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(1919—1971)

The postwar period has witnessed an impressive burgeoning of American scholarship on Indonesia, which was before the Second World War largely a preserve of Dutch colonial experts. Among the prominent American students of Indonesian history, sociology and political science, Harry Benda occupied a special place, since in certain respects he formed a link between Dutch and foreign scholarship. This special quality of his work may be partly explained by his personal history.

Heinz (Jindrich) Benda was born in Czechoslovakia of Jewish parents. When the Nazi menace was nearing the borders of his country, they sent talented young Heinz away — before he was able to finish secondary school — to the Netherlands East Indies where the Czech consul, who was rabidly anti-Nazi, was prepared to receive him. It is at the home of Mr. Stanek, who was our neighbour in Batavia, that we met Heinz, who immediately struck us as an exceptionally bright young chap and very soon became our friend. Within two months Heinz spoke Dutch fluently, better than his host, who had lived in the Indies for twenty years, and practically without any accent.

Unfortunately, Benda was not in a position at that time to pursue his intellectual aspirations. He had to make a living, and at the start of the Pacific War he had despite his age obtained good enough credentials with the Dutch trading company by which he was employed to be entrusted with the management of the Semarang branch of his company after his Dutch chief had been interned by the Japanese. But finally he himself was also interned, and in our common camp in Tjimahi he expressed to me his wish to drop his commercial career after the war, despite his excellent prospects, and to pursue his academic ambitions.

With enormous energy Benda realized his plan. In New Zealand he obtained a teachers' training college scholarship, and as a school-teacher he was able to pursue his studies in history at the University

of Wellington. His opportunity came when he was admitted as a graduate student to Cornell University, where he soon came to the fore as one of the up-and-coming men in Indonesian studies. His mastery of Dutch, Indonesian, German and French in addition to English proved a great asset to him, and the theme of his doctoral thesis, dealing with Indonesian Islam under the Japanese occupation, was more or less in line with his personal experiences of that period.

Through his intimate knowledge of pre-war colonial society on the one hand, and his independent position therein as an outsider on the other, he was able to appraise critically the pre-war Islamic policy of the Dutch as well as the more dynamic and active approach to Islam on the part of the Japanese.

The dissertation, published under the title *The Crescent and the Rising Sun* (1958), earned him a place among the prominent young experts on Indonesia, on a par with Clifford Geertz, Ruth T. McVey and Herbert Feith.

From that time onwards the academic career of Harry Jindrich Benda, as he was henceforth known, conformed to the general pattern in the United States. He was appointed assistant professor at the University of Rochester, and later became Professor of History at Yale University. Despite temporary assignments abroad (he spent a research year in the Netherlands, and later on established the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, of which he was the first director) he kept his post at Yale University till the premature end of his life.

As a scholar mainly concerned with the modern history of Southeast Asia, Harry Benda has time and again introduced a fresh approach to problems with which he was concerned.

I should like to mention a few of his publications which strike me as typical of his independent mind. In the early sixties he published two articles on the role of intellectuals.¹ In these papers he critically analyses the idea prevalent among quite a few western political scientists, who hold that the "intellectual elite" are the obvious people to lead non-western countries toward "modernity". Benda aptly demonstrates, with a wealth of examples testifying to his wide reading, that in the European world the case of "intellectuals acting as an independent ruling class" was restricted to exceptional, revolutionary, situations. As a rule such

¹ Harry J. Benda, "Non-Western Intelligentsias as Political Elites", *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 6 (1960), pp. 205 ff.; "Intellectuals and Politics in Western History", *Bucknell Review*, Vol. 10 (1961), pp. 1 ff.

situations were short-lived. Soon "normalcy" is restored — and "normalization means that political power is once again closely allied to other sources of social control, notably to economic power, and is thus no longer operating in a vacuum." "Social normalcy . . . has apparently no place for the philosopher-king; it can only use the services of the intellectual as an adjunct in the political process".

In the case of the non-western countries, Benda does not expect a displacement of the ruling intellectuals in "the immediate future, even though, as we have seen, there exists an apparently growing trend for power to devolve upon the military within these non-western intelligentsias".

In these countries, too, Benda views the "rule of the intellectuals" as a transitional phase. In my opinion he does not pay enough attention in this analysis to the international context in which the "elites", whether intellectual or military, operate. It is the economic and political power of what André Gunder Frank has, since Benda wrote the above, called the "metropolis" which has turned the "ruling intelligentsia" in the third world — earlier than Benda was apparently prepared to admit — into servants "verbalizing or ideologizing the political interests of other classes or groups", to quote Benda once more.

Probably Benda instinctively felt that there were some shortcomings in his approach to elites. On the offprint of the Bucknell paper he sent to me he wrote facetiously: "My last contribution to 'élitism' — and I mean, my *last!*"

In a review of Herbert Feith's *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia* Harry Benda, without raising the problem of intellectuals as such again, implicitly challenged an elitist view, rather popular among western political scientists, that it is the "problem-solvers", the "administrators", who are the obvious people to provide leadership for the "new nations". He was opposed to applying "essentially western developmental models" to Indonesia. However brilliantly conducted, "such research is . . . focusing on irrelevant questions". Benda's assessment of the trends in Indonesia, in terms of "continuity" and "change", provides more sophisticated insights into the deeper undercurrents of the Sukarno era than was generally understood by his American colleagues — or Australian ones, for that matter.²

² "Democracy in Indonesia", review article in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 23 (1964), pp. 449 ff.; see also "Decolonization in Indonesia: The Problem of Continuity and Change", *American Historical Review*, Vol. 20 (1965), pp. 1058 ff.

In my view, however, Benda's most significant contribution to Southeast Asian studies is his attempt to synthesize the modern history of that region in a broad, interpretative account of the process of western colonialism, and of its partial withdrawal after the Second World War.

Already in an earlier article³ Benda sketched a brilliant outline of such a project. The paper abounds in original ideas. For example, the author's attempt to draw a parallel between the spread of Islam in some areas of our region and that of Theravada Buddhism in others, and to connect especially the latter process with the prevalent rural unrest, is a highly significant contribution to the sociology of religion. At the same time, it offers a new challenge to those scholars who hold that Asian societies were unaffected by internal dynamics until the advent of western colonial intruders.

Finally, in *A History of Modern Southeast Asia*,⁴ Benda was able to realize his dream of analysing "internal developments within the area's indigenous societies, in particular of their variegated responses to the colonial 'input' in modern times". This accomplished work is unique in that it deals with Southeast Asia as a whole, without dividing the analysis, as is usually done, into separate chapters devoted to the different countries or peoples living within the region. The book has become a milestone in the historical literature on Southeast Asia. And I am glad to be able to acknowledge, in passing, that John Bastin, whom I had criticized in an earlier issue of this journal for his Europe-centric approach,⁵ has thus cooperated in an endeavour from which all Europe-centrism is strikingly absent.

Heinz Benda — as I have kept calling him — who had an exceptionally hard time when he was young, found happiness in his later years at the side of his wife (who was similarly of Czech origin and had personally experienced the terror of Auschwitz) and his two children. I doubt whether in the most recent years the Bendas were quite so happy to be living in an America which was waging a war in Southeast Asia that Heinz utterly detested.

He once told me about a Jewish couple from Germany who had fled the Nazis and moved to the States. Asked whether they were happy there, the woman replied, "Oh yes, we are very happy here, very

³ "The Structure of Southeast Asian History", *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, Vol. 3 (1962), pp. 106 ff.

⁴ John Bastin and Harry J. Benda, *A History of Modern Southeast Asia: Colonialism, Nationalism and Decolonization*, 1968.

⁵ W. F. Wertheim, "Asian History and the Western Historian: Rejoinder to Professor Bastin", *Bijdragen T.L.V.*, Vol. 119 (1963), pp. 149 ff.

happy . . . aber glücklich sind wir nicht". I have some inkling that Heinz told me the story with a certain implication.

I had hoped — and the younger colleagues of my institute with me — that Heinz Benda, who never forgot his European background, might have been willing to return to good old Europe and occupy my chair as my successor.

However, late though he was arriving on the scene of Indonesian studies, as a kind of rapidly rising meteor, Benda was early — much too early — in leaving it.

Wageningen, March 5, 1972

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