



## **Benedict R. O. Anderson**

August 26, 1936 – December 13, 2015

Benedict Anderson, the Aaron L. Binenkorb Emeritus Professor of International Studies, and a long time faculty member of the Government department, died December 13, 2015, age 79 in Malang, Indonesia, apparently of heart failure. Ben had retired from Cornell in 2002, and spent most of his time in Asia, although he returned to his home outside of Freeville every summer, and remained active in Southeast Asian studies. An extraordinarily productive scholar and writer, he had just finished drafting his last book, *A Life Beyond Boundaries: A Memoir* (2016), which appeared in print several months after his passing.

Ben gained broad international recognition for his 1983 book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, one of the most influential studies of nationalism, that helped reshape how scholars think of the origins and dynamics of nationalistic ideology. Most students of nationalism had viewed nations as either old and eternal, or ahistorical curiosities of the capitalist age. Ben argued that nations were modern “imagined communities,” that arose as a consequence of capitalism and the explosion of the printed word, which served to unite mass publics around a single vernacular language and a particular sense of a community made up of people one would never meet. His analysis firmly rejected the idea that nations were eternal, but nevertheless insisted that even critical analysts must take this peculiar idea of an “imagined” community seriously. Even imagined communities may be meaningful.

*Imagined Communities* has been translated into over 20 languages and Google scholar today credits it with over 70,000 citations.

In addition to *Imagined Communities*, In the course of a long academic career, Ben published several hundred publications, mostly focusing on Southeast Asia, including *Java in a Time of Revolution* (1972), *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (1990), *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World* (1998), and *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (2005). Other influential publications include “Old State, New Society: Indonesia's New. Order in Comparative Historical Perspective,” published in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, and “The idea of power in Javanese culture,” published in his *Language and power: exploring political cultures in Indonesia*. Beyond his own scholarly output, he gave generously of his time in establishing Cornell Southeast Asia Publications as a repository for influential, immersive scholarship on Southeast Asia. With Audrey Kahin, he also nurtured the Cornell-edited journal *Indonesia*, still the top outlet for Indonesian studies across the humanities and social sciences.

Ben was born in China in 1936, to an Irish father and an English mother. His father was a commissioner in the Imperial Maritime Customs Service, and the family was forced to leave China in 1941, when it was invaded by Japan. He studied at Eton and Cambridge University in England, where he received first class honors in Classics in 1957. Ben came to Ithaca as a graduate student in the early 1960s. Under the tutelage of George Kahin, he turned his focus on Southeast Asia, and began his teaching career in the Government Department in 1967, never really to leave it until his retirement in 2002. He was also active in leadership roles in the Southeast Asian Studies Program, helping to establish it as the premier center for the study of the Southeast Asia in the US. For much of that time, he lived in an old farmhouse outside of Freeville, 8 miles north east of campus.

He arrived in Ithaca and to the Government Department during the tumultuous years when Cornell was one of the national epicenters of campus anti-Vietnam-war protest and civil rights activism. Ben combined meticulous scholarship

with passionate political engagement. He became a vocal critic of the Suharto regime in Indonesia. An essay entitled “A Preliminary Analysis of the October 1, 1965, Coup in Indonesia” (co-authored with Ruth McVey and Frederick Bunnell), which challenged the official story of the September 30 Movement and the anti-communist slaughter of almost a million people in Indonesia and later came to be known around the world as simply “The Cornell Paper”, led to him being banned from that country from 1972 until the end of Suharto’s dictatorship in 1998.

Ben was a superb teacher for the Government Department, with legendary courses on militarism, nationalism, as well as Southeast Asian politics. A formidable intellect with little patience for disciplinary boundaries, he served on a large number of graduate student committees in and out of the Government department. He was much esteemed by his Government colleagues, despite his limited interest in much departmental business. For instance, he was known for not saying much at the Wednesday noon faculty meetings, diligently working on the New York Times crossword puzzle—in pen—instead.

Anderson is survived by his brother Perry Anderson, his sister Melanie Anderson and his two adopted sons, Yudi and Beni.

*Nic van de Walle, chair; Isaac Kramnick, Kaja M. McGowan  
and Tom Pepinsky*