

Review Essay

## Jose Rizal: The Radical Liberal<sup>1</sup>

*Jose Rizal: Liberalism and the Paradox of Coloniality*, by Lisandro E. Claudio. New York, NY: Springer, 2018. Pp. 89. ISBN 9783030013165.

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Jose Rizal's writings contain multiple references to liberalism, human rights, and individual freedom. And yet I do not think we have asked the question: What did liberalism mean to Rizal? My book, *Jose Rizal: Liberalism and the Paradox of Coloniality*, was my attempt to take Rizal's liberalism seriously, and this essay is a summary of that book.

The first thing I want to do is ask a conceptual question, which is: Can we conceive of Rizal both as a radical and a liberal? This is an important question; there are writers like Renato Constantino, who contend that Rizal was counterrevolutionary because he was a liberal. My contention is that this critique would not have made any sense in the 19th century. In that century, liberals were revolutionaries, and they would have been radical amid the clericalism and conservatism of many places in Europe, most especially Spain.

The second thing I want to do is trace the origins of Rizal's liberalism. In George Aseniero's lecture, he discussed the constellations of reaction present in Europe for much of the 19th century, in particular Metternich's Concert of Europe. Much of the liberalism that Rizal's generation came to imbibe was, if you like, a reaction to this reaction.

And third, I wish to outline some aspects of Rizal's liberalism. I will do this through a re-reading of the novel, *Noli me Tangere*.

Let us begin with the conceptual problem: How could Rizal be both a liberal and a radical at the same time? At this point, we need to emphasize that most of the historiography from the early 20th century accepted that Rizal was a liberal. For example, Rizal's foremost biographer, Leon Ma. Guerrero (2013), claimed that Rizal was a liberal first, and a nationalist second. By this, he meant that Rizal began his career demanding certain freedoms from Spain, such as freedom of the press and freedom of religion from the Spanish imperial authorities. He initially thought these liberal demands could be obtained from within the Spanish empire. But, upon realizing that these reforms were precluded by colonialism itself, Rizal started advocating for independence. Hence, his liberalism led him to the nationalist demand for independence.

As we know, Guerrero admired Rizal deeply, as did most of his contemporaries. But in the mid-20th century, certain polemical commentators began to challenge Rizal's legacy. Renato Constantino and, eventually, younger critics like Jose Maria Sison saw Rizal as an ineffectual bourgeois reformist, incapable of responding to the revolutionary demands of the times. Despite their differing assessments of Rizal's legacy, however, both the pro- and anti-Rizal commentators agreed that Rizal was a liberal. Constantino (2005), for example, does not dispute the fact that Rizal made liberal demands, only that "his idea of liberty was essentially the demand for those rights which the elite needed in order to prosper economically." Sison (1966) is more direct in contending that Rizal's writing stemmed from an "outmoded liberal cast."

Constantino's and Sison's views can be simplified as: Because Rizal was a liberal, he was not radical enough. Now, if we accept that a figure's radicalism is a valid criterion for measuring his heroism (a criterion that some will no doubt disagree with), then defending Rizal's legacy requires establishing his radical bona fides. This is, of course, what Floro Quibuyen (1997) has persuasively and eloquently done in his work that proves, among other things, that Rizal was sympathetic to an armed revolution against Spain. Therefore, Rizal was a radical, especially in the context of the times.

But here lies the conceptual and historiographical conundrum. For contemporary readers, it is difficult to reconcile radicalism and liberalism. In the 20th and 21st centuries, liberalism had (correctly)

been associated with the status quo, especially in the West, where “liberal democracy” once represented the so-called “end of history.” Even in the Philippines, our image of “liberal” is the once-powerful Aquino administration and the Liberal Party (liberalism qua dilawan). Moreover, liberals in positions of power have sought to balance and reconcile competing interests, instead of taking bold and categorical stances, making them seem weak, feckless, and ineffectual. Finally, the ascendance of Marxism in the 20th century—particularly after the Bolshevik Revolution—made previous revolutionary forms of politics seem tame by comparison. Hence the term “radical liberal” appears a contradiction in terms. So, for contemporary readers, accepting Quibuyen’s argument that Rizal was a radical makes it difficult to accept the earlier consensus that he was a liberal.

But this is not the way things would have seemed in the 19th century, especially in a colonial context. During that century, liberalism was insurgent and even revolutionary. Consider, for example, that the models for revolution at the time were mostly liberal ones: the American and French Revolutions—these revolutions inspired many radicals in the Atlantic world. Janet Polasky (2015), moreover, has shown that these revolutions informed the radicalism of revolutionaries in the Caribbean. Similarly, Richard J. Evans (2016, 17) says that the liberals of this period constituted “a radical international whose connections spanned the Atlantic.”

The reason for liberalism being radical was simple: the opponents of liberalism remained powerful in the 19th century. In Europe, reactionary institutions like the monarchial state and the theocratic Church remained hegemonic. These institutions were reinforced throughout the continent by the Metternich/Concert of Europe system that Dr. Aseniero has described. In Spain, in particular, the continent’s reactionary tendencies were embodied by the supporters of the conservative Carlos de Borbón, the so-called Carlists of the various Carlist wars. In 1889, Rizal (2011, 79) himself would bemoan the “reactionary Carlist friar” as a “mean egoist, tyrant, oppressor, enemy of all progress and lover of everything feudal, of everything absolute.”

If liberals were radical in the Spanish metropole, they were even more so in the colony, in *Filipinas*. In Europe, there was vibrant liberal opposition against the forces of reaction. In the colonies, however, friars and conservative monarchists were powerful and unopposed.

Hence, Rizal (2011, 289) contended in 1890 that “modern ideas” were “asphyxiated upon touching the shores of Manila.” Therefore, to be a liberal in the Philippines during the heyday of the frailocracy was a radical position. Indeed, it was such a radical position that the demand for liberal rights easily morphed into a demand for independence. It is for this reason that Vicente Rafael (2015) has correctly described the Philippine Revolution of 1896 as a liberal revolution similar to the French and American ones.

Having established that Rizal was, indeed, both a liberal and a radical, let us proceed to outline his liberalism. My preferred definition of liberalism has two elements. First, all liberals oppose excessive concentrations of power. What each liberal considers excessive varies from one to another, but all liberals agree that political power must have its limits. Second, liberals believe in essential freedoms or liberties. Unlike anarchists, however, they believe that these liberties can be protected, rather paradoxically, by ordering these liberties through the law and the state.

If you look at the history of liberalism in the Philippines, our liberals, more or less, have subscribed to these two tenets of liberalism. In the book, I trace the history of Philippine liberalism to the creole (person of European heritage, born in the colonies) politicians, Luis Rodriguez Varela, “El Conde Filipino,” who, from 1799 onward, published books in defense of liberalism and the values of the French Revolution. Varela was also a major defender of the liberal Cadiz Constitution, and sought for the implementation of many of its principles in the Philippines. Finally, he asked for Filipino representation in the *cortes* and the establishment of schools outside friar control—demands that would eventually be echoed by Rizal’s generation.

Many of Varela’s advocacies spread through networks of liberal creole families, mostly in Manila. Eventually, this protonationalist liberalism would coalesce into the *Comite de Reformadores* of 1869, the country’s first liberal party, which included such luminaries like Father Jose Burgos. The *Comite*’s youth wing in the University of Santo Tomas, *La Juventud Escolar Liberal*, included *ilustrados* such as Felipe Buencamino and Rizal’s older brother, Paciano Mercado (later Paciano Rizal).

The Comite and its youth wing were, of course, suppressed in the government repression that followed the Cavite Mutiny of 1872. Elements of its membership, however, reemerged through the Europe-based “propaganda movement” of the late 1800s. It is in this sense that Rizal was heir to a great liberal tradition in Filipinas.

This history allows us to place Rizal and the Philippine revolution within the history of creole revolution from the late 1800s to the 1900s, alongside nationalist/revolutionary creoles in the Americas like Alexander Hamilton and Simón Bolívar. Part of the reason why previous scholars have failed to appreciate Rizal’s radicalism has been because of their inadequate lens of comparison. Instead of the implicit and sometimes explicit measuring of Rizal against 20th-century Marxist thinkers like Mao Zedong or Ho Chi Minh, we should remember that Rizal was more comparable to the earlier nationalists of the Americas. Temporally, of course, Rizal straddles two generations of radical, nationalist revolutionaries: the creoles of the Americas from the 18th and 19th century and the Afro-Asian independence fighters of the 20th century. In terms of politics and temperament, however, Rizal was closer to the former.

In the book, I look at Rizal’s liberalism as manifested in various texts, from his political writings to his two novels. For the purposes of this summary, however, let us examine the *Noli* as a key liberal text. Because of works such as Quibuyen’s, we now accept that the reformist Crisostomo Ibarra is not a substitute for the radical Rizal. Indeed, even a cursory reading of the novel shows that the virtuous nationalist capable of self-sacrifice is Elias—a foil to the egoist Ibarra, who is largely motivated by *amor propio*. If there is a character we can learn from, therefore, it is Elias.

What did Elias believe in? We know that Elias was a shadowy figure, operating in the interstices of society, communicating with its most downtrodden. In the key chapter “The Voice of the Persecuted” (*La Voz de los Perseguidos*), Elias, in fact, notes that he is the “bearer of the desires of many unfortunates” (*portador de los deseos de muchos desgraciados*) (Rizal 2014, 509). Most Filipinos know that Elias’s demands were radical, and he, in fact, tells the seemingly moderate Ibarra that he seeks “radical reforms” (*reformas radicales*) in the conduct of the civil guard and the friar orders. What constituted “radical” reforms in

the Filipinas of Rizal's time? According to Elias, these included "more respect for human dignity, more security for the individual, lessening the power of the armed forces, fewer privileges for this body that so easily abuses these" (*más respeto á la dignidad humana, más seguridades al individuo, menos fuerza á la fuerza ya armada, menos privilegios para este cuerpo que fácilmente abusa de ellos.*) (ibid., 810).

When Ibarra defends the civil guard as a necessary evil, Elias reacts with incredulity, not believing that a person he admired could hold such reactionary beliefs. He explains that the civil guard focuses more on formal legal procedures than addressing social problems (ibid., 814). Espousing the liberal principle of privacy against state power, Elias decries that the "sanctity of home does not exist" (*no existe el sagrado del hogar*), noting a case of the civil guard assaulting private homes in Calamba (ibid., 814). And returning once more to the primacy of the individual, he explains that "there is no security of the individual" (*no hay la seguridad del individuo*), citing cases of arbitrary arrest (ibid.). Ibarra shocks Elias further when he replies that those who push for the changes in the civil guard are mostly criminals (ibid., 816).

After debating the role of the civil guard, the two discuss the power of the religious orders in the colony. Elias calls the friars oppressors, and Ibarra responds by accusing Elias and his comrades of forgetting the "immense debt of gratitude" (*la inmensa deuda de gratitud*) that Filipinos owe the friars (ibid., 819). Ibarra's response shocks Elias, who can "barely make sense of what he had heard" (*apenas podía dar crédito á lo que oía*) (ibid.). The reader is meant to be shocked as well. After setting Ibarra up as beneficent and enlightened in the earlier chapters, this chapter reveals that Ibarra is, in fact, a reactionary.

The image that emerges is that of Elias as a classical liberal, defending two principles that all liberals hold dear: civil liberties and secularism. These ideals were radical by the standards of the time—shunned even by a supposedly enlightened figure like Ibarra. In Elias, therefore, we are presented with Rizal's personification of the radical, nationalist liberal.

I would like to close by teasing out some of the implications of this liberal reading of the *Noli*. As I noted earlier, the liberal ideas of Elias emerge from his interactions with the margins of society; he

is a liberal because he acts as *la voz de la perseguidos* (*the voice of the persecuted*)—this is in contrast to the way many commentators view liberalism today. For many contemporary readers, liberalism does not represent the voice of the persecuted, but that of the elite. One reason for this, as we have noted, can be explained by the fate of liberalism in the 20th century, a century which saw liberals ascend to the heights of power.

The *Noli* reminds us, however, of liberalism's continued importance to subjugated people. Is it not, for example, the poor who are often denied their civil liberties? Is it not these same people who are subjected to the caprices of police power? Elias's cry for liberalism amid abuses of state power remains relevant to us today.

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### Note

1. This review was initially part of "Rethinking Rizal for the 21st Century: Unexplored Themes and New Interpretations," a commemoration of Rizal's 158th birthday held at the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS), with Dr. George Aseniero and Dr. Floro Quibuyen, and forum moderator Gemma Cruz-Araneta.

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