

Corruption and the moral imperative, through the lens of Rizal

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Rizal wrote at length about corruption in the 19th century, a malaise that ailed the country, and described it in terms of its perpetrators: friars, whose ubiquitous presence made them a fixture in daily life; Spanish secular officials at the top of the colony's hierarchy; and local officials, Filipinos among them. Beyond rich descriptions of corruption, Rizal's works and his correspondence with family, friends, and adversaries offer a rich panoply of meaning about colonial life, the nature of power within the Spanish patrimonial order, and Rizal's understanding of the nation. The paper argues that his crusade against corruption was not simply a rejection of official waywardness but was central to the project of building the Filipino nation.

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Corruption in the Philippines is not a 20th-century invention. Rizal spoke lengthily of it, in rich detail. In his correspondence and writings, specific names, places, and cases are mentioned, giving corruption and its woeful prey a human face. Letters between Rizal and his family and

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friends, and his opponents are especially useful because they articulated what colonial reports silenced and what official numbers hid. Furthermore, as Gupta [2005] points out, such narratives embody how people on the ground conceptualize the state, its meaning and purpose, in their terms (not in terms of the law) and in the context of their daily lives (and not of institutions). This is why to dismiss Rizal's exposé on the friars as a mere personal diatribe by a victim of Dominican exploitation would be to deny oneself a rich source of understanding about corruption, the nature and power of the colonial state, and the *mentalité* of the colonized. This paper presents an ethnography of corruption through the lens of Rizal, who was more than a keen observer of colonial life, and argues that the moral imperative against corruption was not incidental to, but constitutive of, the 19th-century project of nation building.

1. Corruption, public and private

Rizal's understanding of corruption is akin to its modern-day definition—namely, the use of public funds and power for personal or private benefit (individual or group). But whereas the definition today hinges on a clear distinction between public and private, in 19th-century Philippines such a demarcation was blurred. The Spanish patrimonial order involved both the royalty along with its secular hierarchy and the Catholic Church, and its own. Within this patrimonial order the friars were firmly lodged, starting from the papal division of the world between Spain and Portugal in the 15th and 16th centuries to the creation and maintenance of the Spanish empire in the Americas and the Philippines. Though not a government official, the friar was the most politically powerful individual on the ground, exercising secular influence all the way to the center of authority in Manila. His accountability, enunciated as a member of the Church, was framed within the ecclesiastical borders of rank and discipline but was not expressed in the public realm except for the instances when the bishop temporarily assumed the office of state.

Hence the modern types of corruption arising from the public-private distinction, such as administrative corruption, which entails the use of public office for financial benefit, and political corruption, involving the use of office by politicians for both financial gain and to stay in office [Goudie and Stasavage 1998:115], do not capture or explain all the sorts of corruption Rizal described in his time. Responding to Vicente Barrantes's criticism of *Noli me tangere*, Rizal explained that he wrote the novel precisely because

of corruption, which he linked to the twin problems of “*frailismo* and bad government” [Rizal 1931:303]. The key to corruption, then, was access to power rather than the formal occupation of office, and here the definition applied by Quiroz in his study of 19th-century Cuba—“the unlawful rent-extraction by those with privileged access to public office for personal or group gain inimical to public interest” [Quiroz 2003:474]—is more appropriate.

Corruption, moreover, is often tested against legal norms. The Spanish colonial period was replete with laws. One after another, detailed royal strictures on the authority of colonial officials were repeated in constant refrain, covering nearly every aspect of colonial life, from the collection and use of tributes in the late 16th century (perhaps the earliest source of colonial abuse) to the (belated) administrative reforms in the 18th and 19th centuries that attempted to curb, among others, the power of the *alcalde-mayor*, notorious for using his power to drive competitors out of business. Yet this huge body of laws, piled up over the centuries, rarely appeared in Rizal’s writings. Instead Rizal focused on the public expectations and standards of office, preferring moral over institutionally defined norms. In this manner Rizal affirmed Niceto Alcalá Zamora’s 1942 description of colonial law as “an unequal system with assertions of high ideals surrounded by a network of mistrust” (cited in Sarfati [1966:25]). The gaping disparity between “high ideals” and the “network of mistrust” was a powerful theme of Rizal.

2. Other measures of corruption

Rodriguez, Uhlenbruck, and Ede [2005:385] offer two dimensions of corruption that, if tweaked, could help us understand the corruption Rizal described: pervasiveness (“the average firm’s likelihood of encountering corruption in its normal interactions with state officials”) and arbitrariness (“the inherent degree of ambiguity associated with corrupt transactions in a given nation or state”). Neither measure is dependent on the other; that is to say, corruption that is pervasive need not be arbitrary and vice versa.

Defining pervasiveness more broadly as the degree of rampancy, and arbitrariness as the absence of fixed reference points, both measures become useful analytical tools in reading Rizal. Consider the chaotic system of colonial taxation as an example of arbitrariness. Mariano Herbosa (married to Lucía, fifth among the Rizal siblings) complained in a letter to Rizal that there was, first of all, the tax of 50 cavans of palay on irrigated rice land “even if it ... [had] no water” (Herbosa in Rizal [1933:186]). Then there

was a tax on land with six cavans of seed, which was charged five pesos in cash per seed cavan, supposedly fixed. But as Herbosa clarified, the tax was raised “if they see that the harvest is good, and it is not decreased if the harvest is bad” (Herbosa in Rizal [1933:186]). Next was the tax on dry land planted to sugar, maize, and other crops, which had multiple (inconsistent) rates, as did the taxes on residential lots. In all these cases, tax rates were limited only by the whim of the assessor.

As a result, taxpayers ended up haggling “like they do in buying fish” (Herbosa in Rizal [1933:187]). Tax receipts, in addition, were useless because, as Herbosa explained to Rizal, the receipt did not indicate the amount paid by the taxpayer:

it only says that the tax for that year has been paid, but does not state whether it is five centavos, twenty-five centavos, one hundred pesos or one thousand pesos. The residents who get or ask for the said receipt accept it with eyes closed; the receipt bears their signature, but the tax list of what ought to be paid does not have any signature; until now I do not understand the meaning of signing on one and not on the other. (Herbosa in Rizal [1933:187]).

A similar arbitrariness applied in the case of land rentals. Tenants of the Dominican estate in Calamba, Laguna, reported that a primary reason for the growth of hacienda revenues and the decline of tenant incomes was the variability, without basis, of rental rates charged by the Dominicans. Rental on the town lot increased, according to the tenants, each time an estate official or servant (neither being a qualified surveyor) measured it: “There seems to exist either a supernatural power that invisibly extends the land or a natural power that shortens the measure of the official” (Petition of the town of Calamba, 1888, in Rizal [2011:38]).

Businessmen also encountered various acts of official arbitrariness with regard to the issuance of permits and licenses. Rizal wrote:

All the Filipinos, as well as all those who have tried to engage in business in the Philippines, know how many documents, how many processes, how many stamped papers, how much patience is needed to secure a permit for an enterprise from the Government! One must count on the goodwill of this one, on the influence of that one, on a good bribe to another, in order that the application be not pigeonholed, a present to the one farther on so that he may pass it on to his chief; one must pray to God to give him good humor and time to see and examine it; to another, talent to recognize its expediency; to one further on, sufficient

stupidity not to smell behind the enterprise an insurrectionary purpose; and that they may not be busy taking baths, hunting, or playing rummy with the reverend friars in their convents or country houses; and above all, great patience, great knowledge of how to get along, plenty of money, a great deal of politics, many salutations, great influence, plenty of presents, and complete resignation! [Rizal 1996(1890a):393].

3. Pervasiveness of corruption

While examples of arbitrariness abound in Rizal's writings, the rampancy of corruption is more difficult to gauge because he generally depicted it through adjectives (*mucha corrupción* [Rizal 1933:300]) and satirical tropes. One could argue that a measure of pervasiveness could be its effect—in this case, the loss of public trust in political and social institutions. This, one sees repeatedly in Rizal's works. In one instance he mused about the necessity of bribing “the tyrants” in order to live tranquilly [Rizal 2011:177]. In another, he asked why taxpayers bothered to pay taxes

if they are not going to be allowed to live for their families? Do they pay their taxes so that they will be enslaved? Will the money of the taxpayer be used to hire petty tyrants and not attend to the demands of society? [Rizal 2011:90]

Gleaning from the writings of the period, ubiquitousness rather than pervasiveness seems the more appropriate measure of corruption. On the few occasions she wrote her brother about the suffering of the townspeople, Narcisa Rizal described what was taking place at home.

We are now in a town very much persecuted by all the authorities, among them the Civil Guards who are everywhere, bothering all classes of persons; boys and girls aged 12 are compelled to buy *cedulas* in the town hall that cost 4 *reales*; all *calesas*, carts, and horses that run the streets are stopped, whether or not they have the corresponding documents, in order to obtain something for their pockets. (Narcisa in Rizal [1933:168])

So ubiquitous were these excesses that they became “normalized” in everyday life. Listen to Paciano's account of the *guardia civil*.

As to the civil guard, ... [i]ts commander is a man of talent; he knows how to live ... if he has no honey or *palay*, he sends for them at the neighbors' homes; if he wants chickens and eggs, he

gives the guard four *reales* to buy them in the countryside with the precise instruction to bring back two dozen chickens and hundreds of eggs; if he desires something in Manila, he spies on a neighbor who has the bad luck of going there to order through him many things and bring them back gratis et amore. As for lime, stone, tiles, bricks, etc. : there is an abundant supply in this blessed town; in short, if he needs servants to clean the house, he promptly solves this by sending out every morning a guard to hunt for half a dozen men to carry out this service, whether they hold a personal *cedula* or not. (Paciano in Rizal [1930:218-219])

Another indicator of the pervasiveness of corruption was its effect on local infrastructure projects. Rizal [2011:89] lamented that public works were carried out at “the expense of the unhappy people, all gratis, with many vexations, and many beatings, and then of what use are they?” Rizal cited one example after another of infrastructure projects that had turned out to be a farce, such as two school buildings in Calamba built at the expense of the town and the *gobernadorcillo*, which ended up as barracks and the courthouse; and the hospital in Los Baños, constructed by workers from other towns, who were forced to work and at way below the daily wage. Charity bazaars, Rizal [2011:89] explained, had to be held to cover the cost of the hospital, which eventually ended up in a state of ruin.

4. *Frailismo, frailitis*

There were different types of corruption, which Rizal generally characterized according to their perpetrators: abuses by friars, corruption at the helm of government, and corruption from below. Not surprisingly, the Spanish friars figured most prominently in Rizal’s works. “To speak about the Philippines,” Rizal [2011:127] wrote in 1889, “it is necessary first to speak about the friar, for the friar is everywhere, from the government office to the suitcase of the poor, hidden in the corner of his hut.” The omnipresent friar can easily be explained. He was a permanent colonial fixture, carrying out his mission as far out in the colony as his order permitted and until the end of his life, in contrast to colonial officials who stayed in the Philippines intermittently (hardly ever completing their term), confining themselves to the walled city of Manila. While the colonial treasury was in a steady state of near bankruptcy, religious coffers were much better supplied, from land rentals, fees for religious services, and charities bequeathed by wealthy Spaniards and Filipinos. The presence of the friars was enhanced by their

familiarity with the local culture and people. The Spanish clergy learned the language of their parishioners and produced the earliest dictionaries and bilingual texts (mostly religious), while Spanish officials did not care to learn any Philippine language. Moreover, as the political philosopher Sheldon Wolin put it, the friar exercised power “over a constituency that could only be the object and never the source of authority” (cited in Sarfatti [1966:14]), while in the secular world, the Filipino *governadorcillo* and *cabeza de barangay*, at least, were allowed a taste of a modicum of power.

Rizal minced no words when speaking about the friars. The “permanent calamity in the Archipelago” [Rizal 2011:385] he called them, that ailed the people in the form of either *frailitis* or *frailofobia* [Rizal 1931:167]. Letters from family and friends reinforced the bleak picture at home: “*dumidilim pa ang nasa cadiliman*” (those in darkness fall under greater darkness), wrote Silvestre Ubaldo (married to Olympia) (in Rizal [1931:107]). Manuel Timoteo de Hidalgo (husband of Saturnina, the eldest) narrated how the town chief was “always at the disposal of the friars” (in Rizal [1931:250]) while Silvestre complained it was “impossible to live in peace while there are friars” (in Rizal [1931:107]). In the dark world back home, private and public realms of power were one. Explained Hidalgo:

At the supper held at the Hacienda, the [Dominican] Syndic showed His Excellency the list of debts of the Calamba tenants, from which it was emphasized that nothing was being paid, thus the debts were increasing enormously every year, and the Governor general was scandalized, as if these were debts to the public treasury. (in Rizal [1931:251])

The amalgamation of power arenas was fecund soil for friar abuses and corruption. For allegedly constructing a new house on her property without authority, Lucía was hauled to court at the prompting of the Dominican landlords. Silvestre recounted to Rizal: “the judge confesses that he cannot go against the interests of the [Dominican] Corporation, because he was a servant of the former Syndic” (in Rizal [1931:104]). As for the friars’ power over the *guardia civil*, in Rizal’s words: “The civil guards commit great outrages at the instigation of the friars to remove from their midst those who obstruct them” [Rizal 2011:387]. In local communities, Rizal pointed out, “though commonly, the candidate of the people [for *governadorcillo*] occupies the first place and in the second place the candidate of the friar, thanks to the influence and manipulation of the friar, his candidate wins, and the other can consider himself lucky if he is not banished” [Rizal 2011:87].

5. Bad government at the top

At the same time, Rizal did not attribute the source of corruption entirely to the friars. In his works, Rizal sketched a picture of corrupt practices from the top of the secular hierarchy down to the *governadorcillo*. The governor-general, wrote Rizal, was

the autocrat, the viceroy, the only Spaniard who wields the greatest power in the land, not excepting the King himself, and who also has the least responsibility of all; to order about eight million submissive, obedient, and docile subjects; to be lord of life, honor, and properties; to have gold—much gold, favorites, worshippers; to be able to commit with great impunity the biggest mistakes or injustices, not to prevent but to support them so that the prestige does not wane, to palliate them, gild them, and excuse them with convenient trite expressions—reason of state, for good government, etc., what else do you want? [Rizal 1996(1890b):581].

Rizal cited Governor-General Valeriano Weyler (1888-1891) as a glaring example of a corrupt official. Weyler was believed to have wrangled money for personal gain from the British-owned Manila Railway Co., Ltd., which obtained the concession to build the Manila-Dagupan railroad in 1884.

Weyler, taking advantage of the last moments of his administration, is making large despoliations, among which the public voice cites his shameful demands from the Manila-Dagupan Railroad Company (foreign certainly) to see if it would loosen, as a condition for its inauguration. The correspondent of *The Hong Kong Telegraph* in reporting its inauguration, without explaining these things that are being said, mentions the great obstacles that Weyler's administration has created and the prolix excuses it has given to render difficult and delay the opening to the public service of this railroad. [Rizal 2011:386]

Weyler's Mindanao campaign, added Rizal, was just "a subterfuge to prolong his term in office, another pretext to juggle something from the appropriation" [Rizal 2011:386]. Not to be outdone, Weyler's wife shared in her husband's notoriety. Combining humor and sarcasm, Rizal wrote:

In the meantime the Marchioness of Tenerife, the Most Excellent Madame Governor General of the Islands, a devotee of the friars, a star extortioner of the first magnitude, from Malinta [Hacienda de Malinta in Tambobong, now Malabon] or Malacañang, invents

deviltries to squeeze the pockets of the Chinese and Filipinos, now collecting taxes on lotteries through her husband's office, now granting permission for the lease of all kinds of gambling, and on diverse occasions trains for little boys to ask for Christmas presents of money from the Chinese, from store to store, from shop to shop, to obtain gifts from the *gobnadorcillos* on days when they are received at the palace and they transact official business. Now she appropriates the rich curtains of Malacañang Palace to make them into her gowns, now she establishes agencies to replace employees, to obtain favors, graces, and official credentials from her equally cunning husband. [Rizal 2011:387]

6. Petty despots at the bottom

Closer to the ground, the *alcalde* ruled. Drawing from the account of a longtime French traveler in the Philippines, Rizal described the provincial governor as follows:

in his hands the high and noble functions he performs are nothing more than instruments of gain. He monopolizes the business and ... abusing his powers, thinks only of destroying all competition that may trouble him or that may try to participate in his profits. It matters little to him that the country is impoverished, without culture, without commerce, without industry, just so the *alcalde* is quickly enriched! [Rizal 1996(1890b):393]

At the lowest rung of the colonial ladder, "petty tyrants" (Rizal's words) played their respective roles in making corruption a quotidian experience. Rizal identified these local despots as

- (a) the constable, who used farmers as unpaid or underpaid laborers for personal service and public works;
- (b) the civil guard, who arrested farmers for a motley of reasons, such as not carrying their *cedulas*, an improper salute, for being suspicious-looking, "or perhaps for no reason at all. The Civil Guard then keeps them to clean the barracks ...";
- (c) the court official or provincial government officer, who summoned the farmer or worker at will, without regard for the costly two- to three-day journey to the town center where the hapless farmer arrives, "apprehensive and disturbed. He spends all his savings; he presents himself to the official; he waits but is told to return the next day; he returns and waits again, only to be asked later by an

angry judge, some difficult and obscure questions which he could not answer. The unhappy man, it is true, may free himself of charges, but on many occasions, he proceeds from there to jail where he emerges later more stupid than before, and everybody thinks himself a good Christian always"; and

- (d) the volunteer company passing through the town (*compañía volante*, "flying" squad), which could arrest a farmer on mere suspicion, "without due process of law and without any cause whatsoever to take him to another place. Then, it is goodbye to the country and to everybody!" [Rizal 1996(1889):45].

In peasant life, corruption thus exhibited many faces and was applied with greater coercion. Amid a system of corruption and abuse, tranquility in the farm was indeed unlikely, as Rizal observed.

It seems that some are bent upon showing the Filipinos in a practical way that there it is nonsense to live honestly trusting in the efficacy of the laws; that in a disorderly country, it is a great crime to think of tranquility and work, without ever asking the Government anything except to let them farm in peace the lands of their ancestors. [Rizal 2011:267]

7. Maladministration of justice

Rizal's narrative of 19th-century corruption is not complete without a reference to the system and delivery of justice. Judicial bribery was not uncommon. In his parody of the wavering Filipino middle class, Rizal wrote:

I had a lawsuit and I won it because it happened that my adversary was an anti-friar and he was exiled when I was almost in despair of winning the case, for I had no more money to bribe the desk officials and to present horses to the judge and the governor. God is most merciful! (in Agoncillo [1974:136])

More appalling to Rizal was the brazenness of the collusion between the accused party and the judge. Recounting the petition of the Calamba estate tenants seeking government intervention in their dispute with the Dominican owners, Rizal noted that the farmers had to wait for months of inaction by the central government. Finally, the acting governor-general sent a confidential person to Calamba to investigate the case. But whom did he send? The Provincial of the Dominicans, to verify the accusations against his own order! "Frankly," remarked Rizal, "we don't know if this manner of

administering justice—the judge asking the advice of the accused and not listening to the voice that clamors for the clarification of the truth—we don't know if this is practiced in some savage country" [Rizal 2011:195].

The tenant farmers, not surprisingly, lost the case. Listen to Narcisa describe the devastating effects on the tenants:

I'm writing this to inform you clearly of all the happenings that occurred during the last two months, January and February [1891], inasmuch as you have not received any news concerning our fellow townsmen who have been dispossessed and stripped of all their lands, homes, animals, and crops of sugar, rice, and other fruits of their labor. Those who suffer these abuses number more than 300 families without counting the small families who live in faraway fields, farm workers of the evicted tenants. Some live under the shade of trees and those who are on the seashore, on the beach, and those in the interior of the town, some are on the street, through the fault of those who have authorized the lay-friar administrators to prohibit the giving of lodgings to evicted fellow townsmen. We suffer this very sad and painful situation and we keep quiet ... because the authorities do all this to us by force. (in Rizal [1933:167-168])

Given this system of justice, Rizal had little regard for the efficacy of the law.

True it is that the Penal Code has come like a drop of balm to such bitterness. But of what use are all the codes in the world, if by means of confidential reports, if for trifling reasons, if through anonymous traitors any honest citizen may be exiled or banished without a hearing, without a trial? Of what use is that Penal Code, of what use is life, if there is no security in the home, no faith in justice, no confidence in tranquility of conscience? Of what use is all that array of terms, all that collection of articles, when the cowardly accusation of a traitor has more influence in the timorous ears of the supreme autocrat, more than all the cries for justice? [Rizal 1996(1889-1890):433]

8. Minister of the moon

The causes of corruption in the 19th century were manifold. Apart from the murky boundary of accountabilities between the state machinery and the Church, the whimsical nature of policy-making, and the even more arbitrary implementation of laws, was the fundamental lack of official knowledge about the colony. Explained Rizal:

Tell somebody: “You be a Minister of the Colonies” and this would be like telling him to rule the moon or the inhabitants of Saturn, with the only advantage that such constellations are visible to the Ministry, but not the Philippines. [Rizal 1996(1890b):579]

Not infrequently, ignorance about the Philippines was coupled with a shortage of administrative experience. The net effect of this combination, in Rizal’s analysis, was to keep the status quo: “It has continued until now, why not go on in this way until a crisis rises? I shall not become Minister of the Colonies again” [Rizal 1996(1890b):579]. In this manner, excesses and all manner of abuse remained unchecked.

At the local level, official attitudes found expression in the way of political survival. Torn between colonial and local affinities, town officials were generally perceived as weak in character (“stout in body” but “thin in spirit,” in the words of Paciano (in Rizal [1930:219]), describing a *teniente*. Rizal was more blunt. Because of the “love of peace and the honor many have of accepting the few administrative positions which fall to the Filipinos,” the “most stupid and incapable” among them invariably ended up as local officials: “those who submit to everything, those who can endure all the caprices and exactions of the curate and of the officials” [Rizal 1996(1890a):419].

The means to political survival included reliance on a protector-master (*patron*). “The system,” said Rizal, “is to serve the master so that he will defend him when he is accused of exploiting the poor or he fails in his duties. The question is to have a good protector” [Rizal 2011:85]. The other means was simply connivance in acts of corruption: “We have a part in the universal tyranny, let us oppress so that we may not be oppressed” [Rizal 2011:86]. Between the first attitude and the second—not much of a difference, really—was there no in-between? Rizal explained:

A few, very rare, perhaps the madmen, also fight, dreaming of doing good to the people, introducing improvements, justice, honesty, but if they triumph, they do not realize their dream, because either they are removed or they wake up in exile. [Rizal 2011:86]

9. The moral imperative

What, then, was the moral imperative? Of Spanish officials, Rizal came to expect little.

It is not necessary that a civil governor or chief of the civil administration fulfill his duties religiously; it is enough that he misgoverns or administers the country badly and his own interests well and afterwards becomes uncivil and other things besides. [Rizal 1931:187]

Of Filipinos, however, Rizal demanded much more. "A nation acquires respect," he wrote, "not by abetting or concealing abuses, but by punishing and rebuking them" [Rizal 1996(1889-1890):507]. Even as he dismissed cultural causality in his work, "On the Indolence of the Filipinos" (1890), arguing firmly that "he who does not act freely is not responsible for his actions; and the Filipino people, not being master of its liberty, is not responsible for either its misfortunes or its woes," Rizal clarified in no uncertain terms that "we [Filipinos] also have a large part [of the blame] for the continuation of such a disorder" [1996(1890a):391].

From his works it appears that the moral imperative from Rizal's standpoint sprang from forces he had developed from within: his immense pride in the Filipino race; beyond that pride, love of our country; and a deep-seated commitment to building the Filipino nation. All three no doubt are intertwined.

Rizal's pride in our race grew as he traveled abroad. A neophyte Filipino overseas, Rizal expressed frustration that while other Asian peoples were easily recognized by foreigners, the Filipino hardly was. Writing to his parents from the Suez Canal in 1882, Rizal [1993:51] observed: "Foreigners in whose colonies the colonials are very much oppressed do not want to believe that I'm an *Indio*; others that I'm a Japanese. It is hard to make them believe the truth." Some two weeks later he narrated to his parents that while strolling in the streets of Marseilles, France, he attracted "the attention of everybody who called me Chinese, Japanese, American, etc., but no one called me Filipino! Poor country, no one has heard of you!" [Rizal 1993:23]. Settling in Madrid seven months later, Rizal remarked:

Here in Spain they have very false notions about the Philippines and there are many people who are so ignorant of that country that it is not strange that they should take us for Chinese, Americans, or mulattoes, and many, even of the young students, do not know whether the Philippines belongs to the English or to the Spaniards. One day they asked one of our countrymen if the Philippines was very far from Manila, and the like. [Rizal 1993:78]

As Rizal settled in Europe, he came face to face with racist attitudes toward Filipinos. In an angry letter to Vicente Barrantes, a known Spanish academic and former civil governor of the Philippines, Rizal [2011:108] remarked: “Thunder, Your Excellency, slander, denigrate us, put us on the lowest rung of the zoological ladder, nothing matters to us.”

But as the propaganda movement grew in Spain, Rizal proudly noted

how the foreigner applauds and values us already; our cause finds defenders, that the Filipino youth may awaken and show the foreigner that we are better than how we have been portrayed, that we have conviction and valor. Besides, when they start to attack us, it is necessary not only not to fear them but to redouble the effort and spirit and that each time they attack us, the rest see that our number grows even more, new authentic names appear, more champions, more combatants. [Rizal 1931:201]

Such pride was matched by Rizal’s love for our country and people. Shortly before he returned to the Philippines in 1892, Rizal wrote his countrymen a personal letter, written as a son who “could not live knowing that many suffer unjust persecutions on behalf of my cause ... I prefer to face death, and gladly give my life to save the many innocents from such unjust persecution” [Rizal 1933:347]. Why would death matter, Rizal added, “if one dies for that which he loves, for the country and for those who love her” [Rizal 1933:348]?

I have always loved my poor country and I am certain I will love her until the final moment ...; and my future, my life, my joys, all these I have sacrificed for love of her. Whatever shall be my fate, I will die blessing and wishing upon her the dawn of her redemption. [Rizal 1933:348]

Essential to that redemption was the element of sacrifice, both personal and shared. “Victory,” Rizal declared, “is the child of struggle, ... happiness is the flower of many sufferings and privations, and ... all redemption presupposes martyrdom and sacrifice” [Rizal 1996(1890b):579]. Essential, too, was the aspect of continuity, of seamlessness from one Filipino to the next, from age to age. “The day you see me in the claws of the friars,” he wrote Marcelo del Pilar, “do not waste time making protests, neither utter grievances nor lamentations: it is useless. Endeavor to put another in my place ...” [Rizal 1931:168].

10. “I fight for the nation, the Philippines.”²

Corruption, therefore, was not simply a matter of miscreant behavior. Corruption and, more generally, colonial abuses, tore at the fabric of the nation in the making. Rizal’s rejection of corruption was thus embedded in the very project of redemption, of nation building, well aware that this was no easy task. In one corner lurked the temptation for the colonized to ape their oppressor, “to be the equal of the masters, if not essentially, at least in their manners” [Rizal 1996(1890a):395]. These “lordly airs” (“*tila ka castila*,” you are like a Spaniard), Rizal warned, had to be avoided [Rizal 1996(1890a):395].

But the root of the problem on the part of Filipinos was their lack of what Rizal called “national sentiment”:

The lack of national sentiment brings another evil which is the absence of all oppositions to measures prejudicial to the people and the absence of any initiative in whatever may redound to its good. A man in the Philippines is nothing more but an individual; he is not a member of a nation. [Rizal 1996(1890a):419]

Even the achievements of Filipinos were individual successes but were not seen as accomplishments of the nation. Citing Filipinos of great intellect and talent, all of them learned and worthy of emulation, Rizal noted: “There is thus *individual* progress or betterment in the Philippines, but it is not *national, general*. Here it is that only the individual improves and not the species” [Rizal 1933:137] (emphasis in original). Central to Rizal’s concept of the nation, therefore, was the idea of collectivity, of conjoining individuals into a whole.

Rizal’s use of medical imagery—“physician” (government, friars), “patient” (Philippines), “disease” (indolence), “white cells” (agricultural sector), “organism” (nation)—is instructive in further understanding his imaginary of the nation [Rizal 1996(1890a):341]. “The Philippines,” he wrote, “is an organism whose cells do not seem to have either an arterial system to irrigate it or a nervous system to communicate its impressions” [Rizal 1996(1890a):419]. The nation as a natural, living, and vibrant body, able to function as a whole, was another key element of Rizal’s thought. He conceded that building that nation was made more difficult by the inorganic mentality of some of his countrymen,

² Rizal to del Pilar in Rizal [1933:209].

that in lamenting, folding their arms, and leaving things to go their usual way, they have done their duty; others, it is true, try to do something more—they give pessimistic or discouraging advice; they advise that nothing be done. [Rizal 1996(1890b):579]

This attitude of letting things be or doing nothing would keep the arterial and nervous systems of the nation in a dormant state, and eventually lead to stagnation.

The patient wants to eat, it wants to breathe the fresh air, but as such desires may offend the susceptibility of the physician, who thinks that he has already provided everything necessary, it suffers and pines away from fear of receiving a scolding, of getting another plaster and a new blood-letting, and so on indefinitely. [Rizal 1996(1890a):419]

Fortunately, Rizal saw signs of life: “There are, however, those who are starting to see clearly and they do everything within their power” [Rizal 1996(1890a):419]. Framed within a strongly redemptive project of building a nation, Rizal’s moral imperative against corruption resonates to this day.

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