

Harry J. Benda

HARRY BENDA'S association with Asian studies stemmed from bitter accident, for he had been of a Prague Jewish family; when Hitler took over Czechoslovakia, his father arranged for Harry's exodus by getting him a job in a Dutch trading firm in the East Indies. A brother was the only other member of the family to escape death under Nazi rule. In Java, Benda settled down to learn the life of a European merchant, but he had too lively a mind to be content with latter-day colonial society. He saw the remnants of a great indigenous tradition around him, and the stirrings of a new life; he began to meet scholars who were interested in Indonesian culture and from them developed a broad intellectual interest in the people of Java. Many of these intellectuals vanished into concentration camps with the coming of the Japanese; and in 1943 Benda joined them, when the Japanese decided to intern Jews. For many of those intellectuals who survived the camps, the experience was a time of learning and reorientation; so also for Benda, whose interest in Indonesian society deepened into the determination to pursue its study as a career.

After liberation from the Japanese Benda was sent, with other refugees, to New Zealand, where he taught and worked for his undergraduate and master's degrees. He then came to the United States, taking a doctorate in the Southeast Asia program at Cornell. Although his degree was in politics, his first teaching appointment, at the University of Rochester, was in history; and as his temper was basically a historian's, his teaching and writing were to remain largely in that field. He came to the history department of Yale University in 1959, and, with Karl Pelzer, engaged in the difficult task of reconstructing a Southeast Asia program that had languished since the untimely deaths of Raymond Kennedy and John Embree. Administrative duties took much of his time; but he loved them as well as teaching and writing, and often toyed with the idea of devoting himself to the guidance of an experimental college or some other project in which he might see his general ideas on education realized.

With his many interests and talents, Harry Benda was not a man to settle down. Partly, his intellectual restlessness stemmed from a feeling that he could not ever belong in any one place, that he was a permanent exile. He was very conscious of his refugee past, of his loss of family, and of the uncertainty of all human arrangements. The cultures of his European past and his American present both attracted and repelled him; Indonesia did so as well, for though he made its history the center of his studies, it was many years before he, with much hesitation, could bring himself to visit it again.

For some people, such ambivalence would have led to intellectual confusion; for Benda, however, the tension was a source of clarity and strength. He sought the banishment of illusions; the result was a view of the world that was tragic and humane, and very much of a piece. It was reflected in his numerous writings on Southeast Asian social history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in which he concerned himself particularly with the political utilization of religion, with peasant movements, and with the sources of popular rebellions. Benda did not hesitate to express unorthodox opinions on such contemporary subjects as the Vietnam War and the nature of

Southeast Asian Communism, and this at a date when few others questioned the official assumptions. Particularly because his views were well founded intellectually and presented as part of a coherent historical interpretation, he found an attentive audience even among those initially unsympathetic to his stand.

Harry Benda was not a man who tolerated fools easily, and an indifferent student was likely to get short shrift from him. But he had a warm heart as well as a sharp tongue, and he had a sense of humor and laughed especially at himself. Above all, he was a good teacher: he lectured with great verve, and could communicate to his listeners his fascination with the working out of a historical problem. His incisiveness and dislike of cant, and his insistence that the historian's task was to consider not minor detail but issues that really mattered to the life of the time, were important sources of guidance and self-discipline to those who worked with him.

In some of Benda's minor writings he spread himself thinly, sketching ideas he had still only partially worked out. He had an urgent sense of the need to say things, however incompletely, that were important but that he might not be able to treat later. He was impressed with the fact that he had started his academic career relatively late in life, that he had a great deal to catch up with and much that he wanted to say. He was not given much time. On October 26, 1971, when he died of a heart attack, he was just short of fifty-two years old. He left a great deal uncompleted, including a major work on the Java War; but at least we have the many important studies which he did produce, and the memory of a warm and lively person.

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