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Contingency and Comparison: Recalling Benedict Anderson

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Contingency and Comparison: Recalling Benedict Anderson

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I first met Benedict Anderson in 1979 when I began my graduate work at Cornell. He invited me to his home for dinner some 20 miles from Ithaca in a town improbably called Freeville, once the location of a juvenile detention facility called the George Junior Republic that had been the model for the Iwahig Penal Colony in the Philippines.¹ Appropriately enough for Ben—a connoisseur of irony—his home used to be the warden’s, who had to leave town hurriedly because of some scandal (Anderson 2010).

This anecdote says something about the Cornell of Ben Anderson, the Cornell that I knew. It was a fertile field for inducing two of the most characteristic aspects of his work: contingency and comparison. Indeed, one

grew out of the other. It is this relationship that I would like to talk about, recalling how they figured in Ben's life and works.

As I was beginning my dissertation in 1983, in the wake of Ninoy Aquino's assassination, he had just published *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 1983). His office was directly below mine in an old house that served as the site for the Modern Indonesia Project, more commonly known as 102 West Avenue by its denizens. It was a former fraternity house whose members had been kicked out of campus for some transgression, so we were essentially on frat row. The chairs and tables were scarred and stained with cigarette burns and coffee spills, the doors were cracked, the stairs creaked, and parts of the balustrade at times came off as you held on to them. In the summers, the frat boys sunbathed and held beer balloon wars while playing loud rock 'n' roll music around us, while in the winter snow blanketed the place, muffling sounds and freezing one's bones. Faculty, students, and visiting professors worked in various offices, often deep into the night, meeting during evening seminars and weekly brown bags featuring speakers ranging from diplomats to foreign scholars. The basement was full of boxes of file folders, which I always thought were Ben's research notes, turning the place into a veritable firetrap.

In short, 102 West Avenue was an ideal place to work. Its ramshackle quality lent to it the feel of a refugee camp: physically precarious, resistant to domestication, but also ripe with insurgent possibilities. At 102, unexpected connections grew into friendships that led people into paths other than what they thought they had embarked upon. Its informal atmosphere allowed for explorations of all sorts that deviated from the disciplinary formations that fixed—and fixated—many of us. Firmly but gently, Ben—sitting in his office, presiding over seminars, asking questions that always surprised and disoriented—served as the tutelary spirit of 102.²

One of the things that drew me (and doubtless many others) to Ben was precisely his style of thinking. He readily admitted that he was not a theorist and not really a political scientist. He shied away from fashionable labels such as poststructuralist or postcolonialist, while the classicist in him—with its love for lexical precision and rhetorical economy—abhorred the theoretical hyperventilation and logorrhea that often plague the American academy. More likely, he would have preferred to be called a historian and a novelist, both of which are closely related to one another. As a historian-novelist, Ben was drawn to the contingent constellations of people and events, reveling

in their surprising and unexpected juxtapositions. All of these generated not only alternative and parallel universes to what had happened; they also opened up doors into worlds that could have happened. In other words, for Ben, thinking entailed recuperating those events and imaginings that had to be repressed in the making of dominant realities.

We can see the critical role of contingency in his various autobiographical accounts as they are spread across his books. For example, in the introduction to *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (Anderson 1990), Ben relates how he became interested in Southeast Asian studies (cf. Anderson 1998, 18–20). It started with a blow to his face. While studying classical languages at Cambridge in 1956, he found himself wandering into a political demonstration held by a small group of South Asians. A fight suddenly broke out, initiated by a group of English students hurling racial epithets at the demonstrators. Ben found himself in the middle, trying to stop the fight. “My spectacles were smacked off my face,” he recounts, “and so, by chance, I joined the column of the assaulted” (Anderson 1990, 1). The rest of Ben’s account consists of tracing the cracks created by such a chance encounter, cracks that led to more fortuitous meetings and unexpected events.

His interest in “Asia” stoked by the violent episode, he decided to learn about Indonesia, which had been in the news. He had heard that there were only two places where Indonesia was being studied seriously: Yale and Cornell. Thanks to an “old friend,” he found a teaching assistantship at Cornell and there met four of his most important mentors: George Kahin, John Echols, James T. Siegel, and Claire Holt (Anderson 1990, 9; cf. Anderson 2016, 15–18). Aside from Kahin and Siegel, it was Holt, an art historian, who had a profound effect on Ben, in part because she mirrored his own predicament as an exile many times displaced and yet seeming to be at home everywhere. Ben described himself as “someone born in China, raised in three countries, speaking with an obsolete English accent, carrying an Irish passport, living in America, and devoted to Southeast Asia,” the author of an “odd book” on nationalism “that could only (have been) written from various exiles and with divided loyalties” (Anderson 1990, 10). Claire Holt came from a wealthy Jewish family from Riga, was a dancer in Paris and New York, then the lover of the Dutch scholar William Stutterheim. She had lived in colonial Java in the 1930s, had translated for the US military during the war, and fled the McCarthyism of Washington to Ithaca on the

invitation of Kahin to teach courses on Indonesian culture (Holt 1967).³ And it was precisely her lack of formal academic training that made her so valued by her students, particularly Ben. Her interest in Javanese mythology, arrived at unintentionally through her wanderings and love affairs, encouraged Ben to think about Indonesian politics differently through the lens of its cultural logics. The result, as many of those in Southeast Asian studies know, was a series of highly influential essays on the politics and culture of the Indonesian Revolution and its counterrevolutionary aftermath (Anderson 1990, 10).

One of his earliest comparative essays was his classic piece, “The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture.” As Ben relates it, the essay owes its genesis to the simultaneous but unconnected presence of two people at Cornell while he was a junior faculty member: the renowned conservative philosopher Allan Bloom and the well-known Javanese historian Sumarsaid Murtono. Neither knew the other, and it was Ben who stumbled upon the connection between the two. One day he overheard Bloom talking to another colleague about how the ancient Greek philosophers had no equivalent for the modern concept of “power.” At the same time, Ben remembered reading Murtono’s MA thesis that related the story of an eighteenth-century Javanese monarch who died without leaving an heir. At his wake, one of his sons noticed that the dead king’s penis was erect, a small amount of “glowing liquid” oozing from its tip. He quickly sipped this liquid, thereby absorbing “the *tédja*, or magic light of kingship,” enabling him to assume the throne. Like the ancient Greeks, the Javanese seemed to have a notion of power that was material rather than abstract, and so, thanks to the wholly contingent presence of Bloom and Murtono, Ben came to think of the comparability of Javanese and Western rationality, beginning with the difference, as well as similarities, in their ideas about power (Anderson 2016, 15–18).

Such unexpected conjunctions informed, or at least triggered, much of Ben’s work. While doing fieldwork in postrevolutionary Indonesia during the early 1960s, his interests were guided by dramatic happenings. Jakarta then was adrift with possibilities, rumors, and contradictions, yet also awash in what appeared to be a genuinely egalitarian ethos. While there, he writes, he “was lucky enough to have two remarkable elderly Javanese teachers who were also brothers” teach him about “traditional” Javanese culture while remaining “wholly sharp-eyed” about its “delusions” (Anderson 1990, 3). “Luck,” in this case, also foreshadowed catastrophe. The coup and subsequent massacres of 1965–1966, which were totally unexpected

both in their extent and viciousness, led to the long nightmare of Suharto's dictatorship and the subsequent banning of Ben from Indonesia for having coauthored a report implicating the regime for its role in the coup and the killings that followed.

But, again, as luck would have it, Ben's exile from Indonesia coincided with the overthrow of the military dictatorship in Thailand in 1973 and the return to a more open society. Having cultivated close friendships with a number of Thai dissident intellectuals, Ben was given another chance to pursue his interests in Southeast Asian revolutionary movements. And in an even more fortuitous spin of the wheel, his brother Perry Anderson had been editing the *New Left Review* and had authored important comparative works on the history of nation-state formations in Europe. Thanks to the accident of birth, Ben found his intellectual and political horizons shifting again, toward more comparative directions. In the midst of repeated displacements and exiles, he found himself "haunted" by unsettling questions about solidarity, difference, and imagination, while accompanied by a recurring object of love, the "imagined community." The latter is alternately figured as the nation, the family in its most extended forms, mentors, colleagues, students, and friends from various parts of the world linked by the generosity and affection of their regard (*ibid.*, 6, 14).⁴ The imagined community, born out of a series of violent mishaps and exiles, contingent meetings and ghostly questions, is also a community of sentiment.

The very title of his famous book, *Imagined Communities*, suggests as much. It was written in the midst of the war between two socialist countries, Vietnam and Cambodia, and in response to the debates in the UK about the breakup of Britain. Nationalism had been derided like religion as a utopic fantasy by European Marxists and as a useless impediment to globalization by proponents of neoliberalism. Ben returned to the conditions of possibility that gave rise to nationalist imaginings, seeking to reconstruct what was once so compelling and persuasive about its discourse. At the same time, Ben was less interested in providing a general theory about nationalist formation as he was in demolishing cherished myths about the immemorial and timeless nature that nation-states ascribed to themselves. He owed his approach to other thinkers, including Walter Benjamin, Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz, Lucien Febvre, his brother Perry, and his good friend James T. Siegel, among others. They provided the theoretical scaffolding for figuring out what he called the "cultural roots" of nationalism. Hence would Ben argue

that nationalism was a kind of substitute for religion, or at least religion's magical ability to turn chance into destiny. It anticipated revolution even as it sought to sublimate its destructive force. Emerging from experiences of "creole pilgrimages," "homogenous empty time," the break up of sacred communities, and the vernacularization of sacred languages—thanks to the conjunction of capitalism and print—nationalism could be reckoned with retrospectively as a sustained, "piratable" project for constructing community amid conditions of anonymity. Here is Ben's own self-effacing evaluation of the modest goals and surprising reach of his book despite, or perhaps because of, its broad comparisons, in 2011:

Fools step in where angels fear to tread. In fact, I have always been surprised how little severe criticism I ever got about *IC*. One reason must have been the fact that I didn't concentrate on any one country or region, so the scale of the theory was super-macro. Basically it was also very simple: technology + capitalism + Tower of Babel = nationalism! Hahahaha! Mistakes: I am sure there were and are heaps of them. But what theory does, if it is any good, is to push readers to think about the world in a new way, especially to abandon fossilized ideas and unmask fantasies and legends, for which each nationalism has plenty to answer. (Anderson 2011, 127)

This brings us to the other key feature of Ben's work: comparison. Indeed, for Ben, comparison was less a method as a "discursive strategy" (Anderson 2016, 15–18). It entailed developing a keen awareness of "strangeness and absence," thereby opening oneself up to what he called, borrowing from José Rizal, the "specter of comparisons." The effectiveness of comparisons could be gauged by the "surprise" they produced—or what Benjamin might call shock effects, catching readers "off guard" by their unexpected juxtapositions among different sites or the longitudinal arc within the same site (*ibid.*, 17–18). How did this discourse of comparison prove to be so generative? Here is an example: Ben's opening paragraphs to his review of Soledad Locsin's translation of the *Noli me tangere*:

Few countries give the observer a deeper feeling of historical vertigo than the Philippines. Seen from Asia, the armed uprising

against Spanish rule of 1896, which triumphed temporarily with the establishment of an independent republic in 1898, makes it the visionary forerunner of all the other anti-colonial movements in the region. Seen from Latin America, it is, with Cuba, the last of the Spanish imperial possessions to have thrown off the yoke, seventy-five years after the rest. Profoundly marked, after three and a half centuries of Spanish rule, by Counter-Reformation Catholicism, it was the only colony in the Empire where the Spanish language never became widely understood. But it was also the only colony in Asia to have had a university in the 19th century. In the 1890s, barely 3 per cent of the population knew 'Castilian', but it was Spanish-readers and writers who managed to turn movements of resistance to colonial rule from hopeless peasant uprisings into a revolution. Today, thanks to American imperialism, and the Philippines' new self-identification as 'Asian', almost no one other than a few scholars understands the language in which the revolutionary heroes communicated among themselves and with the outside world—to say nothing of the written archive of pre-20th-century Philippine history. A virtual lobotomy has taken place.

The central figure in the revolutionary generation was José Rizal, poet, novelist, ophthalmologist, historian, doctor, polemical essayist, moralist and political dreamer. He was born in 1861 into a well-to-do family of mixed Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, Tagalog descent: five years after Freud, four years after Conrad, one year after Chekhov; the same year as Tagore; five years before Sun Yat-sen, three years before Max Weber, eight years before Gandhi, and nine before Lenin. Thirty-five years later, he was arrested on false charges of inciting Andrés Bonifacio's uprising of August 1896, and executed by a firing squad composed of native soldiers led by Spanish officers. The execution was carried out in what is now the beautiful Luneta Park, which fronts the shoreline of Manila Bay. (On the other side of the Spanish world, José Martí, the hero of Cuban nationalism, had died in action the previous year.) At the time of Rizal's death, Lenin had just been sentenced to exile in Siberia, Sun Yat-sen had begun organising for Chinese nationalism outside China, and Gandhi was conducting his early experiments in anti-colonial resistance in South Africa. (Anderson 1977, 22)

Comparisons in Ben's hands were meant to provoke the rethinking of received ideas beyond accepted boundaries. In the passage above, we see how he reintroduces the Philippines to the metropolitan readers of the *London Review of Books*, then later to middle-class Filipinos and other Southeast Asians, by repositioning it in terms of vast world historical forces. The sense of vertigo he provokes arises from apprehending the country's emergence from great historical tides washing over one corner of the globe to the other. Unexpected chain reactions result in unforeseen cascades of change that resonate and reverberate through the archipelago, rippling in turn to other parts of the world. History emerges here as a phantasmagoria of possibilities—inflecting, decentering, and displacing one another. Reading Ben, one begins to feel the Philippines as a tenuous collection of sites ready to come apart and come together in new ways.

Similarly, he introduces Rizal as a world historical figure: not the privileged boy from Calamba destined for greatness, but as a repository for an interminably hybrid history, kin to those other great modernists of the world: Freud, Conrad, Chekhov, Sun-Yat Sen, Tagore, and Lenin, among others. In this way, Ben maps Rizal's life within the shifting force fields of the revolutionary nineteenth century. By deprovincializing Rizal, he recasts him into a cosmopolitan figure whose writings and legacy belong not so much to one country or one people. Rather, they become part of the common inheritance of the rest of humanity.

This, in my opinion, was the basis of Ben's genius. By pursuing such comparisons—or better yet, opening himself to being possessed by their unexpected ghosts—he led us to see what is often so obvious and, for that reason, what remains invisible to our own eyes. His greatness as a scholar and as a teacher lay in his ability to poke and probe underneath layers of mystifications and the garbage of half-truths covered over by the habits of intellectual laziness and moral cowardice. At the same time, he was always alert to other possibilities that came through the inverted telescopes of time, allowing him to see distant connections waiting to be made: Rizal with Maltatuli, Isabelo de los Reyes with Malatesta, Sukarno with Hitler, for example. Out of these improbable and surprising relays of rumors, gossip, jokes, novels, poetry, cartoons, newspaper articles, government reports, and census surveys—these massive and promiscuous mixing of texts and tales, works and lives—Ben led us, cajoled us, prompted and forced us to see the world differently, to imagine yet again the history of futures yet to come.

His death continues to be deeply mourned by untold others. As his close friend Jim Siegel (2015) wrote: “An obituary conventionally names the deceased’s ‘contributions’ as if they have been laid to rest, to be revived when necessary. Careful readers of Anderson’s works will find themselves revived, living members of an organization without a form, joined in unimagined solidarity with others unknown to themselves.”

Notes

- 1 For a history of the Iwahig Penal colony modeled after the George Junior Republic in Freeville, see Salman 2009.
- 2 102 West Avenue was demolished long ago to make room for a parking lot. There is not even a historical plaque that commemorates its existence. In the early 1990s, the Southeast Asian studies program offices were transferred to a stately Tudor mansion on Stewart Avenue funded by Japanese donors, which has a much more institutional feel. A large photograph of 102 West hangs in the main meeting room, and while visiting Cornell sometime in 2007, I asked students if they had any idea what that photograph represented. I drew only blank stares. A history of the pioneering Southeast Asia Program at Cornell has yet to be written.
- 3 For a fuller biography of Holt, see Burton 2009.
- 4 See also the dedication of *The Spectre of Comparisons* (Anderson 1998, viii).

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Negative Comparisons

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Imagined Communities (Anderson 1991) may be packed with culturalist arguments, but one of its original claims is actually anchored on the comparative analysis of institutions and people. The shift from “God’s languages” spoken only by a tiny elite to the explosive growth of the secular vernacular languages, for example, is based on the fascinating history of the printing press and the flow of books it produced (Febvre and Marti 1990). “Print capitalism,” according to Ben, “made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways” (Anderson 1991, 36). He conjures images of people talking to each other in their communities about the latest stories, historical accounts, and philosophical tracts, and then venturing beyond or meeting up secretly to discuss the contents of the books they had read.

Here was the comparative gaze growing and expanding laterally, instead of the medieval top-down, constant divine hectoring on a small group of clerics. Imagination was anchored in this bizarre way of earning profits. It is a comparative stare that thrives because of difference.

Comparative historical analyses also become more evident by the repeated presentation of contrasts. In defining the nation, Ben begins by identifying three paradoxes, to wit:

- (1) The objective modernity of nations to the historian’s eye vs. their subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists.
- (2) The formal universality of nationality as a socio-cultural concept—in the modern world everyone can, should, will ‘have’ a nationality, as he or she