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Benedict Anderson memorial

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When I was a student at Cornell back in the early 1980s, Ben Anderson looked the part of the Cornell professor. He was a bit ruffled, with hair that looked as though it had been repeatedly raked through by his fingers. Whenever and wherever you saw him on campus, he had a book in one hand and a small cigar in the other. It often seemed as though he was lost in thought. At the time he had a reputation as that really smart guy who read and talked about everything in his classes. He ran the gamut when it came to intellectual companionship - intersecting as much with anthropologists, historians, literary theorists and economists as he did with his colleagues in the government department. On the eve of the publication of *Imagined Communities*, Ben Anderson was seen as the slightly less famous brother of Perry Anderson, the well-known British historian, who was one of the editors of the *New Left Review*. That changed, of course, with the publication of *Imagined Communities* in 1983.

There are two things that I admire deeply about Ben Anderson's career. One was his utter disregard for disciplinary and sub-disciplinary boundaries. Anderson wrote his dissertation at Cornell under the direction of Professor George Kahin. Like Kahin, Anderson was often mistaken for a historian rather than a political scientist. Learning from a range of seemingly disparate sources and questioning common sense wisdom about politics and culture was Anderson's trademark. His first book was inspired by a passing comment by Alan Bloom - then Anderson's senior colleague in the Government Department - that the Greeks had no concept of power. Anderson tells of running to the library to check the classical Greek dictionary and discovered that indeed there was no general concept of power there. It struck him that the same was true in classical Javanese culture. From this came Anderson's first book "The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture."

Anderson was deeply influenced by colleagues and graduate students in the Southeast Asian Studies program at Cornell - who came from a wide range of departments. Reflecting on this period, he wrote joyfully about teaching with James Siegel, a professor of anthropology (and student of Clifford Geertz) with whom he taught a graduate seminar on Indonesian fiction. From this, he wrote - "I began to think about how I could use my early training in classical and Western European, as well as Indonesian,

literature for a new kind of analysis of the relations between imagination and reality in the study of politics." On this campus, in that interdisciplinary space, the seed of what became *Imagined Communities* was born.

At a time when there seems to be a great devotion to disciplinarity and even larger disciplinary categories - such as humanities and social science - Anderson's refusal to be hemming in by professional identity is an inspiration and reminder of the creative insights that come from a willingness to learn across social, intellectual, and political boundaries.

The other thing I admire about Anderson's career was his willingness to bring a political and ethical perspective to his work. He believed that politics and scholarship were inseparable. Along with Ruth McVey, Anderson penned the famous "Cornell Paper" chronicling the mass murder of communist party members in Indonesia following the coup of 1965. He also served as one of only two foreign witnesses to the trial of the communist party secretary in 1971 and later translated the secretary's testimony into English. As a result of all of this Anderson was banned from Indonesia, and was only able to return after the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998. As one of my classmates from the early 80s said in a message to me Anderson "exemplified the values of courage and speaking the truth even when powerful government forces fought to suppress that truth."

As someone who stood up against government power, who challenged received categories and wisdoms, and who offered insightful ways of understanding some of our most important political categories - such as nationalism - Ben Anderson will continue to serve as a model & inspiration to us all.