

REX MORTIMER'S *STUBBORN SURVIVORS: DISSENTING ESSAYS ON
PEASANTS AND THIRD WORLD DEVELOPMENT: A REVIEW**

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Stubborn Survivors is a collection of Rex Mortimer's essays, some previously published, on a variety of themes, brought out posthumously by the Centre of Southeast Asian Studies at Monash University. These papers are representative of Mortimer's work over a short, but productive, academic career, and they also bear the imprint of interests and concerns developed while he was a member of the Australian Communist Party (which he left in 1969), and during two formative trips he made to Asia (the first to China in 1957, the second to Indonesia in 1964) before beginning postgraduate study.

Along with papers focusing on Mortimer's main research interest (the Indonesian Communist Party during the Sukarno years),¹ the editors have elected to include some of his more general writings on Asian Marxism, social science, and the peasantry, the shortcomings of development theory and his experiences in China; and, notably, have incorporated an important article he wrote on the limitations of Australian scholarship on Southeast Asia. An introduction by Ben Anderson serves to flesh out Rex Mortimer as a person and thereby allow those who, like this reviewer, knew his work but never the man, better to appreciate his wide-ranging contributions.

Judging from the essays included here, Rex Mortimer was grappling with, without necessarily finding answers to, a number of crucial questions which have arisen in the social sciences since the 1960s, or perhaps better re-arisen since many had been asked in previous periods in the history of Western social enquiry. These questions include the social/political/ideological context of social knowledge and, hence, the limitations of objectivism; the special problems faced by a social scientist whose "object" of study lies outside his/her own nation/society/culture; and the role of the Marxist intellectual both within the academy and outside it.

Mortimer's acute awareness of these issues makes the corpus of his work thought-provoking and challenging, particularly for an Indonesianist with a good deal of sympathy for his stance. I must also admit, however, that it does not necessarily prevent his writings from being, at times, infuriating as well.

His central work on Indonesian communism is represented here by an article originally published in 1974 ("Traditional Modes and Communist Movements:

* Edited by Herbert Feith and Rodney Tiffen. Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, Monash Paper on Southeast Asia, No. 10, 1984.

1. See Rex Mortimer, *Indonesian Communism under Sukarno: Ideology and Politics, 1959-1965* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1974).

Change and Protest in Indonesia") and a 1975 conference paper ("Strategies of Rural Development in Indonesia--Peasant Mobilization versus Technological Stimulation"). In these writings Mortimer steers a careful and fruitful course through some of the more simplistic available analyses. For example he rightly, in my view, rejects the tendency to dismiss Indonesian communism as simply another *abangan* movement, and stresses the recognition by leaders and followers alike that tradition, on its own, provides an inadequate basis for a future-oriented political movement. At the same time, unlike those who view such political movements as the result of a simple awakening of "modern" forms of class consciousness, Mortimer looks at both the "traditional" and also creative and unique features of Indonesian communism (a theme repeated, though less successfully, in his critique of "European" and support for "Asian" Marxism in the 1979 paper, "Asian Marxism and the Dis-Europeanization of the World"). Indonesian communism was, Mortimer argues convincingly, neither the manipulation of a gullible peasant mass by a cynical elite prepared to employ the symbols of tradition in an instrumental fashion, nor a manifestation of a sudden and cataclysmic awakening of a "true" (Western) form of class consciousness in a proletariat hitherto disguised from itself.

The analysis of Indonesian communism is, at the same time, refreshingly free of the tendency, all too apparent in much Western left-wing writing on Third World political struggles, to draw ultimately paternalistic "lessons" from their "failures." Instead, Mortimer gives the following interesting assessment of the "paradox" that afflicted the PKI:

The crux of this paradox was that the closer the Communists remained within Javanese cultural lifeways, the greater the strength and influence they were able to amass, but the weaker their power to convert these resources into a revolutionary force. On the contrary, the further the PKI moved away from these cultural underpinnings by tapping radical and proto-revolutionary elements in the society, the more it demonstrated the radicalism latent in Javanese society but at the same time the greater became its vulnerability and isolation. Never being in a position to put all its stakes on the revolutionary road, the Party eventually fell victim to the cultural plurality and vertical allegiances that are the mainsprings of elite dominance. (pp. 66-67)

By steering such a successful course between social scientific and political attempts to objectify the Indonesian experience for use in other arenas Mortimer's discussion of the PKI also raises, if only by implication, a series of questions about the role of the outside observer. It seems clear that Mortimer had views on this subject, although they are nowhere explicitly expressed in these writings (were they perhaps what prompted a move to Papua New Guinea?). It is a pity that neither Mortimer nor his editors chose to deal with the complex issue of intellectual practice (or the practice of the intellectual) in this volume.

It is clear, for example, particularly in the penetrating piece on Australian scholarship on Southeast Asia ("From Ball to Arndt," first published in 1973) that Mortimer assigned some importance to the task of providing a critique of academic liberalism, not simply for direct political purposes (although the paper nicely exposes the political implications of liberal social science), but also in order to create a space for a critical approach within the academic social sciences. What this approach might be is delimited by the critique of liberalism which

obliges us to look beyond specific instances of short term economic success or failure among Southeast Asian and other new states to the basic long term tendencies at work in both parts of the world. It requires us to re-examine all our assumptions about progress, reconciliation, universalism, and the respective weights to be attached to reformism and root-and-branch challenge to existing world relationships. It compels us to integrate the neglected international relations dimensions of development into Southeast Asian studies, and dissect the impact of foreign economic, political and cultural penetration upon Southeast Asian societies in a no-holds-barred fashion. It robs us of all justification for imposing straitjackets upon our ambit of investigation by excluding such questions as the relevance of the experience of China and North Vietnam to the problems of development. It may even force us to conclude that the Third World countries can only obtain relief from the excruciating fix by which they are forced to define themselves in terms of something that is unattainable and withheld from them, in a world where the overweening power of the industrial giants has been broken. (p. 136)

In spite of his pessimistic conclusion ("I cannot envisage initiatives of this kind emanating from the Australian intellectual culture"), Mortimer is certainly trying to set up a scholarly agenda here for a critical reconstruction of the Australian social sciences in which some role is envisaged for the committed (Australian?) scholar. This, I would argue, means that however Mortimer is judged on political and ethical criteria, his work must also be amenable to critical intellectual evaluation. In any case, this is the way the majority of readers of a collection of papers published by an academic institution are forced to proceed.

In this light, as I have already pointed out, much of Mortimer's work stands up to critical scrutiny. However, largely perhaps because it is for obvious reasons incomplete, it has its unsatisfactory aspects. Different readers will, of course, have different problems with these papers, depending on their points of view. Clearly, as Anderson points out, Mortimer has been dismissed by those unsympathetic to his political stance as a crude polemicist, although, as Anderson also argues convincingly, such a label is unjust. Nonetheless there is, from my own perspective, a somewhat infuriating tendency in Mortimer to dismiss some writers, even those who might have well been sympathetic to his project, out of hand, while at the same time adopting almost wholly uncritically basic concepts and approaches derived from writers who would have dismissed his whole approach. Thus in one paper "European Marxism" is crudely and unfavorably characterized as a whole and dismissed in favor of "Asian Marxism" in an exercise in crude caricature. (One wonders for example how Mortimer felt about including Gramsci, Korsch, and the young Lukacs in the same category as Lenin, Stalin, and, presumably, Althusser; one also wonders how he would have fit recent developments in the People's Republic into such a schema.) Similarly, having called for the kind of global perspective summarized in the above quotation, Mortimer then wrote an, admittedly unpublished, paper, "Wallerstein, Dependency, Passion and Vision" which, whatever one thinks of Wallerstein's work, clearly does it a grave injustice. At the same time, Mortimer seems content in his analysis to employ concepts like peasantry, involution, tradition, *aliran*, etc., all of which, at least in other hands, are used to justify a reading of Indonesia in particular and the Third World in general which is opposed diametrically to Mortimer's own. I am not suggesting

that Mortimer should have abandoned these concepts; only that in using them he might have taken the same kind of critical care as he chose to adopt in other cases.

Rex Mortimer was, therefore, a writer of some vision whose critical perspective in Southeast Asian studies was, and remains, welcome. His work is challenging and provocative; it raised and will continue to raise a number of questions which Southeast Asianists cannot afford, and should not be allowed, to ignore. The task remains of continuing along lines he has sketched out, and this task must also include a critical evaluation of Mortimer's own work.