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## **Symposium**

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

### **Negative Comparisons**

Patricio N. Abinales

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**Vicente L. Rafael**

Professor, Department of History, University of Washington  
<vrafael@uw.edu>

## Negative Comparisons

PATRICIO N. ABINALES

*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

'has' a gender—vs. the irremediable particularity of its concrete manifestations, such that, by definition, 'Greek' nationality is sui generis. (3) The 'political' power of nationalisms vs. their philosophical poverty and even incoherence. (ibid., 5)

Apart from describing the serried world of print as a capitalist enterprise, *Imagined Communities* likewise implores us to look at nationalism not in its customary secular tag but as a cultural artifact. In his controversial chapter "Creole Pioneers," Ben locates nationalism's ancestries in the colonial world, thereby upending the dominant view that its birthplace is Europe. Other contrasts are quite notable: the "imperial imaginings" of monarchs and kings but the nationalist narrowing of their world, and the emotive force of nationalism as displayed and utilized by the military, the institution that sees itself as the perfect scientific machine. In the end this comparative eye enabled Ben to keep steady a position that many are hesitant to take these days—believing in the "goodness of nations" even as blood sports are now justified along nationalist lines.

The same eye informs his major works on Southeast Asian studies, even though these were less known by political scientists, who tend to focus on "large" East Asian countries. His *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (Anderson 1990) examines the discrepancies between Max Weber's charisma and the absence of a discussion of "power" by ancient philosophers, on the one hand, and the way the Javanese interpret and explain power, on the other hand. This was comparative politics and social theory blended, "a tour de force" that "became immediately part of debates in social theory," according to historian Anthony Reid (2011).

Further comparative historical work includes Ben's essay "Studies of the Thai State and the State of Thai Studies," which questions the orthodox and popular argument that Thailand and Japan are comparable because of a shared experience of not being colonized (Anderson 1978, 257). Ben argues that Thailand should instead be compared to the unfederated Malay states. At first glance Thailand and the Malay states are incomparable; the former was a "large" nation ruled by a single monarchy admired for its modernist ideals while the latter were small petty kingdoms, ruled by datus and rajahs—"traditional rulers" placed in power and protected by British colonial overlords. In one of those deft analytical moves that Ben was known for, he would cite the same sources that scholars used to argue Thailand's distinctiveness to prove his

contrarian conclusions. The essay shows how much these royalties had in common, their similitudes underpinned by the fact that they had a robust neocolonial relationship with European powers in the region. The Thai state was therefore not unique or autonomous; like its southern neighbors, it was under the sway of the colonial powers. Japan was not.

“Old State, New Society: Indonesia’s New Order in Comparative Historical Perspective” (Anderson 1983) was written in the same vein. Not satisfied with the Marxist explanation of the history of the Indonesian state, especially in regard to how the military dictatorship of General Suharto was able to seize power with hardly any resistance, Ben conjoined two opposites — “a popular, participatory nation with an older adversarial state” — to come up with a more viable explanation. The essay’s comprehensive piece looked at Suharto’s economic, sociopolitical, and security policies to reveal how much of the former colonial Dutch state structure had persisted. It was a colonial state that effectively brought together the diverse societies of the archipelago, bounding them all under one political economy reinforced by a new argot (Bahasa Indonesia) that “unified” what would become Indonesia. State predated nation, not the other way around.

Ben never put a name to his approach until much later. As far as I can recall, it was in a lecture he delivered in Delhi that he called his landmark study of the Indonesian state as an example of “negative comparisons” (Anderson 2012). He defined the phrase as a discursive strategy that enables one to focus “on comparisons that emphasize, and, I suppose, prioritize difference.” In the introduction to his recently translated memoir, he expanded on the term, stating that

[O]ne has to decide, in any given work, whether one is mainly after similarities or differences. It is very difficult, for example, to say, let alone prove, that Japan and China or Korea are basically similar or basically different. Either case could be made, depending on one’s angle of vision, one’s framework, and the conclusions towards which one intends to move. (In the jingoist years on the eve of the First World War, when Germans and Frenchmen were encouraged to hate each other, the great Austro-Marxist theoretician Otto Bauer enjoyed baiting both sides by saying that contemporary Parisians and Berliners had far more in common than either had with their respective medieval ancestors.) Here I have tried, as perhaps offering a useful

example, to show how the comparative works I wrote between the early 1970s and the 2000s reflected, in their real difference, changing perspectives, framings and (political) intentions. (Anderson 2016)

However, he did not stop there and gave these additional points. His “second point” was that “the most instructive comparisons (whether of difference or similarity) are those that surprise.” Comparisons could also work in one country if one were to look at its history or politics “over a long stretch of time” and write a book “that doesn’t disdain myths and has vested interest in continuity and perpetuating an ancient ‘national identity’” (ibid.). One also needs to be aware of “one’s own circumstances, class position, gender, level and type of education, age, mother language etc),” for only by being conscious about these characters would one be able “to notice what is not there as well as what is there” and “become aware of what is unwritten as well as what is written” (ibid.). Facility with the language of the society one studies as well as openness to learning more languages would then deepen the comparison, resulting in something unexpected and odd. For Ben, “a good comparison often comes from the experience of strangeness and absences” (ibid.).

Those of us in the Government Department at Cornell who he mentored wrote dissertations that tried to apply “negative comparisons.” One student wrote an original study of the Burmese military and the durability of its rule, comparing it at the onset with the kind of state building in Europe that the sociologist Charles Tilly examined (Callahan 2005). Another student penned an impressive neo-Marxist exploration of Filipino “bossism,” placing it in comparison to American machine politics, Southeast Asian strongmen and women (Sidel 1999). Another produced a well-designed impression of Southeast Asian state, protest, and revolutionary politics, adding a “Global South” viewpoint to the literature on social movements that had been dominated by Western experiences (Boudreau 2009).<sup>1</sup> In my case, Ben suggested I take American politics as a minor and the result was a dissertation that—in its first half—compared American national state building in the Progressive era to the construction of a colonial state in early-twentieth-century Philippines (Abinales 2005). Here, the metropolis and the colony were placed on the same eye level, thereby removing a variable that has continually impeded any serious comparative investigation of American politics: exceptionalism. It also puts the Philippines (and, by extension, Muslim Mindanao) right in the center of the turn-of-the-twentieth-

century American political development as well as Philippine colonial state formation—the colony, the margin, the frontier, and the Muslim Umma shaping and continuing to influence the political development of the imperial center and national metropolis, and “Christian” Filipinos, as it were.<sup>2</sup>

One reason for why scholars from my discipline have erred in not classifying Ben as a political scientist is that he did not write like one. His most famous essays were often about political culture, and drew from biographies and autobiographies, literature and, of late, film. He translated and corrected the translations of novels and short stories, and contributed to newspapers and popular websites, ever mindful of a broader audience that read his works. These works were gregarious, lucid, impish, critical, and poetic—rarely the character of most North American-based political scientists. Additionally, a lot of his work was not penned in English; he delighted, for example, in writing essays in street-smart Bahasa Indonesia (using the pre-New Order orthography) or gangster-radical Thai (e.g., Anderson 2000).

Ben was also passionately political. Many know about the twenty-seven-year ban the Suharto regime imposed on Ben, and perhaps fewer also know about his criticism of the Filipino ruling class. Less known was his vow never to visit either autocratic Singapore or the Philippines when it was still under Marcos. These are sorties into the world of real politics that are often rare among scholars of comparative politics.

Ben is perhaps one of the few authors in the late twentieth century remembered with fondness across continents. Amid all these recollections of Ben and his works, political scientists can comfort themselves with the fact that “Omben” (“Uncle Ben,” as he was popularly called by Indonesians) was a member of their species. That said, this celebration may also be a bit premature. Comparative historical institutionalism continues to lose its luster in a discipline that is moving further and further into the world of mind-numbing multi-country comparisons, number crunching, and econometric analysis. Its further retreat into the margins of American political science—compounded by Ben’s death—may very well signal the demise of a perspective that gave Ben Anderson and his old colleagues at Cornell’s Government Department their idiosyncratic identities.<sup>3</sup>

## Notes

*This essay is an expanded version of a 21 Dec. 2015 essay titled “Yes Benedict Anderson was a political scientist,” written for the Washington Post blog site Monkey Cage (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/12/21/yes-benedict-anderson-was-a-political-scientist/>).*

- 1 The old party faction tried to win these students to their side, but they failed and later “reestablished” the Communist Party of the Philippines (Marxism–Leninism–Mao Tse Tung Thought).
- 2 More recent works by scholars on the period seem to validate the Philippine–United States comparison. See, e.g., McCoy 2009.
- 3 Other members of Cornell’s Department of Government during my time as a student there, who were known to share Ben’s penchant for comparative historical institutionalism, included Mary Katzenstein (Indian politics, gender); Peter Katzenstein (international relations, global political economy); Martin Shefter (American political development, American and European working class insurgencies); Vivienne Shue (Chinese state–society relations, peasants); and Sidney Tarrow (Europe, social movements).

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## Patricio N. Abinales

Professor, School of Pacific and Asian Studies, University of Hawai'i Manoa  
Director, Center for Philippines Studies, University of Hawai'i Manoa  
<abinales@hawaii.edu>

# Revolutionary Élan

TAKASHI SHIRAISHI

I received the news of Ben's passing past noon on 13 December 2015, when I arrived at the venue of the Southeast Asian Studies in Asia (SEASIA) conference in Kyoto. Not a few of Ben's students and friends happened to be there as part of arguably the largest-ever academic meeting of Southeast Asian studies specialists in the region. It was an accident, but the fact that many of us were there made our sense of loss of Ben, my sense of loss of Ben, more profound.

When one reaches a certain age and becomes aware that one only has these many years left in one's life, one looks back and thinks of the few, at most four or five, people who have shaped one's life in a very profound way. Ben was one of these people for me and I am fortunate enough to have met him, come to know him well, and learned from him. He taught me how to think, about what it takes to think.

I first met Ben via his writings. I read "The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture" (1972a) and *Java in a Time of Revolution* (1972b) when I was a first-year graduate student at the University of Tokyo. My fellow graduate student and *senpai*, Kenji Tsuchiya (1987), who was working on Ki Hadjar Dewantara (formerly Swardi Suryaningrat) and Sukarno, alerted me to Ben's two works. I had never read such an exciting history book as *Java*. Although in those days I was very slow to read English-language books, I finished the book in two days, deeply impressed with the way in which Ben captured the revolutionary élan of Java's youth and also the moment in which a truly revolutionary Indonesia became possible and then lost. Only much later did