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Benedict Anderson: A Great Inspiration

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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,

particularly with regard to the unequal positions of an investigating subject and those being studied. Ben Anderson's work and life are too important to be taken lightly in any discussion of these issues. Let me take up each of these issues in turn.

Area Studies versus the Disciplines

The rise and fall of area studies, like those of most disciplines, have always been susceptible to the dynamics of geopolitics and the changing strategic interests of major global players. Following the end of the Cold War, political and business elites across the globe shifted their strategic agenda and priorities and made adjustments in response to new challenges and opportunities. In the process, in many universities Asian studies has fallen victim even while other areas of research have gained new momentum. Subsequently there have been public pronouncements providing the rationale and rationalization for the change. Unfortunately, the latter includes the game of blaming the victims. The marginalization of Asian studies is justified on the pretext that something is inherently flawed or inferior about it, as opposed to the old disciplines. The dichotomy between the two has often slipped into a caricature of empirically oriented study of the non-West, on the one hand, versus the Holy Grail of universally enlightening theory-driven mode of inquiry, on the other hand.

Professor of politics and dedicated China specialist Michael Dutton (2002, 495) once inquired into reasons for "the impossibility of writing a work that is principally of a theoretical nature but that is empirically and geographically grounded in Asia rather than in Europe or America." His essay opens with these words:

I begin this work with a simple question. Why is it impossible to imagine, much less write, a work like Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* within Asian area studies? The impossibility I am referring to is not of content but of form. It is not just about writing such a text but about having it read as something more than a description; having it read for its theoretical significance more generally. That is to say, it is about the impossibility of writing a work that is principally of a theoretical nature but that is empirically and geographically grounded in Asia rather than in Europe or America. Why is it that, when it comes to Asian area studies, whenever "theory" is invoked, it

is invariably understood to mean “applied theory” and assumed to be of value only insofar as it helps tell the story of the “real” in a more compelling way? (ibid.)

To take that question seriously, one would need to imagine a different world, one without Ben Anderson, James Scott, Clifford Geertz, and the like. These scholars are some of the towering figures with long-term dedication to the grounded study of specific locales in Asia, whose outcomes made powerful and lasting theoretical impacts across many disciplines. Ben and James assumed leadership positions in institutions officially designated as “Southeast Asian studies.” Colleagues in South Asian and East Asian studies may have a longer list of scholars with comparable reputations and for whom the debate over transdisciplinary area studies versus monodisciplinary traditions would deem silly. After all, the latter often appear to be another kind of area studies, except that they are more Euro–America-focused and except that the practitioners often fail to recognize it as such.

To take Dutton’s question seriously, one must also be able and willing to adopt full faith in the universalist promise of theory of the traditional disciplines and the overall structure of the existing institutionalized academy at least in the rich Anglophone world that supposedly nurtures such promise. One needs to imagine very hard if one were to believe the possibility that these institutions could enjoy a sustained and high degree of autonomy from unwelcome pressures from state apparatuses and commercial corporations.

More often implicit than explicit in undervaluing area studies in the present is the old and familiar residue of colonial racism. While the best practices in the social sciences and the humanities are hosted in well-resourced universities located in Western Europe and North America, pursuing the highest level of universal truth of societies and histories, area studies in these institutions is primarily expected to collect empirical data from the non-West that would validate the universalizing theorization in the social sciences and the humanities. “[F]or there was no history outside the historical time of the West, no development other than the development already enjoyed by the West” (Mitchell 2003, 159).

Language Studies

Nearly all published obituaries for Ben have duly noted his deep love for, and extraordinary mastery of, learning foreign languages: Indonesian, Javanese,

Thai, and Tagalog, in addition to Latin, Dutch, Spanish, Russian, German, and French. More importantly, he made an original and passionate inquiry into the working of languages. His work demonstrates how deep and critical engagement with the working of languages can lead to a remarkably rigorous level of theorizing and groundbreaking scholarship.

Ben's most famous work, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Anderson 1983), and previously his essay, "The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture" (Anderson 1990, first published 1972), could not even have been conceptualized without the level of mastery of foreign languages he acquired, plus his creative imagination and brilliant analysis of how those languages operate in a world of unequals. In his hands, foreign languages are never simply tools for accessing foreign persons and materials as objects of study. Rather, each of them constitutes a universe of its own, and key to the ability to see and critically understand the universe invented by one's own mother tongue. Language is never understood as a static "system" endowed with some given essence. Rather, as his work demonstrates beautifully, all living languages are constantly changing and subject to being challenged, intimidated, coopted, or enriched in interaction with other languages, speaking subjects, and social environments.

Such foundational perspective finds its eloquent articulation in one of Ben's earliest and lesser-known publications, "The Languages of Indonesian Politics" (Anderson 2006, first published in 1966), where languages are the manifestations of a particular set of consciousness. An examination of language practice (as opposed to "system") is more than merely instrumental to his work as a political scientist. It is not even quaint material merely used for illustration. It occupies the most important aspect in his mode of analysis. To provide a glimpse of his perspective I take liberty in quoting him at length:

The extraordinary character of modern "political" Indonesian (with which we are especially concerned) derives from the fact that it is inevitably the heir of three separate languages and two separate linguistic-cultural traditions. The languages are Dutch, Javanese, and "revolutionary-Malay"—the traditions are Dutch-Western and Javanese. The enterprise of modern Indonesian is therefore the synthesis of a new political-cultural intelligence and perspective out of the fragmentation of the colonial and early postcolonial period, and

the restoration of a unity of consciousness such as has not existed since the initial confrontation with Dutch colonialism. (Anderson 2006b, 124)

Like most Asians, most Indonesians speak at least two, but many three, languages fluently. When I first met Ben in 1982, I was a young and freshly arrived master's student in the US. He asked me about my identity and background in the most unusual fashion: "What language do you speak at home?" The more I read his work, the more his question made sense to me.

In a recent article, published posthumously, Ben offers his advice to a younger generation of scholars about the importance of comparative study and what is required to engage in it: travel to foreign lands, live with locals for an extended period, and learn how their languages operate in their home environments. The promised benefit of such learning would be no less than a self-transformation.

You are like an explorer, and try to notice and think about everything in a way you would never do at home, where so much is taken for granted. What you will start to notice, if your ears and eyes are open, are the things you can't see or hear. You will begin to notice what is not there as well as what is there, just as you will become aware of what is unwritten as well as what is written. And this works both for the country you are living in and the one from which you came. Often it starts with words. (Anderson 2016)

Ben's work has enjoyed the highest respect it deserves among many scholars who run and are formally affiliated with Asian studies and traditional disciplines alike. Ironically, many of the same people undervalue or attack language and literary training in their home institutions. Despite their rhetoric, funding for Asian language training has been consistently reduced to minimum or nil, and so has the amount of such training for students in programs that manage to survive. This trend is widely observable and publicly commented in Australia, and most probably in many other countries where Asian studies used to be popular in the latter decades of the past century. Now languages are valued in universities primarily or exclusively for their practical value in daily conversation. The condition of possibility for nurturing a new generation of scholars of Ben's caliber is diminished.

Ethics and Politics

Understanding both *the incompatibility* (thus the limit of translatability) of languages and their universes as well as their mutually enriching *exchange of elements* and the *occasional conflicts* among these languages is central to Ben's vision of the dynamics of modern history. Such perspective explains, at least in part, the originality, respect for the non-West, autocriticism, and genuine humility that run through Ben's work on Asia. If learning at least one foreign language is mandatory to understand both others and the self, then even the brightest and mightiest West cannot possibly monopolize universally the best knowledge of human history, simply because the West does not invent all languages and Westerners are not native speakers of all non-Western languages. We are always at the mercy of others who teach us (about) their language practice—and allow us to learn better about them and ourselves—by participating in their discursive practices. This tendency is true, even if such engagements may involve disputes, hostility, and animosity.

In addition to its wit and eloquence, the corpus of Ben's work is characterized by its commitment to specific ethics and politics of knowledge production. From the perspective of this new century, his may appear as a rather unusual generation of scholars trained in the 1960s, when pressures of university corporatization were not as brutally aggressive as today and activism was globally compelling. But even if that were the case, we have not seen many more scholars of his style and stature among his peers.

As professor of government, Ben was intellectually and politically defiant. His work does not rely heavily on materials pertaining to formal political institutions and processes (parliament, constitutions, state cabinet, or elections), or scientifically coded materials (surveys and statistics). Instead, he was strongly inclined to collecting and analyzing materials often dismissed by political scientists: novels, caricatures, newspapers, pamphlets, television programs, and other forms of pop culture. When I was a master's student in Michigan in 1983, I visited an old friend who was a student of Ben at Cornell University. I was later invited to be a guest speaker in Ben's graduate seminar class. When I arrived, I was surprised to see that a copy of an unpublished fiction that I authored had been circulated to the class. Every student had a copy on the table, with comments on the margins. The meeting of the day was to discuss it critically in my presence. The experience was deeply intimidating, although I felt honored nonetheless. Later on I learned from another student that the same seminar class

often analyzed political pamphlets that were circulated underground in Indonesia during the same period, when Suharto's military dictatorship was at its height.

In his entire career, Ben was unashamedly partisan, throwing the weight of his great sympathy for the disempowered, occasionally to the point of overromanticizing them, as his well-known essay, "The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture," cited above attests. His suspicion of the political and economic elite was always blunt, not to mention his disgust at corrupt officials and their cronies. At face value, many scholars of Asia do similar things. They adopt trendy jargons and frameworks in the Anglo-American academy to deride Asian despots and speak heroically on behalf of the victims of those despots. Rarely do they problematize those jargons, let alone reflect critically on their own position in relation to the people they study. What distinguished Ben from the crowd in Asian studies was his continual and radical critique of the commonly held assumptions in Anglo-American scholarship and in modern Western logic and rationality more broadly.

According to his own admission, Ben prepared *Imagined Communities* with the aim of ridiculing the British scholars who had dominated the theory of nationalism, the British aristocratic pomp more generally, and Eurocentrism in scholarship.

For fun I always titled British rulers as if they were ordinary people, e.g. Charles Stuart for Charles I, but used the standard format for foreign kings (Louis XIV). . . . The first target was the Eurocentrism I saw in the assumption that nationalism was born in Europe and then spread out in imitated forms to the rest of the world. . . . I decided to compare the early US with the welter of new nationalisms in Spanish America, and put the US at the end of the chapter rather than at the start. I enjoyed anticipating the annoyance that would be caused by calling Franklin and Jefferson 'Creoles', as if they were simply an extension of patterns everywhere visible south of the US border, and by commenting that Simón Bolívar was a more impressive figure than George Washington. (Anderson 2016)

For Ben, the people he studied in Southeast Asia were never merely "imagined communities" for analysis. Since his early visit to Indonesia in connection with his doctoral degree, he had maintained deep personal

friendships with a wide range of people. The flurry of emotional obituaries as well as public events that took place around the world to celebrate his life and works are testimony to all these friendships.

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Benedict Anderson's “Strange Hierarchies” in Thailand

PASUK PHONGPAICHIT AND CHRIS BAKER

We came to know Ben rather late. In person, that is. The work, we knew well. His four great pieces on Thai politics (Anderson 1977, 1978, 1985, 1990)¹ greatly influenced our understanding. We stole his phrase “the American era” for the title of a section in our *Thailand: Economy and Politics*. Like many others, we began to use the phrase “imagined communities” as if it had been around since the origin of the world.

We met in person for the first time on Songkran Day in 2002. We had decided to complete a project that Ben had started almost twenty