John Sidel, *Republicanism, Communism, Islam: Cosmopolitan Origins of Revolution in Southeast Asia*
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CONTRASTED REVOLUTIONS

The standardized designation 'Southeast Asia'—two words, un-hyphenated, capitalized—originated in the Pacific War. The Allies divided the world into warzones. Mountbatten's South East Asia Command (SEAC) comprised most of what was to be wrested from Japan that was not already in the China theatre or a former US possession (and included some territory no longer typically placed in Southeast Asia: Sri Lanka; the Andaman, Nicobar and Laccadive Islands; Christmas Island; the Maldives). In 1945, Washington established the Department of Southeast Asia Affairs. The following year a department of 'Southeast Asian Affairs' sprouted up at SOAS, joined by another at Yale in 1947. Diffusion of the term was rapid and far-reaching. Before the Second World War, Chinese-speakers had referred to the region with a variety of terms and epithets, if mostly as *Nanyang*—'South Sea'—but today they more commonly use 东南亚—'Eastsouth Asia' (whereas, in compound designations of a region, European languages put the vertical north–south axis before the horizontal east–west, in Chinese the horizontal east–west axis comes first). One place where the term has not acquired purchase is the region itself, whose inhabitants rarely identify as 'Southeast Asians'.

If the exact contours of Southeast Asia were not determined until after the war, however, the region as a whole had long shared certain broad features. It is the part of the globe where several of the major religious traditions intersect or overlap: Catholicism abutting Islam in the Philippines; the Sanskrit-sphere underlying the more recent arrival of Islam in the

Malay-speaking world; Buddhism surrounding islands of Protestant Christianity in Myanmar. Likewise, almost all of the major Western colonial empires made a bid there, whether in the form of missionaries, joint-stock companies or national militaries: the Portuguese conquered Malacca in 1511, and quit Macao in 1999; the Spanish arrived in the Philippines in 1599, and left in 1897; the first Dutch ships arrived in Java in 1595 and the Dutch Army left in 1949; the French acquired their first enclaves in Cochinchina in 1862 and departed from Indochina in 1954; the English started commercial operations on Java in 1602, and left Hong Kong in 1997; the US military arrived in the Philippines in 1898, and closed the Subic Bay base in 1991.

Southeast Asia is also home to among the most divergent pair of political fates in the Cold War: in Indonesia, the US-supported massacre and uprooting of the Left, which is now a minuscule formation struggling to rebuild itself; in Vietnam, a Communist organization that dispatched two colonial powers successively, and that still rules today. How are we to understand the background behind these two outcomes? What accounts more broadly for the revolutionary trajectories in Southeast Asia? Why were some nations imagined before others? Why did the Philippine Revolution materialize so early? Why was the Vietnamese Revolution so robust? These are among the questions that animate John Sidel's *Republicanism, Communism, Islam*. Western comparison-making among nationalisms in Southeast Asia began in earnest in the 1960s. In 1966, George Kennan could declare the American Vietnam War unnecessary after a considered comparison with the anti-communist insurance that issued from Suharto's Indonesia. On a more scholarly plane, Clifford Geertz contended in the early 60s that Southeast Asia was divided into two kinds of countries. Many of the mainland states, such as Burma, Vietnam and Thailand which based their nationalist creeds on a strictly identitarian legacy of purported ancient vintage—'Bamar-ness', 'Vietnamese-ness', 'Thai-ness'—were 'essentialist' nations. By contrast, many of the states of insular Southeast Asia were more prone to 'epochal' constructions, treating their nations as self-conscious constructions whose outcome would be subject to political or national struggles: Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore.

Some forty years later, Sidel dismantled Geertz's dichotomy in a path-breaking essay, 'The Fate of Nationalism in the New States', published in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* in 2012, arguing that it was not their dilemmas of ethnic composition but the nature and degree of their integration with global capital that was the driving variable in how the new states operated. Ideologically, mainland Southeast Asian states might be classified as subscribers to Anthony Smith's *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, the island nations of the region as implicit partisans of Benedict Anderson's

Imagined Communities, but it was the politico-economic dimension that determined the kind of revolutionary tinder present in Southeast Asia, rather than the doctrinal preferences of their elites. One of Sidel's best examples was that of Burma/Myanmar and Indonesia. After independence, both were ruled by men who had availed themselves of the political opportunities under Japanese rule in the wake of the Second World War; both conducted internal colonization and violent pacification campaigns in their outer-lying regions; both underwent coups in the 1960s that resulted in more complete military rule. Geertz was correct that a narrow commitment to Bamar identity hampered the Myanmar junta's nation-building efforts, but the more significant divergence, Sidel argued, came in Rangoon's unswerving pursuit of economic autarchy, which set it apart from Suharto's opening of the economy to foreign capital. By training his sights on this sort of difference, Sidel presented a much fuller picture of the constellation of Southeast Asian nationalisms, not as wayward particles with any path possible, but rather interlaced contexts, highly conditioned by both global capital and the exigencies of the Cold War.

Sidel, the author of authoritative studies on bossism in the Philippines and religiously framed violence in Indonesia, is a former student of Anderson, to whom he has dedicated his new book. *Republicanism, Communism, Islam* now offers an account of revolutionary mobilization in Southeast Asia that aims to extend, and in some degree correct, not Geertz but Anderson himself. In it, he contends that Anderson, along with Southeast Asianists of an older generation, such as Alexander Woodside, developed too top-heavy or bottom-heavy a picture of anti-colonial nationalism. For between Anderson's anti-colonial elites and urban youth, and Woodside's peasant nationalists endowed with a surfeit of 'acute historical consciousness' and 'cultural pride', lay a common problem: how was mass mobilization even possible when, at first, nationalism only attracted a small sliver of the colonial population? How was a classically elite figure like Sukarno—the product of a Dutch education and the smattering of modernist ideologies on offer in the late colonial state—able to bring his imagined Indonesia to fruition when very few shared his vision in the 1930s, a good portion of which he and his political associates spent in exile? How were the elite-educated *ilustrados* of the Philippines able to fire up peasants in Luzon and Mindanao who did not read their newspapers, much less their novels?

To answer these questions, Sidel turns not just to the revolutionary, but also internationalist—'cosmopolitan' is a term he often uses—resources and infrastructures of the time, and developments of the *longue durée* which prepared the ground for ordinary participation or sympathy with national projects. Unlike Mahmood Mamdani's work on Africa, he avoids foregrounding the path-dependencies bequeathed by the type of late colonial

rule (direct/centralized vs indirect/decentralized) of the region. Instead, deeper historical formations (Catholicism, Islam, Confucianism) and wider international movements (Communism, Pan-Islamism) are the main historical determinants. In similar style Sidel seeks to advance beyond what he terms the 'Cambridge School' of Southeast Asian studies, which has stressed technological connectivity, port cities and commerce, sometimes at the expense of more intentional revolutionary activity, in the generation of nationalisms in the region. In this he furthers, in effect, the agenda at work already in Anderson's *Java in a Time of Revolution* (1972), where comparisons between Indonesian and Vietnamese revolutions are a running theme in the book's footnotes—just as, of course, concern with the *longue durée* is central to *Imagined Communities* (1983), which dwelt at length on the conditioning effects in Europe of Latin as a universalizing language that both facilitated and fostered rebellions against its predominance. In *Under Three Flags* (2005), Anderson would go on to stress the imaginative reach of an elite stratum of educated anti-colonialists like Rizal and Martí at the turn of the century, who dreamt of as-yet-nonexistent political formations. In this sense, Sidel revisits the historical terrain of Early Anderson with the equipment of Later Anderson.

Proceeding mostly in chronological sequence, *Republicanism, Communism, Islam* moves from the Philippines to Indonesia to Vietnam. While the Spanish conquest of the archipelago they named after their king was not the first point of entry for European colonialism in Southeast Asia—the Portuguese had already taken over the booming trading port of Malacca when Magellan claimed Cebu for the Spanish crown in 1521—the Philippines was the site of one of the most ambitious and thoroughgoing of all Western projects in the region. Sidel points out two critical features that distinguished early Spanish rule from other colonial incursions. First, the islands were conquered at the relative apex of Spanish imperial power, in a period that was simultaneously a high point of Catholic orthodoxy and universalizing confidence, generating a vigorous and often violent effort to convert the entire population to Christianity. Already in the 16th century, schools and churches were being erected deep in the countryside, along with a comprehensive, if often unavailing attempt to uproot indigenous religions and cults. By contrast, the Dutch empire never harboured ambitions to convert the population of the East Indies to Protestantism. In Indochina, Catholicism made significant inroads with French penetration—by the mid-18th century there were 300,000 Catholics in the Red River Valley—but Christianity was not embraced by the Nguyễn court, whereas Filipino elites would become at any rate nominally Catholic. The consolidated form of colonial rule in the Philippines has often been described as a *Frailocracia*—rule

by friars. In the 19th century *cofradías* and other Catholic associations would later be put to revolutionary use by rebels, like a hijacked electrical grid.

The second element Sidel identifies as distinctive of Spanish rule in the Philippines is that it was not yet as racially preoccupied as other European systems would be. Chinese-speaking traders were not only allowed to set up coastal operations, but encouraged to marry local women, the ensuing offspring even assigned a special 'mestizo' status. The result was a 'comprador' class in the colony 'virtually unique in Southeast Asia in terms of its legal status and political potential'. Rather than Chinese being rigorously separated from the general population, as the Dutch would try to do in the East Indies, the Sino-mestizo class of the Philippines would form a significant component of a 19th century bourgeoisie that produced a number of revolutionary radicals. From the 1560s onward, through the thriving industry of galleon repair at Manila as well as its Chinese-speaking traders, the Philippines, though still perhaps not as globally connected as Malacca, was linked to the far reaches of the Spanish empire. Eventually Cuban sugar, Chinese silk, Mexican silver, Indian textiles all passed through the port of Manila and beyond. So too the education available to the local population was well beyond anything on offer elsewhere in the region. As early as 1611 the Dominicans founded the University of Santo Tomas in Manila. A den of scholastic quackery perhaps, but it preceded medical schools founded by the French and Dutch by more than two centuries. By the late 19th century, Sidel cites a figure of more than 400,000 children in the Philippines attending primary school, whereas in the 1920s fewer than 70,000 were in primary schools in the Dutch East Indies. By that time, however, the Spanish empire was a battered military power and a cultural backwater. When the great Filipino novelist José Rizal left Manila to study in Europe, he made a point of going to Germany and England, and made no attempt to hide his feelings of superiority to writers of the metropole.

The revolutionary upsurge of the mid-19th century built off the network of Masonic and Catholic associations easily taken over by those who saw an opportunity in forcing an end to Spanish rule. As in Latin America, the political fissures of the quarrels between liberals and clericals in Spain played out in the periphery. The arrival in 1869 of a liberal Spanish governor, Carlos María de la Torre y Navacerrada, to institute reforms in the Philippines acted as the trip-wire for a series of events in Filipino society that Rizal would dramatize in *Noli Me Tángere* (1887), with its cast of scheming evil friars, well-meaning naive liberals, and downtrodden indigenous rebels. For Sidel the problem for the Filipino revolutionaries of the 1890s was not so much their small numbers as their schisms and lack of cohesion. The masonic *gobernadorcillo* Emilio Aguinaldo was,

like Rizal, an *ilustrado*—an educated member of the mestizo class—who wanted to accelerate liberal reform in the face of the Bourbon restoration in Madrid in 1874. But another group of rebels who were gathered around Andrés Bonifacio—an early comet leading a 'revolution inside the revolution'—favoured a more violent campaign to eject the newly hardened Spanish. It was the failure of these two forces to coalesce that limited the impact of the Filipino Revolution. The 'early victory for liberalism in the Philippines not only came at the expense of the more egalitarian republican ideals of the Philippine revolution, but worked to create forms of social inequality and injustice unparalleled elsewhere in Southeast Asia.' The top-down reformists of the liberal Propaganda Movement wanted to oust the Spanish, but flinched at the prospect of a full-scale popular insurrection against them. Rizal, the 'First Filipino', foresaw what might be the outcome of the split. In *Noli Me Tángere*, the young, revolutionary Emilio appeals to the *ilustrado* protagonist of the novel, Crisóstomo Ibarra, whose biography closely resembles Rizal's own, in ways that uncannily anticipated reality. When Bonifacio sent an emissary to Rizal in the remote town in Mindanao where he had been deported after his return from Spain, Rizal tried to convince Bonifacio and the rebels that their actions were premature. The young revolutionary rebuffed the message, and an insurrection was launched in 1896, for which—though he had no hand in it—Rizal was executed. The following year US colonialism, not Filipino nationalism, put an end to Spanish rule, and waged a merciless war of extermination against those who were still fighting for independence.

Dutch colonization of the East Indies was by contrast relatively superficial. Originally undertaken by a chartered commercial company, the VOC, eager to tap into one of the largest global trading networks, it made no use of a local comprador class. Hokkien-speaking merchants in its islands were discouraged from assimilating into the general population, and Dutch educational and religious resources never came close to matching Spanish labours in the Philippines. In consequence, Islamic education and associations had more room to manoeuvre and modernized themselves on their own terms. Earlier Left accounts of the Indonesian Revolution located its origins in the labour and communist movements founded by workers in Java, whereas Anderson focussed rather on the revolutionary energies of the Pemuda—urban youth who contributed overwhelmingly to revolutionary activity between the 1920s and 1940s. Without discounting either of these forces, Sidel emphasizes the 'dense infrastructure of Islamic education and associational life' centred around organizations such as Sarekat Islam which by 1916 numbered some 350,000 members, concentrated among labourers in newly industrial cities like Semarang and Surabaya in East Java. Sarekat

Islam and related associations, Sidel argues, were the network through which anti-colonial organizing on a mass scale became possible.

The railway strike of 1923, a huge coordinated effort between labour and Islamic organizations, was a highpoint of this anti-colonial synthesis. But the Comintern was slow to grasp the need for Communists to work with Muslim organizations. 'So, you do not see the revolutionary significance of Pan-Islamism?', Stalin teased M. N. Roy when they first met in Moscow. By contrast, the Sumatran revolutionary Tan Malaka made an explicit case for embracing Pan-Islamism as a tactic at the fourth Comintern Congress in 1922. He impressed on his hosts that the Dutch colonies did not conform to any familiar pattern of historical development: sultans lived next to industrial labourers in parts of Java, inhabiting wildly divergent historical time-scales. It would be foolish to forego alliances with Muslim organizations that were already, in their general orientation, anti-colonial. As in the Philippines, Sidel notes the failure of a joint anti-colonial movement to emerge for the ejection of the Dutch. Local communists, against the advice of Tan Malaka, pressed forward with an uprising in West Sumatra in 1927 that was brutally crushed by the Dutch. In Sidel's account Tan Malaka features as a tragic, unheeded figure, Sukarno as a wily survivor advancing a please-all-parties programme for anti-colonial unity in his tract of 1926, 'Nationalism, Islam and Marxism'. The departure of the Dutch can be attributed, Sidel argues, to multiple forces. Locally, in many places, pressure was exerted by the Muslim paramilitaries formerly cultivated by the Japanese, which had now collected under the umbrella of the Islamic party Masyumi, itself an outgrowth of the Sarekat Islam. At another level, Washington, satisfied that the fledgling republic of Sjahrir and Sukarno was sufficiently anti-communist, saw no reason for the Dutch to mire themselves in a costly insurgency, and threatened to withhold Marshall aid in order to ensure their exit. When Sukarno in turn became unacceptable to the US by flirting with the Communist Party (PKI) in the next decade, Eisenhower tried to remove him in a coup orchestrated by the CIA, which failed. It would take another, better prepared move in 1965 to oust him from power and kill off the PKI.

What, then, set Vietnam apart? For Sidel, the most fundamental answer is: proximity to China. For centuries part of the Sinosphere, the fate of the former kingdoms and dynasties of what became Indochina were bound to be closely tied to events in their larger neighbour. There were certain *longue durée* features that also came to set it apart from the Dutch and Spanish colonies: the high concentration of capital among French entrepreneurs and Chinese-speaking traders limited the development of a local-Vietnamese capitalist bourgeoisie comparable to the mestizo class of the Philippines, the traders of Java and entrenched indigenous merchants of Aceh, Sulawesi and

Sumatra. In the 20th century, there were nationalist Vietnamese parties and groups, but with nothing like the power or magnetism of the Kuomintang. Another difference was the speed with which a radical trajectory was set off in what would later comprise Vietnam, after an alphabetic reform in 1910 severed the new Vietnamese intelligentsia from their Confucian forebears, as they read different scripts and different books. Suddenly a great writer like Vũ Trọng Phụng—educated at a colonial primary school and by the streets of Hanoi, who made passing allusion to Vietnamese epics, but whose closer field of reference was French fiction: Maupassant or Hugo, not to speak of Freud, Charlie Chaplin, even modernists like Proust—could become a true artist of scabrous reportage and the absurd (his work would be banned for more than a quarter century in the DRV).

Like the abortive Cavite rebellion of 1872 in the Philippines, the Cần Vương insurgency of 1885–89 in Indochina was an early rising among anti-colonial elites that was easily repulsed by the French authorities. But by the 1920s and 1930s, a series of newer communist formations could emerge in the shadow of Chinese communism over the northern border—their rise enabled, however, by the support not just of the Chinese Communist Party, but also the Kuomintang which distrusted the Vietnamese nationalists for currying support from the Japanese in their attempts to subvert the Vichy French. So Ho Chi Minh benefitted from extra backing as well as fewer obstacles, compared with his peers in the Philippines or the Dutch East Indies. Nor was there a large moderate body of workers like the Sarekat Islam requiring appeasement. American assistance was naturally lacking—Truman never answered Ho's plea for support—but a nation was easier to imagine in Vietnam, which had been a unified polity less than a century earlier, though many groups that had been inside of it hardly wanted to resume position in any future Vietnam. Not entirely content to dismiss traditional Vietnamese authority, moreover, Ho—temporarily in control of the north of the country after the 1945 collapse of Japan, which had taken over from the French during the Second World War—had Bao Dai deliver the Great Imperial Seal to him at Huế. Yet as the geographer Christian Lentz has shown, this hardly meant that the Communists were met with a nation-in-waiting. The Tai, Hmong, Khmu, and Dao forces that combined to defeat the French at Điện Biên Phủ in the main did not even speak Vietnamese; most of them did not think they were fighting for incorporation in a communist state, but rather a better system of economic exchange and regional self-determination, a belief which the Communists officially promoted and sanctioned in their 1953 Ethnic Policy.

How persuasive is Sidel's overall picture of the divergent revolutionary fates of Southeast Asia? In comparative ambition and explanatory power,

Republicanism, Communism, Islam is a major achievement. This is a work that is not simply a masterful synthesis of post-Andersonian scholarship, but a bridge between the subtlety of Anderson's style of analysis—even if it doesn't plunge as deeply into national imaginaries expressed in literature and art—and something like the perspective of world-systems theory on the paths of integration into networks of global capital. For Sidel, however, the prospects of a revolution were not just a function of the particular way in which countries in the region were drawn into the arteries of world capitalism, but of the differing types of pre-capitalist networks enmeshed in contact with it. The revolutionary energies that ensued in Southeast Asia were, it follows, deeply uneven: an early run in the Philippines, an explosive finale in Vietnam.

In his final chapter, Sidel expands his field of comparison with succinct overviews of two other cases, Burma and Malaya. In the latter, communists were too concentrated in what the British had rigorously categorized as the Chinese minority population, making it much harder to radicalize the rest of the population; when Muslim communists from the Dutch East Indies travelled to Malaya in the interwar period they tended to meet with fellow Muslims rather than comrades of Chinese origin. The British authorities were also skilled at dealing with the Communist threat, not merely by repression in a pitiless counterinsurgency, but defanging the movement in a parliamentary mechanism in which Kuomintang-related parties, like the Malayan Chinese Association, were inscribed in the state, and anti-communist operators like Tan Cheng Lock and later Lee Kuan Yew could be cultivated to great effect. In Burma, it was manipulation of Christian hill tribes against the majority-Buddhist Bamar population that allowed the colonial authorities to forestall anti-colonial state-making, still unresolved today—though after 1945 the fact that the country had been ruled so long by the Raj (it was only separated from Delhi in 1937, five years before Japan conquered it) also left it inside an Indian orbit less favourable for revolution than the Sinosphere from which Vietnam benefitted. Today, of course, Myanmar has a much closer—if tenser—relationship with China than with India.

What, finally, of the distinction to be made between cosmopolitanism and nationalism in Southeast Asia? What Sidel's study shows is that nationalism in the region typically possessed a cosmopolitan dimension, in the sense that even the most hidebound nationalists were not pursuing their national project in a vacuum: they knew they were entering into a world order of states, and that success depended on some form of international cooperation with more powerful global forces. In a recent lecture Sidel has suggested that Anderson was less likely to stress the cosmopolitan

dimension of the Indonesian revolution because he was writing during Reagan's reheated Cold War, and was wary of providing ammunition for neoconservatives attacking the nationalisms of Southeast Asia as offering cover for communist infiltration. Yet Sidel's own work shows that the same 'cosmopolitan' infrastructures that made revolutions in the region possible could also become obstacles to them. Witness the role of the PRC, after its pact with the US, in Indochina: in the end, Vietnamese Communism may have benefitted from having fewer rather than more opportunities to compromise. Between Anderson's networks of 'anarchist' solidarity in the time of Rizal and Martí, and Sidel's of 'cosmopolitan' solidarity in the time of Ho and Tan Malaka, there are still fresh comparisons to be made.