



Benedict Anderson,

Tribute to a friend.

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I was fortunate enough to meet Ben thru my friend, the journalist Carlos Sardiña Galache. We were amused at the time by an unspoken and juvenile competition consisting of introducing to each other interesting, clever people.

Carlos doubled the bet and on a humid and torrid Thursday of march 2013 we were arriving to the home of legendary Benedict Anderson. Carlos was scheduled to interview him and I was asked to take the photographs. We set off on our way by taxi, with Carlos giving me some guidelines and emphasizing on the high intellectual status of Mr Anderson.

Ben, after all was the author of several social science masterpieces like his famous book *Imagined Communities*.

Carlos seemed grateful for the opportunity and a little tense with the expectations bestowed upon him. Ben's simple apartment was located in the suburbs of Pinklao, a working class neighborhood located north of Bangkok. It was his home during the half part of the year he was in Asia. There was a mess barely under control, books and cigarette butts all over. He was wearing an oversized shirt with ink stains that made me realized he had the habit of carrying a pen in the shirt pocket, it also made me think of the work ahead in Photoshop to remove the stains from the images I was about to take.

He looked unpretentious, far from any sort of intellectual aura, though a bit distant. I figured that we, the visitors, were the new subject of his endless crave for observation.

After taking the essential pictures I could turn my attention to the interview which was underway on the balcony. Despite a timid, sporadic breeze it was a hot and humid day, typical of Bangkok at that time of the year. I crouched down to listen carefully. Ben and Carlos were so engrossed in conversation I felt invisible. One subject would ramify into another, moving across regions, languages, monarchies, religion. Ben was narrating enthralling anecdotes of his life with an enthusiasm that would also denote nostalgia. Some were mini tragedies that time had already transformed into comedy.

When I stood up after a long while I felt that my blood pressure had dropped and I could barely stand. I asked for something sweet and the only thing he had was a pot of brown sugar. I desperately grabbed a handful and put in my mouth. Ben kindly offered me to lay down in his bed where I stayed convalescent until the long interview ended, night had already begun to fall. From the bed I could peer thru a glass door at the two animatedly talking and totally ignoring my condition. They were certainly having fun, their minds traveling thru all continents inhabited by Ben's life lived without boundaries.

Later on he brought up a story of his friend whom had a similar health episode but lost his life soon after... a small sample of his dry sense of humor.

That fateful meeting was the first of many encounters and a regular email exchange between us began to evolve... for me a personal treasure.

Soon Ben was now our friend, as well as the author of those books with such strange names, *Imagined Communities*; *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World*; *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* and many others.

When I told my sister, who is an Anthropologist in Argentina, that I was in touch with Benedict Anderson she was very intrigued. We had a conversation that I tried to

transcript in an email for Ben's amusement, and to tell him in a funny way my impressions of him:

"My sister Silvia, the anthropologist asked about you. She said your writings were of great impact in the academic world, plus other remarks that sounded out of proportion to me. As you know I am not familiar with your field.

She asked me if you were a nice, friendly person... I replied not so much. I said he seems to make an effort not to show emotions. He is very articulate. He tends to speak in a low voice, most of the time with a butt of a smoked cigarette on the side of his mouth. Maybe it is a cultural thing, he seems physically distant... This guy has Irish ancestors and I guess in that part of the world showing excessive emotion doesn't look well. He obviously enjoys being captive in his own mind which must be his playground... Actually he looks a bit autistic to me.

She replied: An eminence needs introspection.

and I added: Yes, I think he is wise, and very generous because he openly shares his observation. Almost everything he says is relevant".

Ben's reply to the email was almost immediate.

"What a lovely very funny message, I laughed and laughed as I read it. "

He also referred to my cartoons, which he liked a lot, especially those for which they could arrest me in countries with oppressive regimes like Thailand.

"Why not start to make a lot of cartoons, and store them away for the right time, which surely will come, and they won't be out of date. "

The three of us met many more times. He laughed and enjoyed mediating every time Carlos and I have our so common passionate clash of opinions.

One day in December, Carlos was in Spain and I decided to pick Ben up and take him out for dinner. Driving while following his directions we ended up lost and had to make a long detour. He apologized many times. I told him he should not feel guilty and he replied that it was not an option: We feel guilty or not.

That night we ended up at a random Thai restaurant which we spotted in a dark unfamiliar road near the highway. On the way to our table I glanced from the distance and noticed a dear friend with whom I was estranged for a long time. To my surprise, a few hours earlier I had texted her asking to make peace before the year

ends. She had sent me a cold, evasive reply. I sat down wondering at what to do and Ben without hesitation suggested I should talk to her.

Minutes later I returned to the table with a smile in my face for the restored friendship. I profusely thanked him for the advice and went on talking about the simple things of life. This memorable anecdote made us closer.

He said once that middle age man with long hair, makes them look like male versions of their mothers, which I found hilarious but prompted me to trim my long hair as soon as possible. On another occasion while discussing the mysteries of love, he told me that if love were not blind in the beginning, a lot of people would stay single all their lives. A funny way to make truthful statements.

So we were in touch either by our occasional meetings. sometimes through emails with attached cartoons, that he would always welcome and reply with... "Dear Omar, lovely sarcasms!!

When Carlos informed me of his death, I thought about the email addressed to him that was waiting for weeks in the draft folder of my computer, waiting for a cartoon to be attached. As Ben well said you either feel guilty or not, and that time I did. I was planning to travel to Thailand next month to meet him and Carlos again. As per his suggestions to make more cartoons, I know that he would have smiled about this one of him sitting on his books as much as I did.