

Anthony Reid. *Imperial Alchemy: Nationalism and Political Identity in Southeast Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 262p.

One recalls that Partha Chatterjee [1986; 1993] lamented Anderson's notion of modular and derivative character of nationalisms in the post-colonial world. "If nationalisms in the rest of the world", Chatterjee wryly asked, "have to choose their imagined communities from certain 'modular' forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine?" [1993: 5]. The echoes of this trenchant question reverberated as I read Anthony Reid's *Imperial Alchemy: Nationalism and Political Identity in Southeast Asia*. The way how this book is framed conjures up the spectre of doubt as to whether the field has moved far enough in the past two decades away from the spirit of this approach to nationalism.

The book consists of eight chapters. The first two chapters revisit some of the issues involved in understanding nationalism in Asia vis-à-vis the 'West' in general and nationalism in Southeast Asia in particular. The subsequent five chapters elucidate a range of fascinating cases including Chinese nationalisms in the region, Malay identity, Aceh, Batak and Kadazandusun. The last chapter provides a concise recapitulation of the book's main arguments.

At the outset, *Imperial Alchemy* raises two questions about nationalisms in Asia that, in my mind, are supposed to set the direction of analysis: Are they following the trajectory of the development of nationalism in Europe, or, are they a 'different beast' altogether? The sense of am-

bivalence is noticeable. Noting that Asia's experience of colonialism, among other things, had no parallel in Europe, there is thus, the need for a different typology for 'Asian nationalism', as follows: (1) ethnic nationalism; (2) state nationalism; (3) anti-imperial nationalism; and in a rather awkward manner he calls (4) outrage against state humiliation (OSH). With these categories, one gets the impression that 'Asian nationalisms' have been granted ontological status, as 'different beasts'. The way the analysis unfolds, however, flags a contrarian view. Nationalisms in Southeast Asia turned out to be not 'different beasts' after all, but "magically" transformed derivatives of the Euro-American imperial experience.

The title says it all. Nicely capturing the main argument, it is claimed that through 'imperial alchemy' the "base metal of empire" was "transmuted into the gold of nationhood" (p. 3). That is, by some kind of political 'magic', the old polities—in their "ethnic, political and civilizational forms"—have been transformed to become independent modern nation-states harbouring various forms of nationalism.

One may argue that typologies of nationalism cannot be complete without taking on board what appears to be inherently *emic* aspects of the nationalist thoughts and experience, such as self-generated meanings (both collective and individual) of what nation, nationalism and nationalist experience are. In some fundamental sense, nation-formation and nationalism as its driving force are processes from within or, at first instance an insider's discourses and experience. That the prime movers of nationalism often were Western-educated intelligentsia ought not to mislead us into supposing that they were outsiders. Rather, they ought to be seen as imagining and positioning themselves within, in fact as the vanguard of, a body politic that was in the making. Even granting that all nationalisms are

a form of reaction to outside forces, imagined and/or real, it ought to be seen at the back of the eyeballs or felt underneath the skin of those who live through it. The reason is simple: analytic imperative demands that primary agency must be sought at the very least where the reaction (if indeed nationalism is just a reaction) is coming from, not in the source of the stimuli. Analysing nationalism, thus, entails allowing the conditions within the incipient nation an analytically privileged standpoint. This makes Michael Billig's [1995] notion of banal nationalism of fundamental importance, and this also explains why the proposed typology of 'Asian nationalisms' spelled out above appears inadequate.

One striking feature of this typology is its state-centric and elitist character. Even ethnic nationalism that, as one might expect, presupposes the central role of the common people in nation-formation seems in the book's formulation driven by, or framed within, the elitist and/or state-centric view of, and by, a particular ethnic group. This is clear, among other instances, in the treatment of Batak in Chapter 6 where after emphasizing the textured experience of various groups under the rubric 'Batak' including those in diaspora, the analysis ended up reducing such complexity by tying 'Batakness' to the nation-state called Indonesia. More about this below.

Conceiving nationalism with the real people as a sidelined object rather than as a central subject of analysis, a limit has been set to the range of nationalisms in the region that the typology and analysis can cover. This enables the simplification of the otherwise very dynamic, multi-layered, continuing and competing processes of nation-formation, paving the way for the strikingly one-dimensional notion of 'imperial alchemy'.

That this alchemy works is clearly shown, so the book claims, by the resilience in the postcolonial

period of the geo-body as defined by colonialism. It is also manifest in the form of a sort of Westphalian state-to-state relations that is valued highly within ASEAN. By taking this situation as if it is a historical given, rather than as historically contingent, the current nation-state boundary has been rendered as a necessary container that nationalism ought to fill in. Any nationalism that cannot—in fact or in intent—fill it up is regarded less than worthy of being considered true or rightful nationalism. The ease and lack of irony, for instance by which the Acehness who fought off the military in the 1950s as 'rebels' (p. 142) indicates the location of authority and the brand of nationalism considered as legitimate. Had the treatment been analytically fair, the term 'freedom fighters' might have been more appropriate and the situation ought to have been regarded as a struggle between two emerging body politics which happened to subscribe to two different, but possibly equally legitimate forms of nationalisms. Driven by the notion of 'imperial alchemy', Aceh's ethnic nationalism could not but play second fiddle to state nationalism of the Jakarta-centered government. With a peace pact signed in 2005 and the parties closely connected to GAM emerging victorious in the elections for governorship in 2006, partiality could not be concealed when this development is described in these words: "The ethnic nationalism of Aceh ... had come to terms with the state nationalism of Indonesia" (p. 143). Rather than taking Aceh's nationalism on its own term, it is treated like a prodigal son returning for forgiveness and acceptance of his father.

By using the imperial-to-national geo-body transformation as the fulcrum of the development of nationalism, a closure to the otherwise open-ended processes of nation-formation has been unduly cast. This left analysis not much option but to downplay or ignore elements of nationalist imagination and experience that do

not satisfy the frame set by the imperial-turned-national geobody. By claiming for instance that “Indonesia and its imperial predecessor are the only form of state the Batak have known” and that “(i)t is now also the only true nation-state they can readily imagine” (p. 186), the possibility of an alternative way of imagining Batakness, particularly that which is divorced from being a citizen of Indonesia, has been denied. One might be struck, for instance, by Reid’s richly textured mapping out of Batakness in Chapter 6—including that which is ‘performed’ by those in the diaspora—and yet he concludes with the pronouncement cited above. Rather than treating other forms of nationalisms such as banal nationalism, colonial nationalism, ‘performative’ nationalism as possibly important constitutive elements of, or parallel to state, ethnical or OSH nationalisms, they were downplayed, if not ignored altogether. Moreover, a teleological explanation has been set underpinned by evolutionary logic that preset or presupposed the formation of the present form of the geobody-tied nationalism. Rendering the present as a *fait accompli* the persistence of the other forms of nationalisms is ignored and the question of their possible validity set aside.

The treatment in Chapter 4 of the long-standing Filipino claims to being Malay seems exemplary of the problem with imperial alchemy as a template for understanding nationalism in the region. It is claimed that it was through Blumentritt that early Filipino nationalists such as Rizal “became convinced” (p. 99) that Filipinos were Malay. Not only is this factually indefensible, for the Propagandists looked on many other European scholars whom they knew earlier than Blumentritt or whose work they had read earlier on. In addition, Pigafetta’s chronicle of the early 16th century points to much earlier and ‘indigenous’ roots of this idea. What is truly disturbing is the implication of this claim: that is,

that Filipino nationalists such as Rizal and others, brilliant as they may have been, couldn’t learn or imbibe something except through the initiative and/or assistance of a European. One wonders what is this mentality that makes it difficult to recognize the sentiments or knowledge of ‘natives’ as their own, and not something that the Euro-Americans had put inside their hearts and minds? It tempts one to ask if the imperial alchemy that the book refers to is not really about nation-formation, but about the avatars of colonial scholarship that persist to this day.

The abovementioned problems notwithstanding, the book is a valuable addition to the growing body of work on nationalism in Southeast Asia. De-coupled from the book’s problematic conceptual anchor of ‘imperial alchemy’, the five case studies offer perceptive and fascinating, if on occasions debatable, interpretations, analysis and synthesis of an impressively wide range of data. Notable for their comparative intent, penetrating insights and synthetic ambition, they offer a nuanced and fluid portrait of nation-formation. Through contrapuntal reading, as what I have tried to do, the wide ranging cases built up in the book could be shown to subvert rather than support the notion of imperial alchemy. If alchemy was indeed accomplished, these case studies demonstrate that it was not so much by the imperial but by the nationalists. After all, they are not called nationalists for nothing.

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