The Importance of *Imagined Communities* – and *Benedict Anderson*

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ABSTRACT

Benedict Anderson's remarkable book *Imagined Communities* reshaped the study of nations and nationalism. Strikingly original, it broke with previous over-emphasis on the European continent and falsely polarized arguments as to whether nations were always already in existence or mere epiphenomena of modern states. *Imagined Communities* stimulated attention to the dynamics of socially and culturally organized imagination as processes at the heart of political culture, self-understanding and solidarity. This has an influence beyond the study of nationalism as a major innovation in understanding 'social imaginaries'. Anderson's approach, however, maintained strong emphases on material conditions that shape culture, and on institutions that facilitate its reproduction — from newspapers and novels to censuses, maps, and museums.

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Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* was published in 1983, giving a breath of fresh air to a discussion of nationalism that hadn't seen really major new ideas in at least a generation. Analysis was mired in old debates over primordial identities vs invented traditions, nationalism as cultural inheritance vs reflection of modern state-making, mere false consciousness vs powerful political factor. To the extent that each of these dichotomies posed a forced choice, Anderson took the side of the second. But more powerfully, Anderson subverted the dichotomies themselves, asking why newly made traditions should feel primordial, how modern state-making was able to produce a world in which cultural identities seemed powerful enough to be killed or kill for, and how constructed identities both rested on political economy and shaped social relations.

Even while affirming the historical novelty of nationalism, Anderson challenged the illusion that it was somehow simply an error. That illusion had roots

in the Enlightenment and wide reach in Marxism. It had long distorted political analyses. Anderson entered the debate in sympathy with an argument Tom Nairn (1977) had just offered. Nairn's positive point was that nationalist movements in Britain were not to be dismissed and indeed could be progressive. He was himself a Scottish Nationalist, and his point was partly a defense of republicanism both in the narrow sense of a challenge to monarchy and in the broader sense of rooting in a polity in an active and relatively equal citizenry. But Nairn also offered a critique of "classical Marxism's shallow or evasive treatment of the historical-political importance of nationalism in the widest sense" that captured Anderson's sympathy and imagination (2006).

Anderson tried to completely restart the discussion. He argued that nationalism had different historical origins (Spanish colonies in Latin America) than Eurocentric authors had suggested. He argued that nationalism should be compared to religious constructions of identity and community as much as to other political ideologies. He focused attention not on the normative-ideological question of whether nationalism was better than class consciousness but on the explanatory question of why communist countries might go to war with each other, understanding the conflict largely in nationalist terms. He asked how nationalism worked as a matter of symbol, social relationships, and categories of consciousness.

Above all, Anderson presented nationalism as a way of imagining and thereby creating community. The nation "is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson, 2006: 9). That this is in some regards an artificial imagining does not make it less powerful. The comradeship is felt, even if it is in tension with the inequalities and sectional divisions. And "ultimately, it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings." (Anderson, 2006: 7). This is what is symbolized in the tombs of Unknown

Soldiers — the identity of each with his fellows and his nation that takes priority over an individual name (Anderson, 2006: 9). National identities are indeed made — invented — but they are not for that reason simply false any more than any other act of creativity.

More than a few readers thought Anderson's title suggested a contrast of imagined to real communities, but it would be more accurate to say that Anderson thought all community had to be imagined — at least "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these)." (Anderson, 2006: 6). What scholars must examine is not so much the truth or falsity of national imagining, but the different styles and forms in which nationhood is rendered, and the material and practical conditions for the production of national imagining.

This imagining of nations required new tools and forms of imagination — new imaginaries. Anderson himself did not use the term 'imaginaries', which was associated with the socio-psychoanalytic theorist Cornelius Castoriadis (1987). But his work had a major influence beyond the study of nationalism by informing the study of social imaginaries, institutionalized cultural ways of calling realities into being and constituting practices. Charles Taylor's influential account of how a distinctive set of social imaginaries constituted the modern was directly indebted to Anderson (Taylor, 2004; Gaonkar, 2002, Calhoun *et al.*, 2015).

For Anderson, the question was how community — or solidarity or identity or indeed society itself — was imagined and through this imagination given shape and solidity. Part of what he wanted to show was that nationalism and national identity had underpinnings in real material conditions. He introduced the idea of print capitalism, for example, to show how a specific form of capitalist enterprise supported the development of national languages and communication within them.

Reading the newspaper gave common news content to the discussions of a nation, but also a ritual demonstration of a kind of belonging. Each person who read the morning paper over tea or coffee could

imagine his countrymen doing the same (and it was initially a gendered imagining). Because publishing was organized as capitalist business, it had a drive behind it. Newspapers extended from early roots serving traders to wider popular circulation. And they produced a vernacular print language that distinguished bourgeois national solidarities from older aristocratic elites. "The pre-bourgeois ruling classes generated their cohesions in some sense outside language, or at least outside print-language" (Anderson, 2006: 76). The older forms of cohesion involved less imagining; they were concrete liaisons and linkages like strategic dynastic marriages. If there was an imagined whole behind this network it was aristocracy not nation.

This is part of what made the Iberian American colonies important demonstrations of the new form of community imagined through language. "In the Americas there was an almost complete isomorphism between the stretch of the various empires and that of heir vernaculars."[1] By contrast, empires in Europe were typically 'polyvernacular'. Making the various local vernaculars languages of states and politics came later in Europe, and the nationalism of the native speakers of the onetime official state language often came last. In the colonies, language provided a common milieu for collective imagining, but not always a demarcation. The distinctions came through further material foundations. Colonial officials inhabited specific administrative realms and moved about in circuits that made them agents of early national imagining. Eventual independence movements were typically not simply negative rebellions against empire, but positive assertions of concepts, models, and even blueprints for new societies. This sense of active project was important to national imaginaries. But it was not simply voluntary; it had material foundations.

In the colonies, nationalism had 'creole' origins. It was not simply the product of indigeneity. To be sure, nationalist ideology in the colonies sometimes claimed

— as it almost always did in Europe — that the nation was always already there before colonial intrusion. But Anderson showed how instead it was formed by the interaction among indigenes and migrants both forced and voluntary, and between officials and ordinary people.

Anderson's account of creole origins challenged the notion that nationalism grew in the West and was exported. It made European colonialism central, rather than the development of nation-states on the European continent. That neither was the whole story may be our conclusion today, but Anderson's strong argument was a much-needed tonic.[2] Much of the power of Anderson's analysis came from its own re-imagining of understandings of nationalism that had become taken for granted, almost doxic in Western discussions.

The central role Anderson ascribed to colonial administrators both foregrounded Europe's colonial projects and suggested an unanticipated consequence. It also discounted the notion that European intellectual elites created nationalism by creating vernacular literatures. Anderson agreed about the importance of literature, of course; it was the notion of indigenous self-creation that he doubted. Literature had its importance partly by means of introducing new kinds of narrative structures through novels the entwined many stories in a complex whole.

Alongside newspapers, novels were other cultural support for national identity produced and circulated by print capitalism. Again, Anderson concentrated not just on common content, but on form. Modern novels also relied on and reproduced vernacular language. In addition, they typically involved the entwining of

1 *Imagined Communities*, 77.

2 Anderson did not take up the complex place of subalterns in this story, in particular the place of 'natives' coopted into colonial rule. India might have informed his argument differently, as Partha Chatterjee suggested, arguing especially that modularity should not be exaggerated in a way that deprived multiple nationalisms of authentic agency and self-creation in their different historical contexts (Chatterjee, 1986).

multiple plot lines and thus modeling the situation of multiple biographies in national narratives. They did not just impart a message — though some did that by celebrating national heroes or national tragedies. They cultivated a way of imaging that in turn supported the integration of self and nation. This was neither arbitrary nor an illusion. It was a way of constituting the nation through shared imagination.

Nationalism was not a false consciousness of capitalism, but a reality — a socio-cultural formation — of its own produced by a key but previously neglected dimensions of capitalism. Print capitalism was a form of business enterprise that not only shaped and circulated culture, but a part of capitalist production. It helped produce the national units that throughout the history of capitalism have been basic to the organization and protection of capitalist business, exploitation, and defense of property and advantages.[3] Novels and newspapers were prime exemplars of the 'infrastructure' of national imaginaries in Anderson's original book, and both grew on the basis of print capitalism.

Perhaps the most remarkable demonstrations of the material underpinnings of imagination — culture — came in Anderson's discussion of census, map, and museum in the second edition of *Imagined Communities*. Each of these three instances, involved institutionalizing a bundle of artifacts and practices that shaped how identities, solidarities, boundaries, and relationships were imagined. The lines dividing pink and grey spaces on maps reinforced the idea that the face of the earth was naturally composed of countries; the rendering of internal geographies as at least interconnected if not integral spaces gave each of those countries a solidity. The very outline of national borders presented the nation mnemonically as a shape that could be reproduced on stamps and posters — and cocktail coasters — and both stand for the whole and anchor it in imagination. As a device for making the nation recognizable, it was infinitely reproducible — just like iconic photographs

of historic sites, perhaps even better. Censuses counted and categorized citizens (and sometimes denizens); they organized them into grids of occupational or religious or property-holding identities. They not only aided the administration of countries; they offered representations of the populations that facilitated imagining nations as organic wholes. Museums join censuses and maps as material organizations for the imagining and therefore production and reproduction of nations. They are both vehicles for representing nations to themselves and as means of situating nations amid other tokens of the same type. These could be arranged in evolutionary hierarchies or rendered more as equivalents. The smaller ethnicities or peoples within nations could be properly presented as components, just as the world's various nations could be the primary identities for locating the places where artifacts were found or artists nurtured.

Finally, Anderson complemented his numerous accounts of the social and material conditions for cultural imagination with a crucial recognition of the role of forgetting. Memory fits perhaps obviously in the series of ways in which national solidarity and identity are reproduced. Anderson was hardly the first to stress its importance. A whole industry of history and commemoration produces national memory — and gives more particular memories in a national frame. Schoolchildren learn their national story. Vacationers visit the sites of historical battles. But this is not all memory. As Anderson taught us, it is also forgetting. When English schoolchildren remember William the Conqueror as a great Founding Father of the English nation they crucially have to forget that William spoke no English and was precisely the conqueror of the English as well as the progenitor of a reimagined England (Anderson, 2006: 230).

Anderson's book became a classic in several disciplines. By training, Anderson is a political scientist and the influence of *Imagined Communities* was large in that field. It came, though, at a moment when comparative politics was being recast by rational choice analysis and other attempts to reduce context-specific theorizing and attention to culture in favor of more universalistic and often reductionistic

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3 Immanuel Wallerstein's analysis (2012) stresses the centrality of capitalism's organization on an increasingly global scale, but in relations among states — mostly national states.

models. Ironically, the field of international relations, in which a kind of instrumental realism had long held sway, was moving partly in the other direction, learning (increasingly after 9/11) to grasp the importance of cultural construction, the role of religion and the politics of identity, without sacrificing a hard-headed and mainly state-centered analytic approach. *Imagined Communities* informed the constructivist movement and also helped to correct for the overwhelming Eurocentrism of the field. Indeed, *Imagined Communities* also informed discussion in another branch of political science, the quasi-autonomous sub-discipline of political theory. Debates in political theory were caught for a quarter-century in a dispute between liberals and communitarians in which attempts to clarify what community meant loomed large. Anderson's book was centrally important to arguments like Charles Taylor's (2004) about the way in which community reflected shared social imaginaries.[4] Anderson's book became at least as important in sociology, anthropology, geography, literature, and history.

This impact on a range of disciplines is important to note because no discipline was the proximate source of Anderson's classic analysis. Rather, *Imagined Communities* was produced in dialog with two different and very important interdisciplinary fields. It was the product of area studies scholarship and Southeast Asian Studies in particular. And it was the product of Marxist analysis, especially as this flourished as an international, interdisciplinary field from the later 1950s through the early 1980s.

Anderson's book famously took its point of departure from war between Asian communist societies, war that according to theory should never have happened. But if this was a challenge to the dominant Marxist

dismissal of nationalism, it was framed nonetheless partially in Marxist categories, in response to questions that had dogged the international working class and postcolonial movements.

The early chapters of Anderson's book famously and controversially located roots to nationalism in Spanish colonial rule of Latin America. This was perhaps surprising for a specialist on Indonesia, to which the book would return at some length, but it is a reminder that area studies scholarship was never simply the sort of narrow particularism decried by its detractors. It was always a comparative enterprise, exploring similarities and differences among histories and contemporary configurations, and always concerned with connections among different parts of the world — whether because of the commonalities of colonialism, the connections formed by trade, or the contexts shaped by shared civilizations, trade, and ideas. Anderson's account of nationalism fits squarely in this tradition, emphasizing the "modularity" of the idea of nation once established. For Anderson, nationalism and national identity was less a matter of lineages and more of creativity, production and reproduction, and modularity.

Much of the importance of *Imagined Communities* — and of Benedict Anderson — has to do with intellectual innovations he offered in seeking to understand nations and nationalism. True to his Marxist roots, he examined in a way few had before the material conditions of production of national thinking. He made contributions to the tool-kit of cultural analysis that are important for a range of other questions. We might, for example, ask about the imaginative constitution of business corporations, curious creations of contracts, and state recognition, and popular acceptance. Corporations are imagined, not just 'concrete' in Anderson's expression.

But it is also the case that Anderson offered one of the most compelling arguments of his era as to why nationalism could not be consigned to the dustbin of history. "The reality is quite plain: the 'end of the era of

4 Use of the phrase "social imaginaries" has suggested to many readers a debt to Cornelius Castordiadis though in fact there is little link between Taylor and Castordiadis. Anderson is a more important and more proximate source for this theme in Taylor's thinking (filtered partly through a very productive reading and discussion group in the Center for Psychosocial Studies. Gaonkar (2002).

nationalism', so long prophesied, is not remotely in sight. Indeed, nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time (Anderson, 2006: 21).

Not every student of the subject was persuaded, but Anderson was right. Indeed, the years after the 1983 publication of *Imagined Communities* saw the flourishing of a wildly optimistic view of post-national globalization and cosmopolitanism. We have the advantage of hindsight in seeing that this ignored many of the reasons for the resurgent nationalism of our own day. Anderson not only warned against the naïve dismissal of nationalism, he reminded us that it offered a mixture of good with bad, real belonging with illusions of greater than real equality. He helped us make sense of a world in which nations are real and really matter.

Nations sometimes matter for bad reasons and in bad ways. They matter because people under pressure from globalization seek the reassurance of a local identity. They matter because people are convinced, often by demagogues, that outsiders are a threat, that migrants are stealing their jobs, or that foreign capitalists are undermining native businesses. But they matter also for good reasons. They matter because a sense of belonging together is basic to investments in shared institutions and social welfare. They matter because however problematic it currently is in practice, electoral democracy flourishes primarily in nation-states.

Anderson refused to prejudge the good and the bad of nations. He noted the importance of nationalism in both nasty wars and national liberation movements. What he analyzed was the protean power of a way of imagining life together different from a dynastic realm or a religious community but like each able to reorganize human relations in a range of different settings. Underestimating nations and nationalism is a mistake. So is universalizing or eternalizing them. Anderson gives us tools for a more nuanced understanding.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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