

IN MEMORIAM

Harry Jindrich Benda, 1919–1971

The death of Harry Benda on 26 October 1971 has deprived Southeast Asian scholarship of one of its most fertile minds and vital personalities. As a graduate student at Cornell, Assistant Professor of History at Rochester, Associate Professor and Professor of History at Yale, and Director of Yale's Southeast Asian Studies, he was a distinguished member of a distinguished company of scholars who between them shaped the tremendous post-war expansion of Southeast Asian studies in the United States.

Harry Benda came to academic life by a roundabout route. Born in Czechoslovakia in 1919 he moved at first towards a commercial career. His first introduction to the area in which he was to become a scholarly specialist came through his emigration to the Indies in 1939. In 1941 he joined the importing firm, Koler and Ankersmit in Batavia, becoming at first head of its purchasing division and then acting branch manager of the company in Semarang. He was caught there by the Japanese advance and he spent the Occupation years as a civilian internee of the Japanese. At the end of the war he saw that he could not take up the threads of his earlier life. His parents had been victims of the German invasion of Czechoslovakia, a fact to which he rarely referred but which undoubtedly fed the sources of his compassion and which formed a part of his acute sense of a world in which enlightenment was forced to wage a continuing struggle with darkness. (It is of interest incidentally that, though agnostic in outlook, he came increasingly to value his Jewishness because of the sense of community it gave him.)

Benda's attempt to make a new life for himself in the post-war world led him at first to New Zealand and to study at Victoria University College, Wellington, and then to the United States where, in 1952, he entered Cornell as a graduate student. Though at the time he saw this period of study in America as a temporary sojourn only — a preparation for the academic life he hoped to make in Australia or New Zealand — there were job difficulties, and his appointment as Assistant Professor of History at Rochester was in fact followed by his commitment to a new country and his decision in 1960 to become an American citizen. From Rochester he went to Yale in 1959, and played a major part in reviving its graduate work in the field of Southeast Asian studies. A full description of the projects he was able to assist from this base would take more space than is available here. Of major importance was one of his last creative contributions when he was selected by Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister, Dr. Goh Keng Swee, to launch a new Institute for regional research in Singapore. As the foundation director of the Singapore Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Harry Benda shaped the character and initial policy of the Institute, and persuaded Ministers and others of the need to preserve its autonomy. His own tenure of the directorship was, in itself, a guarantee to the academic world at large of its scholarly independence.

Benda's scholarship, backed by his impressive linguistic armoury and sustained by his tremendous energy, was solid but also imaginative. It is of importance that his influence was conveyed as much through direct personal contact with students and with his colleagues as through his writing; and indeed his best works manage to carry something of the flavour of face-to-face argument and discussion. His major single study, *The Crescent and the Rising Sun: Indonesian Islam During the Japanese Occupation* (1960) will remain a central contribution to the understanding of its subject, but perhaps more characteristic were his articles, stimulating

and suggestive, and the short *History of Modern Southeast Asia: Colonialism Nationalism and Decolonization*, which he wrote in collaboration with John Bastin. In these, as in his teaching, he had the gift of arousing others, of pointing out to them promising paths to explore, and of getting across a sense of the continuing excitement of the exploration. Nobody could come away from a serious conversation with him without a sense of new doors opened, for he had that fertility of mind which could relate apparently disparate facts and see them in a new unity. He had all the gifts of the great teacher, assisting, encouraging, and arguing — always arguing — with vigour and conviction and yet with open-mindedness and good humour. His warmth and enthusiasm were infectious.

He took a broad view of the historian's purpose. He was sensitive to the contribution which could be made by other social sciences and was concerned to stress the "structure of Southeast Asian history", to borrow the title of one of his most seminal articles. He nevertheless managed to remain squarely within his chosen discipline, captivated always by the uniqueness of the events he studied as well as by the richness and variety of the pattern he perceived in them. One of my own sharp memories of him is his sudden intervention into the discussion which followed the presentation of John Small's paper on the autonomy of Southeast Asian history at the 1961 conference of Southeast Asian historians. "Why this desire to stress the continuity of history?" he exclaimed. "Change, upheaval, difference — these are the things the historian is interested in. Don't play them down by talking about continuity."

There was both vanity and humility in Harry Benda's make-up. The two no doubt went together. In spite of his appearance of intellectual toughness he had his vulnerable side. He could be hurt by suspected slights, just as he would respond warmly to recognition and friendship. Those who came into contact with him could feel a firm and continuing sense of intimacy even when meetings could be only occasional and widely separated. He himself thought of Southeast Asian scholarship as comprising a fraternity and he did much to make it so. There is no doubt that its members will mourn him as a friend and not merely as a colleague.

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