

The Third World's 'Newthink'

a famous French author abhors Indonesia's "system of myths". Their kind that may, in his view, hoax half of mankind

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THE WESTERN HABIT of applying to the countries of the Third World a blueprint for development based on its own highly technical and politically sophisticated society leads us to an odd conclusion. The West is naive enough to believe that in conjuring up terms such as literacy, socialism, land reform, industrialisation or development aid it is invoking rational processes whose broad lines, under the watchful eyes of the planners, are much the same everywhere.

The illusion that we understand the historical laws of our age facilitates and even enlivens the reading of newspapers and periodicals whose task it is to stir up in us, as intelligent world-citizens, both a feeling of euphoria and an anxiety complex. The kind of higher "newthink" thus inculcated staves off the dizziness one might otherwise feel at the sight of large human masses impotently struggling against the effects of a mental shock that is ill-concealed by fragmentary technical installations. It would be horrible to think that half of mankind may perhaps be the victims of a gigantic hoax, not to say a monstrous swindle.

Without going as far as that, how can one fail to wonder what is the condition of thinking men, and what they are thinking about, in more than half the world's area, where modern techniques are sweeping the board, reducing whole cultures to the vestigial state and failing to replace them by anything coherent, save only arbitrary constraints?

ONCE AGAIN I THOUGHT of these things as I read a letter from a young teacher, in Indonesia, that country which is not a country and which Herbert Lüthy recently described in *Encounter* (December 1965) as having "the prodigious panoply of a modern State superimposed on a country regressing towards a subsistence economy."

This "superimposition" reflects the presence of an overstuffed bureaucracy, mainly Javanese, whose orders are to unify some three thousand islands and two hundred languages by the sheer force of

syncretic catchwords, a hotch-potch of all ideologies. Compulsory schooling, at once efficient and restricted, universally distributes this glossary of key-terms in a "national tongue" that is itself synthetic and in perpetual gestation, "enriched" in ten years by hundreds and thousands of new expressions borrowed from almost all the languages of the world or tirelessly invented by Dr. Sukarno. Literacy advances while the "national" culture wilts, the classical heritage having been lost together with the languages on which it was based.

On the other hand, magic terms coined from combined abbreviations are eroding men's brains to the point of obsession. Constantly repeated and added to in the official claptrap of speeches, the radio, the press and the schools, they are the subject of the everlasting glosses which, in this unhappy country, constitute the essence of "thought." As a few examples among thousands, we may quote the Manichaeic terms *Nefo* (New Emerging Forces), *Oldefo* (Old Established Forces), *Nasakom* (Nationalism — Religion — Communism), *Nekolim* (Neo-colonialism - imperialism), *Manipol* (Political manifesto), *antek-antek* (Imperialist lackey). All these are highly charged emotionally, and their effect is that of a continual brain-washing which bears the (equally magic) name of *operasi efisieni*, an eloquent euphemism translatable as "Operation Mental Readjustment."

IN SUCH A CLIMATE, what can be done by a young teacher in one of the sixty unequipped and bookless universities which mass-produce "intellectuals" only barely capable of reading the official propaganda? The living conditions offered him, writes my correspondent, are "unbelievably hopeless." His university teacher's salary allows him to subsist for about ten days a month; the cost of specialist books, almost all foreign, is quite beyond his reach. He mentions an English work which he uses as a textbook for his students, and which costs eleven thousand rupiahs, whereas a professor's pay varies between twenty and fifty thousand.

As for books published in Indonesia, they are mainly law manuals or works of "indoctrination." Translated textbooks are unreadable because of the poor quality of

the translators, who are underpaid for their work. The paper shortage, printing delays (manuscripts may stay with a publisher for years), the machinations of the censors, who may have to be bought several times over, as much for permission to obtain a paper allocation as to avoid the accusation of showing "imperialist and bourgeois tendencies," all combine to make publishing a hazardous undertaking.

"Unless drastic measures are taken soon, the rising generation will be driven into an intellectual life that is barbarian, if indeed the words 'intellectual life' still have any meaning in such conditions." This prospect, says my young Indonesian teacher, can be offset by the fact that clandestine intellectual activity takes place in open-air discussion groups whose tactics are to criticise the official line by adopting, as far as possible, the jargon used in official reasoning itself. Unfortunately these concepts and thought-patterns leave little room for manoeuvre, especially as the young intellectuals who take part in such study-groups are themselves in the grip of uncouth reasoning processes dominated by immediate necessities and passionate prejudices and reflected in the confused terminology employed.

The most striking feature of my correspondent's letter is the impression he gives of an Indonesia imprisoned in a system of myths where the best minds seek, and seek in vain, the foundations of a reasonable political life and a national identity hitherto totally lacking. From within this mythology the rest of the world appears disfigured and distorted in a manner wholly at variance with the real image.

INDONESIAN THOUGHT IS FOLDED BACK upon itself, desperately striving to prove its own values, but without criteria, without traditions, with no hold on reality. There is no common measure between it and the Western spirit, whose extreme complexity and richness of substance are still intact (though I use the word "still" with some reservations). It is understandable that Manichaeic zeal should rage in such an atmosphere. Communist and anti-communist fanatics, equally redoubtable and equally stupefying, give vent to their feelings in a spate of crazy words that have no connexion, not only with ideological Marxism, but even with any sort of "national" policy.

For my part, I shall begin to believe in progress only when nations, old and young, have learnt the bitter lessons of the present chaos and there is a new diversity of worlds and intelligences. Yet I cannot but feel drawn to those minds, so near and at the same time so far away, who are engulfed, perhaps even sacrificed, in the anonymous immensity of numbers, and who, armed with concepts borrowed from the West, struggle desperately on, hoping that the dawning light of reason will allow them to find their bearings in the dark seas through which they thrash.