

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Djalan Djeruk 4  
Djakarta, Indonesia  
September 22, 1953

Mr. W. S. Rogers  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
522 Fifth Avenue  
New York City 36

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The other day, I ran across an open letter to foreign social scientists in Indonesia. It was written by a non-Indonesian, but its contents are so much to the point that I am reproducing it here for your information.

"The Ways of the Researchers"

"Almost everywhere I've been lately I've heard of or run into some Britisher, Australian or American who's come to this country to do research into something or other---social science, political science or what have you. Those I've come across are youngish folk, both men and women, with the necessary qualifications---so far as I'm any judge of such things---for studying their respective fields. They're a pleasant crowd, and their talk reminds me of the endless talk of the universities. All of them are intensely interested in this country, its people and what's going on.

"Yet, after so much good to say about them, I have a few qualms about their presence here. My qualms have nothing to do with them as men and women, nor have they anything to do with the work they've come to do nor the value of its outcome. My qualms reside in a kind of by-product of their presence and their purpose for being here that I doubt has occurred to most of them, or at least not until they'd got here, and perhaps not even then.

"I've never discussed this matter with a single Indonesian, and so I don't know what other Indonesians are thinking about it all. On the surface they seem rather amused that so many people should express so active an interest suddenly---but that's only a surface expression and one of these days I really must get around to trying to check up on it. The truth is that although the idea of checking up has occurred to me before, I've hesitated to begin doing it, for I myself feel it's rather a delicate subject. It looks as though Indonesia were being treated like a laboratory guinea pig, being scientifically and ever so objectively prodded by endeavors which may be almost models of methodology. I'm afraid that the guinea pig may one day turn a sour expression upon its investigators.

"Quite recently I read in an article, "When you try to study living man, his pride gets in the way." That was a statement in

favour of studying a number of man's reactions through the chimpanzees, so perhaps I might remind you of your hasty inner defenses when you suddenly find out that the most interesting man you've been telling your life story to at a party is a skilled psychologist---well; my point is that human beings usually don't like to be treated as guinea pigs.

"So far as the research workers themselves go, at this point I could imagine them arguing in self-defense; we do just the same sort of thing at home---you can't do good and useful research unless you're objective. Of course, I've already said that my qualms don't involve the scientists nor the value of the way in which they must work to get the sort of findings or conclusions that they do.

"I'd like in fact to tackle another angle for a minute---but I'll come back to this point later on.

"I said at the beginning of this letter that the research folk I've met here seem quite excited about the Indonesian visit. I'm excited about my visit here to such an extent that I wouldn't swap jobs with anyone---as I've told you before---so that gives me a fellow-feeling with them. And what's more, I'm pretty sure that this feeling of excitement has the same sort of basis as my own---an idea that Indonesia has got a pretty good chance of getting somewhere worthwhile in her attempt to create a new society for her people.

"Perhaps I'm doing these research people an injustice in including them in my next remark, but I'm pretty sure that at least some of them should be included with the learned bodies which are usually responsible---in finance at any rate---for their being here. I think the interest in Indonesia's attempt to create a new society right at this point too often gets converted into a scientific and ever so objective attitude of prodding about with the guinea pig to see what makes it tick.

"I wish very much that this desirable attitude would always appear, without fail, one stage further off. I'd like the learned bodies and the research workers one and all to get to the pitch of excited interest where they'd say first, "I wonder how I can help the guinea pig." To stop being metaphorical for a moment, the fact is I wish research people would first make their suggestions to Indonesia about what they're going to study here...

"Please remember that, as I've said already, this simile of the guinea pig is entirely my own---as I really haven't a clue as to whether any Indonesians do in fact have any sense of being made into guinea pigs, and I have heard remarks that indicate the opposite. Still, it seems to me to be a possibility, and even such a possibility seems to be worth considering.

"After all, the research workers intend that mankind shall ultimately benefit in some way by what they do, at least by means of additional knowledge. So if what they do can also be of immediate practical benefit, then why not? At least it's an idea worth thinking about.

The writer of this open letter has presented an extremely helpful criticism for researchers in general. Is there a social scientist or newspaperman who hasn't discovered, at one time or another, that "man's pride gets in the way?" There is no way of skirting the dilemma involved in collecting and analysing information about living human beings. That very unsatisfactory word, "objectivity," implies an impersonal and somewhat inhuman relationship between the viewer and the viewed. The investigator may be skillful or clumsy, but the fact remains that he will almost certainly arrive at generalizations which abbreviate and distort the reality of the human situation he is observing.

Still, there are perfectly good justifications for the social scientist's work. I think the most pertinent in this case is the fact that, although human beings do not like to be prodded, they do want to be understood. This is especially true in the young Republic of Indonesia, where leaders are so conscious of outside opinion. A corollary to this desire seems to be a great fear of being misunderstood or criticized. I think that this fear is also unusually strong in Indonesia.

The social scientist obviously faces a special problem in Indonesia. He finds that assistance is eagerly given by private citizens and officials in almost any project he undertakes, yet he also meets with suspicion on all sides. If his field of study touches on political life, he may find a great deal of downright hostility. He will certainly be considered a spy by many, but his greatest problem will be the suspicions of people who do not really care whether he is a spy or not. These are the people pictured in the letter above, the sensitive persons who will feel that they are being probed and prodded when the social scientist is only engaging in a sociable conversation. Perhaps this oversensitivity results largely from a lack of self-assurance. At least I have a feeling that those Indonesians who are most certain of their beliefs--the strongest Moslems, the disciplined Communists, the Sjahrir socialists--are the least given to generalized suspiciousness.

Suspicion is just one of the facts of daily life which the "research folk" will have to learn to live with in Indonesia. It may tax their patience, but it will not be too great a burden on their understanding if they remember that the political revolution ended barely three years ago. After they have been in Indonesia a short time, they will begin to realize that the tension, excitement and uncertainty of the revolution still persist, now complicated by the inevitable disillusionment of the construction period. The Indonesian state, insofar as it is represented by the nationalist elite, is still very much a "movement." It still demands and needs pronouncements of loyalty and dedication. Aims and ambitions which are not articulated in terms of the welfare of the people and state are suspect and still out of place. Foreigners who live in this atmosphere will also hear these demands, and social scientists will be expected to contribute something of value to Indonesia.

I don't think it unreasonable to ask the social scientist to engage in research which is potentially useful in Indonesian

eyes. Perhaps I say this because of a conviction that almost any subject of research would fall into this category. For the social scientist, it is largely a matter of explaining his aims and methods as clearly as possible and as often as necessary. If he insists on working in isolation, divulging his expectations to no one, he will naturally be suspect and unwanted. If he is eager to put the results of his research at the disposal of private and official Indonesians, he will undoubtedly receive valuable assistance in return. If he refuses to do this, he will most likely find many obstacles put in his way.

Indonesians seem generally capable of receiving reasonable criticism, though it seems to make them even more uncomfortable than it does Americans. But criticism based on two or three week visits rankles; an example of this was seen in a recent Saturday Evening Post article, which was generally accurate factually but insulting in its lack of balance and perception.

It is quite possible that justified and well-meant commentary will also be resented, but I don't think that the hazard is overly great. It is indicative that George Kahin's book, Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia, is being very well received, despite the fact it probes very deeply into sensitive problems.

What can the researcher do to allay suspicions and facilitate his work? Perhaps the following suggestions will be of help:

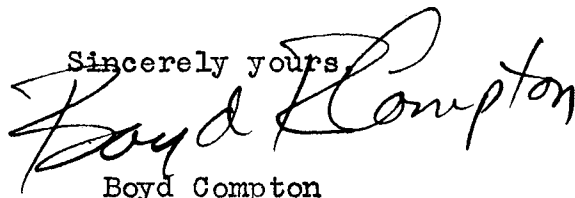
1. Come prepared professionally, preferably with some experience in field research. Know how to read and, if possible, speak the Indonesian language.
2. Be up to date on your field. Indonesian students will be eager to discuss subjects unrelated to Indonesia.
3. Once in Indonesia, take pains to identify yourself. Have papers, letters, anything which explains why and how you have come.
4. Come with a minimum of prior notions and hypotheses about Indonesia. This is virtually impossible for a doctoral candidate who has a year or less to collect dissertation material, but even the hurried candidate will find many of his homemade plans absurd. Listen carefully to suggestions made by Indonesians about your work; I am just now beginning to see the excellence of several suggestions I ignored soon after my arrival.
5. Travel as widely in Indonesia as your finances and time schedule permit. At the very least, get outside Djakarta often. It is a tense and trying city, even for Indonesians. Trips outside the city will take you away from the petty irritations of boomtown

life and the endless griping which nourishes the foreign colony. Impatience will quickly ruin your personal and professional relations.

6. Be prepared to "help" in the most general sense of the word. Teach English, if not to a class at least to your friends. Make the results of your research available to anyone who might benefit.

If the social scientist in Indonesia is easy to identify, respect, and live with, he is unlikely to meet with the troubles hinted at in the letter I quoted above. If he falls down in any one of the three, he may find his relations with Indonesians difficult and his work unproductive.

Sincerely yours

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Boyd Compton". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Boyd Compton

Received New York 10/16/53.