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Benedict Anderson (1936-2015) - “Anderson’s work is better thought of as hopeful”

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Benedict Anderson was a brilliant scholar whose work was animated by a deep commitment to human emancipation.

To those of us outside of Southeast Asia, Benedict Anderson is best known as the author of *Imagined Communities*, the seminal study of nationalism and one of the most popular scholarly books of the second half of twentieth century.

But in Indonesia, where he passed away on December 13, Anderson was known primarily as an “Indonesianist.”

The country was the subject of Anderson’s PhD work. And his first major publication — coauthored with his colleagues at Cornell University — chronicled the massacre of six hundred thousand Indonesians as part of the 1965-66 repression of the communist left leading up to Lieutenant General Suharto’s coup. The work earned him a ban from Indonesia that lasted until 1998, when the reign of the “mediocre tyrant” — as Anderson memorably called Suharto — finally came to an end.

Anderson’s interests spanned Southeast Asia. Along with his fluency in Indonesian and Javanese, he spoke the predominant languages of the Philippines and Thailand — Tagalog and Thai, respectively — and wrote at length about the politics, culture, and literature of all three countries.

This deep involvement in the political developments of Southeast Asia led him to the work for which he will be most remembered. Through his engagement with the political life of the newly decolonized Third World, he witnessed the discursive centrality of nationalism — including in progressive political projects like anti-imperialism and socialism. Sometimes, it even trumped those projects. *Imagined Communities* began with a reference to the war between Vietnam and China, two revolutionary socialist countries, fighting on nationalistic grounds.

Anderson felt that Marxism — the political and intellectual tradition with which he most identified — failed to offer an adequate analysis of, or even take very seriously, the phenomenon of nationalism. The same went for other traditions of political thought. “It seems to me” Anderson wrote, “that Marxism’s ‘failure’ to grapple with nationalism in any deep way was not idiosyncratic. Exactly the same criticism could, and should, be leveled at classical liberalism and at the margins, classical conservatism.”

The result was a curious situation in which a concept that shaped so much of the actually existing political discourse around the world nevertheless suffered from a marked poverty of theoretical reflections. Nationalism produced “no Hobbeses, Tocquevilles, Marxes, or Webers.”

Imagined Communities was both the title of the book and the pithy conceptual framework that sought to ameliorate this poverty. Nationalism, Anderson argued, generates a sense of camaraderie and fraternity akin to a community. Yet the members of this community will never meet each of their fellow members. The community, therefore, is constituted through acts of imagination. While concise in its definition, the evocative scope of this formulation was vast. The achievement of the book lies in Anderson's willingness to fully indulge that scope.

One of the conditions for nationalism, the book argues, was the void left by the decline of religious communities. But in this new religion, Anderson was a man without a church. He was born in China, of Irish and English parents, educated in England and the United States, and worked on and fell in love with Indonesia.

Yet unlike the self-assured atheist who sees in religion only the evidence of the vast stupidity of his fellow men and women, Anderson was not dismissive of the fables and artifacts that he was studying. Neither did he use the word "imagined" to signify false or illusory. Rather, he wanted to understand, like a genuinely curious reader of a gripping tale, the formal structures and creative horizon of this act of imagination.

Saying something is a social construct, Anderson knew, only takes one that far. The logic of its construction is more fascinating, and often more significant. Members of most communities will never actually meet each other. The imaginations that create, sustain, and ascribe meaning to these communities are political in the deepest sense. And a commitment to understanding how certain stories seize us — and what those tales make possible — is a political project.

The story of *Imagined Communities*, which seeks to uncover that logic, has many actors. But its most well-known protagonists are the novel and the newspaper. The starring role for the written word was made possible by the advent of print capitalism. Print technology's ability to mass produce texts and capitalism's unceasing search for a market brought forth, for the first time, a mass vernacular and monoglot reading public — the material basis for a new "national" consciousness.

Along with this structural story, Anderson was equally interested in the literary elements of the novel and the newspaper — the world that their words made. He studied their narrative structure and plot device to show how they opened up a shared imagination of time and space, "creating the remarkable confidence of community in anonymity that is the hallmark of modern nations."

The remarkable breadth of materials, and the easy confidence with which Anderson sifted through it, has made *Imagined Communities* one of those rare books that appeals across the disciplinary trenches that divide academic thinking. Its unselfconscious heterodoxy also generated criticisms from all sides. A reviewer called the book: "too Marxist for a liberal and too liberal for a Marxist."

The legacy of the book, however, is not its proclamation of the correct line on nationalism — be it Marxist or liberal — but rather that it has allowed for different ways of thinking about it. Good books make convincing arguments. Great ones generate new questions for future scholars and activists to puzzle over. Anderson's resides in the latter category.

Imagined Communities came out in 1983. Soon after, both the politics and scholarship of nationalism underwent a considerable shift. The conflicts in Eastern Europe following the fall of the Berlin Wall, and then the ascendancy of right-wing ethno-nationalist formations, revealed a side to the politics of nationalism far darker than Anderson had countenanced. Outside of the West, important critiques were advanced of postcolonial national projects and the folly of the Left in supporting them, severely damaging the progressive patina of nationalism in the Third World that Anderson had encountered.

In this environment, Anderson's scholarly respect for nationalism appeared to some like romanticism. Some wondered whether, in his quest to study the seductive power of nationalist imagination, whether the scholar himself had ended up being seduced.

In his subsequent work, Anderson sought to respond to these concerns by drawing a line between nationalism and what he labeled the politics of ethnicity — calling the latter “a bastard Smerdyakov to classical nationalism's Dmitri Karamazov.” Politics of ethnicity was dependent on one's membership in finite, immutable classes to which one either belongs or is excluded. The imaginative scope of nationalism on the other hand was potentially universal — its horizons open such that Anderson could claim Indonesia was the closest to a nation he could call his own.

One might justifiably wonder whether this distinction corresponds to any actually existing politics of nationalism today. But it would be unfair to dismiss as romantic Anderson's attempt to hold on to the potentially liberatory and progressive imaginative possibilities that might constitute the community called the nation.

Anderson's work is better thought of as hopeful. A hopefulness borne out of a deep intellectual curiosity about how modern men and women conceive of their worlds, and a political commitment to channeling those visions towards emancipatory ends. What better reasons could there be for hope? What better motivations to be a scholar?

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P.S.

* “Benedict Anderson (1936–2015)”. Jacobin. 12.24.15:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/12/benedict-anderson-obituary-imagined-communities-nationalism-indonesia/>

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