

La Liga in Rizal Scholarship

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THE VAST AND CONTINUALLY growing body of Rizal studies has surprisingly paid little attention to the *Statutes of La Liga Filipina*. Most commentators are drawn to the fifth aim—study and application of reforms—and conclude that La Liga was Rizal’s last vain effort at reformist politics, which was cut short by his sudden deportation to Dapitan and replaced by Bonifacio’s revolutionary organization, the *Katipunan*. The document itself is hard to find, as it appears only in varying brevity in a few compilations. Remarkably, even the official edition of Rizal’s complete works published by the Centennial Commission in 1961 included only the abridged version by Wenceslao Retana. Thankfully, this serious omission in historiography has been redressed in the digital age with the online publication of the original text by Project Gutenberg.

Doubts have been cast on the authorship of La Liga, as noted by Benedict Anderson.

It is not easy to believe that this authoritarian structure, evidently adapted from Masonry’s ancestral lore, was Rizal’s brainchild... It is much more likely that structure was the brainchild of Andres Bonifacio, who formed the underground revolutionary Katipunan not long after Rizal’s deportation to Mindanao and the Liga’s abrupt disintegration (2005, 130).

While it is true that no existing manuscript can be traced to Rizal, the *Statutes* was published in Hong Kong while he was living there and was disseminated to political activists in Manila whom he addressed in organized gatherings. Most significantly, he never denied authorship of it even though, as he averred truthfully at his trial, he had no knowledge of

what came out of those meetings after his sudden deportation. What we do know is that Bonifacio revived the Liga almost a year after he had founded the Katipunan; only this time, conflicts among the members brought it to a definite end. Rizal could truthfully deny that the Katipunan was La Liga, but had Bonifacio been asked, he would have likely declared that his Katipunan was Rizal's Liga resurrected.

Most students of Rizal regard La Liga as a political program whose goals and aspirations were the veritable product of the Enlightenment. It was the organizational concretization of Rizal's masterful absorption of the political thought of *le siècle de Lumières*. Guided by Reason, it was an emancipatory movement aimed at the creation of a national consciousness which, once embodied into a subject of history, would choose its own course of action.¹

But this interpretation must contend with the fact that Rizal was a man of his time, and that the 19th century was a period like no other, with its own *problématique* which must be grasped with its own theoretical and practical tools. If the preceding century was, as Eric Hobsbawm puts it, the "Age of Revolution," which saw the pervasive dissolution of the *ancien régime* into the modern world, what followed was the "Age of Capital," where capitalism defined the issues of the day. If, in the Age of Revolution, the political question was the discovery of freedom, in the Age of Capital, the social question was the discovery of inequality at the heart of society.

Encapsulating the drama of his century, Pi y Margall (1857) wrote, "La cuestión social es la cuestión del siglo" (Quoted in Trias Vejerano 2001, 97; The social question is the question of the century). If the political question had been the agenda of the Third Estate desirous of political power, the social question was that of "*el cuarto estado*" (The Fourth Estate)—*las clases jornaleras*, the working classes, who needed better working conditions, a secure place in society, and a voice in the affairs of government. A new type of revolution, "a democratic revolution," was called for. As president of the short-lived Republic of Spain, Pi y Margall presented his government's program of reform with this opening line:

“All political revolutions are, at bottom, a class war” (99). It was his government’s objective to pave the way for the emancipation of the working classes through radical reforms. “The social question is the concern of all,” declares Pi y Margall. And this brings us right to Rizal (98).²

It is the prevailing view that Rizal was not theoretically equipped to grasp the issues of the 19th century, a lacuna in his learning manifested by the absence in his library of books on political thought after the time of the *philosophes* and the *Aufklärung*.³ Leon Ma. Guerrero set the premise of this observation in his biography of Rizal (1963, 431).

Rizal read Voltaire and Bonifacio read Carlyle and the “Lives of the American Presidents,” neither seems to have read Marx or Bakunin or Proudhon. Both the Liga and the Katipunan, *therefore*, were based on the comfortable theory of the social compact: unity, mutual protection and mutual help. But neither was aware of the issue that was already tearing western civilization apart: the choice between liberty and equality (emphasis added).

Guerrero presumes that since both Rizal and Bonifacio apparently had not read the works of these socialist intellectuals, therefore their organizations could not go beyond Rousseau’s theory of the social contract and they were likely unaware of the social issue of their time. This hasty presumption effectively narrows Guerrero’s interpretation of Rizal’s works in light of the Enlightenment, unmindful of the fact that Enlightenment political thought had given way to an increasingly radical interpretation in emerging socialist thought, and the social compact theory had evolved well beyond the initial premises of Rousseau.

There is, to begin with, Proudhon, who critiques Rousseau’s concept of social contract for being confined to political relations between ruler and ruled. In effect, Rousseau’s compact was neither an act of reciprocity nor an act of association of free people but the instrumentality for resignation of the free will of the individual in order to form popular sovereignty. For Rousseau, the idea of the social contract is that each of us places his person

and authority under the supreme direction of the general will, and that the group receives each individual as an indivisible part of the whole. By contrast, Proudhon's concept of *contrat social*, ever distrustful of State power, explains the organizational principle of La Liga better than Rousseau's.

What really is the Social Contract? An agreement of the citizen with the government? No, that would mean but the continuation of (Rousseau's) idea. The social contract is an agreement of man with man; an agreement from which must result what we call society. In this, the notion of commutative justice, first brought forward by the primitive fact of exchange... is substituted for that of *distributive justice*... Translating these words, contract, commutative justice, which are the language of the law, into the language of business, and you have commerce, that is to say, in its highest significance, the act by which man and man declare themselves essentially producers, and abdicate all pretension to govern each other...

The Social Contract is the supreme act by which each citizen pledges to the association his love, his intelligence, his work, his services, his goods, in return for the affection, ideas, labor, products, services and good of his fellows; the measure of the right of each being determined by the importance of his contributions, and the recovery that can be demanded in proportion to his deliveries (1851, 114).

Each theory addresses the practical demands of the day. Rousseau's "general will" is the conceptual force needed to oppose the absolutism of the *ancien régime*, the historic task of the Third Estate in the 18th century. Proudhon's "distributive justice" addresses in its turn the central issue of inequality in 19th-century society and argues that societies have a duty to individuals in need and that all individuals have a duty to help others in need. This Proudhonian principle pervades all of La Liga and must have made the most eminent sense to Bonifacio, yet was lost on Guerrero.

Pi y Margall was the man who introduced Proudhon to the Spanish-speaking world through his translations of Proudhon's, as well as Hegel's, philosophical writings. More than just translating and interpreting their

works, Pi y Margall created a social theory and political party program distinctly his own. His theory of federalism, using *el pacto* as the fundamental element of state formation, contributed to the social compact theory of the 19th century.

“The pact is the legitimate origin of all juridical relations among men who have reached in life the plenitude of reason,” he declares (Margall in Peyrou 2005, 17). The pact as the foundation of the State is linked to his ideal of a society of small producers associated in cooperatives and sustained by a decentralized state. The pact is thus the principle of consent that binds together different types and levels of collectivities, from the local, to the provincial and up to the state, confederating them as autonomous bodies in pursuit of common goals and under conditions agreed upon in the Constitution. He sees in the pact a principle of universal application, serving equally well to bind together cities as well as nations (Pi y Margall 1874). He explains that federalism comes from the Latin word *foedus*, which means pact, alliance; it cannot come into existence unless the contracting parties are free, that is to say, *sui juris*. Federation therefore necessarily means an equal and perfect autonomy of the constituencies from the bottom up (Pi y Margall 1882, 295).

Rizal’s terms acquire a definitive meaning and a theoretical unity when understood in the revolutionary semiotics of the 19th century. These terms include the motto of La Liga—*Unus instar omnium* (one is equal to all); its aim—a compact, vigorous, homogenous civil society arising from a federation of associations all based on the principle of mutualism and animated with a national sentiment; and its preferred form of state—a federal republic. All these terms cohere into one rational whole and each reveals its full significance in light of nineteenth-century political thought.

The ideological provenance of Rizal’s political language did not go unperceived by his enemies. In June 1888, amidst the tensions generated by the Hacienda de Calamba case, when the Rizal family was desperately trying to elevate the matter to the Supreme Court in Madrid, the Spanish

Senate debated on the agitations in the Philippines. A certain Senator Fernando Vida blamed Rizal personally for the perturbations against friar-owned lands, and decried *Noli Me Tangere* as “anti-Catholic, Protestant, Socialist, Proudhonian, and in it the indios are told that the estates possessed by the religious orders are usurpations of property, and that within a year, these properties will be taken away from the religious orders” (quoted in Retana 1907, 132 and in Schumacher 1997, 96).

Pi y Margall and Rizal

“Socialist” was how the Filipino propagandists referred to their great supporter Pi y Margall,⁴ as did Friedrich Engels,⁵ and as did Pi y Margall when referring to himself. The question then is: who was this venerable Catalan to Rizal and what influence did he have on the latter? This can only be answered adequately by original research, for this friendship between two men, likened by some to a father-son relationship, has been largely ignored by biographers of Rizal. What we do have written expressly about this relationship we owe to Manuel Sarkisyanz (1995, 199–200).

Del Pilar called Pi y Margall one of the greatest glories of Spain, who desired to conquer the love and affection of the Filipinos. In the year of Rizal’s coming to Madrid, Pi y Margall already had contacts with a family in the Philippines. Rizal formed a close friendship with this former president of Spain’s First Republic, and frequently visited him at his home. They were friends, when Rizal had been studying in Madrid since 1882, and when he returned in 1890. Pi y Margall’s daughter was said to have loved Rizal, who used to play chess with her father.

Sarkisyanz goes on to inform us that the redoubtable jurist was among the lawyers in Madrid representing the Rizal family in the Calamba friar lands case against the Dominicans. Poignantly, in his old age, Pi y Margall went in that dead of winter to Prime Minister Cánovas to plead for the life of Rizal “for the sake of humanity and for the sake of the fatherland” (1995, 199–200).

The young Rizal met Pi y Margall in Madrid in 1882, at the time when the jurist was writing the constitution for a Spanish Federal Republic. We are told that the newly arrived student frequented the statesman's home where they played chess and he found time to develop a love interest in the host's daughter. Based on these accounts, for which Sarkisyanz cites primary sources, is it not reasonable to presume that Rizal profitably used his time reading the books in Pi y Margall's collection, which undoubtedly included Proudhon, among other contemporary works? As a prominent political leader of the Spanish left and former prime minister, the Catalan had had decades of experience in and against the government, which would serve as important political lessons to the young Rizal. In fact, Rizal revealed to Carnicero, while in Dapitan, that he learned the politics of his country from Pi y Margall. Notably in his review of *Las luchas de nuestros días* (The Struggles of our Times) in 1890, Rizal could not quite contain his admiration for his mentor's works, and encouraged his countrymen to read as much of them as they could (Rizal 1963, 271–282). Logically, the impecunious Rizal had no need to acquire his own copies of those books he had read at Pi y Margall's; hence their absence from Esteban de Ocampo's bibliographic listing. Pi y Margall's numerous books and his translations of French books on political theory and contemporary affairs offered the reader a good exposure to radical European political thought. Although this reading *per se* would not have necessarily led Rizal to German radical thinkers such as Marx, whose debate with Proudhon marked the first schism of the International, it certainly would have given him a vital introduction to socialist discourse. It did lead him to British social theory via Herbert Spencer's works, most notably *Man Versus State*. At the time, the author was the most influential British sociologist, a fact recognized by Marx himself despite their disagreements.

If Pi y Margall is the missing link in most biographies of Rizal, La Liga Filipina remains largely unknown in Rizal studies. As long as it is read in the context of the Enlightenment and not beyond the premises of this philosophy, it will not be understood for what it really was intended to be. Anderson's *Under Three Flags*, for instance, can be

faulted for missing out on both; remarkably for a study of anarchism, it contains no discussion at all on Pi y Margall, a self-professed anarchist/socialist whose political party and writings gave support to the anticolonial struggle in the remnants of the Spanish Empire. The book just refers the reader to Sarkisyanz's accounts of the friendship between Rizal and Pi y Margall. While it is true that Sarkisyanz has done more than anyone else in unearthing the profound relationship between the two, it must also be recognized that he does not articulate how Pi y Margall influenced the internal development of Rizal's political thought; surprisingly, he offers no discussion of La Liga at all.

Anderson does write a short commentary on the Liga, but it is all too short, and includes a rather long footnote on Isabelo de los Reyes' views on the organization.

When I read in these statutes about 'blind obedience and the penalty of death for anyone revealing any League secret'... my character and opinions are very independent, and maybe my joining would serve only to disturb the discipline that is very necessary for any association (2005, 130–131n16).

The fact of the matter is that nowhere in the *Statutes* is there a sanction imposing the death penalty for disclosing the Liga's secrets. The second paragraph of *Deberes de los Afiliados* (Duties of the Members) demands sacrifice of personal interest and blind obedience to the Liga, whilst the fourth paragraph demands secrecy "a costa de su propia vida" (at the cost of one's life), but nowhere is the phrase "a pena de muerte" (death penalty) to be seen in the *Statutes*.

Up till now, La Liga has been a virtual conundrum. The influence of Proudhon's mutualist socialism is evident in the pages of the *Statutes*, but as long as Rizal is presumed to be unaware of social inequality and class exploitation of his time because of limitations of his political consciousness and his class bias, the Liga's radical program to create a civil society based on reciprocity and distributive justice will remain misunderstood.

Bonifacio understood it. So did de los Reyes, who, despite initial reservations on membership commitments, subsequently made the Liga's mission his very own. Sarkisyanz writes that

[i]n that year [1898], [Pi y Margall's] newspaper reprinted "*Memoria sobre la revolución Filipina*" by Isabelo de los Reyes. It seems that Pi y Margall's idea of converting proletarians into owners, his emphasis on workers' instruction and mutual assistance, contributed to De los Reyes advocating, in 1903 and 1904 – in the tradition of Proudhon (having brought his works, translated into Spanish by Pi y Margall, from Barcelona to Manila in 1901) – mutual exchange of services and the workers' claim to profit-sharing (as well as participating in the administration). Thereby, De los Reyes conceived an alliance between labor and capital – becoming the first modern socialist⁶ of the Philippines and of Southeast Asia – envisaging a future "when the Filipino people shall bring forth only *María Claras* and patriotic *Ibarras*, instead of false politicians" (1995, 201).

This paucity of comment on de los Reyes' advocacy, the fact that La Liga is not mentioned at all in its connection, reveals that despite his vast erudition on Rizal and his Spanish links, Sarkisyanz had not given the Statutes his usual scholarly attention. Tentatively he suggests, a few pages earlier, that "if there were Proudhonian elements in Rizal's thought, they had been transmitted by Pi y Margall"—but goes no further (196). Yet nothing could be more glaring: what de los Reyes says in his memoirs about what he was trying to do could well have been said of Rizal's own enterprise, for are not the two initiatives one and the same? Except for a couple of differences perhaps: the Ilocano brought home Proudhon in his trunk; the Tagalog brought him in his head. And both had divergent fates. De los Reyes founded the first labor union in the Philippines, the *Unión obrera democrática*, launched the first labor newspaper to champion the rights of the working class, and organized general strikes. Rizal was exiled to Dapitan where he practiced what he preached in a community he made his own, went on to meet his martyrdom, and with his death galvanized the Filipino people into a nation. Rightfully, de los Reyes has come down in history as the First Filipino Socialist, and Rizal the First Filipino.

Notes

- ¹ The most perceptive interpretation of the Statutes of La Liga as a product of the Enlightenment is made by Cesar Adib Majul (1959).
- ² This was the opening line of the Manifesto of the Federal Republican Party in 1894, “La cuestion social preocupa todos los animos.”
- ³ Not quite true, unless the great works of 19th-century French and Russian literature are considered “non-political.” Rizal’s library listed the works of Balzac, Hugo, Zola, translations of Turgenev, to name but these few; and what books could be more penetrating in their understanding of the 19th century?
- ⁴ As mentioned by Lopez Jaena to Rizal in a correspondence dated 6 March 1887 in Rizal (1963, 85).
- ⁵ Friedrich Engels writes in “The Bakuninists at Work: An account of the Spanish Revolt in the summer of 1873” (in Marx and Engels 1939), “Of all the official republicans, Pi (y Margall) was the only Socialist, the only one who realized that the republic had to depend on the support of the workers. He promptly produced a programme of social measures which could be carried out immediately and would not only benefit the workers directly but eventually lead to further steps, thus at least giving the first impetus to the social revolution.” But this “revolution from above” was undermined by a “revolution from below” of the anarchist followers of Bakunin.
- ⁶ Note that the (*) asterisk cites William H. Scott, “U.O.D., First Filipino Labor Union” in *Social Sciences and Humanities Review* (Manila 1983, 140).

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