

The Lessons of the Bandung Conference

Reviewing Richard Wright's *The Color Curtain* 40 Years Later

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1995

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The despised, the insulted, the hurt, the dispossessed—in short, the underdogs of the human race were meeting. Here were class and racial and religious consciousness on a global scale. Who had thought of organizing such a meeting? And what had these nations in common? Nothing, it seemed to me, but what their past relationship to the Western world had made them feel. This meeting of the rejected was in itself a kind of judgment upon the Western world!

—Richard Wright

Richard Wright's *The Color Curtain* [University Press of Mississippi, 1994], originally published in 1956, chronicles the Bandung Conference of April 18–25, 1955. The gathering of leaders of 29 African and Asian nations considered how they could help one another in achieving social and economic well-being for their large and impoverished populations. Their agenda addressed race, religion, colonialism, national sovereignty, and the promotion of world peace. Despite the pragmatic premise for such a meeting, it would take on monumental importance for the shaping of future Cold War and identity politics, bearing important lessons for political struggle today.

Bandung was sponsored by the Asian nationalist leadership of Indonesia, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Burma (now Myanmar), and the Philippines. The foremost figure of these nations was Ahmed Sukarno, president of Indonesia, who from Wright's description clearly ruled over a police state, however strident his anti-imperialist rhetoric. The prominent personalities were Jawaharlal Nehru, prime minister of India, Kwame Nkrumah, prime minister of the Gold Coast (later Ghana), Gamal Abdel Nasser, president of Egypt, Chou En Lai, premier of China, Ho Chi Minh, prime minister of Vietnam, and Congressman Adam Clayton Powell of Harlem, USA. Lesser-known representatives of Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon, Syria, Japan, the Philippines and others would make interesting contributions.

The strategy of militant Afro-Asian states was to strengthen their independence from Western imperialism while keeping the Soviet bloc at a comfortable distance. This strategic bloc, which was supposed to be independent from the superpowers, was the beginning of what came to be known as the “non-aligned” movement and the “Third World.”

Non-Alignment and Communism

Richard Wright recognized the dynamic, yet-undefined relationship between the concept of non-alignment and the specter of communism through the relationship of Jawaharlal Nehru of India and China's Chou En Lai.

Nehru, a pivotal presence at the conference because of his credibility as spokesperson for neutrality for Asian and African nations in the Cold War, was deeply influenced in his political thinking by his participation in earlier international conferences. He attended the Congress of Oppressed Nationalities in Brussels, Belgium in Feb. 1927, undoubtedly a major pre-cursor to Bandung. As a representative of the Indian National Congress he met envoys of colonial peoples and their European and Latin American supporters—radical nationalists along with socialists and communists. In 1947 he hosted the first Asian Relations Conference, which an impressive gathering of scores of Asian nations attended. He stressed in his inaugural speech Asia's “special responsibility” to Africa.

Wright found Nehru to be “logical, quick, observant, and knowing.” Yet Wright thought Nehru, who shared with him an attraction to communism and a disdain for its concept of absolute truth, was being used by “coy” Chou En Lai.

The Chinese leader approached the conference participants with “utmost friendliness and reserve,...turning the other cheek when receiving ideological slaps.” Wright was surprised, but thought “clever” Chou En Lai’s effective moves at the conference. His speech stressed Asian-African unity instead of attacking the West or pushing communist ideology on newly “free” nations. Nehru ran interference for the more critical questions put to the Chinese leader. “Pan-Asianism” was legitimated and empowered by the weight of communist China. Chou En Lai’s seemingly weak, but tactical stance at the conference only ensured a de facto bloc against the West. In the late 1950s it provided China with the wedge it needed for the Sino-Soviet split. China’s relationship began to decline with India in 1959 over the question of Tibet, and was finally destroyed in the border clashes of 1962.

Cuba, which became “independent” in 1959 under the leadership of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, aligned itself with the Soviet Union despite similar sovereignty tensions (epitomized by the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1961), and in the spirit of Bandung forged the Havana Tricontinental Congress (1965), of course excluding China.

“Pan-Islam”

The author of *The Color Curtain* did not let religious ideological forces at the conference escape his notice. Dr. Mohammed Natsir, former prime minister of Indonesia and at the time head of Indonesia’s largest political party, Masjumi, was a leading proponent of a theocratic Muslim state and what he called “Pan-Islam.” His conception of “Pan-Islam” was that it would make communism obsolete because it would be “socialist in nature.” While it would be internationalist, “Pan-Islam” would be non-aligned and neither communist nor capitalist. He also predicted that the West would collaborate with what the media now calls Muslim “fundamentalists” as a lesser evil against communism.

“Pan-Arabism”

Gamal Abdel Nasser was a prominent figure at Bandung because he was laying the foundations for both Pan-Arabism and Pan-Africanism, which he would be synonymous with in years to come. He denounced the United Nations and the West for complicity in the displacement of the Palestinians from their homeland. Lebanon, another stronghold of refugees from “Israel,” would add its voice. Nasser was a dynamic secular figure who challenged the West by “nationalizing” the Suez Canal (1956) and uniting for a short time Egypt with Syria (the UAR, United Arab Republic) through Michael Aflaq’s Arab Ba’ath Socialist Party.

Algeria, as well as Tunisia and Morocco, denounced French colonialism at the conference. Nasser’s Egypt, which had to liberate itself from both British and French influence, supported their resolution. Algeria, which became officially independent in 1962, was led by Ahmed Ben Bella. Along with Nasser, he consciously linked the destiny of the predominantly Arab north with Africa south of the Sahara through Pan-Africanism. Yet even for their bourgeois statist ambitions, Ben Bella and Nasser had petty scraps with Kwame Nkrumah. When Patrice Lumumba’s Congo

came under neo-colonialist attack five years after, no one, save Nkrumah, would jeopardize their sovereignty to intervene. Nkrumah's advice was poor. All but Nasser would be overthrown by 1966.

“Pan-Africanism”

Kwame Nkrumah, whose emerging Ghanaian revolution (1957) was chronicled by Richard Wright in another travelogue, *Black Power* (1954), does not have a visible voice in *The Color Curtain*. Wright shows disappointment with the “weakness” of “Negro Africa” at the conference even in terms of awareness.

Pan-Africanism, an ideology associated with Nkrumah, clearly informed how African-American identity was shaped at Bandung. The very concept of the term “people of color” and Africans in America not being a “minority” may have been born at Bandung. This significance was recognized in the speeches of Malcolm X.

Lessons of Bandung?

From “People of Color” to the “Third World,” Bandung clearly helped to forge the modern identity politics of race, religion and nationality. Historically, hope for and fear of world revolution has followed what seemed to be unprecedented emerging dignity expressed by statesmen that wielded “Pan-” ideologies which, to the ear, transcend nationalism and pointed to internationalism. What may be left from Bandung is an earlier and equally ill-defined Islamic Fundamentalism.

The legacy of these “great” leaders and their regimes represented at Bandung is a sad one. The personalities that were worshipped (Nehru, Nkrumah, Nasser, Chou En Lai, Ho Chi Minh), however great their oratory, were in practice authoritarian, undemocratic, sexist, and despite major theses to the contrary, complicit with furthering neo-colonialism and/or establishing state capitalism.

Non-alignment was clearly a tactic, not a philosophy. Skillful Cold War diplomacy gained some leverage for state sovereignty, but what of the people? In today's one-superpower world no maneuvers are comparably impressive. In a manner similar to much-criticized communist and so-called non-aligned regimes, many nationalists rally the people for “independence” only to seize power in their name and suppress their aspirations for true freedom.

A fundamental aspect of class struggle is to uphold oppressed nationalities' rights of self-determination. This usually entails all struggles against racism. However, it should matter what form the struggle takes. Are we capable of critical support? If our solidarity is not wanted are we capable of withstanding being race-baited, called Uncle Toms, counter-revolutionaries, class-collaborationists? Should we give our support to everyone who raises a flag and fashions a revolutionary song?

Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral, two of the very few principled Pan-African figures (most of whom died young and never wielded state power at all or very long, other good examples are Malcolm X and Patrice Lumumba), were critical of the “national bourgeoisie” and called for them to commit “class suicide” to help fulfill the promise of a national liberation struggle.

We must have the courage to take nationalists to task. We must not allow bourgeois nationalist “people of color” to define the national liberation struggle as authoritarian, undemocratic, statist, homophobic, sexist, or “scientifically” racist. We must ignore hypocritical “Sounds of Blackness” and march to the beat of our own drum.

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Retrieved on June 13, 2016 from web.archive.org
Published in the Mar/Apr 1995 issue of the L&R Newspaper.

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