

## Rizal's 'Indolence of the Filipinos'

Saturday 16 February 2008, by [DAVID Randy](#) (Date first published: 29 December 2007).

MANILA, Philippines — Writing in 1890 for *La Solidaridad*, Jose Rizal takes up the question of the so-called “indolence” of the Filipinos. This claim, he argues, had allowed the Spanish colonial authorities to excuse their own “stupidities,” and the friars to “make themselves irreplaceable.” We should not be content to simply deny it, he says. We must “examine the question calmly with all the impartiality of which a man is capable who is convinced that there is no redemption unless based solidly on virtue.”

This masterly exercise in deconstruction is Rizal's most sociological and most compelling essay. Here is an exposition of the social theory underpinning the “Noli.” Rizal approaches his subject the way a modern scientist would, but in addition, he deploys all the metaphors at his disposal as a trained physician in order to add satirical force to his arguments. He looks at the behavior typically associated with the predisposition to indolence, and proceeds to analyze the context in which it is bred.

The charge of indolence is hardly heard nowadays, for indeed the Philippines has become one of the main sources of the world's nurses, domestic helpers, caregivers, seafarers, construction workers, musicians, entertainers, teachers, call center agents, etc. Yet, Rizal's analysis remains valid to this day. The lack of advancement among our people is still, as in Rizal's time, largely attributable to defects in their education and the lack of national sentiment.

We all know about the underdeveloped state in which our educational system languishes. And yet we have only focused on the impoverished state of existing facilities and the miserable test scores of our pupils. We have not even begun to look at the kind of human beings our schools are producing, which is what bothered Rizal most. “The very limited home education, the tyrannical and sterile education in the few educational centers, the blind subjection of youth to his elders, influence the mind not to aspire to excel those who preceded him and merely to be content to follow or walk behind them. Stagnation inevitably results from this, and as he who devotes himself to copying fails to develop his inherent qualities, he naturally becomes sterile; hence decadence.”

It is this resignation resulting from mental stagnation that preoccupied Rizal. He pursues this theme in his discussion of the Filipino's lack of national sentiment. The absence of any concern for the nation, he says, “breeds another evil, which is the scarcity of any opposition to the measures that are prejudicial to the people and the absence of any initiative that will redound to their welfare. A man in the Philippines is only an individual; he is not a member of a nation.” Where there is no sense of nation, there can be no collective striving to develop the country.

Today it is not indolence but lack of discipline that is blamed for the Filipino's lack of progress. Like the claim of indolence, however, this supposed unruliness is used to explain many problems and justify the quest for dictatorial rule. It would not be enough to deny this lack of discipline, for indeed anyone can point to everyday manifestations of this annoying trait. Our chaotic city traffic and the countless remedial measures it provokes appear to be its most palpable expression. Every failed treatment only seems to highlight the terminal nature of the malady.

Following Rizal's method, we might however shift our focus from the symptoms to the social context. Why do Filipinos not follow rules? Why do they not fall in line and wait for their turn? Why do they turn to influential persons or patrons to obtain access to public services and institutions? There are two basic reasons, I believe. The first is ignorance, and the second is distrust of the system.

Many Filipinos do not follow the rules because they don't know them, or if they do, they don't know how they are supposed to work. It's easy to say ignorance excuses no one, but shouldn't the first duty of government be to explain the laws to its citizens, their logic and justification? In the absence of such learning, people will improvise or stick to habit.

But the more important reason for lack of discipline is distrust of the system. It is the belief that following the rules gets you nowhere. If you fall in line, you may wait forever; others will find a way to get ahead of everyone. The idea is to devise your own trick, or to find a fixer you can pay or a powerful person whose influence you can tap in order to quickly get what you want. The assumption is that the system doesn't work, and is not meant to work.

Looking at our social reality today, one finds that this way of thinking is not too far off the mark. Our system of rules does provide discretionary powers to some people — powers essential to a social order based on large gaps in wealth and privilege, and on layers of dependence and patronage. In such a system, corruption is only the other face of patronage, a vital ingredient in the highly unequal society we have.

This kind of society is becoming obsolete in the modern world. To prolong its life, pre-modern elites who run government are resorting to authoritarianism, while the citizens who cannot stand living in it are fleeing. But, because we too are evolving as a society, there is hope. Education and migration are releasing many Filipinos from ignorance and bondage. "Peoples and governments are correlated and complementary," says Rizal. "A stupid government is an anomaly among a righteous people, just as a corrupt people cannot exist under wise rulers and laws."

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\* Philippine Daily Inquirer. First Posted 04:52:00 12/29/2007.