoring crucial evidence of his abandonment of liberal politics, especially evident in the Statute of La Liga Filipina (*Estatuto de La Liga Filipina*), which envisioned an authoritarian structure. The organization was so unliberal that Benedict Anderson (2005, 130) found it hard to believe that it was Rizal’s brainchild, suggesting instead that it was the handiwork of Andres Bonifacio.

Although unsure of its “ultimate intent” and without offering substantive analysis, Claudio nevertheless claims “it is likely that Rizal viewed the Liga as a new phase in the liberal-nationalist movement” (p. 17). Yet *La Liga* not only had an authoritarian structure where members “[obeyed] blindly and punctually all orders,” it also sought to dissolve individuals into the civic body. Members were to subordinate personal interests to the collective good, and in return can expect “[mutual] protection in every difficult situation and need” as well as “[defense] against every violence and injustice” (Rizal 1961a, 303).

Clearly, *La Liga* was not about individual rights and freedoms. A member entered into a relationship akin to that of Jean Jacques Rousseau’s eighteenth-century notion of the Social Contract where “[each] of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will, and, in our corporate capacity, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole” (Rousseau 1960, 445). Invoking the Social Contract clarifies the meaning of the organization’s authoritarian demand for obedience. According to Rousseau (1960, 447):

In order then that the social compact may not be an empty formula, it tacitly includes the undertaking, which alone can give force to the rest, that whoever refuses to obey the general

will shall be compelled to do so by the whole body. This means nothing less than that he will be forced to be free... this alone legitimizes civil undertakings, which, without it, would be absurd, tyrannical, and liable to the most frightful abuses.

The author focuses on the novels, curiously explaining that while much can be said about his other works, “Rizal will be remembered as a novelist... a first-class fictionist, and a second-rate historian, too prone to letting propagandistic goals distort historical fact” (p. xiii). How is this a sound basis for relying on the novels as primary sources of his political ideas? Like the *Statute of La Liga*, Rizal’s propagandistic writings were explicit articulations of his political ideas and thus should be central to any analysis.

Claudio briefly discusses one such piece of writing, “How the Philippines is Governed” (*Como se gobiernan las Filipinas*), claiming the 1890 essay to be “[the] most crucial text that defines Rizal’s thoughts on liberalism in the Philippines” (p. 27). He highlights how Rizal took Spanish liberals to task for compromising much of their principles and forgetting their role in the lamentable state of governance in the colony (p. 28). The author, however, neglects a key element in the essay: Rizal’s discussion of the lack of national sentiment among Filipinos.

The issue of national sentiment marked a decisive shift away from the Voltairean anticlericalism of the *Noli*. After confidently believing in Progress, proclaiming the inevitable moral advance of the Philippines and the awakening of the national spirit, Rizal (1961a, 285) now claimed in the essay “that every country has the government that it deserves.” Having become a staunch critic of the individualism and lack of cohesion among expatriates, Rizal’s poor opinion of his youthful colleagues morphed into a sweeping indictment of a “national spirit” in a state of infancy:

Concerning his country every Filipino thinks this way: Let her settle her affairs alone, save herself, protest, fight; I’m not going to lift a finger, I’m not the one to settle things; I’ve enough with my own affairs, my passions, and my whims... [Filipinos] believe that by lamenting, folding their arms, and letting things go on as they are, they have fulfilled their duty. (Rizal 1961a, 285)

This theme emerged more forcefully in *El Filibusterismo* as Rizal (1961b) called attention to the Filipinos’ lack of civic virtue, warning that independence will only result in autocratic rule with today’s slaves

becoming tomorrow's tyrants. Unlike in the *Noli*, the friars were no longer the real enemies and *frailocracia* the fundamental problem. For Rizal, Filipinos did not constitute a nation, now reimagined as a civic community. In the words of Padre Florentino:

Our misfortunes are our own fault... as long as the Filipino people do not have sufficient vigour to proclaim, head held high and chest bared, their right to a life of their own in human society, and to guarantee it with their sacrifice... as long as we see them wrapping themselves up in their selfishness and praising with forced smiles the most despicable acts, begging with their eyes for a share of the booty, why give them independence? ... What is the use of independence if the slaves of today will be the tyrant of tomorrow? (Rizal 1961b, 252)

This crucial difference escapes Claudio's attention. Instead, his determined pursuit of a liberal Rizal leads him to conclude that "[the] biggest difference between the *Noli* and the *Fili* is that the former represents a history of creole liberal reformist past, while the latter tests a possible revolution in the near horizon" (p. 59). He points to an indeterminacy in the *Fili* stemming from Rizal's ambivalence toward revolutionary violence (p. 64), following Leon Maria Guerrero's ([1961] 2007, 299) characterization of Rizal as a "reluctant revolutionary" who "hesitates and draws back." Yet, oddly enough, Guerrero seems to appreciate the clarity of Rizal's ethical position:

In Rizal's mind the Filipinos of his generation were not yet ready for revolution because they were not yet ready for independence, and they were not ready for independence because they were still unworthy of it. When the individual had learned to value social good above personal advantage, and when these individuals had become a nation, then "God would provide the weapon," whatever it might be, whether revolution or otherwise... (Guerrero [1961] 2007, 300).

The urgent task was to build a civic community. The campaign for liberal reforms had been a misguided exercise. Rizal appeared to have understood this, going through what Javier De Pedro (2005)

describes as “metanoia,” a kind of spiritual conversion, that helped seal his decision to come home. With his faith in Progress seriously undermined, he no longer saw the nation emerging naturally and inevitably from history. The nation had to be created. Writing to Marcelo del Pilar in 1889, Rizal (1961c, 408) said it is in the Philippines “where we ought to sow if we wish to harvest.” This was the meaning of Rizal’s *La Liga*, his solution to the problem of the absence of a civic community he took pains to describe in the *Fili*.

Claudio not only insists on a liberal reading of Rizal but also extends the role of liberalism in the historical emergence of Filipino identity. He argues that Rizal’s life and works “represented the flowering of liberalism among Filipino natives, showing that liberal principles could bind different racial groups through one goal” (p. 19). Liberal principles inaugurated Filipino nationalism since “[without] a common rhetoric centered on rights and freedom, creoles, indios, and mestizos would be unable to see themselves as a people” (p. 19). While he approvingly cites Anderson’s (1983) work on nationalism, Claudio seems oblivious to its account of the complex historical forces that brought about the imagined community.

John Schumacher (1991), also using Rizal as “our best-documented example,” is certainly more nuanced. For him, the ilustrado’s national identity was accentuated by their experiences in Europe, which nurtured their desire for liberal reforms, “[but] the sense of national identity and purpose was already present before any significant number of Filipino students had set foot in Europe” (p. 37). Evidence from Rizal’s early poetry proves this. His 1870 poem, “To the youth of the Philippines” (*A la juventud Filipina*), although dreaming of *hispanidad*, evinced a Filipino imagined community where it referred to the youth of the Philippines as *bella esperanza de la patria ma*—fair hope of my homeland (see Dumol and Camposano 2018, 27–28).

Claudio takes nationalist historians to task for relying on “pseudo-Marxist boxes of bourgeois and proletarian, revolutionary and counter-revolutionary” in their attempts to make sense of Rizal’s position on revolutionary violence (p. 67). But he does the same thing with his forced (liberal) reading of Rizal. He is thus unable to appreciate both the profound shift that occurred between the two novels, a shift prefigured in Rizal’s political essays, and the place of *La Liga* in the trajectory of his evolving political ideas and shifting politics.

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