Max Lane on Indonesia: A review

written by Dan La Botz | June 11, 2010

Max Lane. *Unfinished Revolution: Indonesia Before and After Suharto.* New York: Verso, 2008. 312 pages. Notes, index. $29.95

Perhaps no other non-Indonesian knows as much about Indonesia, its culture, and the left as the Australian Max Lane, lecturer on Asian Studies at the University of Sydney. Lane is responsible for the magnificent translation of Pramoedya Ananta Toer's great novel *The Buru Quartet*, as well as being the translator of other works by that author and other writers. In addition, he worked for years with various dramatists and actors in the Indonesian theater, and he is a writer and poet in his own right. He has also been a leading figure in building solidarity with the Indonesian left and popular movements and over the years written innumerable articles about the struggles against the Suharto dictatorship and the tumultuous period which followed it. (See his blog.)

Unfinished Revolution represents Lane's attempt to tell the story of modern Indonesian people's movement, of the left, and of the most important contemporary far-left party, the Partai Rakyat Demokratik (PRD). It also represents an important interpretation of the history of modern Indonesia, a country dominated first by the figure and following of Sukarno, leader of the national revolution against the Dutch, and later dominated by the murderous counter-revolution and dictatorship of Suharto, undertaker of the national revolution. For Lane, the crushing of the Sukarno-led national revolution interrupted the emergence of an Indonesian nation, culture, and a movement toward socialism. The Suharto coup which killed between one and two million people left the revolution therefore unfinished. Lane argues that the common people—*rakyat* in Indonesian—stood at the center of that process and also represents its future.

Lane's book deals with the period between the Suharto coup in 1965 and 2008 when he completed his book, supplemented with some discussion of the Sukarno period which preceded it. He argues that the Indonesian national movement led to a period of intense activism and movement building in the post-independence period of Sukarno and again in the period leading up to the overthrow of Suharto and just after. For Lane, the heart of the Indonesian national revolution has been this experience of activism and its life in the country's popular consciousness and history as well as in its literature, above all in the literature of Toer and of the poet Rendra.

Lane tells how small groups of students helped to detonate broader popular movements of workers, the urban poor, and peasants which within a decade brought about the overthrow of Suharto. The student movement evolved into many NGOs and social movements, a kind of civil society movement which provided a broad base of young activists. The PRD, the leading group on the far left, played a central role in this process through its advocacy of *aksi* [actions]—demonstrations, strikes, and other confrontations with the dictatorship—which created powerful movements. In doing this, they and other parties built on lingering memories in the popular consciousness of the Sukarno nationalist period. The PRD and the student left, however, constructed movement but failed to establish more stable institutions, and most important failed to build a major political party to give expression to that movement.

After Suharto fell, the PRD promoted "peoples committees" among workers, the urban poor and peasants, but these caught on in only a few areas of this immense island nation. Reformist figures, some with ties to the Suharto regime and huge organizational bases—Megawati Sukarnoputri, Abdurrahman Wahid, and Amien Rais—succeeded in out maneuvering the small leftist groups which

had been key to overthrowing Suharto. In the post-Suharto period, actions and movements continued, but they became ever more fragmented.

Faced with these problem posed by this failure of the movement, and attempting to salvage it, Lane argues at one point that "*Aksi* [protest action] itself is a form of organization." (p. 209) Or he suggests that the student movement of the 1990s lives on in intellectual criticism. Perhaps. But by the time Lane wrote his book, the student movement had disappeared and other social movements were marginal, without influence on society. The left had failed to build a mass party. Meanwhile the left suffered a crisis of leadership as it confronted the problem of generational change. Lane suggests that the future lies with the memory of Sukarnoism, with the people, and with a revival of activism.

While there is much to be learned about the left in Indonesia between 1990 and 2008 from Lane's book, his interpretation of events seems to me quite problematic and contradictory. While Lane would consider himself a Marxist, his book becomes a defense of the left nationalist populism of Sukarno and his followers and of the revival of that populist current in the 1990s movements and in the PRD. He argues that because the working class is so small and the numbers of rural and urban poor so large, workers' unions will not be the central organizations of labor, while the impoverished masses of the *rakyat* or people constitute the agent for social change. For them protest movements and riots are their natural forms of struggle and also lie at the heart of the popular culture. Yet, he recognizes that such populist movements remain fragmented, and even at their best often become subject to patron-client relationships. He acknowledges that Sukarno in fact created a cult of personality which diminished his role as leader and voice of the mass movement of the people.

I disagree with Max Lane's interpretation, believing that it tends to under estimate the potential of the role of the working class, and particularly the industrial working class in Indonesia and its future. As I argued in my book *Made in Indonesia: Indonesian Workers Since Suharto*. (Boston: South End Press, 2001), which covers much of the same ground as Lane's, workers, unions, and working class politics have a potential to play a leadership role in Indonesia. In my view, Lane's "people," made up as they are of peasants, rural laborers, industrial workers, artisans, self-employed petty merchants and vendors, are too diverse to provide a coherent class base or political program for Indonesian society. In Indonesia and other countries in the developing world such populist masses tend to be dominated by a charismatic leader or sometimes by the state or by a state-party. The alternative is the development of a primarily working class party with clear objectives which can give leadership to the diverse masses of the society. The question, as Lane would agree, I think, is that the unfinished national revolution must be transformed into a socialist revolution. Lane's people's revolution appears to me to put an obstacle in that path, that is in making the step from nationalist to workers' revolution, because it is precisely the people conceived in this populist way who historically form the social basis for nationalist revolutions which then institutionalize into obstacles to socialism.

Setting aside for the moment Lane's interpretation, I regret to say that I feel that he has not succeeded in telling the story in a way that will be accessible to most readers. Though Lane understands the history, culture and politics, perhaps better than any other non-Indonesian, he does not always succeed in weaving the strands together in way that will be understandable to readers who are unfamiliar with that terrain. Beginning as it does in the post-1965 period, Lane's book does not discuss even briefly the history of Dutch and Japanese imperialism which led to the emergence of the modern nationalist movement, while his extended discussion of Sukarno and his role in the nationalist movement comes unfortunately only towards the end of the book.

Lane's interesting early chapter on Toer and Rendra, their role as public intellectuals of the left,

and the relationship between the nationalist movement and culture suggests that these ideas will form a central argument of the book. Yet we lose the thread of that cultural argument in long descriptions of the actions of the contemporary (1990s to 2000s) radical movement, and occasionally narrative gives way to chronology as developments are followed in a level of detail in which the most important events and the author's sense of the significance of these events may be lost. Lane also uses a number of Indonesian words to give us the flavor of the culture, but, as the foreign terms multiply, and as he introduces dozens of NGOs and political party initials, the reader can be overwhelmed by the detail.

Yet, despite those literary issues and my own disagreement with the political interpretation of Indonesian history and politics, Lane's book offers the best narrative we have of the popular movements that overthrew Suharto and the fullest and most coherent description of the role of the PRD. Those who want to know that history will find the book very worthwhile. I remain, despite our differences, a great admirer of Max Lane, both for his wonderful translations and for undertaking to tell his version of this story.