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Imagined Affinities? Benedict Anderson's Pre-History of Globalisation 1

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By Esther Leslie

In his latest book *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination*, Benedict Anderson advances his longstanding ambition to rehabilitate the image of nationalism. Through a collaged history of the late 19th century, Anderson forges uncanny connections between anarchism and anti-colonial bourgeois nationalism. The interconnections between these autonomous forces, and not Marxism's internationalism, supposedly provide today's alter-globalisation movement with its pre-history. But, asks Esther Leslie, how many get to share in this 'globalised sensibility'?

Book Cover: Under Three Flags

Benedict Anderson's *Under Three Flags* presents a history told in terms of action at a distance, where events, people and political movements are subject to forces darkly exerting their power across seas and continents, rather like the moon affecting water or the stars' gravitational mass accumulating and compacting cosmic material. Anderson's book is made of compressed material, dense with numerous historical figures who are drawn more or less fleetingly into a forcefield that pulsates through late 19th century political communities. Anderson's own reference in the introduction is starry – his 'comparative method' (which compares Japanese nationalism with Hungarian, or Indonesian with Swiss) confronts its objects first as discrete points of light in dark skies, but realises in the course of researching that these bright spots are not static and disconnected from each other, rather they are in 'frantic motion, impelled hither and yon by the invisible power of the gravitational fields of which they are ineluctable, active parts'. Anderson as astronomer mapping the heavens is a recycled image. Previously he compared his critical gaze to the view through an 'inverted telescope': what is close is suddenly far away, defamiliarised. Now in *Under Three Flags* the distant bodies – anti-colonial campaigners and activists – are brought into view and the usual perspective from the centre is reversed, not simply by focussing on events far away from the centres of power, but by reflecting the centre – in all its refracted perspectives - through the eyes and intellect of the colonised. Names flash up here like suddenly glimpsed stars - Zo d'Axa, Suehiro Tettyo, Juan Luna and a thousand others in this firmament - though largest of all loom two men, the Filipino folklorist and political activist Isabelo de los Reyes and cosmopolitan intellectual Jose Rizal, the proponent of independence for the Philippines. Around them and in their wake diverse men brush past each other, travelling between political movements located at opposite poles of the planet, sharing goals, knowledge based on experience and sometimes prison cells. Blasted into visibility these myriad names fade one by one back into the inky canopy of the book (just see how long the index is and how many entries are singular). Constellations appear suddenly - Anderson writes in the introduction of a 'montage' style of history-writing - or they do not appear at all in any concrete sense, the connections between parts being rather, as Anderson has written of elsewhere, born of 'simultaneity', the shared consciousness of a shared temporal dimension.

The forces that jostle the book's characters are powerful. On the negative side, and stunningly generative, is colonialism and its violence towards indigenous peoples. It is countered by no weaker a force, the twinned energies of anarchism and militant nationalism, a seeming paradox curiously entwined in the anti-colonial struggle, and manifested in one way or another in both legitimate bourgeois political parties and outlaw terrorists acting in concert or alone. Anderson finds this particular constellation of forces – colonialism, revolution, nationalism – compelling. He has long wanted to combine nationalism with Marxism, that is to say, to remedy from within what he perceives as Marxism's reluctance to understand nationalism and especially its utopian progressive and

fantasized aspects. In *Imagined Communities*, he has previously explored how ‘nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artifacts of a particular kind.’

To understand them properly we need to consider carefully how they have come into historical being, in what ways their meanings have changed over time, and why, today, they command such profound emotional legitimacy.

But now a new situation has arisen, suggests Anderson, in which analysis is needed of a new political formation, brought about by recent events and termed by Anderson ‘radicalism after communism’. From the perspective of such a radicalism, the question of Marxism and nationalism falls away and new relationships within the envelope of nationalism are pushed to the fore. Anarchism replaces Marxism in a political panorama that appears tweaked for the anti-capitalist, anti-hierarchy generation. This ‘anarchism’ is locally autonomous but interconnected, as opposed to the supposedly hierarchical and centralist forces of Marxist political organization. There is a certain *Schadenfreude* evident here as Anderson observes the political impotence of Marxism in the late 19th century and its incorporation into the state and official organs of representation. Anderson ends his book with a vignette. Invited to speak on the themes of the book (originally articles in *New Left Review*) at the University of the Philippines, he arrived too early, sat himself in the student canteen and was handed a leaflet by anarchists seeking ‘horizontal’ solidarity. The leaflet, an attack on corrupt bosses and the authoritarian Maoist party alike, advertised a website - manila.indymedia.org - a website, Anderson tells us, wide-eyed, like a traveller from another planet, linked to many others of its ilk and dotted around the world. Anderson is delighted, for this signals the continuation of a tradition that he sees established in the 19th century. He calls its latest manifestation ‘late globalisation’. Again situating his argument within contemporary reference points, his book purports to have been about the pre-history to all this: anarchist and anti-colonial bourgeois nationalism as ‘early globalisation’. What he has traced in his study of anti-colonial revolts is globalisation’s first manifestation. It is not the internationalism of Marxism that takes the credit here for making links across the globe, but anarchist national liberationists. Where Marxists have occupied the recent terms of debate by identifying capitalism as a ‘globalising’ force and communist revolution as its just as globalised resistance, Anderson attributes to those figures who theorised, led and were martyred in pursuit of liberation from colonialism a globalised sensibility. This is evident in their at-homeness in all parts of the world, their proficiency in various languages, their immersion in European literature and culture, which does not cut across their commitment to the heritage of the colonised lands into which they were born, and their efforts to connect disparate struggles in what Anderson terms a ‘political astronomy’. And this at a time when in the Philippines, the Spanish colonial powers made every effort to rule as had the Romans, by dividing the population into warring tribes. The irony, notes Anderson, is that colonial rule, which divides within the territories it masters, also produces strong identifications with the land of the aggressor, and these might be more productive of political change than placatory. It is not the alienation of the anti-colonial fighters from the colonial powers that dynamises the struggles, but their intimacy.

Anderson depicts his anti-colonial fin-de-siecle campaigners as adherents of a literate ‘anarchism’, an anarchism so genteel it tolerates nation-building within its anti-state precepts and flies under multiple flags. It is capacious and generous but somehow other-worldly. In other words, colonialism (and its counter-force) is rewritten as globalisation and this is rewritten as cosmopolitanism. And in other words again it could be said that Anderson is placing himself in the centre of this compound. He is the brightest star, for it is he, born in China to Anglo-Irish parents, and educated in the US and UK, a scholar of Indonesian matters, and now Professor of International Studies, who has authored a book of such arcane reference, so elegantly written and multi-lingual in its intelligence, that it cannot but recall the early globalisers he presents for us readers to admire. ‘I haven’t met many cosmopolitans in my life, perhaps no more than five’¹, remarks Anderson in an interview and so this present historical study becomes something of a quest out of loneliness to find those who are, even if they reside in the

past, on a level with him. This book is a romance, a paean to polyglot and polymath world citizens who jaunt between borders and disciplines, the steam-sailing intellectual elites who wrested their countries from the oppressor, through words composed to the rhythm of bombs exploding in the newly invented political tactic of terror. The print culture that was a pre-requisite for bourgeois nation formation (as proposed in *Imagined Communities*) becomes the basis of a global exchange that can yet again allow the imagination and preparation of the new national community, the one after colonial oppression.

The central figure depicted here, Rizal, 'national hero of the Philippines', wrote two novels, *Noli Me Tangere* (1887) and *El Filibusterismo* (1891). The second novel provides a striking motif: a lamp in the form of a pomegranate, which is 'as large as a man's head, with fissures in it exposing to view the seeds inside, which were fashioned of enormous carnelians. The covering was of oxidized gold in exact imitation of the wrinkles on the fruit'.² It is filled with dynamite.

'Yes, nitro-glycerin!' repeated Simoun slowly, with his cold smile and a look of delight at the glass flask. "It's also something more than nitro-glycerin -- it's concentrated tears, repressed hatred, wrongs, injustice, outrage. It's the last resort of the weak, force against force, violence against violence. A moment ago I was hesitating, but you have come and decided me. This night the most dangerous tyrants will be blown to pieces, the irresponsible rulers that hide themselves behind God and the State, whose abuses remain unpunished because no one can bring them to justice. This night the Philippines will hear the explosion that will convert into rubbish the formless monument whose decay I have fostered.'

The bejewelled fruit-bomb lamp is to rip apart the colonial elite of Manila. That the novel climaxes with an explosion is a sign of Rizal's transposing imagination, for he transports the latest techniques of political class struggle to his homeland. In so doing, he imagines the violent end of colonial power brought about by anarchist intrigue and righteous revolt. Such forceful overthrow is brought a step closer a year later in 1892 by the foundation of the Katipunan, a nationalistic sect bent on removing the Spanish, and closer still in 1902, when, influenced by Rizal, who had been executed aged 35 in 1896 for rebellion, sedition and conspiracy, Isabelo de los Reyes founded the first workers' union, the anarchist-oriented Union Obrera Democratica Filipina, in 1902, as bulwark against the exploitation of Filipino labour by a new bunch of colonizers, the United States.

But Anderson is further interested in the gem-studded bomb, for it may also be another sign of Rizal's world citizenship, his global openness to cultural forms, including those that are 'bizarre, scandalous and avant-garde'. Rizal's pomegranate bomb could be influenced by an unpredictable source, the decadent writer J-K Huysmans, whose hero Des Esseintes challenges nature by studding his tortoise with gemstones (an interest in homeopathy and homosexuality is also shown to be common to both). In these speculations Anderson turns detective, scouring reading lists and letters for evidence of a connection between the two authors, who stem from seemingly different worlds, but are of course passing through the same passage of time, in the same cosmos. And whether such a connection exists or not is not important, for the 'method' of this book is to discover within the forcefield genuine points of contact as much as analogies and coincidences. Entertaining disparate things within the same pages is a counter to usual history-telling, as much as it is a vigorous exercise for the acrobatic mind of the intellectual who exists across and without boundaries. Anderson, just like Rizal's mestizo hero Ibarra in *Noli Me Tangere*, has cultivated the doubled, reflexive vision of a global intellectual. Ibarra has the eerie experience of seeing the Jardin Botanico in Manilla, which necessarily conjures into his mind's eye the grand botanical gardens of Europe. Original and copy (where each is both) exchange places in a flurry of 'demonic' comparisons: the tropics, the tropics recreated, the emulated tropics as sign of European cultivation, the grand gardens of Europe, recreated elsewhere, but poorly – Ibarra sees from close up and afar. The global intellectual sees multiply, which is to say he sees in the only way

adequate to the situation. It is a complex viewing, productively disfigured by what Anderson terms 'spectrality'. It is a haunted vision, one that is distinctly uncomfortable with what it sees. Ibarra is exposed in the botanical garden to a whirl of politicized foliage and the phrase that Rizal uses to describe it – 'the demon of comparisons' - leads Anderson into a webwork of reference: Mallarme, Baudelaire, Poe, and once again the question of the relationship between intellectuals from the colonized periphery and European thinkers is forwarded.

There is another way of reading the image of the explosive pomegranate, and this is drawn directly from the linguistic and historical plane, rather than the cultural-literary one which Anderson is so comfortably at home. The word grenade comes anyway from the French word for pomegranate, for, in the 16th century, soldiers in France and elsewhere in Europe threw bombs the size and shape of pomegranates and these were filled with large grains of gunpowder that looked like pomegranate seeds. Indeed one troop was trained specially in such bomb throwing and was named the Grenadiers. Anderson's twists and turns through world culture are diverting, in all senses, but might only be non-consequential parades of learning – that is to say, his head a pomegranate crammed full with the jewels of culture, his 'brilliant' thoughts have burst out onto the pages.

Footnotes

1 <http://www.culcom.uio.no/aktivitet/anderson-kapittel-eng.html>

2 This quote from *El Filibusterismo* is taken from the online translation by Edward E. Derbyshire and titled *The Reign of Greed*. See <http://members.tripod.com/rizalslifewritings/Writings/Fili/English/fili33.htm>

Info

Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination*, London:Verso, 2005.