Culture Mandala: The Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies

The Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies

Volume 3 | Issue 1 Article 7

November 1998

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Recommended Citation

Grey, Maggie (1998) "Activism, academics and public awareness: a report on the Asia-Pacific Solidarity Conference April 10-13,1998," *Culture Mandala: The Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 7. Available at: http://epublications.bond.edu.au/cm/vol3/iss1/7

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Activism, academics and public awareness: a report on the Asia-Pacific Solidarity Conference April 10-13,1998

Abstract

Extract:

In all, fourteen plenary sessions which in most cases were reports on the progress of democratisation and human rights issues from the many geographic regions represented. Included in these sessions were representatives from Tahiti, New Caledonia, Fiji, Bougainville, the Philippines, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Japan, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand, Korea, Cambodia, Myanmar, Turkey and Nepal.

Keywords

democratisation, human rights, political activism

CONFERENCE REPORT:

Activism, Academics and Public Awareness: A Report on the Asia-Pacific Solidarity Conference April 10-13, 1998

Glebe High School, Sydney
Organised by the Asia Pacific Institute for Democratisation and Development
and the Democratic Socialist Party

by Maggie Grey

The weather exhibited little empathy with the interests of Asia-Pacific: for the first two days Sydney bucketed rain, until even attending the humble school in working class Glebe, seemed to me, after the perpetual ritz of the Gold Coast, a mark of significant solidarity. During breaks in proceedings, one had the choice of remaining on one's tin fold-up chair in the School Assembly Hall-cum-Gymnasium or venturing into three feet of drip-free shelter which surrounded the building; the toilets appeared to be in solidarity with the welfare concerns of the conference.

Everything was wet, wet, except that is, the spirit of the participants. This was a fiery but friendly meet, a celebration of intercultural and international solidarity and the rain was but a curtain behind which communities of Asia and the Pacific exhilarated in achievement and gained heart for further struggle. Students selling political badges of incendiary variety, T-shirts emblazoned with the venerable Marx and the handsome Che and books proclaiming every dissident argument of the last two millennia added to the dynamism. At the end of each day there was a meal and films or a concert of regional folk, protest songs, and dancing.

The key address was from East Timorese Activist and Noble Laureate, Jose Ramos Horta; his message: the need to recognise the commonality of all 'human' causes and human rights issues.

There were in all fourteen plenary sessions, which in most cases were reports on the progress of democratisation and human rights issues from the many geographic regions represented. Included in these sessions were representatives from Tahiti, New Caledonia, Fiji, Bougainville, the Philippines, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Japan, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand, Korea, Cambodia, Myanmar, Turkey and Nepal. That almost all reports were depressing was not entirely surprising; that many were spoken in

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incomprehensible accents, helped relieve the seriousness; that vaguely socialist and politely revolutionary conclusions were drawn from the reports seemed reasonable; and being among such a large group energised to do something about it, was refreshing.

A major focus of the Conference in both plenaries and workshops was the "bloody Suharto dictatorship". These plenaries, chaired largely by Indonesians in exile or otherwise liberated (at least one of the keynote Indonesian speakers, Robby Hartono, was unable to attend due to detention in prison shortly beforehand), detailed from many perspectives, why the dictatorship should be brought down. The workshops devised local means of realising that process.

Fifty workshops completed the conference: at least half of these were lessons in or invitations to, political activism. One that I attended focussed on a boycott and campaign against shoe giant *Nike*, whose Indonesian sweatshops are notorious for their slave wages (Michael Jordan, US Basketball star and *Nike* icon earns far more for his endorsement of the shoes than does the entire Indonesian staff in one year). In another workshop, the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) was analysed from the perspective of indigenous peoples and developing economies and appropriate forms of protest discussed. As mentioned, at least two workshops were designed to allow students and activists from East Timor and Indonesia to organise supporters for solidarity campaigns. Other workshops concerned with raising awareness of specific human rights issues were held by Sri Lankan Tamils (who were not members of the LTTE), Bougainville's Interim Government representative, and Burmese supporters of Aung San Suu Kyi.

Despite the unique opportunity available to the Australian media to interview so many national representatives of distinction from within our region and the undoubted newsworthiness of the call for a new Indonesian regime, the media apparently found the conference to be of neither intellectual nor commercial interest and failed to patronise it. The organisers however had expected little else: one interesting item of conference gossip was that in the months preceding the conference, the elite of Australia's newspapers had attended black-tie dinners hosted by the Indonesian state. These dinners had found coverage in two Indonesian papers but none in the Australian press.

Nor was the media the only absent player. Though advertised widely (both in Australia and abroad), the conference seemed to have attracted few academics (in fact I had the impression, but no statistical data to prove it, that I was the only one). The fact that I came to a socialist conference from Australia's first and largest private university may signify something about stereotypes or simply be an indication of the bilateral elitism which seems to separate communities of activists and academics. The absence of cap and gown however did not mean a void of analysis. Rather it was rewarding (from the point of view of a teacher rather than a scholar) to see how many representatives had used the theoretical components of an earlier university education to skill them for political activism or welfare work. Committed to development throughout the Asia-Pacific, participants were articulate and well informed, and only occasionally sank their feet into the wet concrete of socialist jargon.

Chomsky claims that in developed societies, the *political class* (that complex class which at one end of its Bell curve, comprehends power, and at the other, controls it) comprises roughly 20% of the population. Besides corporate and government interests, the class is largely composed of academics, activists and welfare workers, and, depending on particular issues, members of specific nationalities and ethnic groups. In Australia, the recent emergence of the One Nation Party, is a perfect example of the political incomprehension of communities beyond the perimeters of this *political class*. Yet globalisation processes are daily producing an increasingly complex environment which needs to be comprehended by far more than 20% of any population, if societies are to function meaningfully in a global context. If tertiary education for all is not yet a universal human right, citizens of all societies nevertheless require a much greater awareness of domestic, regional and international issues and of their local cultural implications. If adequate consciousness can not be raised by the traditional educational methods, then other cultural techniques are necessary. Greater cultural integration within the region may be one answer; new media stars and genres another.

Those who attended the Asia-Pacific Solidarity Conference were well versed, by virtue of experience and learning, in foreign policy issues, yet they received no media time and an academic snub. This vacuum of communication, common to all states in the region and embarrassingly present in Glebe, needs to be resolved. While mass media are always constrained by state and corporate interests, these two communities, activist and academic, should together be able to forge a healthy new genre of public awareness campaigns and media programming which avoids the *diplomatic* obfuscations (or censorship) of much contemporary 'current affairs' and which stimulates productive social responses in empowered citizens.

Perhaps it is only a question of style (or lack of it) which needs resolution: the academic's word-pinching reluctance to commitment needs to be joined with the activist's reckless willingness to reduce issues to simplicity. A new aesthetic is also needed for such projects, one which embodies knowledge and commitment to practical reform, with artistic sensibilities and which places foreign issues squarely in a local context. Within the Asia-Pacific region, Australia prides itself on its relative freedoms of expression, yet this conference revealed major weaknesses in the communication channels by which we comprehend our region. In particular, public communications served to shield abusers of human rights and to conceal the victims.

A new nexus between political activists and academics should seek a major place within the public media and exercise its intelligence therein on a regular and prominent basis. Humanists of the political class should not tolerate marginalisation within the exercise of political authority. It is necessary that we extend our moral and intellectual authority on behalf of others.

Or so I understood the lesson of the Asia-Pacific Solidarity Conference to be.