

Being an apologist?: The Cornell Paper and a debate between friends

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For those who knew Herb Feith, Indonesia scholar, humanist and peace studies pioneer it is perhaps unimaginable that he could be regarded as an apologist for atrocities committed in Indonesia. But in early 1966, in the midst of the ongoing massacres of communists and their suspected sympathisers after the so-called 'coup' attempt the previous year on 30 September, some of Herb's close and respected colleagues were perplexed at what they took as words from Herb condoning the military-sponsored violence. This article is an attempt to present a closer look at the conversation that took place between these scholars of Indonesia at this critical moment, because it raises pertinent questions still relevant in Indonesian and Asian studies more broadly about how we balance our obligations as analysts seeking substantiated truth and fact, with the moral obligation to speak against tyranny and injustice and the pressures we experience from within our own national contexts.

Herb was in the middle of his teaching semester in Melbourne when news reached him of the arrests of a group of generals, alleged to have planned a coup to unseat the government, in Jakarta on the night of 30 September. At that time, getting a grasp on what was happening was extremely difficult as Jakarta quickly came under a state of martial law, cutting off communication with the outside world. From his home in Melbourne, Herb followed the cataclysmic events of 30 September 1965 and its bloody aftermath as much as he was able. In his little correspondence from the period, there is not much to indicate, however, that in the last months of 1965 he had much additional information beyond that which was published in Australia's dailies and in the highly censored mainstream Indonesian press.

Like many other Indonesia observers, a change in regime and

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the end of Sukarno's Presidency was imminent was not unforeseen. Moreover, whilst the manner in which this power struggle leading to the 'coup attempt' on 30 September was played out, may have surprised him, the fact that it took place did not. Nor was he surprised by the fact that its aftermath proved to be bloody. Like other commentators at the time, Herb expected that the increasingly tense stand-off between the three pillars of power in Indonesian politics that has lasted throughout 1965 would spill over into a confrontation. In an article published the previous year, Herb had predicted that the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) could succeed in gaining power, though things would be difficult after Sukarno goes, and "that the army will then emerge as the dominant political force and that it will treat the PKI as an enemy".¹

The reality, though, of just how little he did know of the details of what happened in these first weeks of October is clear from his only published commentary on the coup. On 10 October Herb was interviewed on ABC radio² where he was non-committal about where to place responsibility for the attempted coup, but predicted a long drawn out period of violence between the government and the Communists.

News reporting on the coup in Australian news media was extremely limited. In his survey of Melbourne newspapers during this period, Richard Tanter demonstrates that there was very little mention of the events in Indonesia and almost no mention of the killings.³ The general sentiment within Australia at the time accepted the elimination of both Sukarno, whom they saw as a trouble-making despot, and feared communists.

By late October, however, news began to trickle through of mass arrests in Indonesia as the clampdown on PKI members and supporters took hold. At Herb's alma mater, Cornell's Modern

¹ Herb Feith, 'President Soekarno, The Army and the Communists: The Triangle Changes Shape', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 4, No. 8 (Aug., 1964), 969-980.

² ABC radio, 10 October, 1965; 19 October 1965, *Lot's Wife*.

³ Richard Tanter, 'Witness denied: Australian media responses to the Indonesian killings of 1965-66', *Inside Indonesia*, no. 71, (July-September) 2002.

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Indonesia Project, Ben Anderson, Ruth McVey and Fred Bunnell with George Kahin's encouragement, followed the events as closely as was possible from outside Indonesia, monitoring and analysing Indonesian newspaper sources (up to thirty Indonesian publications), and other material from contacts in Washington and Jakarta. The trio rushed to piece together the events of 30 September and its aftermath. Was this really a PKI-backed attempted military coup, or was it all part of a masterful plot born of intra-military factionalism dressed up to make it look like a PKI plot, in order to justify the full-scale expulsion of the communists from Indonesian politics? For the Cornell team, which included Ruth McVey whose research was concerned with the communist party in Indonesia, the theory of a PKI conspiracy in conjunction with these Generals, particularly Lt-Col Untung, did not add up. Moreover the emerging stories and rumours of systematic arrests and increasingly also brutal killings and large-scale violence, were way out of proportion to the initial catalyst, a plot by the 30 September movement. They set to work in Ithaca scrutinising news reports, statements from military and political leaders, witnesses to the kidnappings of the Generals and subsequent attacks on members of the PKI. The wider 'Cornell' network, including Herb, Jamie Mackie and John Legge at Monash, were in touch with Ben and Ruth during the course of their research from October until January. In its latter, writing-up stages over the new year, Herb and others from this inner circle were in contact via correspondence and occasional long international phone calls to Cornell's Modern Indonesia Project base at 102 West Avenue, Ithaca.⁴

⁴ Ben Anderson letter to Herb Feith, Jamie Mackie, (nd. mid-November 1965), Monash University Records and Archives, MON 78 1991/09, Folder 181. ["We have been up to our ears in the coup as you can imagine and have much appreciated the tidbits you have sent along...Fred and Ruth and I have been clipping... We are supposed to write up some kind of general analysis of the whole affair, but this seems a fairly dim prospect as the newspaper material here is positively overwhelming, we are getting about 30 Indonesian newspapers now on a regular basis. The thing to lay immediately it seems to me is the whole PKI ghost."]

The Preliminary Report

In early February, the 'Preliminary Report' marked "for your eyes only" was distributed among a small network of trusted Indonesia-watchers, including the group at Monash. Its findings ran counter to the official story then issuing from Indonesia and supported by the United States and Australia. The 'official' story published just forty days after the events on 30 September by the Armed Forces History Centre under the direction of Nugroho Notosusanto, was titled *The Forty Day Failure of the 30 September Movement*. As historian Kate McGregor describes it, this version of events "was largely a consolidated version of Army propaganda setting out 'proof' that the coup attempt was a communist plot".⁵ In its opening lines the PR argued that the PKI's and Sukarno's involvement in the attempted coup and murder of the Generals had been minimal, rather that, "They were more the victims than the initiators of events".⁶ The events of 30 September were instead, they argued, the result of a struggle between factions within the Armed Forces itself, whereby "The patent design of the Army was to place all blame [for the challenge on the government] on the PKI".⁷ The Preliminary Report pointed to the anti-communist campaign launched by the Army subsequently, with massive raids against leftist elements and PKI property and organisation of mass demonstrations calling for the PKI to be banned. Based on the evidence, the authors argued that the 30 September movement and the anti-communist campaign launched on 21 October, "though intimately related, nonetheless form quite separate political phenomena".⁸

Its assembly in such a short time and most of all the conclusions within the report, though marked as 'preliminary' were also highly challengeable. In a letter to Kahin on 18 February 1966, in what could

⁵ Katharine E. McGregor, *History in Uniform: Military Ideology and the Construction of Indonesia's Past*, Singapore: NUS Publishing, 1997: 62.

⁶ *A Preliminary Analysis of the October 1, 1965, Coup in Indonesia*, Ithaca: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, 1971: 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁸ Anderson and McVey, *Preliminary Analysis*: 63. This is reiterated in more recent research (John Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2006: 22).

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only have been a matter of weeks after receiving the PR,⁹ Herb was one of the first to contest its findings, though he recognised its importance, “First of all the Preliminary Analysis alia *Thriller*. Strongly as I disagree with quite a bit of it, it is certainly tremendous stuff and opens a new page in the study of Indonesian politics.” His main focus of disagreement with the authors was based on his belief that “PKI-Untung links can’t just be assumed to be non-existent, that Sukarno’s flickering health must have been a factor of enormous importance, and that army plans to organise some sort of provocation of the PKI were probably far advanced....”¹⁰ Thirty years later Herb reiterated this position, “I was startled by the Cornell paper’s exculpation of the party, and I think unconvinced, but I am pretty sure that I shared the sense of outrage expressed within it....”¹¹ In his letter to George, Herb indicated his was a different albeit still preliminary interpretation of the events and referred to a short article he had recently written about the coup and killings published in the local journal *Nation*.¹² This article was to spark a bitter albeit short exchange between friends.

A moral analysis?

The production of the Preliminary Report at such speed and with such highly flammable conclusions, coupled with his own difficulty of gaining insight into events so rapidly unfolding but clearly of immense and historic importance and calamity, all led Herb to reflect at the time on his role and that of the field more widely. As he confessed to George Kahin in February 1966 his own thinking on the facts of the events remained ‘massively confused’. In a way his already sixteen years of engagement with Indonesia – professional, scholarly, patriotic – and the

⁹ The PA was completed in Ithaca, 10 January 1966. See George McT. Kahin, *Southeast Asia: A testament*. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003: 178.

¹⁰ Herb Feith letter to George Kahin, 18 Feb 1966, Monash University Records and Archive, 78/1991/09 Box 7.

¹¹ Herb Feith letter to Richard Tanter, 8 October 1996, National Library of Australia, Manuscripts Collection, MS 9926/ ACC 02/262, (General Correspondence, Folder T-W).

¹² Herb Feith, ‘Killings in Indonesia: To moralise or analyse: a dialogue’, *Nation*, 19 February 1966, 9-11

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constantly competing tensions within his roles in relation to Indonesia and Australia, came together in the form of this one-page essay published in February 1966 and given its title by the journal's editors, 'Killings in Indonesia: To moralise or analyse: a dialogue'.¹³

The essay is written in a Socratic style, which would be a method Herb increasingly preferred in the coming decades. The essay is a dialogue between 'A' and 'B' about the coup and subsequent killings. In summary, 'A' makes a case for a more broadly humanitarian response, whilst 'B' argues that the communists got what they deserved – without doubt the dominant view in the US and Australia. As Herb told his friends, "I certainly meant for my readers to be convinced by the 'A' case..." That is, that regardless of the politics of the victims, the mass murders should be wholly condemned. As Herb saw it, he was attempting to raise critical questions about objectivity, neutrality and detachment. Though he later admitted to regretting the editor's choice of title for the article and perhaps to some extent the methodology he used, he did not regret its intention. Herb had constructed the two sides at polar opposites in an argument about communism and justification of widespread killings and imprisonment of its followers.

Branded an apologia

Herb wrote the *Nation* article in mid-February and sent it off to his Cornell friends expecting their usual critique and possibly also help getting it a wider circulation, entirely unaware of the way in which they would read it and respond to it. Ruth and Ben immediately saw it as an attack on their work in the Preliminary Report, but more critically, they read it as an apologia for the anti-Communist purge still taking place in Indonesia. Their counter-attack was painfully personal.

In her letter to Herb, dated 25 February, Ruth McVey, a beautifully fluid and astute writer, in a self-confessed hot temper, hurried off an acerbic and personally targeted response in verse. She entitled the poem 'The

¹³ He was approached by the editors of *Current Affairs Bulletin* (Sydney) to write something but declined, instead suggesting Lance Castles, who wrote the article anonymously ('Indonesia – The coup, and after?', *Current Affairs Bulletin*, 30 May 1966).

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Omlet-Maker's Song (To be sung in moments of flagging Enthusiasm by analysts of current Indonesian Affairs). The poem is a brilliantly constructed and intentionally cruel critique of what she depicts as amoral detached scholarship that dismisses the mass killings in favour of 'higher' science. It is also a personal assault with sardonic references to Herb's use of the concept of problem-solving in his book *Decline of Constitutional Democracy*¹⁴; and ending by making a comparison with the apologias made of Hitler's 'Final Solution'.¹⁵

From Ben, whose reply Herb received on the same day in early March, the message was perhaps even more upsetting because of the particular closeness of their friendship. Ben's tone, though less acute than Ruth's, gave way to an crushing transcription of his 'Moralise' essay in order to demonstrate how, Ben explained, "you will be subject to very serious misinterpretation".¹⁶ Anderson took what he called "key excerpts" from the article and "simply substituted different nouns and adjectives...while keeping the rest of your argument as it stands". These nouns and adjectives so simply substituted were 'Berlin' for 'Jakarta', 'Jews' for 'Communists' and 'Third Reich' and 'Nazis' for the 'Indonesian Army'.

Herb and the Cornell Indonesianists were not strangers to debate amongst themselves, divergences of view and different approaches to work. Such was the atmosphere encouraged and promoted by George Kahin at the Modern Indonesia Project and it produced a great research environment. Nevertheless, Herb was caught entirely off-guard. How, he wondered, had these his closest colleagues and dear friends misunderstood him so grossly? How was it that he had explained himself so badly, so that he, a Jewish refugee from Nazi oppression, could be

¹⁴ In *Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), Herb Feith argues that two types of leadership dominated post-revolutionary Indonesia. Following from S.N. Eisenstadt and Lucien Pye, he called these 'administrators' and 'solidarity makers'. As he explained, "The whole emphasis of the administrators was on problem-solving" (p117), whilst the 'solidarity makers' were concerned with symbolism, mass organisation and mediation.

¹⁵ Ruth McVey letter to Herb Feith, 25 February 1966, Monash University Records and Archives, MON 78 1991/09, Folder 203.

¹⁶ Ben Anderson letter to Herb Feith, 24 February 1966, Monash University Records and Archives, MON 78 1991/09, Folder 181.

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labelled an apologist for mass exterminations and political repression? Herb was knocked sideways by the letters, to the extent that his wife Betty felt compelled to write to George, also a close friend of hers, to seek his advice and clarify Herb's position.

Herb doesn't know I am writing you but I must. He's stunned at a recent letter from Ben and Ruth indicating their assumption that the aim of his article was an Apologia for Mass Murder. I'm stunned too. I just want to let you know that quite the reverse was the intention. The point of the article was a protest against the bland acceptance by the press here that it's OK to kill these people because they're Communist supporters. We thought this was 100% clear. Apparently it was not.¹⁷

Betty's compulsion to write to George was partly, she explained, because she herself had encouraged Herb to use the dialogue style. They were, she explained, trying to find a way in which to overcome the general apathy within the Australian public and encourage them to "read to the end rather than just another protest of the kind that one ignores here in the press everyday...(particularly as Herb is rather prone to write such things)."

The author of a survey of Australian media coverage of the Vietnam conflict during this same period asked, "How far was the Australian public made aware of the major problems associated with the Vietnam War?"¹⁸, finding that "Evidence exists to provide a basis for suspicions that distortion is occurring in the reporting...The general trend of these suspicions is that Viet Cong successes are played down, while American and Saigonese successes tend to be played up".¹⁹ The author concluded that given the limited and biased nature of Australian news reporting on the war, "the Australian public cannot hope to make informed decisions

¹⁷ Betty Feith letter to George Kahin, 10 March 1966, Cornell University, Rare and Manuscript Collections, Carl A. Kroch Library, Kahin archive, Box 5 14/27/3146.

¹⁸ Derek McDougall, 'Australian Press coverage of the Vietnam War in 1965', *Australian Outlook*, vol 20, no3, December 1966, 307.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 303.

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about Vietnam”²⁰ – and indeed with the situation in Indonesia. The apathy or indeed sense of approval, within the wider Australian public on the killings was reflected in the lack of interest in Indonesia from government at the time. As a further example, in mid-1966 an Australian parliamentary delegation to Southeast Asia visited Singapore, Malaya, (Sabah, Sarawak), Thailand, Cambodia, and South Vietnam. Not Indonesia. It is not known if the attempts were made to include it on the itinerary and the Indonesians would not cooperate, or if the situation was simply deemed to be too chaotic at the time, but in the report of a delegate on this trip, Senator R.C. Cotton, which included extensive discussion of the importance of Southeast Asia to Australia’s future, Indonesia is not mentioned.²¹

Undoubtedly, Betty’s main concern when writing her letter was however to alert George to the extent to which Herb was upset by the misunderstanding with Ben and Ruth, and she thought, perhaps, also with George himself too. Sadly, her hunch was right. On 14 March, most probably before Betty’s letter posted four days earlier from Melbourne, had yet reached him, George replied to Herb with apologies for its delay,

If even people here at Cornell, who are fond of you and predisposed to be sympathetic towards your views conclude on reading the piece that you are, in fact, evidencing a considerable callousness with regard to the killings, I am afraid others who do not know you might well all more readily come to the same conclusion.²²

However, knowing Herb as well as he did, George was careful to explain that he also understood Herb’s intent and the parameters within which he was grappling to work. Drawing on his own experience he wrote,

²⁰ Ibid., 310.

²¹ R.C. Cotton, Liberal Senator for NSW, Australian Parliamentary Delegation to Southeast Asia, 1966; ‘7 weeks in SEA’, *Australian Outlook*, Vol 21, no 1, April 1967, 94.

²² George Kahin letter to Herb Feith, 14 March 1966, Monash University Records and Archives, MON 78 1991/09, Folder 198.

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It seems to me, then, that you have encountered the difficulty besetting so many of us of trying to reason concurrently with an untutored mass audience and with the politically-informed and humanitarianly-sensitive element which constitutes, unfortunately, so small a part of public opinion. I certainly have found it difficult, if not impossible, to do this with respect to American involvement in Vietnam, and I would imagine it would be quite as difficult to achieve this object with regard to Indonesia in the Australian milieu.

George Kahin's reference to the war in Vietnam and the fine balance that he as an intellectual in America opposing the war, recently found himself treading, is critical background to his own misgivings and those of Ben and Ruth about Herb's attempt at 'balanced' analysis of the current crisis in Indonesia. Herb's essay came in the midst of debate and disquiet about Vietnam raging within and across America's intellectual and government classes but not yet present in Australia. As Noam Chomsky put it in an article a year later in the *New York Review of Books*, in which he launched criticisms at American intellectuals whom he called 'academic apologists' peddling untruths about the war in Vietnam, "It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies. This, at least, may seem enough of a truism to pass over without comment. Not so, however. For the modern intellectual, it is not at all obvious."²³

The responses of his close friends and most respected colleagues to what he saw as an attempt to engage with deep questions of his own about balancing the analytical with the moral roles as academics, led Herb to a personal and professional crisis of confidence. For some weeks he wrestled with his reply to Ben and Ruth, initially admitting it was "a sock in the jaw that you and Ruth gave me, Ben, but it was probably a very good thing."²⁴

²³ Noam Chomsky, 'The Responsibility of Intellectuals', *The New York Review of Books*, February 23, 1967.

²⁴ Herb Feith letter to Ben Anderson and George Kahin, 29 March 1966, Monash University Records and Archives, MON 78 1991/09, Folder 198.

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In his eventual full reply to his Cornell friends, Herb accepted responsibility for the *Nation* article and its mistakes, but he also shed light on his own struggles about how to pursue his scholarly and activist roles. He confessed to what he called ‘visa cowardice’, that is the need “to protect my entrée and that of my students”.²⁵ But his reply to Ruth and Ben also contained several pages of detailed notes and technical comments on the Preliminary Report. For Ben, Herb’s generous and engaged reply was a relief. He had regretted his earlier letter to him as soon as it was sent, and told him so in his reply, “I have been feeling terribly frustrated...feeling quite helpless about doing anything, and the result of this is that most of my sense of frustration was deflected quite thoughtlessly onto you”.²⁶

Herb Feith’s distressing engagement with his Cornell friends and colleagues over the Preliminary Report illustrates an enduring challenge for scholars in the exercise of professional values. This challenge is that of contributing effectively to broader public debate when the terms of that debate are far removed from the scholar’s own position. In order to engage with an Australian public that accepted the slaughter of communists as a desirable outcome, Herb felt he had to write an article that took that position seriously. By respecting and engaging with views with which he disagreed, Herb aimed to move his readers away from those views. In taking seriously the public view, however, he deeply offended committed friends and colleagues, who saw his article as a bewildering capitulation to brutality. Herb Feith resolved the challenge on this occasion by recanting and by accepting the insistence of his friends on interpretative purity, but the event seems to have been a catalyst that pushed his academic career in the other direction. Although he continued to conduct scholarly research, he did so on a reduced scale and he gave his heart instead to activism and to changing the world.

²⁵ Herb Feith letter to Ben Anderson and Ruth McVey, 12 March 1966. Monash University Records and Archives, MON 78 1991/09, Folder 181. [The letter, though dated 12.3.66 was not finished and posted until mid April.]

²⁶ Ben Anderson letter to Herb Feith, 1 May 1966, Monash University Records and Archives, MON 78 1991/09, Folder 181.