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Cultures of Empire, Nation, and Universe in Pres. José P. Laurel's Political Thought, 1927–1949

In order to refigure the period of Japanese occupation along a longer historical narrative of Filipino resistance to foreign domination, this article examines the mobilization and definition of the Filipino nation vis-à-vis Western imperialism and empire in the political thought of the wartime Philippine president and Japanese “collaborator” José P. Laurel. In order to elucidate the historical genealogies and legacies of empire informing his thought, this article reconstructs and interrogates his universalism against his nationalism and his construction of Pan-Asianism and the Orient against that of Western imperialism and the Occident.

KEYWORDS: PAN-ASIANISM · LAUREL · IMPERIALISM · NATIONALISM · UNIVERSALISM

The entrenched, orthodox Philippine narrative of the Second World War, inflected with the salvific *pasyon* scaffolding that undergirds much narrative interpretation of Philippine history, presents the Japanese occupation of the islands as a Dark Age that shattered the golden period of American colonial peace, prosperity, and tutelage toward independence. Reynaldo C. Ileto (2007, 84) writes that Pres. Sergio Osmeña “spoke of Douglas MacArthur’s return as a repetition of his father Arthur’s arrival in 1898 to free the Philippines from Spain,” and that Pres. Elpidio Quirino asked Filipinos “[w]hat was the ‘Death March’ . . . if not the common *pasyon* or Christ-like suffering and death, of Filipinos and Americans?” Yet not all Filipinos viewed Douglas MacArthur’s fulfilled promise in 1945 as the redemptive return of their liberating savior. One of those Filipinos was wartime president and Japanese “collaborator” José P. Laurel.

This article aims to examine how, in his rhetoric and thought, Laurel mobilized and defined the Filipino nation vis-à-vis that of Western imperialism and empire. Eschewing the issue of collaboration that tends to obscure and dismiss Laurel, this article analyzes Laurel’s philosophical negotiation with empire and reconstructs his embedded positions on the Orient/“Asia,”¹ nation and race, universalism and civilization, and imperialism and Pan-Asianism. It identifies the intellectual continuities and coherence in Laurel’s thought across time in order to weigh Laurel’s contribution to Filipino political thought and intellectual history. This approach is in keeping with the historiography on Laurel, which consistently perceives a unity—rather than phased development or sharp differences across time—between his prewar and postwar thinking (Agpalo 1965, 1992; Gripaldo 1982, 2006; Steinberg 2000). This inquiry departs, however, from existing scholarship on Laurel’s political philosophy, such as the works of Remigio E. Agpalo (1965, 1992) and Rolando Gripaldo (1982, 2006), which mainly (a) analyzes Laurel’s stated positions on “assertive Filipinism,”² public morality, and the best form of government—all of which are seen to emanate from his interpretation of the nature of man—and (b) examines them against his public career and historical background. In contrast, this article investigates how Filipino history informed his philosophical thought, to see how empire and imperial history writ large influenced his views on “nation,” “civilization,” and “race,” which appear as naturalized entities in his thinking.

Pan-Asianism and Laurel’s Nationalism

At once a political ideology and a wishful vision of solidarity, Pan-Asianism sought to transcend and harness the national in its formulation of an anticolonial, anti-Western, alternate world order. From the 1870s until the 1920s, before the Japanese empire officially endorsed Pan-Asianism, there were common predominant features across Pan-Asianist thought but no central, unified ideology among its non-Japanese adherents. “Asia” was not a stable intellectual, geopolitical, or cultural container. To the earliest theorists of Pan-Asianism in Japan and China in the 1870s, the Sinic world explicitly and exclusively delimited their projected “Asia.” However, certain anticolonialists and nationalists across Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East appropriated and reinterpreted Pan-Asianism in their local contexts, successively enlarging the heuristic definition of “Asia” to include all oppressed, non-Western nations struggling against Western imperialism.

Pan-Asianism emerged in the mid-nineteenth century as leaders and thinkers in China and Japan attempted to redefine their formerly isolated countries within the new international political order that had been dominated by European imperialist powers (Saaler and Koschmann 2007, 3). Pan-Asianism featured an element of anti-Westernism in its evaluation of modernity, Westernization, and the international order (Aydin 2007, 3). This anti-Westernism was born, however, of Japanese intellectuals’ prior acceptance of the universality of Western civilization. According to Cemil Aydin (*ibid.*, 7), they had “constructed an abstract image of the West that became a central pillar in their visions of world order and their assessments of intensifying global interactions.” They devised this image and at the same time reacted against it.

The non-Western elites’ encounter with European exceptionalist narratives and the racial barriers that circumscribed the West’s application and understanding of Enlightenment ideals crucially delegitimized the Eurocentric world order (*ibid.*, 8). This delegitimization impelled Japanese intellectuals to construct a more inclusive concept of global civilization and an alternative discourse of civilization and race (*ibid.*). Japanese reform projects centered on the idea of a universal modernity that confronted Europeans’ exclusive identification of progress with the white race and belief that the culture of Christianity accounted for Western superiority. From these debates emerged the alternate vision of an international order centered

on Pan-Asian solidarity in opposition to Western imperialism. The idea of a “common destiny” across Asia—to challenge Western imperialism—became the intellectual vehicle through which Southeast Asian Pan-Asianists expanded the prior Sinic world delimitation of Pan-Asianism to allow it to include other parts of oppressed “Asia,” particularly after the Russo–Japanese War (1904–1905) (Saaler and Koschmann 2007, 10).

This article, through an analysis of Laurel’s thinking on Asia, empire, nation, and universe, interrogates this vision in the Philippine context. It highlights the textures of Laurel’s thinking that deeply paralleled those of Pan-Asianist and Social Darwinist thinkers in Southeast Asia, such as in Vietnam, seeking to draw out these threads in a way that the existing literature does not. Further, it renders his political philosophy comparable with those of other Southeast Asian Pan-Asianists with whom he is not usually compared, such as Aung San, Sukarno, and Son Ngoc Thanh. As with other Pan-Asianists, Laurel’s Asianism and Pan-Asianism were above all aimed at nationalist ends, and at times Laurel instrumentalized Pan-Asianism for their achievement.

Agpalo and Gripaldo mentioned the Orient in Laurel’s thought but did not dwell on it. Gripaldo (1982, 534) recounted that, as president, Laurel’s educational and cultural policy “was to instill in the minds of the people the idea that they were Orientals and should act and think as such.”³ For his part, Agpalo (1965, 190) underscored that Laurel’s lasting contribution to philosophical thought laid in his capacity to absorb and synthesize both Eastern and Western thought. While these interpretations centrally embed the influence of what Laurel believed to be the “East” in his philosophical thought and legacy, they fail to interrogate what that entity of the “East” entails.

Laurel’s thinking on the East was deeply intertwined with his thinking on race, another naturalized entity in his thought that Steinberg, Gripaldo, and Agpalo have not directly interrogated. Steinberg (1967, 77), quoting Laurel, stated that he was “concerned with the importance of ‘racial pride in shaping the destiny of a nation,’ which he believed had been critical in Japan’s stunning Meiji-era achievements.” This statement was a loaded assertion on Laurel’s part, as it explicitly drew a racial and Social Darwinist framework onto both Meiji history and his prognosis of the Philippines’s future. Laurel’s understanding of morality as the guide not only for domestic governance but also for international relations mediated his Social Darwinism, from which



Fig. 1. José P. Laurel as acting chairman of the Constitutional Convention in 1934

Source: JPLMF Archives Inventory Series 14, Box 1, Env. 8

one may extract Laurel’s thinking on empire and imperialism.⁴ Indeed, Laurel’s personal history positioned him between and alongside the three main imperial powers that had occupied the Philippines, making empire a central presence in both his thought and life.

Historical Background and the Japanese Example

José Laurel’s family had been embroiled in the Philippine Revolution against both Spain and the United States. José was the son of Sotero Laurel Sr., an official in Pres. Emilio Aguinaldo’s revolutionary government and a signatory to the 1899 Malolos Constitution. Before the Second World War, José received a Doctor of Civil Laws degree from Yale University and served in the Philippine Commonwealth as a senator and associate justice of the Philippine Supreme Court. Yet, José sent one of his sons to study at the Imperial Military Academy in Tokyo from 1934 to 1937; José also received an honorary doctorate from Tokyo University, publicly praised certain Japanese institutions, and maintained close relationships with Japanese officials, even serving as a prewar lobbyist for Japanese business interests (*ibid.*, 74). He was a strong critic of US rule in the Philippines even as he served in the Commonwealth government (fig. 1).

The Japanese forces invaded the Philippines on 8 December 1941 as part of their confrontation with the US and in pursuit of widening Japan's Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere from East to Southeast Asia. Bombing American military bases in the Philippines, landing at three points in Luzon, and approaching Manila, the Japanese took the capital on 2 January 1942, then Bataan and Corregidor in April–May. The Commonwealth government-in-exile under Pres. Manuel L. Quezon and Vice Pres. Sergio Osmeña arrived in San Francisco on 8 May 1942 and installed itself in the US (Agpalo 1992, 184–85). The Japanese Military Administration established the Philippine Executive Commission on 23 January 1942. After holding a series of posts in this transitory government, Laurel became president of the Second Republic of the Philippines when Japan granted Philippine “independence” on 14 October 1943.

As president, Laurel (1944, 3) presented his desired total reform as “comprehensive,” “far-reaching,” and implying “a complete renovation of the individual and collective life of the Filipinos.” In his war memoirs, which were completed in prison in Japan in 1945 while awaiting trial, Laurel (1962, 21) similarly described how, during his tenure as president, he never renounced the thought and logic that underpinned the program he pursued.

Bearing in mind the instruction I had received from President Quezon . . . I boldly announced my national policy, my political ideology, and my moral philosophy in my speeches, interviews and conferences. The fundamental national policy, I said, was that of national survival. All around us was [sic] devastation and suffering. . . As to the political ideology, I said that the dream and aspiration of Filipino heroes and patriots have always been complete and absolute political freedom for the Philippines and that all true Filipinos are pledged to the realization of that ideal. I therefore stood for a Government of the Filipinos, by the Filipinos and for the Filipinos exclusively and alone without the interference of, or injunction, or dictation from a foreign power. I announced my moral philosophy—the deeper foundation of my administration was that of righteousness which is divine and is common to all religions worthy of the name; that man lives in the triple world, physical, intellectual and moral; that physical and mental vigor (*mens sana in corpore sano*) is not enough, but that man's life

must be dominated by moral principles. I therefore concluded that righteousness was the foundation of genuine popular and political leadership (Service to the people on the basis of Righteousness).

In this light we may treat Laurel's program as a “collaborator” president as an expression of his political philosophy, not only of circumstantial opportunity and the logic of collaboration.

The success of the Meiji educational policy fascinated Laurel (1944), who concluded that “in education what is needed is not democracy . . . but regimentation, not liberty but discipline, not liberalism but correct orientation, not flexibility but rigidity in the formulation of the desired mold of citizenship” (cited in Steinberg 2000, 122–23). In October 1944 Laurel commented that “war serves as a catalyzer” in that it “speeds up transformations in social and political life which under peace-time conditions may require years, or even generations to carry out” (cited in Steinberg 1967, 79).⁵ In Steinberg's (ibid., 78) interpretation, Laurel “seem[ed] to have been willing to cooperate primarily because he was convinced that Japan lacked the power to sustain the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere for any protracted length of time. He saw that American pressure would compel an eventual contraction, but he thought it would happen more slowly than it actually did” (ibid.). Laurel reportedly calculated in 1943 that ending the war with Japan would require six more years (ibid., 79), during which time he believed he could “alter materially any postwar society” through his wartime role (ibid.).

Laurel's thinking prior to the Japanese occupation indicated, as Steinberg (ibid., 77) wrote, that he was “dubious about the influence of American materialism, educational theory, and individualism, all of which had permeated Philippine culture prior to the war,” and that he saw the Japanese nationalist, centralized (even authoritarian) model of success as a crucial counterweight to Anglo-American political theory for Filipinos.⁶ Gripaldo (1982, 532) for his part drew attention to the ways in which the “abnormality” of being a Japanese-sponsored president provided Laurel with the opportunity to test his ideas in a circumscribed manner, even while understanding that Philippine independence and the republic were essentially a sham. The contours of these ideas that Laurel sought to apply, and which were forged initially in his negotiations with nation and race, are reconstructed below.

Nation and Race

Pres. José Laurel (1943, 1) began his 14 October 1943 inaugural address by declaring that moment as “the hour of fulfillment of the supreme aspiration of our people for centuries.” Laurel sought to revive the memories of revolution and struggle against Western imperialism, which the colonial period under the American Commonwealth had sought to delegitimize and suppress. “The long night of vigil is ended. You have not died in vain. The spirit of Mactan, of Balintawak, of Bagumbayan, of Malolos, and Bataan lives again!” (ibid.). Laurel spoke these words with sincerity and not merely to pander to his Japanese benefactors during their occupation. At an address he delivered at the University of the Philippines on National Heroes’ Day in November 1929, Laurel (1931, 36) similarly reminded his audience of the “unfinished task” of independence in an effort to “rekindle . . . the love of freedom” that he felt American colonialism had extinguished. “In the 1940’s,” according to Agpalo (1992, 93),

the influence of the Propaganda Movement and the Philippine revolution on Laurel manifested itself even more strongly. . . . In this decade, Laurel came out with two studies on civic precepts and moral values that he believed ought to guide Filipinos in their civic life—*Commentaries on the Moral Code* and *Forces that Make a Nation Great* . . . Both studies quoted extensively and repeatedly from the writings of Graciano Lopez Jaena, Marcelo H. del Pilar, Jose Rizal, Andres Bonifacio, Emilio Jacinto, and Apolinario Mabini, or commented on their deeds.

In the 1950s, Laurel sponsored an amended version of Sen. Claro M. Recto’s Rizal Bill in Congress, which made the teaching of the works of Rizal, particularly his novels *Noli me tángere* and *El filibusterismo*, mandatory in private and public schools (Laurel 1960; fig. 2).

In recalling the achievements of the “artisans of Filipino nationality” during his National Heroes’ Day speech in 1929, Laurel (1931, 36) listed the names and places made famous during the Philippine Revolution in his wish to supply flesh and terrain to the landscape of the imagined Philippine nation long suppressed by colonialism. He sought to “remind us of our submission during more than three centuries to the Lion of Castile and of our present subjection to the American Eagle, however benign and altruistic may be the



Fig. 2. José P. Laurel with portrait of José Rizal, undated.

Source: JPLMF Archives Inventory Series 14, Box 2, Env. 9

rule which this flag symbolizes” (ibid.). Ernest Renan (1882) famously stated that the essence of a nation consists in all individuals having many things in common and also in having forgotten many things. Their futures are bound by their common, subsumed pasts. Commonality is not enough; neither religion nor common interests (the latter being merely that which brings about trade agreements and policy) predict the borders of the global map of nation-states, for a nation is a sentiment—a soul and a principle. Laurel shared Renan’s thought, as did Benedict Anderson (1983) and Eiko Ikegami (1995) among others in the extensive literature on nationalism. For Laurel the Philippine Revolution was as much the instantiation of the “nation” as it was the moment when the abstract concept of Philippine nationalism became peopled and embodied. Echoing Renan, Laurel (1931, 34) stated in his 1929 National Heroes’ Day address that the essence of nationality is “sentiment”—“it is pride and glory in a common inheritance of tradition that strengthens the bonds of union.”

Laurel’s subsequent list of national heroes during that speech naturalized those heroes as a canon. If the nation is something intangible, only when it is embodied does it become concrete, as its peopling defines its tangible form. Concurring with this reading, Agpalo (1992, 188), wrote: “What should be the goal of this ‘new government under the Republic’ composed of a new type of citizens? Laurel replied by invoking the famous words: ‘The welfare of the people is the supreme purpose of all governments on earth. The people is all; blood, life, wealth and strength: all is the people.’” In this regard Laurel quoted Bonifacio, who had lifted this thought from Jacinto’s *Liwanag at Dilim*. Laurel’s 1941 *Commentaries on the Moral Code* declared, “The law as it is written is a dead and lifeless thing,” and “Individual initiative is necessary in order to give it a meaning and a purpose” (Laurel 1965, 18). Laurel (ibid., 19) then asserted in Rizal’s words: “What the people are, so is their government.” The problematic implied herein is the question of who is to be judged as embodying the national spirit, and in this context the significance of Laurel’s constructions of empire and the Philippine nation emerges.

Laurel’s vision of the body as the site of the nation led him to seek as president a program of racial improvement consistent with the eugenics of the period. In his inaugural address Laurel (1943, 15) declared: “The increase of birth-rate which is desirable for a young country like ours is not incompatible with the improvement of the racial stock.” Although he

lamented that “over heredity we have no control except in so far as we may prohibit the marriage of diseased individuals or prescribe the sterilization of imbeciles and lunatics,” he asserted that “we can and we should shape the forces of our environment and education so that the propagation of health and intelligence may outrun the reproduction of disease and ignorance” (ibid.). In this statement the responsibility for the biomedical protection of and attention to the body as the site of the nation fell most explicitly on the female body: “It shall be the concern of my administration to improve the individual quality of the masses by stressing medical attention for expectant mothers, correct methods of pre-natal and infant care, proper nutrition for our children. . . . For this purpose, all the resources of learning and science at our disposal will be mobilized” (ibid., 15–16). The body, more generally, also figured in Laurel’s racial improvement program, which additionally supported “a well-balanced diet for adults, clean amusement and wholesome sport and recreation for both young and old, and other measures designed to conserve the health of the populace” (ibid.).

Laurel’s national-racial project began firstly and crucially with the Filipina as a life-giving body and then as a nurturing mother. This emphasis on the Filipina invoked the tradition in Philippine discourse of conceptualizing the nation as a woman and as a mother—*Inang Bayan* means “Mother Country,” and since the Philippine Revolution it has been a concept central to articulations of the national project. Laurel (ibid., 16) told the nation: “There is absolutely no reason why we should devote more effort and attention to breeding super-stallions for our racing stables, milch cows for our fairs or prize hogs for our markets, than to raising healthy, intelligent and self-respecting human beings who will be a credit to our country and who will glorify the Filipino race.”

In anticipation of the 1943 Constitution, the Preparatory Commission for Philippine Independence (PCPI), of which Laurel was president, produced a research and planning report on 11 October 1943 that also explicitly linked nation and race as it sought to conceptualize the appropriate cultural and educational program to cohere the country as a nation. “The formulation of the country’s education program must take into account the ideology and basic tenets of the fundamental law of the land. In addition, however,” the report continued, “the experiences of the race through centuries of social evolution, which point to unmistakable goals toward which the country has been directing its efforts, must not be overlooked” (PCPI Committee on

Research and Planning 1943, 48). The report then stated that in the “endeavor to plan, clarify and implement in thought and in practice the aspirations of the nation,” what should serve as guide were not only the mandates of the Constitution but also “the best expressions of the racial will” (ibid.).

To Laurel a distinct but “broad Filipinism,” as the report put it—or, in a phrase Laurel coined, an “Assertive Filipinism”—must be developed through education in order to properly reflect the Filipinos’ racial will, conveyed through the cultures and cultural expressions they had thus far developed. The report reflected a certain nativism, which rested on the assumption that what was “native” to a people was most natural and best suited to them, and should be employed in cultural deepening and racial strengthening. The report asserted, “The education for the Philippines must be basically Filipino”; nevertheless, it did “not preclude intellectual hospitality to important features of other cultures and systems of education which may contribute to the enrichment of education in the land” (ibid.). This kind of program would be self-strengthening, one grounded in the primacy of place as the basis for evolution, both past and present. Thus, the report introduced the elementary school curriculum as featuring “special emphasis . . . in the first four grades to character education and citizenship training,” which included “home geography and simple elements of Philippine history and culture” (ibid., 51). The report also asserted that “native and oriental folk music, dances and games, as well as drawing, are to be added to the [elementary school] program of the first four years in order to develop aesthetic and artistic taste and grace” (ibid.).

Hardly a universalized conception of man, this vision of race, the embodied unit of the nation, was deeply particular to the native place and the regional Orient. The report emphasized native practice as the best, most natural method to use in imparting all skills and attributes that the educational program desired to groom as constituting its ideal of citizenship. “In order to instill the love of labor,” the report wrote, “the teaching of native arts and crafts and simple gardening should be made a part of the curricula,” and “the training in native arts, crafts, gardening and sewing should be intensified for the last two years in the elementary school” (ibid., 52). This curriculum bore a distinct Social Darwinist influence. Interestingly, however, it drew a clear limit to the harnessing of place and native culture. In describing the rural “settlement farm schools” that served “the non-Christian settlements where food production is the outstanding activity of the school,” the report

stated that although the elementary farm school placed “emphasis on farm work” and aimed to “help feed the children” it should “also bring to them the benefits of civilization” (ibid.). For “the prime task of the settlement farm school [was] to assist non-Christian Filipinos to settle down, to produce and to live a well-ordered community life” (ibid.). Clearly here we see that within the setting that shaped the “racial will,” there was an asserted evolutionary hierarchy that favored the lowland, Christian societal arrangement over the nomadic, non-Christian one.

The PCPI’s (ibid., 49) report listed primary educational objectives⁷ for the Philippines, within which the priority placed upon the body as encasement of the individual’s embodiment of the nation became evident. The Physical Education and Health section declared that “physical education makes a nation healthy and vigorous and enriches the cultural life of the people” (ibid., 55). Moreover, the report went on to link individual bodily health and self-possession to *national* sovereign vigor and self-possession—which in turn linked bodily health and self-possession to independence itself: “Being an independent nation, physical education for the youth should naturally include activities that will help prepare the nation for defense” (ibid., 55).

This prioritization of the physical and the bodily, and its elevation alongside morality and civic responsibility, flowed from the nineteenth-century Western racial science bound up with the imperial project and Victorian-era biology that identified, categorized, and described the world it encountered—the quintessential authorial and imperial act.⁸ For his part Laurel had a racialized understanding of the nation in an international world order that was dominated by a racially charged Western imperialism supported and affirmed by his Pan-Asianism.

The Orient

In his thought Laurel defined the Orient not merely negatively as oppressed by Western imperialism, but also positively as the cradle of civilization. For Laurel, the Orient and Occident emerged as real, historical entities in their dialectical history with each other and with a third entity, which was what he imagined as universal “civilization.” He referred to “Mother Asia” as what “[nursed] the human race and [endowed] it with the most ancient civilization and the most profound religions that the world has ever known” (Laurel 1997a, 49), and discussed the Orient and Occident’s ostensible passing between and cocreation of “civilization.” In a December

1927 speech at the University of the Philippines College of Law, he particularized the West by reducing it to one of many cultures, so that not a single “Western Civilization” was deemed prominent and privileged. Rather, there was something like “civilization,” which was propagated at different times by different cultures, recounting that the West originally learned certain of its values, spirit, and traditions of thought from the East (Laurel 1931, 2–3). Thus he declared on 14 October 1944, in a message to Greater East Asia delivered over station PIAM, “East is East and West is West, it is true, but there is absolutely no valid reason why when they meet they should not meet as equals. There is no reason why as heretofore they should meet as superior and inferior, master and slave, oppressor and oppressed. If they stand equal before God, so must they stand before man” (Laurel 1997a, 250). Therefore, despite the real existence in Laurel’s thinking of an opposed Orient and Occident, or a differentiated East and West, Laurel’s understanding of civilization served to flatten the historical bases upon which something like the European chauvinism that Hannah Arendt (1973, 226) described could emerge, and it opened a premise from which to assert his bedrock “universalism.”

East and Southeast Asian observers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century believed that international geopolitics and the advance of Western imperialism were leading to an inevitable race war between the Orient and the Occident. In his 1927 speech at the University of the Philippines, Laurel (1931, 8) stated that he “would not want to see a mighty world conflict staged. But as Asians, the Filipinos cannot remain indifferent . . . geographically and racially, we belong to Asia.” On Greater East Asia Day, 8 December 1943, he linked all “Occidental penetration” into the Orient as a common history, again making real and historical the existence of an Orient and Occident (Laurel 1997a, 44). “No nation in Asia, worthy of the heritage of her past, her sacred traditions, and the right to live under the sun, can henceforth countenance the return of Western rule or influence,” he charged (ibid., 44). “The Asians can no longer be satisfied with being mere ‘hewers of wood’ and ‘drawers of water’ for Occidentals” (ibid.). Here Laurel described a geopolitical, historical landscape that, while built on a depoliticized, naturalized conception of universal civilization (however vaguely defined) to which all men had equal right, had come to represent a very real competition for dominance and a foreseeable race war.

The task here, according to Laurel, was for the Orient not only to awaken and reclaim its inherited bond to the civilization that the Occident had claimed for itself, but also to unmask the corruption of world religion as represented in Western imperialism, which universal civilization was made to serve and legitimize in the hands of the Occident. In the aforementioned 1927 speech he declared that “the Orient should unmask the true nature of Western imperialism and understand its real spirit and designs” (Laurel 1931, 8), which he associated with moral corruption by excessive pursuit of material gain and the establishment of structures of racial and cultural inequality in violation of the essential equality of men under natural law. In his *Moral and Political Orientation* Laurel (1949, vi) asserted that “every man is man’s brother and equal. There shall not be any discrimination on account of race, creed or color,” and that “freedom is a divine endowment and is not a matter of grace from the earthly powers that be.”

Due to his personal understanding of natural law, Laurel interpreted this task as a divinely sanctioned mission for the Orient. He asserted: “God in His infinite wisdom will not abandon Japan and will not abandon the peoples of Greater East Asia” (Laurel 1997a, 26). Similarly, in his 22 November 1943 address in Manila to Subhas Chandra Bose, President of the Provisional Government of Free India, Laurel (ibid., 31) referred to Bose as the “leader of 350 million Indians in their effort, which is legitimate and divine, to free themselves from the British rule.” This remark pierces Theodore Friend’s (1988, 3) claim that Japan’s “Holy War for Asian Liberation” rang as alien and difficult to understand for educated Christian Filipinos for whom “the term ‘just war’ evokes argumentative principles that rationalized the Crusades.”

God appeared undifferentiated in Laurel’s view of natural law through his understanding of “universal civilization,” which allowed for Laurel’s statement to Bose, made from a member of one world religion to that of another. Laurel (1949, vi) nevertheless declared that “there is One Eternal God, Creator and Sustainer of the universe.” Indeed, he also wrote that, “until unity of religion is achieved, the Church and the State must remain completely apart and separate” (ibid.). While he stated that “this separation implies equality of all religions,” he nevertheless envisioned this separation as necessary only due to the particular historical moment during which the “millennium of religious union is not yet” (ibid., 56). Here we see that even within his universalism and championed equality lies a bedrock of particularism and inequality, by which he cannot deny his belief in

his own One Eternal God above others. This elision of universalism and particularism, of the universe and *La República Cristiana*, the Christian Republic, obtains elsewhere in his thought.

Universalism and Civilization

Laurel's universalism conflicted with his particularism, and his shifts between the two revealed the ways in which his contingent, particularist, historically constructed understanding was deeply embedded in his universalist vision and actually worked to produce that "universalism." In his 1927 speech he affirmed that, "at the behest of the Christian religion, Western nations have invaded the East, conquered its territories, ruled its people against their will" and "have forced upon every weak people in the Orient the administration of their own laws and usurped local sovereignty on the pretext of spreading Christian civilization" (Laurel 1931, 6). Yet, "their benighted Christianity . . . has led them at the same time to adopt stringent laws of exclusion against the Orientals in defense of the very sovereignty which they have trampled upon" (ibid.). He stated in an address before the Assembly of the Greater East Asia Congress in Tokyo on 5 November 1943 that "the East is the cradle of human civilization. It has given to the West its religion and its culture, and yet the West has used the same civilization to exploit the peoples and countries whence that civilization came" (Laurel 1997a, 26). Laurel thus imagined a universalist, divine foundation to world religion and to human civilization, while also positing intractable differences between the systems of law emanating from the West and East, such that the enforcement of one's system over that of the other was unjust and unnatural, although they might stem in part from the same sources. This intractability perhaps resulted from what he interpreted to be the historical perversion of "civilization" and religion in the hands of the West, which produced exclusionary laws and a benighted version of Christianity.

Thus this dialectical history and the contingent, historical products that resulted from it, in Laurel's thought, necessarily revealed to the Orient its connection to the Occident and inextricably returned the Orient to the Occident in its divine mission of "unmasking" the particularist corruption to which the Occident had subjected the originally Eastern "universalist" civilization. Laurel (1931, 3) asserted that world religion and human civilization originated in the East: "World Civilization saw its first light at the northern base of the snow-capped Himalayas, and then, crossing

Central Asia, it entered Greece and developed into the grandeur which Rome spread over Europe." Further, in Laurel's thought, the East was able to differentiate which particular historical products adhered acceptably to human civilization's universal principles (the grand Roman Empire) from those that did not (modern Western imperialism). This interpretation privileged the East's current judgment of the West's caretaking of purported human civilization in a way that either delegitimized the West's ability to correctly or morally assess the validity of its goals or accused the West of failing to adhere to the putatively operational, desirable objectives of this universal order. Either scenario embedded a deep particularism in Laurel's universalism, while naturalizing that particularism.

In his discussions of the Philippine nation Laurel similarly employed his universalism to naturalize, depoliticize, and ennoble his nationalist agenda, the Philippine nation's existence, and the distinctiveness of Filipino national identity. In his address at the consecration of the Head-Elect of the Evangelical Church on 30 April 1944, he intoned:

We should be the better Christian because we are good and true Filipinos proud of our racial heritage. I do not see how we can contribute to a world order based on peace and justice unless we be true Filipinos first, loyal to those traditions by which God himself in His infinite wisdom has seen fit to mold us, distinct from any other people on earth. (Laurel 1997a, 151)

He concluded, "being good and true Filipinos should make us the better and more helpful and more proud citizens of that world order" (ibid.). From a universal, divine world order, ostensibly oriented toward the establishment of peace and justice, he moved to the particular world religion of Christianity, and within those "universals" ultimately embedded Filipino nationalism, a contingent construction of the historical phenomenon of nation-states. In this view, the Filipino was not only one equal out of all of God's creations, but also a particular manifestation, a distinct people molded unlike any other people.

One should also note that Laurel's thought, here and elsewhere, featured a particular elision between the *República Cristiana* and the universal world. In his 1927 speech he praised Woodrow Wilson as the "Filipino people's benefactor," describing the way in which Wilson's "love of humanity was

greater than his love of country, for he held humanity more sacred than nationality” and he “believed that man is more than the citizen” (Laurel 1931, 11). “For this reason,” Laurel (ibid.) concluded, Wilson was “a citizen of the *Repubblica Cristiana*, of the world,” for “he championed the cause of truth, justice, liberty, and righteousness not for America alone, but for big and small nations alike.”

These particularisms did not negate the existence in Laurel’s thought of a purportedly universal human heritage held in common among all, nor of its theoretical possibility even amid the pitted divisions and geopolitical strife of Laurel’s time. His discussions of science revealed what he perceived to be a joint march of all peoples toward transnational, agnostic, universal progress. At a luncheon held on 14 April 1944 in honor of Filipino scientists he stated that “a scientist transcends national boundaries” for “the entire universe is his concern. He is the recipient of the common heritage of mankind” (Laurel 1997a, 138). Again positing the actual existence of some kind of universal system of natural law or scientific truths, he declared, “[the scientist’s] laws are not those legislated by any individual country. They are the laws that he has to observe and apply to the problems at hand, for thus alone can nature be forced to reveal her secrets. Thus alone can nature be made to serve the needs of men” (ibid.). Yet, in those last two sentences, Laurel provided another entry point for particularism. Although he stopped short of acknowledging the processes by which power determines scientific “truth” and scientific legibility, he alluded to an understanding that science, too, was a product of historical forces and power relations, such that it could never be truly apolitical or universally beneficial.

Laurel’s discourse on distinct Filipinoness, however, included a vision of the “universal” and of natural law that contained a particularism that was both expected and natural. Laurel reasoned from the position that humans are all born equally of God, but that God made a diverse human race whose members, while all human, are gloriously unique and differentiated. Therefore, for Laurel (ibid., 151), God’s mission, the “creation of this world order, that is . . . the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth,” could only be achieved if one were true to one’s nature, a trait that required obeying one’s particular constitution as Filipino as well as obeying the divine principles of universal humanity. Laurel’s thought reflected this position, that within humankind’s differences, as with the earth’s multitude of species, each group of people required the assurance of those who would care for its

specific needs, in addition to humankind’s common needs. For this reason, he stated that “human progress can be realized and made palpable for the great masses of our population only through science,” and “the world can be renovated, and a greater and more abundant life can be brought about[,] only by science”; yet “our own problems in the Philippines, peculiar as they are and as they must be, can be solved and remedied only through science and, naturally, through the help of the Filipino scientists” (ibid., 207). This same principle similarly led Laurel to adopt the Wilsonian belief that internationalism would only be made practicable by the existence of free and independent nation-states everywhere (Laurel 1931, 38–39).

On the positioning and characterization of the Filipino nation, Laurel (1965, 59) quoted a Tagalog proverb, “ang damit na hiram / Kung di man sikip / Ay maluwang” (“borrowed clothes / Are either too tight / Or too loose”) in his 1941 *Commentaries on the Moral Code* to warn Filipinos against imitating the Occident. Quoting Rizal he warned: “aspire to be a nation by conserving what is your own. Should you seek to Occidentalize your customs, you seek suicide, the destruction of your nationality, the annihilation of your Fatherland. In the future you will be a people without character, a nation without liberty” (ibid., 59). Laurel counseled Filipinos to “cultivate the habit of using goods made in the Philippines. Patronize the products and trades of your countrymen” (ibid., 83), and “use and develop our national resources and conserve them for posterity. They are the inalienable heritage of our people. Do not traffic with your citizenship” (ibid., 86). In this piece of advice, nationhood for Laurel appeared completely naturalized, as if it had always existed for posterity, despite having been a recent historical construction in the Philippines, as evident in the lack of a “Filipino” nationality in the late nineteenth century to which Rizal’s words were expressly addressed. Indeed, in Rizal’s lifetime the word “Filipino” meant Spanish peoples born in the Philippines and had no corollary to the category of “Filipino” as Laurel used it.

Imperialism and Pan-Asianism

As it did for most Pan-Asianists since the late nineteenth century, the theory of natural selection crucially informed Laurel’s racialized understanding of the world order and supported his Pan-Asianism. In a 1959 pamphlet, “Opportunism and the Darwinian Aspect of Current Political Struggles,” Laurel (1997b, 90) wrote: “[N]atural selection, and the law of the survival of the fittest, as elaborated by Darwin, have no ethical principles, but merely

concern themselves with the preservation of the species; and one may add, perhaps that it does not matter one way or the other whether the species to be preserved are opportunistic politicians, habitual grafters.” However, Laurel (ibid.) perceived a “higher suggestive lesson”: “Since [the Philippines is] still a young and weak state why not continue propping ourselves up for a while longer with supports from stronger friends?” Laurel (ibid., 91) asked: “[W]hy cannot the survival of the Filipino nation, amid so many adverse conditions, and formidable risks, be assured by unsentimental and realistic bargains and relationships with all nations, far and near, which could give help or benefits to us for the time being?” Yet, in this position he still did not seem to condone an alliance with the West, which he did not believe shared the Philippines’s interests, making Pan-Asian solidarity the only natural conclusion left for him.

Laurel believed that Asiatic solidarity was a repudiation of imperialism itself, which he defined as Western. He asserted in his December 1927 speech that “the fundamental problem for the Orientals” was the need to “acquire political and economic freedom so that they and their posterity will be able to emerge from the present form of political and economic bondage imposed upon them by the so-called superior people” (Laurel 1931, 8). “We can do this task,” he declared, “by de-hypnotizing ourselves and casting away self-distrust”—with ‘self’ here referring to other ‘Orientals’ (ibid.). Hence, he imagined Pan-Asian solidarity to be a triumph over Western imperialism, which guarded against a “united and compact Orient” (ibid.). In his address to the Assembly of the Greater East Asia Congress in November 1943 (fig. 3) he detailed this imperial program:

America and England have always intended to divide the peoples of Greater East Asia in accordance with the principle of “*dive et impera*” in order to weaken the morale, the vigor and the vitality of the peoples of Greater East Asia. America and England have divided these peoples by establishing divisions in their religion, in their classes and by encouraging political differences among them. (Laurel 1997a, 24)

Laurel defined Western imperialism through its materialism and intention to dominate weaker peoples, particularly those of the Orient who were neither of their race nor culture. This definition allowed Laurel, once president, to rationalize the Japanese empire as something distinct from Western



Fig. 3. Leaders of Greater East Asia Joint Declaration Conference held at the Japan Imperial Diet Building, 5–6 Nov. 1943. The congress participants were (l to r): Ba Maw, Zhang Jinghui, Wang Jingwei, Hideki Tōjō, Wan Waithayakon, José P. Laurel, and Subhas Chandra Bose.

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imperialism. The retreat from Western imperialism figured for Laurel as a retreat from the infection of Western immorality. “We can combat the virtue of excessive materialism which we inherited from the West,” Laurel (1943, 10–11) stated in his inaugural address, “only by a return to the spiritual ways of the East where we rightfully belong.” He similarly warned against the tendency to accumulate wealth, a temptation that the West introduced (Laurel 1931, 7). To Laurel the Japanese were of the Orient and limited their empire to its putative cultural-territorial space and sought to unite Asians and give them freedom to develop and maintain their own cultures. His championing of Pan-Asianism and support for Japan’s Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere rested publicly (his personal opinions might have differed, given the pressures he was under politically) on their ideological commitment to the “co-existence, cooperation and co-prosperity” with “recognition of, and respect for, the autonomy and independence of every integral unit”

within the Sphere (Laurel 1997a, 24). The Co-Prosperity Sphere declared that its organization was designed such that “each nation may develop in accordance with its own institutions,” but “without any particular member monopolizing the resulting prosperity to [*sic*] the other integral units,” while acknowledging that “the prosperity of all is the prosperity of the integral parts, but that the prosperity of the integral parts is not necessarily the prosperity of the whole” (ibid.).

This imperial vision represented for Laurel a potentially new form of empire based on solidarity and autonomy that aimed at a more inclusive universal understanding of prosperity. “Just as the East was the cradle of civilization,” Laurel (ibid., 29) contended, “so the East may again be the foundation of a new code of international relations based on moral justice and aimed at the common happiness and prosperity of all the members.” Moral codes and older notions of a moral universe and moral government infused this new imagined diplomacy with the rhetoric that recalled classical Confucian discourse. “Diplomacy is wisdom, diplomacy is trenchant, diplomacy is cooperation, diplomacy is mutual understanding,” Laurel intoned (ibid., 94). Crucial in this vision for diplomacy, however, was a notion of belonging and commonality that would make possible such mutuality. “In the case of the Philippines which is returning to her Oriental fold to which she, by nature, by traditions, by culture and by geographical propinquity, belongs,” Laurel (ibid.) asserted, “these synonyms of diplomacy should be developed and followed.” Here one sees the particular political vision that Pan-Asianism sincerely held for Laurel and that animated his geopolitical position both as a Filipino political thinker and as president.

Conclusion

What emerges in Laurel’s thought are cultures of nation and universe tied deeply to the legacies of empire both in the Philippines and in the imagination of those in Asia who felt themselves to have been the objects of, rather than subjects in, a Western world order. The theoretical moves found within the development of Pan-Asianism mirrored those found within Laurel’s thought: the premise of an anti-Western, anti-imperial critique formed the basis for building a conception of a shared identity that sought to enact a broader understanding of universal world order. In his thought the Orient and Occident emerged as real, historical entities through their dialectical relationship with each other and with “civilization.” The circularity of this

process—historical entities produced as historical products only through their dialectic—reflected the similarly circular relationship between universalism and particularism in Laurel’s thought. Laurel’s universalism existed always in tension with his particularism, and his movements between the two revealed the ways in which particularist, historical contingency was deeply embedded in and constitutive of his “universalist” vision. This tension resulted from what I argue was his understanding of natural law, which was at once divinely homogenous and necessarily differentiated. Although universal, his natural law also took for granted as natural the historical innovation of the nation and its political agenda. This innovation, too, bore the legacy of Western imperialism, the experience of which pushed Laurel to defend and protect the sanctity of the nation-state as a guard against imperialism, while also engendering fantasies of universalism and Pan-Asian solidarity to secure such particularist, national freedoms. In what seemed to be a mounting race war, both the weapons of the nation-state and of a reconceived Pan-Asian Oriental empire seemed necessary in the unfinished struggle against Western imperialism.

At present the specters of imperialism, both Japanese and Western, paradoxically remain beyond and ever-with the Philippines. José Laurel’s advocacy of Pan-Asianism has only feebly lived on in Filipino intellectual and political history, due to the experience of the Pacific War, Japanese occupation, and successful twentieth-century Westernization of the Philippine political economy and its international orbit. Pan-Asianism did, however, abet and inform the discourses of Third Worldism and Pan-Malayism that came to the fore thereafter, most prominently in the 1950s. Meanwhile, Laurel’s political thinking and nationalism have lasted through his lifetime commitment to education and in his founding of the Lyceum of the Philippines University.

Steinberg has also perceived a belated effect of this history that has become evident in the Philippines’s postcolonial discourse. In his view, the Second World War “exacerbated a deep ambivalence within Philippine society . . . by challenging some essential assumptions under which the nation had been functioning, exposed painfully an extremely sensitive nerve” (Steinberg 1972, 181). “Whereas Pio Duran,” a nationalist politician and lawyer, “was considered a pariah for advocating, in 1935, that the Philippines was ‘inextricably linked’ to Asia,” as Steinberg (ibid.) has argued, “his message became a key component in the post-war thinking

of establishment leaders like Claro Recto, Ferdinand Marcos, and Carlos P. Romulo.” Moreover,

To the degree that the Filipinos came to see the Japanese as the self-proclaimed spokesmen for a resurgent Asian assertiveness, they came to wonder if Quezon's initial anti-Japanese stance was correct. Was Pio Duran perhaps right when he called the Commonwealth leadership “apostates of Orientalism who have aligned themselves with the governing West in an effort to emasculate a portion of the Oriental race”? The value system established during four hundred years of colonialism was radically challenged, producing a tension which could be glossed over only partially. (ibid., 182)

Additionally, as Iletto (2011, 61) has argued, one sees in Laurel and Recto's championing of the Rizal Law that the Japanese occupation allowed some Filipinos to achieve a conceptual break with Mother America and enabled those straddling the empires to connect the Philippine Republic of 1943 with the age of Rizal and its conceptual break with Mother Spain. The Japanese politics of de-Americanization, which sought to reduce the cultural influence of the US in the Philippines, also paved the way for the return of Spain to the official historical narrative (ibid., 62). For his part, Laurel took advantage of this Japanese program to nurture the growth of vernacular Filipino theater and literature and to rewrite Filipino history through his works such as *Forces that Make a Nation Great* (ibid.).

Although the content of José Laurel's philosophical and political thinking may have errant, uneven substantive influence within Filipino discourse, Laurel's continuing importance lies in his life and works' project to recall the Philippines's long history of imperialism, refiguring American imperialism as part of that history and situating the Philippines in its immediate geographical context, with its past and future lying in “Asia.” In this context the significance of the cultures of empire, nation, and universe in Laurel's political thinking emerges and remains.

List of Abbreviations

Env.	Envelope
JPLMF	José P. Laurel Memorial Foundation, Manila
PCPI	Preparatory Commission for Philippine Independence

Notes

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- 1 José P. Laurel used “East” and “Orient” as well as “West” and “Occident” interchangeably. Following these usages, this article affirms no difference between these terms.
- 2 In the 1920s Laurel postulated “Assertive Filipinism” as, in Quijano de Manila's description, “a principle of law, arguing that a lack of national purpose inevitably led to a breakdown of social order and undermined the integrity of the body politic itself,” while his son Dr. Salvador H. Laurel described Filipinism as “a kind of shorthand for nationalism and cultural identity” (Ingles 1986, 62).
- 3 Even allowing for the possibility that the Japanese editors of the *Manila Daily Tribune* suggested the comparative chapter, “Forces that Made Japan Great,” in Laurel's (1944) *Forces that Make a Nation Great*, this book's first two chapters—“The Orient, the Cradle of Civilization” and “Racial Pride”—comprised Laurel's prewar conceptions (Gripaldo 1982, 538).
- 4 Agpalo (1965, 189) hinted at but did not analyze the place of imperialism in Laurel's thought. He quoted Laurel who wrote that “morality in international relations implies the outlawry of aggression, war, and imperialism,” for “if it is wrong for a person to assault and despoil his neighbor,” Laurel argued, “it must also be wrong for millions of men banded together under the name of their state to assault and despoil the neighboring millions bearing the name of another state.”
- 5 Additionally, according to Steinberg (2000, 123), “Laurel was strongly attracted to the prewar disciplined centralism of Japanese social organization” because he “saw his nation as paralyzed

by its inefficiency and lack of discipline." But Laurel's support for a strong executive and centralized government, in Steinberg's reading, sprang from a temporal argument and a certain elitism rather than an early enunciation of the "Asian Values" that Lee Kuan Yew would later articulate. Steinberg (2000, 123) has suggested that, even months before the Pearl Harbor attack, Laurel had championed the assumption of emergency powers by Commonwealth Pres. Manuel Quezon, because Laurel believed that "constitutional dictatorship" was "in keeping with a worldwide trend in which totalitarianism was gradually supplanting democracy." Yet, more than just providing a moment-in-history argument for an empowered executive branch, Laurel also sought to seize upon the trend of increasing centralization to enact, in his words, "a national policy, a political ideology, and a moral philosophy" (cited in *ibid.*, 122).

- 6 Agpalo (1992) similarly noted that President Quezon admired Bushido and commissioned a study of it for the creation of the Philippine Commonwealth Code of Ethics, which would later serve as an immediate source for Laurel's work, *Forces that Make a Nation Great*, and which also highlighted the role of Bushido in the development of the modern Japanese nation. However, Agpalo (*ibid.*, 198) warned against overinterpreting this point, which he considered as "merely one of the justificatory arguments for the general principle that strong and progressive nations need a moral code." As Agpalo (*ibid.*) argued, Bushido "was neither the major source of nor profound influence upon the [*Forces that Make a Nation Great*], as well as on the Commonwealth Code of Ethics."
- 7 The education objectives were listed as follows: "1. To develop a deeper spiritual love for the Philippines and to foster Filipino culture; 2. To develop moral character, personal and collective discipline, and family and civic life; 3. To promote physical vigor, bodily well-being, and sound mental attitude; 4. To gain command of the processes necessary for the acquisition of knowledge and skills and to enhance the aesthetic sense; 5. To instill love of labor and to guide and train individuals for specific vocations; 6. To teach and diffuse the Filipino national language; 7. To lead to a correct understanding of the position of the Philippines as a member of the family of nations in East Asia as well as its place in the new world order" (PCPI 1943, 49).
- 8 Harriet Ritvo (1997) and Sujit Sivasundaram (2005) both point to the role of colonial knowledge in empire building. Ritvo's work concerns the British naturalists' attempt to make sense of the biodiversity encountered during the age of British imperial expansion and finds that this taxonomic activity garnered laymen interest, sustaining a domestic marketplace and debate that trafficked in the freaks such as the Hottentot Venus, the sexual lives of far-flung women. These activities formed part of the constellation of practices that would testify to and codify a biological "chain of being" centered on the physical and also tied to place, much as the more overtly "racial sciences" and theories of Social Darwinism did. Ritvo maintains that the anxiety in classificatory works reflected largely Victorian society's fears regarding racial mixing and work on hybrids that reinforced and shaped political and social biases about humans. Meanwhile, the hierarchizing of different races in Ritvo's analysis shows that such unflattering fungibility at the bottom only emphasized firmness at the top.

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