Benedict Richard O’Gorman Anderson, simply known as Benedict Anderson, was 79 when he died peacefully in his sleep during a visit to the town of Batur, Malang, in East Java, Indonesia, on 13 December 2015. He was born on 26 August 1936 in Kunming, China, to James O’Gorman and Veronica Beatrice Mary Anderson. He was a Cornell University scholar and in time became one of the most influential voices in the fields of nationalism and Southeast Asian Studies. His colleagues, scholars, and admirers noted that it was fitting that he died in the country he had come to love so much and spent a life time to understand. Indonesians reacted with an outpouring of tributes to him and mourned the death as a loss of public figure there.

In 1941, the Anderson family moved to California, where he received his initial education. While working for his BA in classics from Cambridge University, England (he received the degree in 1957), he developed an interest in Asian politics. Enrolled thereafter in Cornell University’s Indonesian Studies programme for his PhD he went to Jakarta, Indonesia, in 1961. After the 1965 army coup and the subsequent massacres of communists and Leftists by the Right-wing forces, he co-authored three studies, one of which was an outline of the coup. He argued that discontented army officers, rather than communists, were responsible for the coup and challenged the military government’s claims to legitimacy. It became known in 1966 as the “Cornell Paper”. As a result the military government barred Anderson from Indonesia for an indefinite period. Anderson taught till his retirement at Cornell University. He served as director of the Modern Indonesia Programme and at the time of his death was the Aaron L. Binenkorb Professor Emeritus of International Studies there. His fame rests solidly and safely with a famous analysis of nationalism in his book Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (1983). His thesis, namely that nationalism was largely a modern concept rooted in language and literacy, was hotly debated but admired. The book was translated into more than two dozen languages. Yet many readers of that book did not know that his erudition, flair, wit, and breathtaking generalisations were based on his knowledge of Southeast Asian languages, besides major European ones, which gave him rare insights into Indonesian, Thai and Philippine political culture and history. He was also a great teacher who inspired his students to think of history creatively, read it against the grain by mobilising every ounce of intellectual courage and energy to look at history and politics in new and critical ways.

Anderson’s enforced absence from Indonesia redirected his energies elsewhere, particularly Thailand. His 1977 essay "Withdrawal Symptoms" on the social forces behind a 1976 military dictatorship became his most influential work on Thailand. He later turned attention to the Philippines, which led him to his last major work, Under Three Flags: Anarchists and the Anti-Colonial Imaginaton (2005), which according to highlight surpassed his Imagined Communities in historical imagination. In between he published a delicate exercise in comparative study, a collection of essays, titled, The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World (1998). The collection, while focusing on the theme of identity and nationality was soon applauded as a fascinating example of strategies to write history, particularly with the help of highly specific case-studies to make far-reaching general points. The Fate of Rural Hell: Asceticism and Desire in Buddhist Thailand (2012) was his last work. It was once again a characteristic Anderson analysis — a subtle analysis of one of the aspects of Thai culture that threw light on contemporary politics.

Even though his research often focused on Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, his elegant generalisations drew response, admiration and fierce criticisms. Given his knowledge of several languages, countries, cultures and nationalist politics in various parts of the world, we should not be surprised that he had given to his memoir the title, A life beyond the Boundaries: A Memoir. It is scheduled to be published by Verso in July 2016.

It is ironical that a man who had devoted almost an entire life to the study of nationalism was described by the New Republic, as “a man without a country”. Possibly his extraordinary command over languages, vast travels and a graceful writing style and a scholarship that never sat heavily on him and always demonstrated itself with equal grace added to his mystique as an intellectual with universal appeal. With all these qualities, he could produce compelling ideas and transcend challenges to those ideas. Through engagements with his works we move onto a different sphere of thinking and conceptual exercise, and ideas like “imagined communities”, “political astronomy”, “spectre of comparisons”, “hard to imagine” (in studies of imagination), “political time” lead us beyond the banal task of deciding whether they are right or wrong. We begin to ask, how do these ideas capture our minds? And, if these ideas, or at least some of them, are engrossing not because they are right or wrong, then we must ask, because of what? What lends force to the sweep of his formulations?

A reviewer informs us that Anderson originally wished to work on India. But he decided to turn his attention instead to Indonesia. What was India’s loss was Indonesia’s gain. More importantly, with a fascinating coverage of Southeast Asia he moved beyond what his paper, on Indonesia. Through his engagement with other nations in that region and with his universalist flair he broke new grounds in comparative studies. Yet as I intend to suggest, it was not an exercise by a traditional comparativist on the basis of certain structural or universal-functionalist assumptions. Take his most influential work, Imagined Communities. Published in 1983, it was hotly debated but admired. It is ironical that a man who had given to his memoir the title, A life beyond the Boundaries: A Memoir. It is scheduled to be published by Verso in July 2016.

A life beyond boundaries

BENEDICT ANDERSON 1936 – 2015

RANABIR SAMADDAR

Benedict Anderson speaking at the conference on "Cosmopolitization and the Nation-State", organised by the Asian Development Research Institute (ADRI) and the Prince Claus Fund, in Patna in 2001. (see Biblio: March-April, 2002, p 22)

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However in this case at least such a consideration is necessary. Yet we need not focus too much on his life, but study his method.

Speaking of method, language was one of the tools with which Anderson ventured into concrete studies of language and nationalism. Yet precisely because the idea and the concept of language was a concrete universal, he could escape banal and demeaning comparisons while actually engaging in comparing and juxtaposing different experiences. In this sense, he had already anticipated the idea of assemblage, which would animate global studies two decades later. While working on the Philippines, he repeatedly commented that there was a need to see the Philippines in world historical terms. He asked, why the Philippines, he would have replied, why not? The Philippines, a country in the "outer periphery", was interesting in its own right. This he sought to establish by returning to the 1890s and the global history or the world system of that time. In some ways, his initiative to put the Philippines on the world intellectual map mirrored that of his hero Jose Rizal. As one Filipino scholar Filomeno V Aquilava Jr., commented, while many in the Philippines saw José Rizal's execution as more than simply a Philippine event. Five months after Rizal's execution on 30 December 1896, the Italy-born Michele Angiolillo attended a huge demonstration in London's Trafalgar Square, where he heard a call to avenge the death of Rizal and other victims of the regime of Spain's Prime Minister Antonio Canovas del Castillo. On 8 August 1897, Angiolillo assassinated Canovas, which led to the fall of 'casique democracy' in Spain and of Valeriano Weyler's brutal governorship in Cuba. In making these connections, Anderson made us realise that, even without digital communication technologies, Rizal's execution was world news and had global ramifications.3 And then to reinforce his argument of Creole nationalism, he again turned to RizalIn Why Counting Counts: A Study of Forms of Consciousness and Problems of Language in Noli Me Tangere and El Filibusterismo (2009). In it he examined Jose Rizal's great novels through a quantitative analysis of the scope and evolution of their political and social vocabulary, and he gave special attention to the characters (including the narrator) using specific terms and languages and to their respective frequency. Through this method he sought to throw new light on Rizal's changing political consciousness and use of his native language. The most important questions raised by him concerned the shifting nature of Rizal's intended readership, the geographical location of the birth of a Filipino identity in the modern sense, the odd concealment of the Chinese mestizos combined with a growing hostility to the Chinese as an alien race, and the complex relation between the colonial-international aspects of Spanish and the ethnic-nationalist claims of Tagalog, and the emergence of a democratic cross-class lingua franca, especially in Manila. A reviewer drew the following lessons from Why Counting Counts:

We need to do our reading; think global; see the world with a different lens and go against the grain and ask odd, difficult questions; keep on reading; do not stop; embrace multiplicity; reread; and then do the dirty work by raising odd questions, and so read language closely; be a demonio as Anderson was when he counted words with a perspicacity that found demonic comparisons between Rizal's two novels; and one last lesson, the most important, namely, we must exercise empathy. Empathy, as he taught is a hugely underrated cognitive skill.4

In a sense, then, we may say that this was the way in which Benedict Anderson rose to the implicit challenge of Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) by demonstrating the inadequacy of the Euro-centric world view and establishing that to know the "other", one need not theorise it by dichotomising the West and the East, but taking it (the "other", the East) seriously in order to understand it as well as the world we live in. He not only avoided dichotomy, but also showed how within a global regime of power, anti-colonial and anti-feudal nationalisms were making their presence felt. Yet I think an unforthcoming question remained with Anderson even after the origin and spread of nationalism had been magisterially accounted for namely: How does an idea spread? Is it imposed? Is it translated? Is it superimposed? Does it find a final hybrid form? Is it a result...
of conquest by an invading idea or of an idea conquering military conquest? In a delicate essay, “Hard to Imagine” Anderson offered a complicated answer to this question, comparing the English translation of Rizal’s novel, Noli Me Tangere (1887), on the occasion of his hundredth anniversary, with the original that preserved the original flavor of the anti-colonial ideas, style, and mode of expression of early nationalists with a standard product that would be easy to read for a wide audience. He then proceeded to make a large observation, which would be the foundation of the following points: de-modernisation (as if the early nationalists had been non-modern); exclusion of the reader (as if the question of local readers which Rizal had in mind had to be excluded from consideration when translating); exclusion of the local language (Tagalog); bowdlerisation (expurgation of certain passages of the original novel); de-localisation (taking out the local context, geography, etc.); translation (for example, the New Left Review of Siam over Forty Years (2013), in which he not only undertook an investigation into what constitutes a deformed text that violates an unwritten rule, but also upset with my comment. As we talked freely for a few hours in Bangkok, I suddenly recalled his reference to Under Three Flags as a novel that fails its readers (novel manqué) and slowly came to realize his empathic mind, sensitivities and his own uncertainties amid the gathering storm of neo-liberalism over the poorer nations. These were the countries he had spent his life to understand. In these days of cruelty, massacres, plagues, and plunders, it is easy to forget how difficult it was to understand how they are coping with changing times. Empathy and a sense of connectedness can go a long way in making us resilient. Are we all not Andersonians in some sense and on certain occasions?

ENDNOTES
2 https://newrepublic.com/article/125706/benedict-anderson-man-without-country
4 The Spectre of Comparisons (Verso, London, 2005), p 131; readers interested in such comparison of two nationalist revolutionary thinkers in the Spanish colonial world may see
5 In English respectively, “cause from holding on to me” and “the reign of greed”
7 The Spectre of Comparisons (Verso, London, 1998), pp 166 and 252
8 The Spectre of Comparisons, p 252
9 A novel that may disappoint readers with its unprouducive consequences, therefore a definite decision not to enter into the contract with the readers; marques to a person who has failed to live up to a specific expectation or ambition
10 Under Three Flags: Anarchism and Anti-Colonial Imaginaries (Verso, London, 2005), p 33); readers interested in such comparison of two nationalist revolutionary thinkers in the Spanish colonial world may see
12 Noli Me Tangere (accessed on 13 December 2015); Hagimoto notes the limits of such an approach and points out, “Sinuating themselves in the same city (New York) Martín and Rizal never meet each other on paper. Only their particular andante-idealimperial ideas traverse and interact in a peculiar way through them. Rizal and Asia in the late nineteenth century met through the theatre, and the world of the metropolitan city, which would soon become the hub of a modern US empire” - pp 146-147
14 “Withdrawal Symptoms”, p 24