

THE RELEVANCE OF MABINI'S SOCIAL IDEAS TO OUR TIMES*

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It is with a combined sense of humility and honor that I address the faculty and students of the Lyceum. There can be no alternative to this attitude since not only is my talk this evening one dealing with the ideas and the mind of a national hero to whom we are all specially beholden, but the main audience represents one of the most concerned student bodies in our country. It is a student force that is playing its expected role of leadership in making the Filipino people move more surely and inevitably towards greater national and social consciousness.

Clearly, no movement can be purposive or can acquire direction, unless it is motivated and guided by certain ideas and principles giving it, as it were, nourishment as well as support. The compelling character of any movement is in the final analysis, a function of the nature and strength of the ideas behind it. Paraphrasing Mabini, the movement of a people is like the energy of an overflowing river which can be destructive unless properly channeled—then and only then can such an energy be converted into something beneficial.¹ Indeed, what harnesses human energies are ideas.

As long as we are still in the process of increasing and intensifying our national consciousness and the further development of a national community, it is necessary and proper to draw those cogent ideas and principles from the common matrix of the thinking of our revolutionary fathers for it is from this matrix that we can discover those forces that initiated the process of our having become an historical people and which opened the gates of nationhood for the Filipinos. It was the Philippine Revolution that transformed the *indio*, previously identified and categorized as a subject of the Spanish monarch or as a ward of Spanish ecclesiastical authorities, into a Filipino, a member of an indigenous national community. During the Spanish regime, the term "Filipino" was reserved for Spaniards born in the Philippines, and what was called "*Filipinas*" was for their benefit as well as for some other Spaniards born in the Peninsula. But persons like Rizal, Bonifacio, and Mabini were among the first to conceive of the transformation of the *indio* into a Filipino. In brief, *Filipinas* was now to be for Filipinos, who were to be the natives of the Archipelago and whose ancestral roots were traceable to those inhabitants living before the Spanish conquest. It is in this important sense that our

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¹ See "A los revolucionarios Filipinos," *La Revolucion Filipina*, Vol. I, p. 102.

revolutionary fathers were the first to conceive of the notion of a Filipino national community. But more than this, each helped to bring it about in the manner provided by their particular genius. This evening, we shall deal with a few of the ideas of Mabini relevant to particular problems of the national community.

First of all I would like to emphasize that Mabini was the political philosopher *par excellence* during the Philippine Revolution and probably the most comprehensive, so far, that our people had produced. Recognizing that the basic problem in all political philosophy in its attempt to formulate the conditions for social order and progress is that of political obligation, he analyzed this problem and deduced from it all its ramifications until he was led to formulate a generally consistent theory. This enabled him to understand further the meaning of the Revolution and devise practical programs to render some of his theoretical principles operative. Starting with a conception of man and society and assuming natural law as a postulate, Mabini traced the social function of government and then justified the existence of this institution in terms of Man's nature and the character of social relations. It was on this basis that he presented a theory of, and justification for, revolution.

Mabini's social and political ideas can be presented into two categories: The first deals with the individual as Man. Here, regardless of regional, racial, national and religious qualifications, the individual is viewed as an organism with intellectual and moral capacities and equipped with the natural impulses to develop these capacities. And whatever obstructs the development of these capacities means to Mabini, the absence of freedom. Besides developing moral and intellectual capacities of the individual, society must provide a system of relations established primarily to satisfy mutual economic wants. The second category, less abstract than the first and closely related to empirical and historical data, deals with the aspirations and expectations of a particular people whose problems are such that, if unsolved would prevent them from attaining those ends which properly belong to them as men. It is in terms of this distinction that the concluding section of Mabini's *Decalogue* can be better understood:

. . . as long as there are national frontiers erected and maintained by the selfishness of races and dynasties, to him [that is, to one's countryman] you ought to unite in a perfect solidarity of purposes and interests, to have strength, not only to fight the common enemy but also to realize all the ends of human life.²

The implications of this prescription is that in the historical phase wherein Filipinos found themselves, it was only through nationalism, in the sense of the need of forming a national community, that they will be able to solve their social problems and do away with those obstacles to be able to enjoy what properly constitute human ends. In simpler terms,

² "El Verdadero Decalogo," *ibid.*, p. 107.

nationalism is not an end in itself but simply a means to bring about that social order that makes possible human ends, more specifically the development of the intellectual and moral energies of a people.

With your kind indulgence, I would like to digress further on this matter. First of all Mabini considered that the relation between the colonizer and colonized was marked essentially by oppression and exploitation. To keep this relation which is plainly to the advantage of the colonizer, the colonizer must limit the liberties of the colonized, control his education, and keep him dependent economically. In effect, the colonizer generates that social situation which is precisely the negation of that atmosphere of freedom vitally needed for a person to develop his intellectual and moral faculties. We must remember that Mabini was born as a colonial subject of a Mother country that was in its last throes as an empire and where the will to rectify colonial mismanagement was almost absent. On account of personal experiences as well as those of his friends, he concluded that a colonial situation was irreversibly incompatible with the freedom of the individual as Man—freedom to develop one's talents and inner energies, freedom to enjoy the right to life and security, a chance to have the best possible education, and opportunities to contribute not only to the progress of one's own people but to that of mankind as well. Consequently, Mabini, in the light of his colonial experience, was led to the belief that the independence of his people was a fundamental prerequisite to their individual freedom; this in turn was needed if Filipinos were to do their share in contributing to the progress of Humanity.

A facile answer to what could be done with the obstacles is: Do away with the exploiters! But this is not possible unless the exploited first of all become conscious of their conditions and then by means of a unity of purposes and interests transform themselves into a community strong enough to do away with, what Mabini called, the common enemy. The community formed, while exemplifying an organized force with a better chance for successful ventures, would also serve as a sanction for the use of coercive action.

According to Mabini, the aim of all government, if it is to be legitimate and thus would deserve the name, is to secure "*la mayor suma de libertades, conocimientos, bienes y seguridades para los ciudadanos.*"³ What is here succinctly stated can be interpreted to mean that the government had to grant to the citizens the greatest number possible of political rights, the best form of education, and maximum satisfaction of economic needs and security. Since Mabini assumed that a colonial government was incompatible with such aims, he believed that only through the instrumentality of a national community would such aims of government be operative, provided that, naturally, the national community was working within the context of independence.

³ "La Trinidad Política", *ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 69.

Again, it can be clearly seen that independence was also a means and not an end in itself. Moreover, although it was a necessary condition, it was not sufficient to bring about good government. Here Mabini evidently followed the warning of Rizal about the possibility of the native slaves of today becoming the governing tyrants of the morrow. Mabini believed, nay, wished, that patriotism or love of country, moral consideration for each other, a life of reason and virtue, and loyalty to a greater whole, in this case the national community, will push to the background all exploitation and bring about the blurring of class differences. Herein lies one of the meanings of his *Decalogue*. This aimed to bring about a social consciousness among the people within the framework of a political structure such that when an individual willed a certain good, it would be for the good of the national community and not merely for individual, family or sectional interests.

Mabini probably wrote his *Decalogue* in the first few months of 1898. However, after many months of experience as an official dealing with many of his countrymen, especially those with high government offices or economic interests, he arrived at the sad discovery, as we shall see later, that the exercise of the will for the good of all was a difficult one especially when it ran counter to personal, family, class or institutional interests.

Mabini had no second thoughts about prescribing and justifying a revolution against any foreign rule. In the early part of 1898, justifying the revolution against Spain he wrote:

A revolution is always just, if it tries to destroy a government that is foreign and a usurper.⁴

Although he was relatively more prudent and moderate prescribing revolution against a national government, he justified it under certain conditions:

A revolution against a national government or one composed of elements of the country is also just, if such government abuses the power placed at its disposal by the people for the purpose of the administration of justice, and uses this power to drown out the public voice and to administer to its caprice and convenience.⁵

After the defeat of the Filipino revolutionary forces in the field of battle on account of superior American military forces, and while Mabini was in exile at Guam, he was able to reflect on the causes, strength, weaknesses, and decline of the Revolution. Possibly thinking of the divisive forces that plagued the Revolution and those men who tried to take advantage of the Revolution to perpetuate their own interests, he was able to analyse and describe some of those factors that do bring about revolutions. This time, he was not prescribing or rationalizing a revolution, but simply approaching the subject as a social scientist. This is what he wrote:

⁴ "Ordenanzas de la Revolucion," *ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 108.

⁵ *Ibid.*

The possibility must be taken into account that a powerful and unscrupulous class might exploit the ignorance or corruption of its compatriots to further its own particular interests. In such a case, the revolution will worsen rather than improve conditions.⁶

. . . .
when a government produces the stagnation of a people to perpetuate its own interests or that of a particular class . . . a revolution is inevitable.⁷

It is to be noticed here that Mabini was using the term "government", not in its most abstract sense, but to refer to a group of officials charged with the administration of government. In this sense Mabini looks at government as possibly constituting itself as a special segment (or elite) in society with particular interests of its own not necessarily identical with those of the country. He also suggests that the government may be allied with a particular class in society precisely because it might belong to this very class. It clearly appears that Mabini by 1900 had lost the political innocence he evinced during the early days of the Revolution in 1898. This makes his message to us the more important.

It will be recalled that at the start of the Revolution in 1898, Mabini believed or hoped that with independence, the circumstances would be such that a good national government, in accordance with his criteria already discussed, would ensue or at least be possible within the foreseeable future. Such an optimistic attitude is explained by the revolutionary fervor and the hope for the reconstruction of social relations that filled the minds of the revolutionists. But after a year or so, it clearly appears that Mabini was not so sure anymore that independence necessarily implied what he considered to be a good government. The early optimism of Mabini can be further explained by at least three of his premises. The first is that man's natural impulse to progress will lead him to destroy any obstacle hindering this progress. The second is that in the face of a common danger, coupled with a love of country and mutual love, the people would thrust aside all class and regional differences. The third, closely related to the second, provides that the conception of a greater good, that of the community, will make men sublimate their personal interests to it.

If Mabini were asked now why independence might fail and could not rise to the kind of government he had in mind as well as the absence of exploitation by fellow nationals, he would answer unequivocally. Those people, who, in effect, comprise the government, have failed to conceive of the general good of the national community especially when this good ran counter to their personal or family interests. These are the persons, too, who have used their positions not for social service but as means to cater to selfish aims.

⁶ "La Revolucion Filipina," *ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 275.

⁷ *Ibid.*

A second question to be raised is whether the people can develop this conception. Although Mabini worked to generate this conception by means of his writings and personal example, most of his exhortations were directed to the leaders of the Revolution. Certainly his *Decalogue* was for all and his educational programs were to universalize this conception. But since time was of the essence, he had to concentrate on the leaders. He might have believed, too, that the example of working for the good of all had to come from the political leaders of the country. This makes sense, I believe. The reason is that it would be very difficult for the generality of the people to develop this conception by themselves unless they are concerned that they are the beneficiaries of the social system and have come to feel at the same time that there is no discrimination against them, that is, the system of social relations has not been used to serve the interests of special segments of society. To Mabini, when a government is truly serving the interest of the whole populace, its successes as well as its failures must be shared by all the members of the body politic. Reflecting on the failure of the Revolution, he expressed great disappointment on the actions of revolutionary soldiers who committed great abuses on the civilian population, particularly with their acts of violence on women. He blamed the soldiers for their lack of discipline and the officers for the absence of the decision or even inclination to punish cases of immorality. The more serious charge was against the top ranking leaders of the revolutionary movement, specially those who acquired their leadership "not by meritorious acts but by reprehensible means."⁸ Believing that every person, however humble, can do his bit for the national cause, Mabini pointed out as one of the causes of the revolution were the presence of those persons who presumed that "they could not serve their country except on an elevated position."⁹ This attitude, Mabini added, was dangerous to the common welfare. There were other causes enumerated by Mabini for which time does not allow us to discuss. At bottom, all what Mabini was telling us is that national failures are caused by immoralities, selfishness, and presumptions found in all segments of society, especially among the leaders.

Everything that we have discussed so far if properly analyzed presents a dilemma or, worse, a vicious circle. If the political leaders of a country do not conceive of, or act in, terms of the good of the national community, or if they act for their own benefit or that of a special segment in society, then clearly the social relations of the country will not redound to the benefit of the people. If the people come to discover that social relations are not for their benefit but for a special segment of society, that is, they judge their society as an unequal society, then how can they be expected to be loyal to a national community or even conceive of it

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 318.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 321.

or its good? And if there is no conception of a national community among the people, where is that higher good to which they are supposed to work for and to which they are expected to sublimate their personal or selfish interests? How can such people emplace in power leaders who possess the will for the good of all, when they themselves do not have this will, much less recognize it in others? The vicious circle can be broken. In our country things are not as bad as the theoretical situation presented in the above argument. The vicious circle had been disrupted by our great national heroes and at present its destruction may be slow, but sure.

To understand this vicious circle, it is necessary to know what a national community connotes, and to make a distinction between its conception and actual realization or operative character. A national community is not a concrete object that can be seen; nor is it a mere collection of individuals. As conceived by our revolutionary fathers, especially Rizal and Mabini, a national community is a collection of individuals related to one another by racial affinities as well as by a common history of suffering, aspirations, and expectations, and where all individuals, over and above their love of the country of their birth, have certain attitudes in common. Among these attitudes are the desire to develop the intellectual and moral faculties for the benefit of all, pride in the achievements of other members of the community, the absence of shame on the results of one's labors and inner energies, refusal to accept any form of injustice even if one could profit from it, not to take advantage of any other member of the community, and above all to be ready to give up one's life in the defense of those rights that are believed to belong to any member of the community. All these can be condensed into the following: In a national community each member when he wills, wills for the good of the whole community as against personal, family, or particular or segmental interests.

So far we have been dealing with a conception. In actual life, a national community is always in the process of becoming, as it were, in a flux. To put it in another form, a community can be in the process of becoming more and more of a national community; and the criteria for this is the accommodation of more and more of the elements of a national community as well as an intensification of those already existing. The conception of a national community is an ideal or at most a model.

The problem at hand is not whether we Filipinos now have formed ourselves into a national community. It is rather how much of the elements of a national community are present as well as how they are being intensified and whether other elements are slowly entering into the conception of a national community.

The problem as stated assumed that to some degree we are a national community; but, from another point of view, we are not yet a highly developed one at least from the model presented. Let us first deal with the positive

aspect of the problem. The fact that we have national heroes is a tacit admission that these men have helped bring about a national community — at least in its beginnings. Many of them had sacrificed personal interests for the benefit of others while some did die that the conception might be realized. Who will deny now that Mabini played his part in bringing about the national community? And when he wrote once about the Filipinos being on the threshold of a national life, he implied that there was now something achieved which was previously absent during the Spanish regime. The fact that we have had honest judges, especially in the highest tribunals, brave prosecutors, dedicated teachers and social workers, soldiers who had willingly given their lives in battle, honest and hardworking civil servants, vigilant student bodies, thinkers like Recto, etc., citizens willing to testify in court in spite of threats to their lives or those of their nearest kin, etc., and etc., all demonstrate that we do have many of the elements of a national community. We need not belabor this point.

Though the negative aspects of the balance sheet are depressing, it is not entirely hopeless. What can be said when members of the legislative branch vote for themselves higher salaries when money is needed for other neglected problems of the community? And when this action, plus the obstruction of bills that will harm special interests as well as the passing of laws that favor certain groups against others, begins to be resented by a great number of people, will not this situation lead the people to look down at some government officials as forming a special segment in society? And worse still, when political parties differ from each other, not in the attempts to help bring about the social good, but in their mad contest to grasp political power and use it for their benefit, is this not a sign that there are leaders in our country who have failed to conceive of the good of the community? The high existence of crime is also an index to the low social and community consciousness on the part of our population. Most of these criminals are generally victims of lack of a good education and lack of opportunities for economic betterment, some of them are victims of bad example when they see others appropriating for themselves what is illegal, or when they watch officials use governmental power for their personal benefits. Added to all these, is their calculation that when they get into trouble, there will be someone powerful enough to protect them. All these constitute the sheer lack of the will for the good of the national community. I take it that I need not dwell further on these details.

The increase of social and national consciousness must be through the agency of those persons who, by virtue of their education and sensitivity to inequalities, can emancipate themselves from petty interests to be able to conceive of the social good. Mabini always looked up to the educated segment to provide ideas, direction, and support of the revolutionary movement. Although he was later on disappointed with the actions of many of the

relatively educated leaders, his general principle is still valid, especially now when it is no longer true that education is a monopoly of the relatively more opulent groups in our society. It is up to the educated segment of our country, especially the youth belonging to this segment, that must develop the will for the good of the national community. They can do this in political participation. By electing into office only of those who have learned to exercise this will, the educated youth of our land do not only serve as the conscience to the community but help bring new elements into what would constitute a national community.

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