

philippine studies: historical and ethnographic viewpoints

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Symposium

In Appreciation of Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, 1936–2015

Benedict Anderson: A Personal Tribute

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Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints
vol. 64 no. 1 (2016): 156–59

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Benedict Anderson: A Personal Tribute

RESIL B. MOJARES

I came to know Ben Anderson rather late.

Sometime in 1987, in a Mister Donut coffee shop in Cebu City, Alfred McCoy, Michael Cullinane, and I decided to put up a panel for the annual Association for Asian Studies (AAS) Conference slated to take place in San Francisco in March 1988. I knew Mike and Al from the time they were doing doctoral fieldwork in Cebu and Iloilo, respectively, in a friendship that stimulated my interest in history and has lasted to this day. And so, as the “Visayan gang,” we were excited about having our own panel at the AAS conference in San Francisco. It was to be our “coming-out party.” “Showtime,” Al said in his engagingly histrionic way, and it was his bright idea to invite Ben Anderson as our panel discussant.

Already a legend in Southeast Asian studies with his work on Indonesia and Thailand, Ben had started at the time to do work on the Philippines. (He would publish later that year what may be his first full article on the Philippines, “Cacique Democracy in the Philippines,” in the *New Left Review* [Anderson 1988]). Our panel on Filipino political families (which eventually formed the core of *An Anarchy of Families* [McCoy 1993]) was to be Ben’s first appearance in a Philippine panel at AAS.

It was showtime indeed. With high interest in the Philippines because of the “People Power Revolution” and Ben’s presence, our panel was assigned to the hotel ballroom for an unusually heavily attended presentation. I am still amused by the image I had of Al, Mike, and myself studiously taking down notes, like earnest graduate students, as Ben thoughtfully commented on our papers and suggested lines of inquiry for a comparative study of political families in Southeast Asia.

This was the first time I met Ben. We briefly chatted after the panel session and he graciously invited me to come to Ithaca for a talk, which I did a week or so later.

In the years after, we ran into each other mostly at conferences (Madison, Ann Arbor, Honolulu, Manila), and once in a surprise visit he made to Cebu where my wife and I had the privilege of having him as a guest in the house for dinner. The last time I saw him was in November 2014 when, in the company of Karina Bolasco, he showed up in a lecture on Nick Joaquin

I was giving in Ateneo. (He was stranded in Manila, waiting for his Irish passport to be renewed so he could fly back to Bangkok.)

It was in the 1970s that I first came to know, if tentatively, of Ben's writings when I started to read up on Indonesia. I had received a doctoral fellowship in comparative literature under Ford Foundation's Southeast Asian Graduate Training Fellowship Program (1974–1977), and was programmed to go to the University of Indonesia. Like anyone coming into Indonesian studies from the outside, reading scholars like Clifford Geertz and Benedict Anderson was inevitably a must.

I never made it to Indonesia however. In a story too long to tell, for having been a political detainee in the early months of martial rule, I could not get a passport to travel and had to abandon any plan I may have had for becoming an Indonesianist. I would have missed Ben anyway had I gone to Indonesia. As I would learn much later, Ben was expelled from Indonesia in 1972 for cowriting the controversial "Cornell Paper," which incensed the Indonesian government for its investigation of the "anti-Communist massacres" of 1965–1966 that marked Suharto's rise to power.

One is awed by the stories one learns about Ben's life and career. Born to Anglo-Irish parents in China, he had his early schooling in the US (where his family was stranded in the Second World War); studied at Cambridge in England; did his doctoral studies at Cornell; and lived in Indonesia in the 1960s in the politically heady days under Sukarno. Barred from Indonesia, he shifted to Thai studies in the midst of the fall of the Thai military dictatorship in 1973 and the bloody coup of 1976, and then took up the study of the Philippines in the frenzied days that attended the collapse of the Marcos dictatorship. Working in Southeast Asia in turbulent, intellectually thrilling times, forging friendships with local scholars, must have cemented his passion for the region.

"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" (in his own words), Ben practiced a scholarship deeply marinated in a personal attachment to the countries he had lived in and to which he devoted his intellectual energies for half a century. Yet, it is a scholarship unfailingly informed by an expansive, transnational knowledge of the world. With his reputation and the quality and range of his work, he brought the Philippines—perhaps more than anyone—into the discourse of world scholarship, as shown by his widely influential work on nationalism,

Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (Anderson 1983), in which Rizal is a key figure, and his vigorously original essays in *New Left Review* and *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (Anderson 2005).

His is a scholarship that harnesses the power of the Western critical tradition, yet one sensitively grounded in the historical and current realities of the countries he studied, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines. An aspect of his work with which I have great affinity is that he is more interested in *thought* rather than *ideas*, in living persons and communities thinking, imagining, and acting out of their historically particular worlds rather than abstract, disembodied ideas.

I remember his lively, youthful curiosity about odds and ends of Filipino history and culture, conversations and email exchanges on the personalities of José Rizal and Isabelo de los Reyes, the meaning of *diskarte*, Filipino bar girls in nineteenth-century Spain, and gangsters in Filipino popular culture. It was this curiosity, and intellectual generosity, that would lead him to write and publish works specifically meant for Filipino readers, *Why Counting Counts* (Anderson 2008) and Isabelo de los Reyes's *Ang Diablo sa Filipinas* (De los Reyes 2014). Unlike other academics of stature, he did not think in terms of what was career-enhancing or consider it beneath him to participate in more “local conversations.”

I will remember his quiet, humane generosity. I never studied under Ben Anderson (although, as an admiring reader of his work, I can well count myself a student). I am thus grateful for the interest he took in my work and the encouraging comments he made on it. I recall one of our rare meetings at a conference in Manila in 2010. At the concluding dinner, before the participants went their separate ways, he came up to me, gave me a hug, and said, “My hero.”

If scholars can be thought of as an “imagined community,” I have never been as blessed with the deep comradeship of being part of that community.

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Benedict Anderson: A Great Inspiration

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We have witnessed many emotional and eloquent tributes to Benedict Anderson from around the world, following his sudden and peaceful death. Writing such tributes is never easy, in light of Ben's incredibly diverse talents and achievements in scholarship as well as his richly nuanced life experiences, distant travels, political activism, and fascinating aspects of his private life. Those who enjoyed the privilege of close friendship with Ben or those who gave his work special attention must have felt this difficulty. I never had any close working relationship or friendship with him nor did I follow all that he wrote. Some of his published works have nonetheless become a major source of inspiration in my research and teaching since the 1980s, particularly in Indonesian studies, area studies more generally, and cultural politics. Therefore, instead of attempting to discuss Ben's achievements across the breadth and depth of his work, what I wish to do in this essay is something very modest. Based on the limits of what I know, I discuss some of Ben's achievements and how they can and should be a source of inspiration to scholars in Asian studies in the face of the challenges of the new century.

For at least the past two decades, Asian area studies has been the target of attacks from multiple directions. Its value and relevance have been questioned, often in opposition to traditional disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. Closely related to the debate is the value of language training. Finally, there are issues of ethics and politics of studying Asia,