The idea of sociology in an Asian context was first suggested in the work of the Philippines’ national hero, the writer and agitator José Rizal, who paid for his revolutionary insights with his life. Professor Syed Farid Alatas finds contemporary meaning in Rizal’s penetrating analysis of Filipino society under the Spanish at the end of the 19th century.

On Eurocentrism and Laziness: The Thought of José Rizal

The PHILIPPINES’ NATIONAL HERO, the writer José Rizal, was the first intellectual in Southeast Asia to think systematically about social and political issues. In fact, it could be said that Rizal’s thoughts about the nature of Filipino colonial society laid the foundations for an original Southeast Asian sociology of colonial society.

Rizal, who was of mixed Chinese descent, was from a prosperous family and able to enroll in the top schools in Manila. His father successfully managed a sugar plantation on a parcel of land leased from the Dominican Order. He attended the Ateneo de Manila University, then studied medicine at the University of Santo Thomas. In 1882, he left for Spain to continue his study of medicine and the humanities at the Universidad Central de Madrid.

His first novel, Noli Me Tangere, literally Touch Me Not, from the Latin version of the words spoken (according to John 20:17) by Jesus to Mary Magdalene when she recognizes him after his resurrection, was published in 1887, the year Rizal returned to the Philippines. The Noli, as it is affectionately known among Filipinos, portrayed the oppressive conditions of Spanish colonial rule and can be read to this day as an analysis of the problems of Filipino society.

Rizal’s second novel, El Filibusterismo (The Revolution), was published in 1891. The Fil speculates on the likelihood and outcome of a revolution against the Spaniards. Rizal’s views enraged the Spanish friars and colonial authorities. His parents’ property was confiscated and male members of the family were deported to the island of Mindoro, and Rizal himself was exiled to Dapitan, Mindanao, from 1892 to 1896. Accused of inciting Filipinos to revolt in 1896, Rizal was found guilty of sedition and executed by firing squad on December 30, 1896. He was just 35.

Although he lived a tragically short life, he was an original thinker and prolific writer unrivalled by anyone of his generation in the region. Among his works are several poems and essays, three novels, studies on Philippine history, and a Tagalog grammar. His impact extended far beyond the Philippines, where he remains a potent figure to this day, influencing intellectuals throughout Southeast Asia.

VIEWS ON COLONIAL SOCIETY

There are three broad dimensions of Rizal’s writings on the Philippines. First, there is the critique of the colonizers’ knowledge of the Philippines. Second, there are his ideas on the nature and conditions of colonial society. Finally, there are Rizal’s discussions on the meaning of and requirements for emancipation.

According to Rizal’s logic, the corrupt Spanish colonial bureaucracy relentlessly exploited the Filipinos, but blamed the underdevelopment of the people on their presumed indolence. Rizal’s aim was to show that this view was erroneous through recourse to both logic and historical fact. Rizal went into pre-colonial history to address the colonialists’ view of Filipino indolence. The facts proved that pre-colonial Filipino society was relatively advanced, suggesting that the presumed backwardness was due to colonialism.

And, of course, despite the claims of the heavy-handed colonial government and the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, colonial policy was oppressive. Rizal referred to the “boasted ministers of God [the friars] and propagators of light (!) [who] have not sowed nor do they sow Christian
moral, they have not taught religion, but rituals and superstitions.” (Rizal, 1963b: 38) The sentiment is not without merit even today.

THE CRITIQUE OF COLONIAL HISTORY
Rizal had definite views about the problems of what we would call today “Orientalist” images of Filipino society held by colonial-era scholars. This comes across very clearly in his annotation and republication of Antonio de Morga’s Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas (Historical Events of the Philippine Islands), a work that first appeared in 1609. De Morga, a Spaniard, served eight years in the Philippines as Lieutenant Governor General and Captain General and was also a justice of the Supreme Court of Manila (de Morga, 1890/1962: xxx). Rizal’s objective in annotating and republishing this work was to correct what he understood to be erroneous reports and slanderous statements that could be found in most Spanish works on the Philippines. He also wanted to recover the pre-colonial past that was erased from the memory of Filipinos by colonization (Rizal, 1890/1962: vii). This includes the destruction of pre-Spanish records and artifacts that could have thrown light on the nature of pre-colonial society (Zaide, 1993: 5). De Morga’s work differed from others as it was the only civil, as opposed to ecclesiastical, history of the Philippines written during the early Spanish colonial period (Ocampo, 1998: 192). Ecclesiastical histories were problematic not only because they tended to be biased, but also because they “abound in stories of devils, miracles, appuritions, etc., these forming the bulk of the voluminous histories of the Philippines” (de Morga, 1890/1962: 291 n. 4). Rizal’s annotations stressed the following: Filipino advances in agriculture and industry in pre-colonial times; the point of view of the colonized on various issues; cruelties perpetrated by the colonizers’ the hypocrisy of the colonizers, particularly the Catholic Church; the irrationality of the Church’s discourse on colonial topics.

Let us consider an example of the point of view of the colonized. In a section where de Morga discusses Moro (Muslim) piracy, Rizal notes that:

If we are to consider that these piracies lasted more than 250 years during which the unchangeable people of the South captured prisoners, assassinated, and set fire on not only the adjacent islands but also going so far as Manila Bay, Malate, the gates of the city, and not only once a year but repeatedly, five or six times, with the government unable to suppress them and to defend the inhabitants that it disarmed and left unprotected; supposing that the insane 600 victims every year, the number of persons sold and assassinated will reach 200,000, all sacrificed jointly with very many others to the prestige of Spanish rule. (de Morga, 1890/1962: 134 n.1)

Rizal also notes that the destruction of Filipino industry, the depopulation of the islands, Spanish plundering of gold and the enslavement of people were never seen as wrong acts among the Spaniards (de Morga, 1890/1962: 134 n.1). The second kind of indolence Rizal noted was a people without freedom should not be imputed to the people but to their rulers (Rizal, 1963b: 31). His many writings furnish us with instances of oppression and exploitation such as the confiscations of lands, appropriation of labor, high taxes and forced labor without payment, that go far in explaining the reluctance of the Filipinos to work (Rizal, 1963a).

Secondly, Rizal insisted that the Filipinos were not inherently indolent. Furthermore, to the extent that there was indolence, this was not to be seen as a cause of backwardness. Rather it was the exploitative conditions of colonial society that resulted in indolence. In pre-colonial times, the Filipinos were hardworking and diligent, controlling trade routes, tilling the land, mining ore and manufacturing. Their indolence developed when their destiny was taken away from them. Things were different in the pre-colonial period.

THE MEANING OF INDOLENCE
Rizal was very aware that in Spanish colonial discourse, the backwardness of the Filipinos was blamed on their indolence. In the view of the Spaniards, Filipinos had little love for work. But, as the late Malaysian academic and politician Syed Hussein Alatas (who was also my father) has noted, the unwillingness of Filipinos to cultivate land under the feudal encomenderos (overseers) was interpreted out of context and understood to be the result of laziness, which was in turn attributed to their nature (Alatas, S.H. 1977: 125). Rizal made some very interesting observations that Alatas considered to be the first sociological treatment of the theme (Alatas, S.H., 1977: 98). Firstly, Rizal observed that the “miseries of a people without freedom should not be imputed to the people but to their rulers” (Rizal, 1963b: 31). His many writings furnish us with instances of oppression and exploitation such as the confiscations of lands, appropriation of labor, high taxes and forced labor without payment, that go far in explaining the reluctance of the Filipinos to work (Rizal, 1963a).

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However, that Rizal’s recourse to historical and sociological factors to explain the lack of motivation to work among colonial Filipinos is on the whole sound (Alatas, S.H. 1977: 105-106). The theme of indolence, or the lazy native, in colonial scholarship formed a vital component of the ideology of colonial capitalism. Rizal was probably the first to deal with it systematically and sociologically. The exposé of the myth was taken up in greater depth by Alatas in his famous The Myth of the Lazy Native (1977), which contains a chapter entitled “The Indolence of the Filipinos,” in honor of Rizal’s work on the same topic, “The Indolence of the Filipino” (Rizal, 1963c).
Arguing that the underdevelopment of Filipino society was not due to any inherent shortcomings of the natives but rather to the distortions of colonial rule, Rizal asserted that emancipation would come about from enlightenment. Colonial rule was oppressive because of the backwardness of the Church. The Church was against enlightenment, the supremacy of reason. The European Enlightenment was good for Filipinos, while the Church was against it because it established reason as authority, and not God or the Church. While thinkers such as Marx, Weber and Durkheim all argued that reason had become unreasonable in the sense that modernity was alienating, anomie and ultimately irrational, Rizal had a different attitude toward the Enlightenment and reason (Bonoan, 1994). His writings do not show the same kind of disillusionment or ambivalence with reason that we find in much Western thought of the same period. This is likely because, for Rizal, the Philippines was not sufficiently modern, being held back by an anti-rational Church.

The consequence of this, as Rizal foretells in El Filibusterismo, is the emergence of the filibustero, the “dangerous patriot who will soon be hanged.” In other words, the revolutionary (Rizal, 1992: 69). The revolution against Spanish rule and the Church seems inevitable and the only means of achieving freedom. El Filibusterismo is a prescription for revolution. The Noli of 1887 does not go so far as the Fili. It only suggests the need to displace the civil power of the villainous Franciscan friars. In the Noli, the civil and military power exercised by the Spanish Captain General, a colonial officer, is perceived as rational and progressive. Elias, a noble, patriotic and selfless Filipino dies in the novel, while the egoist Ibarra, a confused romantic in love with the iconic symbol of Filipino womanhood, Maria Clara, survives.

In the Fili, there appears a shift in Rizal’s thinking. The villains now include both the clergy, this time the Dominican priests, as well as the mercenary Captain General. The revolution does not succeed, which was a reflection of Rizal’s assessment of the lack of preparedness of the Filipinos for revolution. He feared that those who would spearhead a revolution would be motivated by little more than self-interest rather than social commitment (Majul, 2001: 68). Rizal himself was reluctant to join the revolution because he did not advocate a revolution that was bound to fail. Rizal, however, was revolutionary in his actions and writings. He paid the ultimate price for this when he was executed for treason against Spain.

The idea behind promoting scholars like José Rizal and other Asian thinkers of varying degrees of renown, is to contribute to the universalization of the social sciences and humanities. These disciplines may be global, but they are not universal so long as the multiple voices that have something to say about society are not rendered audible.

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