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Remembering Malcolm Caldwell (1931-78)

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The *Journal of Contemporary Asia* commemorates the 30th anniversary of the death of its founding editor Malcolm Caldwell by publishing his fine article, “South East Asia from Depression to Re-occupation, 1925-45,” originally published in the *Sri Lanka Journal of Humanities* (2, 2, 1976, pp. 153-69). It was written not so long before his assassination in Cambodia. Even at this late date, the article of 1976 itself needs no introduction. But it serves to raise matters that create a better understanding of its author.

At the time of his death and since, most tributes to and appreciation of Malcolm’s life and writing have concerned the here and now, the contemporary, his political life. After all, he took his position of Chairperson of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (1968-70) very seriously. He was permanently involved with contemporary events. But there was something deeper than that. In the first issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Asia* in 1970, Malcolm observed the Third World response to imperialism and concluded:

At least we may be sure that the peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America themselves alone can transform their own lives. Since the vast majority of these people are peasants, the future must be in their hands, whether it accords with one’s preconceived theories or not.

Malcolm was fascinated by the possibilities opened up by the Western “discovery” of the Third World around that time. At least for Asia this meant focusing theoretical and political attention on the revolutionary potential of the peasantry. He was really impressed by Mao Zedong’s analysis of the Chinese peasantry and his mobilisation of them, despite the contrary advice of Stalin and the Comintern. And he much appreciated the anti-authoritarian parts of Mao’s thinking. Indeed, he more than once described himself as an “Anarcho-Maoist.” The term had a meaning at the time just as my own self-description as a “Marxist-Maoist” was easily comprehensible. They would require pages of explanation now.

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We can see why a man with such views would co-found the *Journal of Contemporary Asia* at the peak of the Vietnam War, but why would he then have published articles in the journal about Rg Veda India 4000 years ago or on ninth century Java and their like? For Malcolm, so deeply concerned with the present, he considered that he could only comprehend it by understanding how it came into being. Malcolm was no antiquarian. He was a scholar of Southeast Asian economic history. And what he meant by scholar may be gauged, for example, from his excellent article "Orientalism in Perspective," in the *The Bulletin of the British Association of Orientalists* (new series, 9, 1977, pp. 30-8).

Malcolm was a scholar-activist. His political activism is known well enough but his scholarly activities remain more in obscurity. First, he was famous as a teacher of the economic history of Southeast Asia. Students from all around the world flocked to his classes despite the obstacles put in their way by the SOAS administration. Those students were dead right, for nowhere else would one find such lively well-informed, committed and scholarly views expressed by students and teacher. The letters SOAS stand for the School of Oriental and African Studies, at the time ridiculed pretty accurately by Malcolm as the School of Otiose and Arcane Studies.

But what of his scholarly writings on economic history? One problem is where to find them for, in his generosity, as well as his realism, Malcolm would write in some pretty obscure places, like the *History Journal of the University of Malaya* or the *Bulletin* of the now-defunct British Association of Orientalists or for the small Alternative Publishing Co-operative in Australia or in the early issues of the *Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities*. In a way this was in keeping with his ability to find and read other excellent, if somewhat obscure, publications, as the references in this article show. Readers might take note of those.

Like all of Malcolm's writings, the piece reproduced in this issue is a lucidly written piece. It shows the merging of his scholarly economic history with the equally scholarly committed dealing with geo-politics. This article was written just at the end of the Vietnam War. It explains graphically how post-World War II and post-colonial Southeast Asia was born in a complex struggle between imperialism and liberation forces. It begins with the economic boom in 1925 and continues through the Great Depression and its impact on the region. It was a complex struggle because of the shifting alliances and divisions amongst the forces involved. This article is a wonderfully compressed analysis that stunningly encapsulates an era in a nut shell.

In it, he pithily contrasts, "The Neanderthal colonialists Holland and France, whose primitive reaction to any stirrings among the 'natives' was to reach for the club and the whip..." with the "Anglo-Saxons whose tactical and strategic responses were more subtle...". Some eyebrows might be raised at his compression of thought, for example,

In rapid succession the [American] CFR [Council on Foreign Relations] came up with blue-prints – latterly adapted with little modification (and none of substance) by the allies – for the IMF, the World Bank, the United Nations, and the like institutions necessary for implementation of the grand design.

But, I believe if the British delegate to those formative financial meetings that still dominate global events, John Maynard Keynes, was alive today he would ruefully agree, at least over the disappearance of his plans for financial institutions in the post-war world. Contradictions show in the changing relationship between Britain and the USA. In the inter-war period, the previous number one, Britain, held the USA to ransom by its control of Southeast Asia's rubber and tin. But the up and coming imperial rival had its control of petroleum technology to play and began to rule the roost from World War II onwards. Japan appears in various roles. In those days China counted not at all until after the victory of the communists and then the fat was in the fire. And dealing with contradictions, we have to say that amongst the forces of liberation were numbered many who did not require very much in the way of liberty. So many former exponents of nationalism became mere members of a national bourgeoisie. And some gleefully adopted the former colonialists' repressive measures of imprisonment without trial to deal with left and liberal opponents. They still do so, at least in Indonesia and Malaysia.

The article deals with Southeast Asia in a time of struggle when it seemed that real victory (or some kind of victory) was still possible. And for many of those on Malcolm's side many, including myself, would say that that struggle has been lost. Does that mean the whole period has to be lost too? Most history deals with "successful" movements or institutions. Indeed, much of history is written by the victors. We do not have to accept that movements unsuccessful in their day have to be dropped into the dustbin of history. That is a point that Malcolm would probably have agreed with if he was still with us.

Malcolm was an iconoclast. Although, like myself, a Scotsman, Malcolm rather surprisingly loved cricket. He liked Guinness as well and was an indefatigable supporter of real ale. His interest in beer was not just in the taste but also in the sociability and other conveniences of the English pub that was. The best place to find him of an evening was in the Sultan of Lewisham where long discussions held in a congenial and co-operative atmosphere on the topics mentioned above would ensue. Many a *Journal of Contemporary Asia* article was hammered out there. Again, like myself, a Scottish nationalist (with small "n"), he was an advocate of many other national struggles. He also brought to bear some of the still not too widely understood thoughts of the erroneously supposed inventor of capitalism another Scot, Adam Smith. That was a characteristic he shared with Karl Marx.

Indeed, he is often described as a Marxist. That arbiter of contemporary knowledge, Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malcolm_Caldwell), unequivocally states that Malcolm "was a British academic and a prolific Marxist writer." Well, was he?

In terms of scholarship the question is irrelevant. What matters is whether the work in question is an accurate and constructive piece of analysis. In those terms his reputation is important. He had that wonderful and rare characteristic of being able to listen to other people and, if he found their views valuable no matter how they conflicted with his own earlier opinions, he would make use of them in his own work and activism. He knew how to change his mind. And this may help explain his association with Marxism. He found space for some Marxist ideas. He was sympathetic to Marxist scholarship because of its critical nature and because of its high political aspirations. He approved of much Marxist activism and we have

already mentioned his attraction for radical Third Worldism and Maoism. And he counted so many friends who were and most still are Marxist. Reading this article, as a Marxist I can agree with almost everything he says, whilst I also see very little specifically Marxist in his analysis (and this goes for practically all Malcolm's writings).

Why is it that when a great piece of left-wing analysis comes along it has to be hailed as Marxist? Maybe this urge echoes some secret fear in the minds of the establishment that somehow or other the Marxists have got it right after all! But it is, after all, possible to be a good, critical left-wing scholar without necessarily being Marxist. Surely it does no harm at all either to the reputation of Marxism or to that of Malcolm himself to say he was not a Marxist. His articles in the *Journal of Contemporary Asia* additionally stand witness to that.

The article published here is typical Malcolm Caldwell in being pretty well compatible with Marxist thinking of his day (and how much of that was there at that time on Southeast Asia?) but the analysis is his own. It is good, open, critical, left-wing thinking. And, it goes without saying, scholarly. It also encompasses a vital concept developed by his old Filipino buddy and great historian Renato Constantino: that true history has to be fought for, recovered and only then will it become the "Usable Past."

To sum up, Malcolm was an iconoclast, a nationalist – whilst remaining a true internationalist. A great scholar, a real fighter and a warm personality, he was a man for all seasons.