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

Revolutionary Élan

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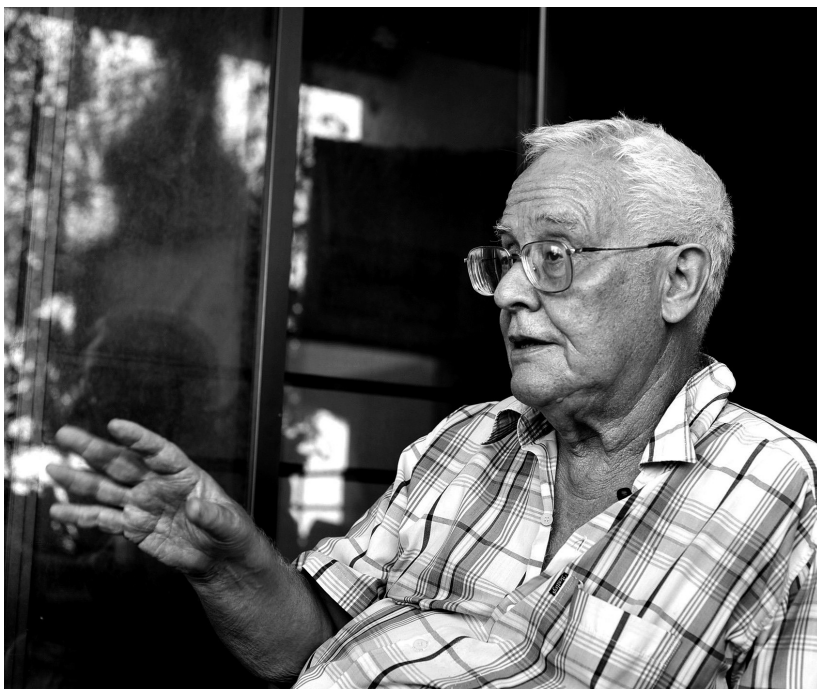
Revolutionary Élan

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



Benedict Anderson, being interviewed by Spanish journalist Carlos Sardiña Galache, at his home in Bangkok, 14 March 2013. (Photo courtesy of Omar Montenegro, www.studionuma.com)

I learn that Ben's idea of "slicing" through time to bring up one defining moment in history came out of his fruitful conversations on the notion of liminality with James Siegel, whose classic work on Aceh, *The Rope of God*, had come out in 1969.

Electrified by *Java*, I found Ben's "Idea of Power" puzzling. I took it as a kind of decoding of Java's (more generally, old Java's) classical texts. I also took it as a cogent argument for taking seriously what Indonesians themselves were saying and for understanding Indonesians on their own terms—points Ben made, if I remember correctly, in the mimeographed critique he circulated on Herbert Feith's *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia* (1962). But I myself was not sure whether the culturalist turn to "tradition" was the best way to read Sukarno and his writings. Although deeply charmed by Ben's analysis (which deeply influenced many a Cornell PhD dissertation in those days), I found Sukarno's language—rendered in Bahasa Indonesia—to be quite modern and intelligible and Sukarno himself a consummate hybrid in linguistic and ideological terms. Later on, however,

I came to appreciate Ben's attentiveness to the differences between languages and Ben's efforts to think through these differences, rather than merely insist on each language's fundamental untranslatability. (Ben often got annoyed at Indonesianists who unproblematically invoked Indonesian words in their lectures and writings.)

In retrospect, meeting Ben through these two texts inspired me to go to Cornell to pursue my PhD. I was in Ithaca for four semesters, from Fall 1975 to Spring 1977, for coursework. I first met Ben at 102 West Avenue, where the Cornell Modern Indonesia Project was lodged, and where I attended the organizational meeting for Ben's Indonesia seminar. At that meeting, Ben distributed cans of beer and *kretek* cigarettes. His big long-haired dog, whose name I have forgotten, always accompanied him to the seminar, yawning from time to time (and seemingly at the right moments!) as if he were bored. I thoroughly enjoyed student life. I took all the lectures and seminars Ben offered: the Indonesia Seminar, Government and Politics in Southeast Asia, Military Politics, and the special seminar on Pramoedya Ananta Toer, which he cotaught with James Siegel. It is hard, however, to explain what I learned from him. I know that I learned how to think, but it is difficult to explain what this means and how I learned to do so. What I remember is the sense of surprise and puzzlement that his readings and probing questions generated.

He required us to read together, for instance, the section on traditional authority in Reinhard Bendix's (1960) *Max Weber*, Sumarsaid Murtono's (1968) *State and Statecraft in Old Java*, and Claire Holt's (1967) *Art in Indonesia*. The readings made me aware—and I believe it was at least in part what he wanted to teach us—that Max Weber's notion of traditional authority can tell us something about the kind of sociological logic at work in old Java, but is entirely silent on the language—which Murtono uses liberally—in which the Javanese went about managing their state and practicing statecraft. Claire Holt's work has proven helpful in enabling us to understand the kind of "language" Murtono uses.

Ben also required us to read parts of his *Java* and his own English-language translation of Pramoedya's short stories (1952). He drew our attention to the word *mabuk* (intoxicated) that Pramoedya often used in his short stories, a word that best captures the revolutionary élan that Ben described in Java. Ben once told me that he dreamed of writing a novel in which each of his many protagonists spoke many different languages. When I began working on the topic of political policing and the "phantom" underground in Indonesia in

the late 1920s and 1930s (Shiraishi 2001), Ben often asked me whether there were Comintern documents that used multiple languages side-by-side, and whether in such cases conceptual and pragmatic slippages occurred.

Another thing that struck me was his mode of comparison. He was not interested in using comparison to come up with a general proposition, the kind of comparison that is now fashionable in political science. He was dismissive of Theory with a capital T—he often said that only a very, very gifted few could do theory well—and cautioned us to be clear about what comparisons were for. He required us to read the passage in U Nu's (1975) *Saturday's Son* in which U Nu compares the Burmese state he inherited from the British to a dilapidated car, alongside Bendix's *Max Weber*, in order to make us understand the state not as an abstraction, but as a kind of machine. He required us to read Ben-Ami Shillony's (1979) *Revolt in Japan: The Young Officers and the February 26, 1936 Incident* to make us see how faulty Samuel Huntington's notion of military professionalism (1957) is (Ben liked to say that Huntington's works were basically "chew toys for dogs"). And in his lectures and seminars he was already telling us about bureaucratic and educational journeys, newspapers and print capitalism, philology and Javanology, and the state with its own membership, interests, and memories. His works such as "Studies of the Thai State: The State of Thai Studies" (Anderson 1978) and *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 1983) were built on such comparative readings and fundamental questionings of the very basic concepts we often deploy uncritically.

In retrospect I am sure I would have been a very different person and academic if I had not met Ben. In a sense, for many years, the works I did in English were written with Ben as my imagined and actual First Reader. My dissertation, which was eventually published as *An Age in Motion*, sought to revise Ben's argument in *Java* about the revolutionary period in the mid-1940s by showing that the revolution could trace its lineage—in terms of personalities, ideologies, languages, and forms—to the prewar radicalism of the 1910s and 1920s. My thinking about East Asian regionalism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries was also an attempt to come up with a different way to look at Asia beyond country comparisons and examine the kinds of transnational and international dynamism that helped create a region.

When I expressed interest in learning Tagalog in 1988, Ben told me that he would learn Tagalog together with me. For two years we met three times a week with John Wolff in my office in Cornell, where I was teaching.

Ben's interest in the Philippines came as a surprise to me then because I remember that he hardly talked about the Philippines in his lectures on Government and Politics in Southeast Asia in the 1970s.

As it turned out, our interest in the Philippines diverged in important ways. Ben turned to Rizal and to history to understand how the Philippines turned out the way it did, whereas I turned to political science and international political economy to make sense of the crucial macroeconomic and geopolitical changes taking place in the 1980s and 1990s. I wanted to know the conditions and policies under which the Philippines could establish a stable democracy and pursue its own growth path, and what neighboring countries like Indonesia and Thailand might learn from the Philippine experience.

What I understand now is that the Philippine crisis of the 1980s proved to be the harbinger of things to come in this region: democratization and money politics, on the one hand, and globalization and liberalization of market economies, on the other hand, with all the problems and challenges that attend these processes.

Ben once told me that he was not that interested in economics, but in Asia macroeconomic transformation has turned out to be far more important than the geopolitical changes enabled by the end of the Cold War. As the Philippine debt crisis of the early to mid-1980s, the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s, and the "global" (American and European) financial crisis of the late 2000s have made clear, the study of the economy should not be delegated only to economists. At the end of the day, all the economic policies are deeply political.

Ben always reminded us not to forget about "world-historical time," and he demonstrated this beautifully in his book *Under Three Flags* (2005). Somehow, Ben found his world-historical time in the past, and I now understand that this is in part a generational thing. His own sense of world-historical time was shaped by the Cold War; he told me once that everything he hated derived in some way from that Cold War. Because that era proved so formative (and also productive) for him, he felt that what came after the Cold War was in a sense distant to him, and he engaged the post-Cold War era not through its politics and economy, but through its culture, through its literature and film and everyday life.

Ben was a wonderful teacher and person, an exacting reader in the best sense. It was my huge privilege to have been mentored by him.

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