

Book Review

Republicanism, Communism, Islam: *Cosmopolitan Origins of Revolution* in Southeast Asia by John T. Sidel

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Books like *Riots, Pogroms and Jihad: Religious Violence in Indonesia* (2006) and *Capital, Coercion and Crime: Bossism in the Philippines* (1999) have cemented John Sidel's reputation as an iconoclastic interpreter of Southeast Asian politics and history. Influenced by the work of a host of giants of scholarship on the region, but primarily Benedict Anderson, his latest book does not disappoint in terms of insight, attention to detail, and grand historical and geographical scope. It is captivatingly written and studious in the gathering of evidence, especially historical ones, from a broad range of sources. Many of these are important but half-forgotten, at best, by most present-day scholars of the region.

In a nutshell, the book's main argument is that revolutions in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam—occurring within the half-century between the late 1890s and the 1940s and 1950s—are best understood as the product of transnational connections spanning across a *long durée* of many centuries; rather than that of domestic social and political transformations. Sidel (2021, 17) offers “a denationalized, transnationalized, and internationalized descriptive account of the Philippine, Indonesian, and Vietnamese revolutions counterposed against nationalized, nationalist, and nation-centered narratives,” and an “overarching framework for explaining the broad and variegated patterns of revolutionary mobilization across Southeast Asia as a whole.” This is presented as the book's main contribution to the debates on revolutions in Southeast Asia in terms of theories and general perspectives.

Perhaps it is inevitable that the chapters on Indonesia and the Philippines display most of the influence of Anderson, who is acknowledged by Sidel as his major inspiration. Like Anderson, but not drawing exclusively on him, one of Sidel's primary methods is to trace imaginings and actual formations of "the Philippines" and of "Indonesia" to the introduction of (mainly) their intelligentsia to such competing ideas as republicanism and communism (and Pan-Islamism in the case of the latter) from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Thus, we are provided with by now familiar yet still erudite narratives about the intellectual and physical wanderings of Jose Rizal and of the influences of Dutch socialists and new Caliphate-yearning Pan-Islamists on Indonesian nationalist and revolutionary thinking. Though Parisian anecdotes are inevitably weaved into the narrative on the origins of the Vietnamese revolution—the only one of the three cases producing a nation-state officially extolling socialist ideology—Sidel's analysis here stays closer to contemporary geographical boundaries. The shadow of China looms large, unsurprisingly, not just in the revolutionary era links between Vietnamese and Chinese communists, but also in terms of the historical legacies of the Imperial era, which helped paved the way for the emergence of similar revolutionary projects.

But Sidel is not only interested in the cosmopolitan intelligentsia, as revolutions must mobilize and therefore resonate with much broader sections of society. He addresses the point, for example, of how there were essentially two interrelated sides of the Indonesian revolution of the 1940s—one driven by intellectuals and the other mainly by rural youths making use of preexisting institutions of solidarity-building such as networks of Islamic boarding schools (in doing so, essentially bringing together two strands of Anderson's work over two different periods of his career). From this point of view, a more clearly articulated position on why a "socialist" revolution emerged victorious in Vietnam but not in the Philippines or Indonesia would have been welcome.

It is also important that Sidel sets his sights not just on European influences tied to the respective colonial social orders centered on Jakarta/Batavia, Manila, or Hanoi. He puts together a much longer history to make sense of Indonesian, Philippine, and Vietnamese national consciousness. In many ways, this is

a gargantuan task because the cross-cultural fertilizations over a large span of time and space the book describes are difficult to encapsulate by any central logic.

Although Sidel points out that the same approach could be useful to address cases outside of the book, such as Burma, it is only broached in passing that the antecedents of modern revolutionary processes in many other parts of the world, embroiled in broad-ranging trade or other networks in one way or another, could be—or have already been—traced in a similar way. It makes sense, of course, that culturally meaningful artifacts emerged, got redeployed, and therefore redefined, endlessly too, in places like South or Central Asia, the Middle East, and North and West Africa. The insertion of more examples from outside of the region in the analysis might have been helpful in underlining the book's argument about Southeast Asia itself.

There is a tendency within the book to suggest, alternately, that it is (a) providing a fully distinct interpretative perspective on the making of revolutions in Southeast Asia and (b) synthesizing the great wealth of knowledge and insight provided by some select preceding scholars of the region. Obviously, there is much of both on offer here.

Overall, the book should be described as a masterful work of synthesis, serving the important function of challenging the parochialism and inward-looking tendencies so entrenched in much of the extant Southeast Asian literature.

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