

## A Second Life for a Hero: Reimagining José Rizal in a New Era

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**Abstract.** This text tried to reflect upon the single presentation of Round Table #3 at the ‘What If’23 International Conference of ‘What If?...’. The theme was “A Visionary Unveiled: The Unforeseen Journey of José Rizal” by Maria Minerva P. Calimag, revolving around the well-known medic, writer, and polymath from late colonial Spanish rule in the Philippines. By hypothesising a Rizal awakened in another dimension or parallel universe, Calimag imagines him linked to medical achievements such as establishing institutions (hospitals, medicine schools) and policies (universal health care, preventive and promotive health).

Keywords: José Rizal; Nationalism; Literature; Medicine; Counterfactual

### 1. Introduction

The ‘What If’23 3rd International Conference of ‘What If?...’ World History, held from 22-24 November 2023, in Porto and online, gathered several researchers and artists dealing with the counterfactual. It was possible to engage in a fruitful dialogue regarding various of subjects, such as attitudes toward death, business consulting, food history, and the so-called visions of Fatima, among other exciting never (fully) materialised by History. Several lecturers were invited, some of them maintaining a strong connection to virtual history, such as Pedro Cipriano and Rogério Ribeiro.

The Oral Presentation Round Table #3 from the conference, which took place online, was the last session [1]. In that particular, there was only one speaker, Maria Minerva P. Calimag, professor of Medicine at the University of Santo Tomas in Manila, Philippines. Calimag specialised in several areas, such as Palliative Care, Ethnopharmacology, Educational Management, Health Informatics, and Health Policy. She is the author of dozens of articles spread over a period that goes back to the 1980s, and she is editor-in-chief of the *Philippine Journal of Anaesthesiology* and associate editor of some others. She presided over several medical associations and was awarded on numerous occasions.

Her interest in counterfactuality is well known, and in 2021, she published a paper in *Hypothesis Historia Periodical* regarding Anaesthesiology and the then-recent pandemic surge of COVID-19 [2]:

Through a fictional tale that allows W. T. G. Morton to travel in time, he is transported into the modern world, and an alternate history of the development of the specialty is written. In the present time, Morton realizes that the field of Anesthesiology he jumpstarted has expanded beyond his expectations, especially during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. By focusing on the philosophical and sociological underpinnings and on ethical evidence-based medicine, a holistic view of the Specialty of Anesthesiology is created.

There, Maria Minerva P. Calimag highlighted “important figures like Robert Fogel, Geoffrey Hawthorn, Niall Ferguson, and Richard Evans” as its main influences. She also stressed the famous essay by Winston Churchill (1874-1965) [3] in which the British statesman asks in a twisted counterfactual device, “what would have happened if Robert Edward Lee had not won the battle of Gettysburg” [1 p.73]<sup>1</sup>. In other words, sometimes at the risk of being confused with a very popular fictional literary genre, counterfactual history, as its name suggests, aims to ask the question “what if” to the facts. Not always taken seriously by historiography, with the exception well-established fields of economics and military studies, counterfactuality, according to the mentioned Niall Ferguson, allows us, nevertheless, to challenge and question important dimensions such as possibility, causality and inevitability [4].

During the 2023 roundtable, the presentation entitled “A Visionary Unveiled: The Unforeseen Journey of José Rizal”, and the following discussion revolved around a fellow Filipino doctor and writer from the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## 2. Between Medicine, Politics, and Literature

### 2.1. Life and Death of a Revolutionary

José Protasio Rizal Mercado y Alonso Realonda (1861-1896), better known as José Rizal, is a significant figure on the Philippine road to independence. He was brought up in a large family with roots in China, Japan, and Spain. He began writing poetry early on and critical essays on the negative Spanish views of the pre-colonial period. Starting studying philosophy in Manila, he soon switched to medicine, specialising in ophthalmology. In the early 1880s, he continued his studies in Europe, attending lectures in Madrid, Paris, and Heidelberg. Interested in many other areas, such as painting, sculpture, cartography, anthropology, and literature, Rizal is sometimes considered a polymath [5]. In this sense, it is worth adding that this multiplicity of interests and activities continued and expanded after Rizal’s stay in Europe. In particular, during his exile in Dapitan (1892-1896), on the island of Mindanao, a place nowadays known as the Rizal Park and Shrine [6].

However, even after Rizal returned to the Philippines in 1892, he became involved in politics, emphasising the need for liberalising reforms based on militant nationalism. In fact, two of his works have become emblematic: *Noli Me Tángere* [Touch Me Not] (1887) and *El Filibusterismo* [usually translated as The Reign of Greed] (1891). Both novels, written in Castilian, deal with emerging Filipino nationalism in the face of Spanish colonialism. Seeking to rehabilitate, as it were, indigenous culture, as well as denounce the flaws of Spanish rule, the two novels constitute a diptych that greatly influenced contemporary Filipino society [7]. It is well known that *Noli me Tangere*, published in Berlin, was translated several times shortly afterwards. It’s worth mentioning that the translation into Portuguese (from Brazil), in 1911, with the title *O País dos Frades* [The Country of the Friars], circulated in left-wing circles and was mentioned by *A Sementeira*, the leading Portuguese anarchist newspaper of the time [8 p.xxi].

Despite advocating for moderate social reform, Rizal was arrested in 1896 following his supposed connection to the Katipunan, a secret society involved in an insurrection against Spanish rule (1896-1898). In fact, his connections to the Katipunan are uncertain and were likely instrumental for both the nationalist rebels (as a source of inspiration) and the Spanish rulers (as a reason for the imprisonment and trial of a well-known opponent). Moreover, during his presentation, Calimag stressed that Rizal did not favour an armed revolution. Nevertheless, accused and tried for rebellion, sedition, and conspiracy, he was sentenced to death on 30 December 1896. His final poem, written shortly before his execution

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<sup>1</sup> This revisionist idea was emulated or replicated in several other texts. See, for example, from a military point of view: McPherson J 2001 *If the Lost Order Hadn’t Been Lost What If: Military historians imagine what might have been* (London: Pan Books) ed R Cowley pp. 223-238.

by a firing squad, *Mi Último Adiós* [My Last Farewell], reinforced his status as a martyr and a national hero. From the fourteen stanzas, here's the first one:

Adiós, Patria adorada, región del sol querida,  
Perla del mar de oriente, nuestro perdido Edén!  
A darte voy alegre la triste mustia vida,  
Y fuera más brillante, más fresca, más florida,  
También por ti la diera, la diera por tu bien<sup>2</sup>.

However, after the Spanish-American War of 1898 and the Philippine-American War of 1899-1902, the archipelago came under Washington's administration. Invaded by Japan on 8 December 1941, a few hours after the bombing of the Pearl Harbour naval base, the Philippines would only be liberated by the Allies in the 1944-1945 campaign [8 p. xvi]. Rizal's homeland only gained complete independence in 1946. To this day, Rizal retains his status as a national hero. Both the American administration and the Japanese temporary rule endorsed this status. In fact, the Rizal Monument, a memorial in Manila, was built during the American administration. It is also important to stress that their books are mandatory in Philippines schools.

## 2.2. The Premise

In 1999, the Finnish composer Einojuhani Rautavaara (1928-2016) presented his Eight Symphony entitled *The Journey*. This piece of music, commissioned by the Philadelphia Orchestra, departs from the earlier and very popular symphony, the so-called *Angel of Light* (1994) [9]. In any case, the Eighth Symphony is a *journey* through the human soul and has recalled one of the best-known urban myths in classical music: the “curse of the Ninth (symphony)” [10]. In a word, after Ludwig van Beethoven's (1770-1827) Ninth, several composers, such as Franz Schubert (1797-1828), Anton Bruckner (1824-1896), Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904), Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) [11] and Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958), died before reaching a Tenth Symphony. The legend still states that all of them gave their final, sometimes incomplete Ninths, or unfinished Tenths, a visionary tone, as if from the Beyond [12]. The legend certainly doesn't stand up to the evidence since Dimitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) wrote fifteen symphonies, and Leif Segerstam (b. 1944), who is still active, wrote 371 symphonies (as of January 2024)! It's also worth mentioning that Rautavaara died without producing a Ninth.

In any case, cinema has also been fueled by the what if of the “last” work, the incomplete work or the work only dreamed of. Two recent films, *Napoleon* (2023) by Ridley Scott (b. 1937) and *Dune* (2024) by Dennis Villeneuve (b. 1967), undoubtedly echoes two of the most famous films never filmed: Stanley Kubrick's (1928-1999) *Napoleon* and Alejandro Jodorovský's (b. 1929) *Dune*.

The list would be even longer in literature, and here it should be noted that Rizal also left an incomplete novel entitled *Makamisa* [After Mass]. The manuscript was only discovered in 1987 in a collection of his papers. In reality, only ten pages were written. This time, the language used was Tagalog, but Rizal returned to the themes of his previous novels. This would have been a first what if (what if Rizal had finished his third novel?), but it wasn't fully explored in Maria Minerva Calimag's presentation, which dealt instead with the return of Rizal from the grave, “when he realizes that he is alive and has entered another dimension... a multiverse”.

However, since Calimag hasn't yet written a short story, an article, or even a novel about Rizal's new life, we can also think of the device of the infinity mirror. Take, for instance, Yakoy Kusama's (b. 1929) Infinity Mirror Room installation at Tate or the film *Inception* (2010) by Christopher Nolan (b. 1970), when Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Ariadne (Elliot Page) face countless versions of themselves reflected in two gigantic aligned mirrors. One could only guess Rizal's second life, imagining scenario

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<sup>2</sup> A free translation of this first moving stanza: Farewell, my adored homeland, region of the beloved sun, / Pearl of the orient sea, our lost Eden! / With gladness I'm going to give you my sad, sad life, / And it would be brighter, fresher, more flowery, / I'd give it for you too, I'd give it for your sake.

upon scenario, like the mirrors. One thing is for sure: according to Calimag, the Filipino national hero will devote more time to medicine this time. What if Calimag wrote a novel or article about Rizal?

### 2.3. What if Calimag wrote a novel or article about Rizal?

The hypothesis of Rizal devoting more to medicine than politics in a more auspicious era than the colonial rule can be related to the symphonic poem *Balada Blanická* [Ballad of Blaník] composed in 1920 by Leoš Janáček (1854-1928). The piece is based on a Czech legend of warriors asleep on a mountain. As in other similar legends, such as King Arthur (England) or King Sebastian (Portugal) [13], these warriors will wake up to save the country in time of need. But in contrast to other musical adaptations, such as Bedřich Smetana's (1824-1884) *Má Vlast* [My Fatherland], in which the warriors symbolise the struggle for independence, Janacek's version updates the legend's original purpose. Composed in 1920, at the time of the independence of Czechia, the sleeping warriors on the mountain awaken and swap their swords for ploughshares, contributing to the country's future [14]. Indeed, almost the same can be said of this new Rizal. Reborn in an independent country facing the future with hope, or even in more recent times, his gaze could reach new horizons. In the words of Calimag herself: "he is about to embark on another voyage and mapping an uncharted territory for Philippine Medicine". In this sense, using tools not fully disclosed by Calimag's vision, as the text is yet to come, Rizal will devise a way to develop health institutions, such as hospitals and medicine schools, and envisage policies to achieve universal health care. It should be remembered that the creation of Universal Health Care is a recent development in the Philippines, hence the expectations [15]. In any case, we should consider the possibility of Rizal getting involved in politics again in order to fulfil his health care vision. Moreover, Calimag is willing to interview him on this subject in the multiverse.

It also discussed an alternate scenario from the American science fiction television series *Sliders* (1995-2000), which revolved around four characters trying to return home after an experiment to navigate between parallel universes [16]. Among the 88 episodes of the five seasons, it's worth mentioning several, more and less, disturbing realities, especially from the American point of view: a universe in which the American Constitution had been revoked; a universe under alien invasion; a universe in which the United States of America did not become independent; a universe where the Soviet Union won the Cold War; a universe in which Alexander the Great failed to conquer Egypt, allowing the kingdom of the pharaohs to take over most of the world; and so forth. In this particular case, it's important to stress a somewhat prophetic episode, anticipating both the year 2020 and the increased resistance of bacteria to antibiotics: a universe ravaged by a pandemic known as Q, in which penicillin was never discovered [17]<sup>3</sup>. In that episode, these four "strangers in a strange land" follow Alexander Fleming's (1881-1955) footsteps and "discover" the cure.

In any event, a novel or article about Rizal set in the present day would have to deal with new and contemporary elements, such as artificial intelligence (AI), environmental issues, and the new challenges posed by technology to ethics. Above all, in a period of peace but far from a "golden age", it would be essential to ask whether Rizal would devote himself to medicine or continue to be interested in his many endeavours that made him a polymath. That would be a major what if within the literary what if of Calimag's proposal.

### 3. Conclusion

I have just a few remarks to add to this final section. The discussion with Maria Minerva P. Calimag provided insight into José Rizal's biography, references, and influences in the field of counterfactualty, as well as part of the project she intends to carry out around the Filipino icon.

Having lived in a time of profound change in his homeland, Rizal nevertheless managed to build a career in medicine, devoted himself to many other passions, wrote novels, and was an activist for native rights, struggling against Spanish colonial rule. His early death, due to his activism, did not allow him

<sup>3</sup> A scientific "what if" of this(non)discovery could be found in Alharbi S. et alli 2014 []

to pursue all these passions. In this sense, one could also ask, if Rizal hadn't died so early, what could he have accomplished?

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