BEN ANDERSON AND THE IMAGINING OF INDONESIA

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In 1957 Ben Anderson came to Cornell in search of revolution. Not that he was then trying to overthrow established institutions, although later overturning established ideas was very much his purpose. Initially, what he wanted was to understand the profound changes that had brought about the disintegration of the imperial system, a matter he had not found satisfactorily addressed as an undergraduate in England. To be sure, he had been a student of Classics; but the study of politics would probably not have gotten him much further, for in those days it was largely devoted to perfecting established arrangements and thinking or to winning the Cold War. The crumbling of empires and the emergence of new movements and nations was seen, at best, as part of a general progress to Modernity, enabling industrialized prosperity, making Them more like Us.[1]

Ben's background led him to find this vision of progress at best a comfortable self-deception. He had been born in Yunnan, where his father, James Carew O'Gorman Anderson, was a commissioner in the Chinese Marine Customs Service, supervising the collection of tariffs, most of which then went into the pockets of foreign creditors in payment of China's debts. James Anderson was Irish, a descendant of O'Gormans who had distinguished themselves in the Irish nationalist movement. (Ben liked to remind interlocutors that Ireland only became independent in 1922, and that after armed struggle.) Like a good many of his fellow foreigners in the customs service,

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[1] For Ben's decision to go to Cornell and his early exposure to Southeast Asia, see the introduction to his book *Language and Power—Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990). The volume collects some of his important writings on the subject.

Ben's father was sympathetic to the Chinese cause, and had sought to mediate between Chinese and foreign interlocutors rather than simply to impose the latter's demands.[2]

Ben's mother, Veronica, came from the other side of the imperial fence. Her father was Sir Trevor Bigham, KBE, CB, Deputy Commissioner of Scotland Yard. Ben's parents met at a reception in 1935 when James was back in Europe on leave. They wed, and Veronica joined James in Kunming, where Ben was born in August 1936. With China increasingly torn by the Nationalists' war with Communist forces and the Japanese, they found themselves transferred to Shanghai and then Hong Kong, from which, in mid-1941, they obtained passage to the United States. By this time Ben's father was gravely ill. The family remained in the US (first San Francisco, then Denver) until 1946, when they were able to sail for Ireland, where they reached Waterford, James's home, in time for him to die.

The family stayed on in Waterford, and Ben was educated in Ireland and the UK (Eton and Cambridge), but the turbulence of the first years of Ben's life did, I think, deeply affect the way in which he later viewed the world. To him, European tradition and the American Now were not everything; one needed to understand the world more generally, and try to discover what was mobilizing the growing demands for political liberation and social justice. Southeast Asia seemed a good place to study this at the time: there was revolution in Indochina, rebellion in the Philippines, unrest in Thailand and Burma. Indonesia had taken a turn to the nationalist left; it had recently hosted the Bandung Conference, which had proclaimed an international Third Way between the Soviet- and US-led ideological camps. And it was currently engaged in civil war, with the US encouraging rebellion. (Very likely another, perhaps unconscious, consideration was that Southeast Asia was not far from Yunnan, Ben's birthplace. And his father had been born in Penang.) At the time, the major center for the study of Southeast Asian politics was at Cornell, and Ben could get a teaching assistantship there; so he came to Ithaca.

Alas, the government department at Cornell was typical of its time in being quite out of sympathy with what Ben felt to be important. Its emphasis was on the United States and on the American vision of the world. Insofar as it considered other possibilities, it was through the then eminently ahistorical approach of Comparative Politics.[3]

Fortunately, Ben's teacher for Southeast Asian Politics was George Kahin, whose approach was that of a historian rather than a political scientist, and whose particular interest was the Indonesian revolution. His influence is reflected in the strictly historical approach of Ben's first publication, on Indonesia in the waning days of Japanese rule.[4] This "interim report" (which I think originated in a seminar paper)

[2] For a discussion of the Chinese customs service and Ben's father's role in it, see Perry Anderson, "A Belated Encounter," *London Review of Books,* July 30, 1998: 3–10; and Perry Anderson, "My Father's Last Years in China," *London Review of Books,* August 20, 1998: 8–34.

[3] Benedict Anderson, "Frameworks of Comparison," *London Review of Books,* January 2016: 15–18.

[4] Benedict Anderson, *Some Aspects of Indonesian Politics under the Japanese Occupation: 1944–1945* (Ithaca: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, Interim Reports series, 1961). And see his "Japan the Light of Asia," in *Southeast Asia in World War II: Four Essays,* ed. Josef Silverstein (New Haven: Yale University, Southeast Asia Studies, 1966), 13–50.

was written in 1961, just before he went to Indonesia for his PhD research. Needless to say, his experience of Indonesia in the next few years profoundly affected his thinking. He fell in love; with Indonesia, and most especially with Java. He found there a most attractive culture, intricate and yet admirable ways of thought, deeply held beliefs, and an opening-out of perspective.[5] But this was also the high time of Sukarno's Guided Democracy, with clashing mass movements, heightened religious-cultural tension, noisy anti-Westernism, and a vocal radicalism that sought mainly to prop up the existing leadership, but also expressed popularly cherished ideals.[6]

Ben's exposure to Indonesia at this time shaped the way he saw its independence struggle, as reflected in his thesis and its published descendant, *Java in a Time of Revolution*.[7] What mattered in Indonesia's revolution was not formal power-holders or institutions, but the inchoate yet insistent movement of youth in search of a new communal vision that would encompass what seemed valid of tradition, the experience of Japanese rule, and the ambition for modernity.

The shift in focus also meant a shift in heroes. For George Kahin, the exemplary leader had been Sutan Sjahrir, who practiced the art of the possible and sought to construct a polity that would be independent but acceptable to the democratic West. For Ben, it was Tan Malaka, whose radicalism and refusal to work through established bodies and networks he saw as embodying the *pemuda* spirit, expressing the egalitarian ideals and the spontaneity of the revolution.[8] This contrast was not just a difference in political enthusiasm but also reflected the increasing importance of culture in Ben's concern. What was important, it now seemed to him, was understanding the spirit (or contending spirits) of the time and place, to know where the actors were "coming from" intellectually.

Ben's new emphasis on the importance of culture was much influenced by Jim Siegel, who joined the Cornell anthropology department and the Southeast Asia program in 1967.[9] Siegel, who had worked on Islam in Aceh, was inspired by the ideas of Victor Turner, whose concept of liminality—the state of finding one's self between two life periods, with the liberation and confusion that that implies—fit well with

[5] See especially his *Mythology and the Tolerance of the Javanese* (Ithaca: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, 1965); and "The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture," in *Culture and Politics in Indonesia*, ed. Claire Holt, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 1–69 (found also in Anderson, *Language and Power*, 17–77).

[6] For Ben's reaction to Guided Democracy, see his introduction to *Language and Power*, 4–6.

[7] His doctoral dissertation was "The Pemuda Revolution: Indonesian Politics 1945–1946" (Cornell University, 1967). Its published version was titled *Java in a Time of Revolution: Occupation and Resistance, 1944–1946* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), in recognition of its Java-centric focus and also of the fact that Ben considered the critical period of the revolution, as a revolution rather than simply a war of independence, to have been that of the period before the defeat of Tan Malaka in mid-1946. See his introduction to the published work.

[8] For a discussion of his differences with the Kahinian interpretation, and a general critique of foreign approaches to the study of Indonesian politics, see Benedict O'Gorman Anderson, "Perspective and Method in American Research on Indonesia," in Benedict Anderson and Audrey Kahin, eds., *Interpreting Indonesian Politics: Thirteen Contributions to the Debate* (Ithaca: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, Interim Reports series, 1982), 69–83. For a later dissection of Southeast Asia studies, see his "The Changing Ecology of Southeast Asian Studies in the United States, 1950–1990," in *Southeast Asian Studies in the Balance: Reflections from America*, ed. C. Hirschman et al. (Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, 1992), 25–40.

[9] See "Frameworks of Comparison," 18–19. See also Siegel's tribute to Ben Anderson elsewhere in this issue of *Indonesia*.

Ben's interest in the utopian ideals, energy, and disorganization of the *pemuda* movement. It encouraged him to give increasing attention to the relationship between culture and history, the way in which they intertwined and produced institutions and ways of thinking that were quite new and often unexpected.

Ben did not really consider himself a "political scientist," even though he was given the unusual reward of being appointed to the government department faculty directly after receiving his PhD.[10] It was not wrong, he said, to think of him as a "cultural historian."[11] Moreover, as he grew increasingly involved in the exploration of Javanese civilization (and particularly that of the *abangan* and the world of the *wayang*),[12] he sometimes stated that he did not feel he could speak with authority on other Indonesian cultural groups, only the Javanese.

That might have led him to an Orientalist's career, with little concern for events or implications beyond the area of his affection, but Ben was too interested in current affairs, and Indonesia was at that time much too turbulent for him to retreat into a Javanist shell. Moreover, he liked to debate things and share ideas, and other SEAP students and staff liked to engage him. Even as a beginner he was a charismatic figure: the combination of British cool and Irish romanticism was engaging; he wrote well and debated brilliantly; and he was willing to consider all sorts of ideas. Moreover, his orientation toward culture and history spoke to an increasing discontent with the ahistorical, established-institution political science approach of that day, so what he had to say was taken as provocative but also very serious.

Two things were important in transforming Ben from a rising star in Indonesian studies into an international authority on the understanding of nationalism. The first was that, having offended the post-Sukarno regime by rejecting its account of the 1965 coup that brought it to power, he was banned from Indonesia from 1972 until after the fall of Suharto.[13] In the interim, he spent much time in other Southeast Asian countries, in particular Thailand and the Philippines. Considering their experience in key periods of socio-political change helped greatly to broaden his understanding of the relationship between social movements and the state.[14] One of the things he concluded was that, while political science (and, indeed, most popular thinking at the time) saw the "nation-state" as the natural modern political entity, there was a

[10] He commented to me at the time that they probably did it in order to assign him the teaching of British Politics, a required course with which no one on the permanent staff wanted to be burdened.

[11] Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, "The Cultural Factors in the Indonesian Revolution," *Asia* 20, Winter 1970/71: 48. See also his articles "Religion and Politics in Indonesia since Independence" and "Millenarianism and the Saminist Movement," in *Religion and Social Ethos in Indonesia*, ed. Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, Mitsuo Nakamura, and Mohammad Slamet (Clayton: Monash University, 1977), 21–32, 48–61.

[12] See especially his "The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture" and "Mythology and the Tolerance of the Javanese."

[13] The offending study was published as Benedict R. Anderson and Ruth T. McVey, with the assistance of Frederick Bunnell, *A Preliminary Analysis of the October 1, 1965, Coup in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, Interim Reports series, 1971). For Ben's take on the experience, see his "Scholarship on Indonesia and Raison d'Etat: Personal Experience," *Indonesia* 62 (October 1996): 1–18. He was a firm opponent of the New Order regime; see especially his "Petrus Dadi Ratu" in *Indonesia* 70 (October 2000): 1–7; and *Violence and the State in Suharto's Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2000).

[14] Of particular interest for today is his work on marginalized elites and diasporas. See especially his lecture on "Long-Distance Nationalism: World Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics" (Wertheim Lecture, Centre for Asian Studies Amsterdam, 1992).

fundamental conflict between these two concepts. "Nation" meant community, a sense of togetherness, a striving towards the realization of a common self. "State," however, was about control and the entrenchment of a hierarchy. In the nation-state that replaced royal dominion as the legitimate source of rule, the state seized the collective dreams of community that were born of new technologies and modes of communication and pressed them into slogans legitimizing its power.[15]

While he was formulating his ideas on this, his brother Perry urged him to put them down in a study that might be the basis for a broader discussion of the relationship between nation and state. Perry Anderson was a historian who had written important books on the transition between institutions of rule in Europe.[16] He was also editor of the *New Left Review* and head of its publishing arm, and eventually he persuaded Ben to expound there upon his ideas about nationalism, not just in the light of Southeast Asia, but of the world. The result was *Imagined Communities*, which, when it appeared in 1983, had a profound effect on thinking about identity and ideological change.[17]

Ben intended the study as a polemic attacking assumptions as to the naturalness and inevitability of the nation-state as the modern form of societal organization.[18] All communities, save for the most local and face-to-face, are imaginings, he argued, most of them conceived in terms of family and lineage. What sowed the seed of a different concept was the gradual emergence in post-medieval Europe of elites who, through the development of trade, technology, bureaucracy, and especially of print capitalism, began to see themselves as a body with its own identity and interests. Needless to say, this tendency was resisted by the old order, and so the nationalist idea found its first victories where royal absolutist rule was weakest, in Latin America of the early nineteenth century, when local elites cast off the tattered coverings of Iberian rule. These new ruling groups were creole, often quite literally in Latin America's case, but more generally spiritually—they were shaped both by the past they were rebelling against and by the new socioeconomic pressures and ideas that were inaugurating the future. Their efforts at forming a new structure of rule served as a model for other such groups, in Europe and later Asia and Africa. Thus the nation-state became the ideological and organizational exemplar, and it served to unite the populace in the area of its rule into a "family" to which was owed fealty and sacrifice. Revolutionary nationalism is transformative; the "official nationalism" of the state repressive.

Imagined Communities brought time into the picture, and this not in "developmental" terms of progress toward a more perfect future, but as another stage in the relationship between power, technology, and culture. It spoke to the mood of those who had tired of the static models of comparative politics, no longer shared the developmentalists' optimism, and were not enchanted by the subsequent navel-gazing

[15] See especially his "Old State, New Society: Indonesia's New Order in Comparative Historical Perspective," *Journal of Asian Studies* XLII, 3 (1983): 477–96 (found also in *Language and Power*, 94–122).

[16] Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* and *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (both London: New Left Books, 1974).

[17] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983). Revised and expanded versions were published in 1991 and 2006.

[18] See his discussion in "Frameworks of Comparison." The polemic was aimed especially, he said, at the Eurocentrism of British academic debate on nationalism, and also at the unquestioning anti-nationalism of both liberal and Marxist scholarship.

of postmodern and poststructural analysis. The work was an instant success, and had a profound influence on the subsequent study of ideological formation and change. It may have been conceived as a polemic, but its argument has had an impact that long outlasted the original conflict.

Much of Ben's subsequent work was spent in elaborating the ideas he introduced in *Imagined Communities,* giving particular attention to the mestizo character of emerging elites and the liminal experience of transition between old and new ways of thinking. In *Language and Power,* he brought together essays illustrating this in the case of Indonesia, and in *Under Three Flags,* he explored it with particular reference to Philippine and Cuban nationalism of the late-nineteenth century.[19] In *The Spectre of Comparisons,* he brought together studies illustrating the connectedness and also the singularity of Southeast Asia's intellectual transformation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and addressed the ever-vexed question of the relevance of "area studies."[20]

In the years since Ben's readmission to Indonesia and his retirement from teaching in 2002, he often returned to Southeast Asia and particularly to Java, which remained his principal love. He still taught and researched, and indeed was on a lecture tour in East Java when, quite unexpectedly, he died. He was lucky (being of an age), for his passing could thus be commemorated in the place that he loved, and his ashes strewn across the Java Sea. He would not have desired better. For his colleagues, students, and friends, particularly in the field of Indonesian studies, his departure was an emotional and intellectual shock. How we looked at Indonesia (and Southeast Asia, and the world) had owed much to Ben's thinking; he had studied revolution, but also revolutionized the way we studied. We can no longer look forward to his new insights and challenges, but we can gratefully use those he has given us to further our imaginings of Indonesia, and the world.

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[19] Anderson, *Language and Power*; and Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (London: Verso, 2005).

[20] Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998). Useful for placing Ben's arguments on the matter of area studies is Vicente Rafael, "Regionalism, Area Studies, and the Accidents of Agency," *American Historical Review* 104, 4 (1999): 1208–20. See also Rafael's tribute to Ben Anderson elsewhere in this issue of *Indonesia.*