

Raquel A.G. Reyes (2006). UNDER THREE FLAGS: ANARCHISM AND THE ANTI-COLONIAL IMAGINATION. By BENEDICT ANDERSON. pp. 255. London and New York, Verso, 2005. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, **16**, pp 339-341
doi:10.1017/S135618630637647X

© Cambridge University Press

Reviews of Books

UNDER THREE FLAGS: ANARCHISM AND THE ANTI-COLONIAL IMAGINATION. By BENEDICT ANDERSON. pp. 255. London and New York, Verso, 2005

Raquel A.G. Reyes^{a1}

^{a1} School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

This book attempts to trace the impact and influence of anarchism on anti-colonial nationalism, or as Benedict Anderson puts it in his introduction the “gravitational force of anarchism between militant nationalisms on opposite sides of the planet”. Focussing on Cuba and the Philippines, the most important remaining colonies of Spain's dying Empire, Anderson maps the political current of anarchism in the final decades of the nineteenth century, by moving breathtakingly from the European cities of London and Paris, to South America and Rio de Janeiro, to the East and to Hong Kong, Singapore and Manila, taking in several other cities in between. He views this journey as an experiment in “political astronomy” and devises a method which he describes as a blend of “Eisenstein's montage” and the thrilling uncertainties of an unfolding *roman-feuilleton* novel, enjoining his reader to imagine she is “reading a black and white film” or a novel that revels in cliff-hangers.

Broadly, Anderson follows a two-pronged line of argument. First, he aims to show a “transglobal coordination” between Cuba's nationalist revolution in 1895, the last to occur in the New World, and the Philippine nationalist revolution a year later, the first to occur in Asia. Their “near-simultaneity”, Anderson argues, was no mere coincidence. New technology: the invention of the telegram, the widening postal systems and railway networks, for instance, had succeeded in ushering forth a form of “early globalisation” which drew the ends of the earth closer, thus making a wide range of events, conditions and consequences – from scientific discoveries, the movement and making of capital and profit, to military conquests and defeats – both easy and swift.

Second, Anderson stresses the cosmopolitical nature of Filipino and Cuban nationalism by highlighting the cosmopolitanism of the elite nationalists themselves. Multi-lingual, geographically mobile and impressively cultured, this group of Filipino elite, patriotic intellectuals who are the focus of Anderson's study, formed friendships with and found allies in Europeans (British, French, Spanish and German), whether they were liberals, anarchists or simply sympathisers. Moreover, these patriots abroad kept themselves and their countrymen in the Philippines abreast of world events through reports in newspapers, through letters and telegrams, and, significantly through their travels. In the process, Anderson argues, both Filipinos and Cubans could “learn how to ‘do’ revolution, anti-colonialism, and anti-imperialism”.

By situating nationalism within these larger currents of modernity and cosmopolitanism, Anderson rightly unhinges the late-nineteenth century Cuban and Philippine revolutions from their provincial moorings and often parochial historical interpretations, and analyses them as being very much part of changing global conditions, shaped and pushed to a significant degree by prevailing transnational forces. The fruitfulness of this panoptic approach has been proven by other historians who have, like Anderson, explored the question why social changes occurring in distant regions of the world, with no apparent or obvious connections or ties, should have experienced similar transglobal coordinations or overlapping cycles of change.¹

Most interestingly, Anderson chooses to foreground three renowned Filipino patriots whose remarkable lives and works serve as an anchor upon which anarchism and its influences are discussed. Anderson's fascination with the astute political campaign organiser Mariano Ponce, the pioneering folklorist and journalist Isabelo de los Reyes, and above all, the polyglot and novelist Jose Rizal are plain. Anderson ranges across their considerable achievements: novels, essays, historical research, while at the same time, he endeavours to capture with intimacy, familiarity and warmth, their individual personalities. The ebullient, energetic, thrice married and virile Isabelo (father to fourteen children), is for example, contrasted with the self-conscious and sensitive Rizal who sired no children. To examine the works of these accomplished men in tandem with some of the most exciting scientific thinking and literature to be produced in Europe in the nineteenth century, necessitates the exploration of not only the development of their "anti-colonial imagination", but the exuberance of their intellectual adventurousness and the rich complexity of their imaginations. In two chapters, Anderson discusses Rizal's politically explosive novels *Noli me Tangere* (1887) and *El Filibusterismo* (1891), commendably taking the lively route of examining the novels for their biting humour, or Rizal's "unquenchable laughter" as Anderson describes, and references to sex. Highlighting passages that allude to the sexual lust of a friar, and male and female homosexuality, Anderson speculates on the eclectic sources that may have inspired the young Filipino. Here, Anderson finds correspondences in Rizal's sexual insinuations, which pepper both novels so spicily, with parallel scenes that can be found in works by the scandalously avant-garde half-Dutch and half-French novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans, with Edgar Allen Poe, with Baudelaire and Mallarmé. This novelistic melting pot is not entirely convincing and the links are tenuous. As Anderson himself quickly admits, while Rizal's novels are filled with classical references in Latin and Hebrew, and his vast library attests to his wide reading, there is no evidence to show any of these authors had been read by Rizal. What is significant is that Rizal was at the right place at the right time, and at the right age, to have been both excited and inspired by current, European literary activity. Rizal had made the first of many visits to Paris in 1884; he was an attractive, quietly confident and acutely observant twenty-three year old, and had arrived just over a year after Huysmans' *À rebours* had been published, a novel that had succeeded in outraging *bien-pensant* bourgeois society with its seductive and exotic sex scenes. What occurs, Anderson suggests, might be attributed to the magic of alchemy. "Rizal's originality", Anderson writes, "lay in the manner in which he transposed, combined, and transformed what he had read". It is the experience of Europe, Paris in particular, that provided the stimulation in an already fertile mind for ideas to take shape and crystallise.

It should be remembered that Rizal's novels are serious critiques of colonialism. But it is his mocking laughter and, at times, gossipy tone, that give the works the flair and sophistication found lacking in say, Benito Galdos's monumental *Doña Perfecta* (1876), a work scholars habitually compare to Rizal's *Noli*. A novel concerning a decaying colonial society and the depredations of imperialism, Anderson points out, has never been more enjoyable to read than Rizal's *Noli*. Anderson, as he is only too aware, has built a case for anarchism based on circumstantial evidence. In the Philippine case, his argument, he must surely admit, is largely unconvincing. Proving the political influence of anarchism in the formation of an anti-colonial imagination amongst a Filipino elite intelligentsia, who in the late 1880s and early 1890s were enamoured by the economic and scientific progress, as well as the bourgeois cultures of western Europe, and more interested in social reforms rather than revolution, was a tough hypothesis. What he has achieved is a stylishly written study that has allowed him to exhibit his considerable erudition – his broad knowledge of world history, his linguistic skills and his abiding interest in Philippine history.

Note

¹ Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c.800–1830 Volume I: Integration on the mainland* (Cambridge, 2003).