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TRIBUTE

Nationalism: How social theorist Benedict Anderson's influenced a generation of scholars

Thursday 17 December 2015, by [PINTO Rochelle](#) (Date first published: 16 December 2015).

The author of the seminal 'Imagined Communities', who died on December 13, changed the way nationalism is studied.

Like most of my ilk, I first heard about Benedict Anderson in a classroom. A teacher in my Master's programme was trying to get us to kick a habit that hooks tenaciously into our mental scaffolding – that of seeing Europe as the origin of all modern thought and form (seeing India as the origin of all ancient thought is only a corollary of this). On the day after we were supposed to read Anderson's canonical text of 1983, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, she asked where the first movements for national independence had occurred, and though we knew about North America, and had speed-read through Anderson, we automatically but uncertainly murmured, Europe, knowing somehow it was the wrong answer. Her exasperation made us realise how hard it was, contrary to popular belief, to absorb a plain fact when it went against a well-entrenched idea.

Benedict Anderson's writing was one possible route through which students of literature, politics and history and numerous other disciplines would unlearn the idea that the expression and movement for national political independence was a European invention. While Anderson highlighted the primacy of movements in North America, Haiti and other colonies of Spain and France, he also emphasised that national feeling was not a naturally occurring emotion. By the late 1990s in post-Babri India, even the most privileged and protected among us knew that, even though those from other quarters of life had known it for a while.

It is one thing however, to know something, and another to learn to think with it and Anderson's *Imagined Communities* had arrived in our classroom to help us do that. He drew attention to the universality of monuments to the unknown soldier and asked how people could be drawn to die for an abstract idea, evoking both sympathy for those who would fall to enemy fire without their names ever being known, while drawing attention to militarisation as a corollary of nation formation. By the time we were introduced to his work, it had made enough of an impact to be challenged by theorists of Indian nationalism. But the reason he impressed himself so indelibly on the humanities was in the way he traced how the newspaper, which placed news of one part of a region cheek by jowl with another, an image from a neighbourhood store alongside one of a film star, would unselfconsciously link different moments in time and space, allowing us to sew the lives of disparate kinds of people together. A single sentence in a novel that linked an event of the past to a place in the present, he said, could do the same, allowing the nation to emerge almost as a natural being, letting the reader into the experience of belonging to the new formation that was offered.

Key concepts

Even as he dislodged Europe, Anderson did not offer a celebratory idea of nation – there were no simplistic formulations on offer. If the Americas were the earliest to articulate the concept of an independent nation, they did not as yet offer that possibility to the slaves. *Imagined Communities* also combined words in new ways, offering theoretical formulations for us to try out: words such as print-capitalism, the product of the convergence of technology, capitalism and what he called the “fatal diversity of human language”, or “homogenous, empty time”, which he had drawn from the social theorist Walter Benjamin, a time unmoored from its scriptural meanings.

When Anderson dislodged the novel from its place in literary history, he placed it next to the newspaper which he called an “extreme form” of the book, and discussed it, as English Marxists had done before him, as a commodity in the market. The difference was that he also juxtaposed to it, a theoretical history of varieties of nation formation, and if that were not enough, a political theory about how modern languages had emerged, all of which would now be necessary if we were to historicise novels we were familiar with. He overturned assumed truths, some of which we had unlearned from literary critics, others that we still assumed were universal.

Imagined Communities was a necessary port of call for books on print. In time his portmanteau terms would be questioned, the sweep of his formulations challenged, a certain sign that the book and the author had shaped their field. I had a chance to hear him speak at a packed auditorium in London, and found that his other work had another life altogether in South-East Asia. The audience discussed the circumstances that banned him from entering Indonesia revealing a commitment to the place of study and an engagement with its political life that had little to do with professional success. It was a revelation of the real trajectory of his thought. It was his familiarity with the cultural worlds of the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia that enabled the re-location of Europe. Indonesia, where he died last Sunday, on one of his annual visits ever since the ban was lifted, is being seen as his appropriate place of rest. The field of print studies and that of nationalism has proliferated, and if eventually Anderson’s work is no longer referenced, it is because the structure of his argument has so imprinted our thinking, we no longer realise that it is his ideas that we use.

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<http://scroll.in/article/775971/how-social-theorist-benedict-andersons-influenced-a-generation-of-scholars>

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