

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 Batu, 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 counterrevolution there three years after a student-led revolt had overthrown a military dictatorship became his most influential work on Thailand.¹ He later turned attention to the Philippines, which led him to his last major work, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (2005), which according to many surpassed the *Imagined Communities* in historical imagination. In between he published a

A life beyond boundaries

BENEDICT ANDERSON
1936 – 2015



COURTESY: ADRI

Benedict Anderson speaking at the conference on “Cosmopolitanism 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)

RANABIR SAMADDAR

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.

II

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”.² 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”, “long distance nationalism”, “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 writing specialist papers 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 structural-functional assumptions. Take his most influential work, *Imagined Communities*. Puzzled by the rise of nationalisms across the world, he sought to first explain what a nation was and then to trace the rise of different nationalisms. He did not resort to banal comparisons, but followed the method of abstract and conceptual exercise. In its opening pages, he wrote:

In an anthropological spirit, then, I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community — and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign... It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion... The nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind. The most messianic nationalists do not dream of a day when all the members of the human race will join their nation in the way that it was possible, in certain epochs, for, say, Christians to dream of a wholly Christian planet. It is imagined as sovereign because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical

Benedict Anderson’s 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

dynastic realm... Finally, it is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings. These deaths bring us abruptly face to face with the central problem posed by nationalism: what makes the shrunken imaginings of recent history (scarcely more than two centuries) generate such colossal sacrifices? I believe that the beginnings of an answer lie in the cultural roots of nationalism". (Revised Edition, 1991, pp 5-7)

We all know how Anderson saw the emergence of the nation as a product of print capitalism, which produced publications in various vernacular languages allowing for a sameness and diffusion of ideas linked to the nation. Nations were more than simple by-products of different identities. In this way, he studied several histories of nationalisms and nations without ever falling into a comparativist's trap. Why? I would say, the global studies he undertook rested on certain general principles and categories: in his case, language, power and time. It is important therefore to follow the trajectory of his work, travels and life, if we are to understand his way of making generalisations. Considering the biographical element in an analytical exercise is not always a good idea.

However in this case at least such a consideration is necessary.³ 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. If 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 Aguilar Jr., commented, while many in the Philippines saw José Rizal's execution in ordinary ways, in *Under Three Flags*, Anderson "completely recast it 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 Cánovas del Castillo. On 8 August 1897, Angiolillo assassinated Cánovas, which led to the fall of 'cacique 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."⁴ And then to reinforce his argument of Creole nationalism, he again turned to Rizal, in *Why Counting Counts: A Study of Forms of Consciousness and Problems of Language in Noli Me Tangere and El Filibusterismo* (2009).⁵ 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*:

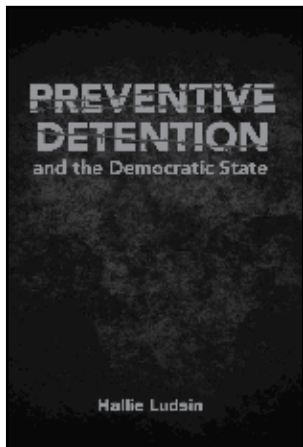
We need to do our reading; think global; see the world with a different lens and go against the grain and ask odd, difficult questions; keep on reading; do not stop; embrace multiplicity; reread; and then do the dirty work by raising odd questions, and so read language closely; be a demonio as Anderson 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.⁶

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.

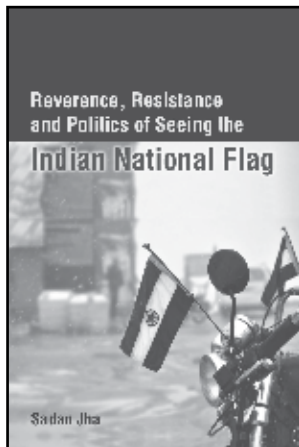
Yet I think an uncomfortable question remained with Anderson even after the origin and spread of nationalism had been magisterially accounted for, namely: How does an idea spread? Is it imposed? Is it translated? Is it superimposed? Does it find a final hybrid form? Is it a result

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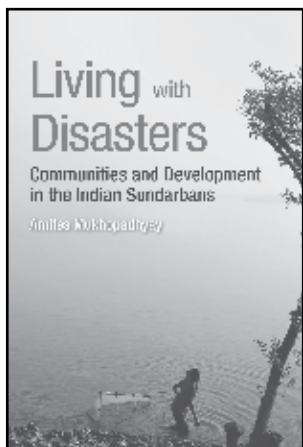
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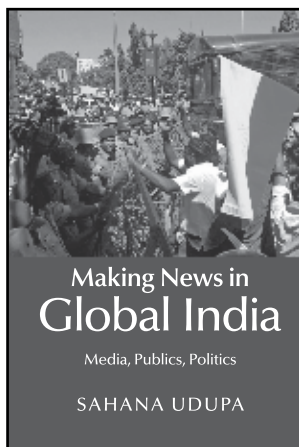
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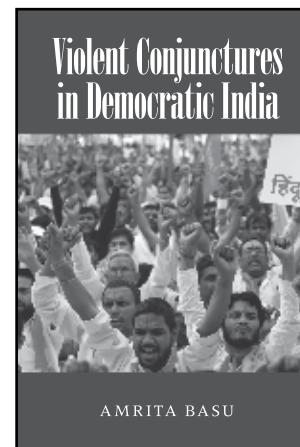
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of conquest by an invading idea or of an all round conquest including military conquest?

In a delicate essay, “Hard to Imagine” Anderson offered a complicated answer to this.⁷ He showed how the English translation of Rizal’s novel, *Noli Me Tangere* (1887), on the occasion of his birth centenary in 1961 had replaced the original flair of the anti-colonial ideas, style, and mode of expression of early nationalists with a standard product that would be acceptable to Anglo-American readership. He discussed the dynamics of translation to make a larger observation, which consisted in this case of the following points: de-modernisation (as if the early nationalists had to be 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.); de-Europeanization (no Europe for the classic orient) and getting rid of anachronisms (to make the orient unproblematic). Anderson concluded the essay by commenting on the passage of the political time, indeed what made a political time, by situating early anti-colonialism — complex, anachronistic, paradoxical, in contrast with the official, elite ideology of a legitimating nationalism with the arrival of the nation state in the Philippines. Anderson said: the early anti-colonial nationalists appeared to the “post-independence establishment with its precarious, domestic, and international prestige” as both amigo (friend, familiar, one of us) and enemigo (enigmatic), Rizal as the “general guarantor of the truth of Philippine nationalism — in a certain sense even as its alibi... but also upsetting if not subversive”.⁸ He candidly stated that even this lesson in terms of the metamorphosis of the political time was not convincing enough if we did not go into the details of American occupation and its strategies, and the inter-war years when the Japanese turned Philippines into ruins.

Was it then a specific idea of time that allowed him a unique way to make comparisons, or was he always comparing two times (early nationalism and the moment of arrival of a successful nationalism in the form of nation state) to make a general point, or did he think that only by playing with time could one compare, else comparison was meaningless? Was he then at the end only a qualified Einsteinian, for as he said in the Introduction to *Under Three Flags*, that the influence of anarchism over anti-colonial nationalism was due to the gravitational force of anarchism between militant nationalisms on opposite sides of the planet? Recall that Anderson had asked us to consider his book as “a black-and-white film or a novel manqué”,⁹ which would tell the readers a curious history of anti-colonial resistance in the Philippines at the end of the 19th century to argue that Rizal’s life and works demonstrated the globalisation of anti-colonial movements. Ease of transport and communication meant Filipinos could draw inspiration from revolutionaries of Cuba on the other side of the world. Anti-colonial revolutionaries met and conspired in Europe, the glue being the anarchist thought, before returning home to sagas of tragedies and triumphs. Anderson said that tracing the journey of early nationalism across three continents was as an experiment in political astronomy — a method which some

would say was a blend of Eisenstein’s montage and the thrilling uncertainties of an unfolding novel, that revels in cliff-hangers. How should one explain the “near-simultaneity” of the events he was narrating? As mentioned, in his opinion, it was a time of globalisation with its new technology, such as the invention of the telegram, widening postal systems, and railway networks that drew the ends of the earth closer, thus making a wide range of events, conditions, and consequences from scientific discoveries, movement of capital and profit, military conquests, annexations, colonisation and defeats possible. Time was flattening out to make things simultaneous, yet time was relative to make comparison possible. That is why, perhaps, even after studying for a life-time three countries — Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines — he never compared them in a trite way. In *Under Three Flags*, Anderson alluded to numerous comparisons between the life and the works of Jose Rizal and Jose Martí (the Cuban nationalist revolutionary), yet never seriously discussed the comparison in any detail, while stating for instance, “the comparison with Martí is illuminating.”¹⁰

Can we say, then, that perhaps Anderson knew that comparison had limits, and the global interconnections of the anti-colonial thinkers and forces he was describing in the book had structural constraints?¹¹ Or was it due to his characteristic flexible way of drawing connections and comparisons that he avoided any discussion on the late 19th century imperial universe (in this case Spanish) that placed structural limits on those connections? One reviewer therefore has remarked that “the links in Anderson’s global chain often seem in danger of coming apart.”¹²

III

Anderson, however, was aware of the limits of his method, therefore he struggled to balance his mode of working on interconnections and simultaneity to explain a ‘global’ phenomenon with a renewed focus on particular events, phenomena and their metamorphosis. This never solved the paradox, but I dare say it made his method even more subtle and complex. That is what we can learn and cherish. For instance, in *The Fate of Rural Hell: Asceticism and Desire in Buddhist Thailand*, his description of the development and persistence of the wat (a Buddhist sacred precinct with quarters for monks, a temple, an edifice housing a large image of Buddha and a structure for lessons) reflected not only the living legend of rural struggle but challenged us to reconsider what we understand today as Thailand’s rurality. Monkhood, schooling, travelling, the exploitation of rural cheap labour, and the engaging of oneself with capitalists and big people in politics as reflected in the course of an abbot’s life are all rural strategies in the aspiration to become part of modern bourgeois Thailand. Once again we have in this slim volume the juxtaposition of multiple powers in one place. In fact the modern rural community becomes a productive space where villagers engage with the state, capitalists, NGOs, local powers, tourists, politicians, monks, and even supernatural entities, to produce rural Thailand. The temple, like the rural community, becomes a reflection of the unclear distinction between the co-existing local, national and international features. There is no glorification of pre-bourgeois past, but a remorseless

investigation into what constitutes connectedness in the late capitalist age and the meaning of desire and asceticism in our time.

It will be unfair to say that Anderson understood only simultaneity and not heterogeneity, for more than any other post-national cultural theorist he looked deep into the nationalist abyss of the developing world. Take for instance his work on Thailand, *Exploration and Irony in Studies of Siam over Forty Years* (2013), in which he not only undertook a path-breaking study of the state of Thai studies, but also the nature of the October Coup (1976), radicalism and communism in Thailand, and murders and progress. In the essay “Withdrawal Symptoms”, later included as a chapter in this volume, he wrote:

The consequences of October 6 point therefore in two different but related directions. On the one hand, the coup has obviously accelerated the secular demystification of Thai politics. Direct and open attacks on the monarchy loom imminently. Sizeable groups, both liberal and radical, have come to understand that they have no place in the Bangkok order, and so, in unprecedented numbers, have left for exile or the maquis.¹³ On the other hand, the political conceptions and symbols of the once hegemonic right have become self-conscious slogans with an increasingly specific social constituency. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was possible for many Thai conservatives to view the Thai Left quite sincerely as a kind of alien minority (“really” Vietnamese, Chinese, or whatever), and the anticommunist struggle as a loftily national crusade. Today, such ideas have become less and less plausible even to the right. The events of October 6 have served to speed up the process whereby the right gradually concedes, almost without being aware of it, that it is engaged in civil war. In the long run, this change is likely to prove decisive, for modern history shows very clearly that no revolutionary movement succeeds unless it has won or been conceded the nationalist accolade.¹⁴

Where did this Benedict Anderson (who had authored before this the Cornell Paper) vanish after 1983? Was there then an early Benedict Anderson and was there no chance that the early Benedict Anderson could return as late Anderson? Perhaps we can say that his decision to publish the collection, *Exploration and Irony in Studies of Siam over Forty Years* two years before his death was such an indication? Perhaps he, who had written so much for *New Left Review*, recalled that he had published also in *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*?

IV

Let me end this tribute with a personal note. I was fortunate to know Benedict Anderson closely and enjoy his affection. But we never discussed our works. Only once did he make appreciative remarks on *A Biography of the Indian Nation*, and asked why I did not write on the revolutionary nationalists of India? We discussed Indian politics, Southeast Asia, generations of communists in India and Indonesia, etc whenever we met. It would be Bangkok where he had set up his base for studies on Southeast Asia and where I had to go sometimes in connection with human rights work. One of the reasons why I never asked him about his work

was my uncertainty about the trajectory of his writings. I once told him that I was extremely happy that he had written *Under Three Flags*, and I liked it more than the *Imagined Communities*. Yet could he not have been more decisive in this new book? He smiled and replied with almost the words he had written in the Afterword to the new edition of the *Imagined Communities*, “Ranabir, you refer to IC? Forget, it has become banal. And this new one? It is a badly written novel.” This was perhaps 2007.

Initially, I thought that he was upset with my comment. As we talked freely into the sultry evening 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 realise his empathic mind, sensitivities and his own uncertainty amidst 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, wars, and plunders, it is easy to say that nations are failing. It is difficult 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

- 1 “Withdrawal Symptoms: Social and Cultural Aspects of the October 6 Coup”, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 9 (3), July-September 1977, pp. 13-30
- 2 <https://newrepublic.com/article/125706/benedict-anderson-man-without-country> (accessed on 2 January 2016)
- 3 See the piece in *The Hindu* by Vasundhara Simate - <http://www.thehindu.com/books/books-authors/benedict-anderson-noted-for-book-on-nationalism-dies-at-79/article7983449.ece> (accessed on 23 December 2015).
- 4 <http://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/116448-benedict-anderson-philippines-place-world> (accessed on 29 December 2015)
- 5 In English respectively, “cease from holding on to me” and “the reign of greed”
- 6 For a technical analysis, see the review of *Why Counting Counts* by Gina Apostol, “Why Benedict Anderson Counts: Lessons on Writing, Culture, and José Rizal”, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 4 March 2014
- 7 *The Spectre of Comparisons* (Verso, London, 1998), chapter 11, pp 235-262
- 8 *The Spectre of Comparisons*, p 252
- 9 A novel that may disappoint readers with its unproductive consequences, therefore a deformed text that violates an unwritten contract with the readers; manqué refers to a person who has failed to live up to a specific expectation or ambition
- 10 *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and Anti-Colonial Imagination* (Verso, London, 2005), p 131; readers interested in such comparison of two nationalist revolutionary thinkers in the Spanish colonial world may see
- 11 On this, Koichi Hagimoto, “Between the Empires: Martí, Rizal, and the Limits of Global Resistance”, Ph. D thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 2010 - http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/6678/1/Hagimoto_etd_2010.pdf (accessed on 15 December 2015); Hagimoto notes the limits of simultaneity and points out, “Situating themselves in the same city (New York) Martí and Rizal never meet each other in person. Only their patriotic andante-imperial ideas traverse and interact in a peculiar way, connecting the Caribbean and Asia in the late nineteenth century metropolitan city, which would soon become the hub of a modern US empire” — pp 146-147
- 12 Sunil S. Amrith, “Gazing at the Stars”, review of Benedict Anderson’s *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and Anti-Colonial Imagination* in *History Workshop Journal*, 66, 2008, p 230 (pp 227-236)
- 13 Dense shrub lands; rural guerrilla bands moving in dense shrub lands
- 14 “Withdrawal Symptoms”, p 24