

Kill Your Heroes

A Filipino Anarchist Discussion about National Heroes

Malagino

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Contents

Kill Your Heroes 3
The Nature of National Heroes 3
Heroes' Humanity 4
The Spirit of Their Times 5
Ghosts to Spook Us 6
The Forgotten Ones 6
In the Modern Day 7
The Named and the Nameless 8
What Do We Need? 8

On December 30, the day set aside to commemorate Dr. José Rizal, scientist, author, and icon of the Philippine Republic, it is only right to emulate his example by analyzing and critiquing our society. Our contributor Malagino focuses on a concept that informs how we regard Rizal and his contemporaries during the ascendancy of “Filipino nationalism”: **Heroes. Specifically, national heroes.**

Kill Your Heroes

Heroes. Specifically, national heroes.

In the Philippines, this concept haunts classrooms and audiences like a specter whenever there is a celebration of the anniversary of some hero’s birth or death. It hangs in the air over the heads of the participants, who know that some impassioned speech on bravery, virtue, talent, and devotion to freedom and unity is sure to ensue.

In July 2020, one such speech took place right in the beating heart of the Philippine Republic. Well-known tyrant Rodrigo Duterte used his “State of the Nation” address to revive the memory of heroes like José Rizal, revolutionary leader Andres Bonifacio, and radical journalist Marcelo Del Pilar, framing them as examples Filipinos should follow. Duterte contrasted them with those who supposedly commit terror by abusing their freedom of expression and action, subtly referencing the opposition mounted by liberals and leftists.

Once again, on November 30, 2020, Andres Bonifacio Day, Duterte expressed his desire for Filipinos to emulate Bonifacio’s patriotism and courage in order to create a just, progressive, and inclusive society, especially in a time where the greater society is beset by the challenges of the COVID 19 pandemic. Of course, there is nothing just, progressive, or inclusive about the Republic under his regime, which bungled the country’s pandemic response from the very beginning.

The idea of heroes, specifically “national heroes,” is inculcated in our country’s collective consciousness. They put these people on a pedestal for citizens to admire and emulate.

These heroes can come from any background—politico-military leaders during the war for independence, martyrs who died to sustain or regain a sense of liberty or security, figures so ancient they are treated like myth or legend.

Their names are plastered in their hometowns’ public schools and libraries, their likenesses immortalized with statues in city parks, their lives recounted every year in Civics class. Somehow, without our noticing, they enter our psyches as parents, politicians, teachers, and historians constantly reference them.

As if by some collective agreement, these people become the idealized version of the image of the citizen. These heroes are promoted because of the actions they took in their lifetimes and how their lives contributed to bringing about our current situation.

We come to rally around their memories and learn about the principles they espoused so that we can continue their legacy. Sometimes, we’re tasked to “think about what our heroes would have done” like a cheesy inspirational quote straight out of Facebook.

The Nature of National Heroes

As a result of government and society being headed by those who were lucky enough to survive the Philippine Revolution (or privileged enough to change sides during it), those who became the leading figures of the Philippines undertook to exalt the revolutionary nationalist Katipunan (a secret association founded in 1892 to oppose Spanish colonial rule), elevating those they once lived, worked, and fought beside such as José Rizal and Marcelo H. del Pilar.

The thing is—most of us inherited these heroes from past generations, without understanding the context that gave rise to their being admired, if not outright venerated.

This sentiment is not new to the Philippines. As far back as 1969, nationalist historian Renato Constantino tackled the legacy and legend of José Rizal, the Philippine “national hero,” in the Third National Rizal Lecture, published in 1971 as “Veneration Without Understanding”:

“In his time, the reformist Rizal was undoubtedly a progressive force. In many areas of our life today, his ideas could still be a force for salutary change. Yet, the nature of the Rizal cult is as such that he is being transformed into an authority to sanction the status quo by a confluence of blind adoration and widespread ignorance of his most telling ideas.”¹

This is why a critical evaluation of history requires us to reject the concept of the hero in our culture. Heroes are born out of the circumstances of their time. They are not simply idols to be worshiped. Rather, their memories are used by those in power to suppress those who actually desire to follow their example of courage and subversion.

Heroes' Humanity

Amid all the romantic stories of valiance and glory, it's easy to forget that these were humans who had their own shortcomings, weaknesses, and failures, like all of us. For all their prowess on the battlefield, skill in agitating and organizing across the islands, or literary and poetic expertise, focusing and only exhibiting those aspects of their lives is ahistorical misinformation.

Rizal was called “Hamletian” and “indecisive” by post-war writer Nick Joaquin for refusing to take part in the Ilustrado revolution² that his *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo* inflamed and inspired. Even as more and more Filipinos—not just Tagalogs, but also those from Central Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao—took part in their own revolts against an increasingly despotic yet fragile colonial government, Rizal even went so far as to offer his services as a doctor to the Spanish Army against another revolution in Cuba.

Andrés Bonifacio, for all his organizational genius in expanding the Katipunan association across the archipelago, was unsuccessful in the battles against the Spanish at Caloocan and San Juan. Worse, when faced with the task of trying to link his struggle in Manila and Morong (now Rizal province) to the insurrections in Cavite province, instead of trying to mend the division that caused the surrender of the movement, he played into the factionalism and petty fights of the upper-class Caviteño leaders, who were divided into the Alvarezes of Magdiwang and the Aguinaldos and Tironas of Magdalo. This inadvertently led to the defeat of this phase of the Revolution and, as we will see later, to the American “assimilation” of the archipelago, which paved the way for another colonial empire to take power.

How could these heroes have done this? Simple, they reneged on an agreement with the colonial government.

Sensing that the Philippine Revolution would soon be defeated with strongholds in the rebel-held province of Cavite falling to the Spanish, the clique of Emilio Aguinaldo, the first elected president of the Philippines, holed up in the town of San Miguel in the province of Bulacan. There, the so-called “Biak-na-Bato Republic” composed and adopted a constitution and negotiated with the Spanish for a full surrender and the exile of revolutionary leaders in exchange for amnesty and cash payments. However, while he was in exile, American diplomats and military leaders persuaded Aguinaldo to come back and continue the fighting with the unofficial support of the American army and navy, who aimed to add another theater to the Spanish-American War.

As a result, Aguinaldo and his ilk inadvertently betrayed the interests of common Filipinos. The president did this by tacitly supporting the United States in the Spanish-American War, after being approached by Consul Spencer Pratt and persuaded to restart the Revolution with the promise of US support towards gaining independence. This was all deceit, however, as their true intentions were actually to take the whole archipelago for themselves. The consequence was that the “heroes” were deceived by American imperialists in the Battle of Manila, where the US colluded with the Spanish to wage a mock battle in order to prevent the Filipinos from taking the capital city of Manila, which had been the main goal of the Revolution in the first place. Later, when the independentist cause seemed futile, the autonomists betrayed these same interests by planning to accept American dominance over the Archipelago.

With the nationalist revolution defeated, the United States of America became the new colonial master. Over time, the the American colonial state developed into the Philippine Commonwealth, an incorporated Filipino government similar to the current Commonwealth in Puerto Rico. While Filipino collaborators thought of themselves as having

¹ Constantino, R. (1972). *Veneration Without Understanding*. Journal of Contemporary Asia (4), 3–18

² Joaquin, N. (1977) *A Question of Heroes*. Anvil Publishing

good intentions, they were still pursuing their economic and social interests. People like Manuel Quezon, Sergio Osmeña, Cayetano Arellano, and Pedro Paterno became accessories to the foundation and continuation of what became the American neocolony of the Philippines.

Later, former revolutionaries like Artemio Ricarte and again Emilio Aguinaldo once more exposed Filipino peoples' liberty and independence to the threats of imperialism and fascism, when they supported the Japanese during World War II on the premise that they might give the archipelago "independence."

Of course, this problem with heroic veneration isn't confined to Filipino heroes. Across nations, centuries, and ideologies, widely praised leaders and thinkers cannot escape making mistakes, even when they earnestly pursue liberation.

As libertarians and anarchists, we need look no further than some of the classical luminaries that shaped the early history of our philosophy and movements.

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the first person to declare himself an "anarchist," continues to influence mutualists and market anarchists today. Yet Proudhon expressed sexist, misogynistic, and anti-Semitic ideas—espousing at various points the belief that the choice of a woman was to be "a courtesan or a housekeeper" and that Jewish people are "the enemy of the human race."

Before he arrived at anarchism, at one point Mikhail Bakunin embraced Pan-Slavism as a route to liberation. In the early part of his life, he apparently believed in the necessity of a Tsar and "thought the Tsar was capable of really working with the people, and the people capable of imposing its will on the Tsar through a National Assembly."³ He moved on from this belief, but later, he expressed anti-Semitic ideas, equating the Jewish "sect" with the capitalist financiers and bankers ascendant as capitalism developed in his time.

The Spirit of Their Times

Of course, centuries separate us from those who first upheld anarchist ideas; there are many differences between the society of the 19th century and the world we live in today. Many of the figures who are considered founding fathers (and they are almost always fathers) that our cultures idealize are disappointing in ways that can be explained by the difference in context. They were products of different conditions and circumstances. They were born and raised in the spirit of their times, whether those were peaceful or tumultuous, liberal or reactionary, oppressive or free.

Surely, a laborer from the 19th century wouldn't be as concerned about automation or climate change as much as a present-day worker would. In the same way, an activist from the 21st century won't be able to stomach the views of most Renaissance- or Enlightenment-era people on subjects like sex education, mental health, or discrimination and racism.

A different spirit of their times can also explain the deeds of the ruling class. A capitalist may find it in his best interest to court the investors from one country rather than another, and to be a comprador for a multinational company a quick flight away rather than one across the world, even if their capital has for a long time been invested elsewhere. A politician might support one candidate against another even if they are from opposing parties for the sake of obtaining better spoils in office—or several politicians might alter their alliances to cement their "mandate," demonizing those they used to cozy up to as "terrorists."

Many of those called heroes engaged in admirable battles against the ruling establishment; these may even be worth emulating in form if not in substance. But—especially in the case of those involved in the liberal, "progressive," and socialist milieus of the late 19th and early 20th centuries—most of them simply called for a better state or a "people's state" while ignoring the hierarchies that already existed. Even worse, some appropriated the the state to extend their own power.

They also supported struggles that were eventually rejected or deemed irrelevant by those that these heroes influence in the current day. In the Philippines, for example, no one in their right mind would still want to integrate themselves into an empire as Rizal advocated, certainly not now that the Philippines is nominally independent. Admittedly, more people would like to become citizens of the American Empire than of a Hispanic one.

³ Brian Morris, (1993.) Bakunin: The Philosophy of Freedom, p. 26.

The question remains, then—for what purpose do proponents of the state urge us to hearken back to earlier days? Why do they dredge up memories as if they're reminding us of what the state once stood for, when today they are blatantly on the side of oppression?

It's simple. Those at the helm of state institutions need to shut us up.

Ghosts to Spook Us

Those who rule over us need to alienate us from the tradition of outspokenness and dissent that many heroes fought to uphold. The ruling elite need to shame us into remembering that they brought about the Republic that we live in today. They need to validate themselves to the people, who, if not for inspirational figures like Bonifacio and Luna in the Philippines or a Washington or Jefferson in the so-called United States, would associate their rulers with greed and malice, not the continuation of a Revolution.

The need to validate their rule is exactly why state institutions like the military invoke national heroes. The military graces their training camps with the names of freedom fighters who rejected precisely the indoctrination and moral decay that characterize the soldiers that crowd their barracks.

State bureaucrats and elected officials call upon dead poets and novelists to excuse their attacks on the press and freedom of speech. Today, they have become the colonizers who fight against the same kind of “terrorists” whose role was once instrumental in bringing liberal ideas to the Philippines. While one part of the government of the Philippines was celebrating the death of a man who fought against the religious orders and their censorship, another just passed an anti-terror law that even the frailocracy would have been proud of.

Those in the state remind the people of all the sacrifices that it cost to establish these states, even if the fighters who died decades or centuries ago in the wars of empire and capital were far removed from the pigs and lapdogs that pillage and destroy minority and working-class communities today.

As a result of this sort of indoctrination, not only do we give “established” heroes too much credit, we ignore many other people as we try to examine our history. As the state forces children to learn the birthdates and hometowns of the same people over and over, the teachers gloss over, if not outright obscure, those who are worthy of reflection, both dead and alive.

The Forgotten Ones

There were individuals who were too radical for their times, who supported movements towards independence and autonomy in the Philippines and espoused ideas and beliefs that were simply foreign to people at that time.

In the late 19th century, Europe-educated *Ilustrados* were influenced by liberal ideas about economic freedom, secularization, and liberal democracy. While socialistic and anarchistic practices existed in the Philippines, a truly socialist movement only arose in the Philippines by the return of Isabelo de los Reyes. De los Reyes was exiled by the Spanish colonial authorities to the infamous Montjuïc military prison on the eve of the Philippine revolution. There, he met anarchists who introduced him to anarchist and socialist ideas through books and periodicals. Once he was released, he was further tutored by anarchists and syndicalists, immersing himself in subversive movements in Madrid and Barcelona. These influenced his actions in the Philippine situation, which commenced in 1901 after Aguinaldo's defeat in the Philippine-American War.

While the so-called *sajones*—the American-trained and -educated elite—were taking positions of power and government in the archipelago, de los Reyes, along with Dominador Reyes, Hermenegildo Cruz, and Pascual Poblete, set up the Union Obrero Democratica (UOD), the first labor federation in the country. They federated Manila workers and other Filipinos to agitate for Philippine independence and fight for protective labor laws. The UOD also practiced mutual aid in the form of assistance for the education of children and medical care for the sick and injured. The founding documents of the union were the life and works of Karl Marx and, remarkably, *Entre Campesinos* (*Between Peasants*), an anarchist work by Errico Malatesta.

With the UOD emerged the constellation of socialist and anarchist organizations that continue to fight for the worker, the peasant, and the Filipino against foreign and local aggression and vested interests. Yet barely anyone knows their names today.

There were also others who were simply deemed too different from the mainstream. While some were “too radical,” others’ personalities and identities shut them out of ever becoming famous as heroes. Women, for all their contributions to archipelago-wide insurrections across the centuries, are barely recognized and remembered compared to their male counterparts.

In the hinterlands of the archipelago, where the cross and sword seeped into but not through the indigenous communities, *baliangs*, female shamans, continued to be spiritual crusaders of the native culture, rejecting the Spanish not with arms but with religion. They used their religious icons to sustain their own beliefs in a folk Christianity that remains to this day, subverting the Church and the state. Consequently, though foreign ideas had an influence in the native society, they did not fully permeate it. Rather, these now nameless figures and communities resisted colonialism, preserving the foundation of today’s Philippine culture.

Later, figures like Gabriela Silang of the region of Ilocos led a regional uprising against both the Spanish and British when a front in the Seven Years’ War opened up in the archipelago with the invasion of Manila. Melchora Aquino provided Katipunan rebels with medical assistance and food during the early stages of the 1896 Revolution. Teresa Magbanua and Trinidad Tecson led revolts in their home provinces when the war shifted from fighting Spain to fighting America between 1899 and 1901. Nieves Fernandez and countless other women played an important role in the guerrilla units fighting against Japan in the Second World War. The many guerrilla leaders of the Huks who defeated the Japanese fascists remain unsung in classrooms because the Huks dared to rebel against the post-colonial state as well.

Another significant example of our unknown predecessors are the queer rebel leaders who tried to uphold their cultural and religious traditions as *asogs*, male *baliangs*, who wore female clothing and adopted feminine expression. Largely from the Visayas, these figures were central to both the religious and everyday lives of colonial-era Filipinos who rejected Spanish customs and beliefs.

The rebels Dios Buhawi, Tapar, and Gregorio Lampinio played a part in Visayan history in their resistance to the Spanish Empire. In their revolts, the struggle for indigeneity and cultural autonomy was connected with the equality of women and queer people, whether consciously or not.

People don’t even remember their names, probably because they hear those names only once in fifth-grade Civics class—if they ever hear them at all. They are mentioned as if their contributions to their homelands and the larger struggles in the archipelago were moot, as if nothing really mattered until 1896 and the Philippine Revolution.

In the Modern Day

There are people who are simply deemed insignificant by the “larger society,” who are forgotten and ignored, but who are as important as any of the heroes that stand on pedestals today.

They are the laborers at home and abroad who take on menial work, especially household and domestic jobs—whose only representation comes in court when their bosses insult, abuse, and overwork them.

They are the destabilizers: trade unionists, youth activists, climate advocates, and journalists who are illegally detained, arrested, assaulted, disappeared, found riddled with stab wounds and bullets.

They are the artists and actors who try to open people’s minds to new ideas and new ways to address old problems by means of their own versions of art and culture, yet find themselves castigated or unjustly arrested.

They are those who live under the poverty line, whether they be the fishermen and farmers who worry about their livelihoods being taken away or those living in tenements and shantytowns in the cities who work jobs in the underbelly of the economy like transport, sanitation, and construction.

They are those who become the victims of drug wars, excise taxes, and “development projects” initiated by those who aim to render all their labor useless, to take the value of all they worked for and jack up the prices of commodities to exploit them for what little money they have left.

Without these forgotten heroes, society will not run and will not evolve. Without them, we will lack voices and action to change things in our communities and in the nations we inhabit. None of our “heroes” would exist were it not for the thankless work these people have undertaken for centuries, or even millennia.

Yet those in power will not listen to them. To cave in to the demands of the nameless would mean letting go of their power structures, of the supremacy of their skin tone, of their language, or businesses, or guns and laws. Those in power will never call these unsung people heroes, even if they deserve to be.

The Named and the Nameless

And so we come to the contradiction, the conflict between the named and esteemed of society and the nameless, those forgotten by time and memory. The former are the “great men” that we have discussed at length in this text. The latter are those who have contributed so much to the struggles we take up today, prefiguring, initiating, and continuing the long road in the direction of autonomy, independence, and self-determination.

We are the ones affected by these memories, who remain under the thumb of those who peddle heroes for propaganda. We are those who are working and toiling in the industries across the world providing for the needs and desires of all people, yet who do not receive the value or fruits of our labor. We are those who suffer under the status quo, those who are on the receiving end of the many forms of oppression and exploitation in the world, including race, gender, ability, social standing, education, and language. We are those who, if not for the bread and circuses, the pomp and circumstance in which national heroes play a part, would come to realize how much we have been wronged and how much needs to be made right.

If we continue this line of questioning, we arrive at another question: “Tomorrow, who will be considered the heroes of this time?”

We already know who that will be. It will be the ones who embody the ideals of the current society and its ruling class, or at least the façade of ideals that they have created. It will be the ones who stand in as brand names for the state’s campaign to make authoritarianism look better. The cult around such heroes only underscores how detached the current government is from the spirit of the dispossessed. That blind worship is the reason why those who deserve the same respect and honor for their genuine bravery, skill, and perseverance will remain nameless.

If we continue on this path, those who are pushing for social change and working against the status quo will not be the heroes of the future. Yes, there will always be exceptions—there will always be steps in the right direction, and victories for the causes we champion. But right now, the multitudes who do not wield the power to act for our needs and freedom remain nameless.

We continue the struggle of those who came before us, the struggle for selfhood and dignity, the struggle to see our needs given weight in this society.

What Do We Need?

Many individuals are proclaimed modern-day heroes. This even applies to entire sectors of society—from overseas workers traveling abroad for work, to medical front-liners facing the current pandemic. We call praise them for all they’ve done for us, lauding their courage and valiance. Yet, some would not like to be considered heroes—and truly, calling them all heroes obscures the reality of the situation we live in.

Why is this so? For many, the actions they take for the benefit of those around them at the cost of their own security are forced upon them by problems that our society could easily avoid. These people were simply there when the need manifested itself, whether they liked it or not. They labored under strenuous conditions while still suffering the surveillance of the government, businesses, and the ruling class—the ones who had exacerbated the problems, if not caused them in the first place.

At least as defined herein, heroes don’t need to exist. We can look up to people, respect and remember them, but there is no need to treat anyone like a god, no point in elevating anyone so that it appears futile to achieve what they have.

We don't need perfection, and we definitely don't need an ideal imposed on us so we can work our asses off for the benefit of whoever is profiting on our labor and misery. We don't need martyrs to tell us that the price of our freedom is blood. We don't need soldiers to assure us that our military service will keep our communities together.

We don't need dead authors and orators to show us the power of the written word, the force in every sentence that continues to inspire people to this day.

We don't need judges to know that the thirst for justice and equality shall never cease. And we especially don't need politicians whose reputations obscure the selfish interests they pursued in their lifetimes.

What *do* we need, then?

We need to express appreciation to those who are ignored by their bosses, their landlords, and their governments. We need to show them that they deserve to live and to thrive just like other human beings.

We need to learn more about history, about the movements and conditions that led to the current situation, about how people agitated for social, economic, and political change in the past.

We need to participate in the fight against injustice, aggression, and exploitation in our communities. Every protest, every workshop, every garden, every written work, every assembly we organize, every community we protect is a step in the right direction.

We need to kill our heroes—because legends and stories are ghosts that will scare us into submission to those lording over us. Kill our heroes, because statues and memorials won't rescue us from pain, injury, and death. Kill our heroes because we can't rely on anyone else.

No one can save us but ourselves.

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