

# 1 Benedict Anderson

## BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Author of one of the most important concepts in political geography, that of nations being 'imagined communities', Benedict Richard O'Gorman Anderson was born in Kunming, China in 1936. Brother of political theorist Perry Anderson and an Irish citizen whose father was an official with Imperial Maritime Customs, he grew up in California and Ireland before attending Cambridge University. Studying briefly under Eric Hobsbawm, Anderson graduated with a First Class degree in Classics in 1957. He moved to Cornell University in 1958 to pursue PhD research on Indonesia where he was influenced by George Kahin, John Echols and Claire Holt (Anderson, 1998; 1999). In 1965 Indonesia's military leader Suharto foiled an alleged coup attempt by communist soldiers, purged the army, and massacred civilians. Working with two other graduate students, Anderson analysed Suharto's version of events, questioning their veracity. Their assessment reached the Indonesian military who in 1967 and 1968 invited Anderson to the country to persuade him of the errors in this monograph, then known as the 'Cornell Paper'. Failing to be convinced, Anderson was denounced by the Indonesian regime.

Following formal publication of the allegations (Anderson et al., 1971), Indonesian authorities barred Anderson from Indonesia for what became the duration of Suharto's regime (though Anderson returned to Indonesia in 1999 following the dictator's death).

Anderson completed his PhD, *The Pemuda Revolution: Indonesian Politics, 1945-46* in 1967 and taught in the Department of Government at Cornell University until retirement in 2002. Editor of the interdisciplinary journal *Indonesia* between 1966 and 1984, Anderson studied topics as diverse as Indonesia's government, politics and international relations (e.g., 1964), human rights (e.g., 1976) and role in East Timor (e.g., 1980). An expert on South East Asia, military conflicts between Cambodia, Vietnam and China in the late-1970s stimulated Anderson to analyse the importance of, and political attraction to, nationalist politics. The result was *Imagined Communities - Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; 1991; 2006).

In this work, Anderson maintained that major theoretical approaches had largely ignored nationalism, merely accepting it as the way things are:

**Nation, nationality, nationalism - all have proved notoriously difficult to define, let alone analyse. In contrast to the immense influence that nationalism has exerted on the modern world, plausible theory about it is conspicuously meager. (Anderson, 2006: 3)**

Particularly culpable in this respect was Marxism, the relationship between it and nationalism being the subject of debate in *New Left Review* in the 1970s (e.g., Nairn, 1975; Löwy, 1976; Debray, 1977; see Anderson, 2006: 208–9). In this climate, Anderson (2006: 3; original emphasis) argued Marxist thought had not ignored nationalism but that 'nationalism has proved an uncomfortable *anomaly* for Marxist theory and, precisely for that reason, has been largely elided, rather than confronted'. *Imagined Communities* was an effort to reconcile theories of Marxism and nationalism, and counter what Anderson envisaged as a skewed context for the assessment of nationalism, namely an almost wholly European focus, to the detriment of understanding the colonial antecedents of modern nationalist politics. Drawing on case studies of colonialism in Latin America and Indonesia, Anderson (2006: 5–6) proposed 'the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign'.



Anderson's concept of nations being 'imagined communities' has become standard within books reviewing geographical thought (e.g., Crang, 1998; Cloke et al., 2001; Anderson et al., 2003; Oakes and Price, 2008). The contention that a nation is 'imagined' does not mean that a nation is false, unreal or to be distinguished from true (unimagined) communities. Rather Anderson is proposing that a nation is constructed from popular processes through which residents share nationality in common:

It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.

(Anderson, 2006: 6; original emphasis)

This understanding both shapes and is shaped by political and cultural institutions as people 'imagine' they share general beliefs, attitudes and recognise a collective national populace as having similar opinions and sentiments to their own. Secondly:

The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations.

(Anderson, 2006: 7; original emphasis)

To have one nation means there must be another nation against which self-definition can be constructed. Anderson is thus arguing for the social construction of nations as political entities that have a limited spatial and demographic extent, rather than organic, eternal entities. Further:

It is imagined as *sovereign* because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm ... nations dream of being free ... The gage and emblem of this freedom is the sovereign state.

(Anderson, 2006: 7; original emphasis)

Anderson argues that the concept of the nation emerged in the late-eighteenth century as a societal structure to replace previous monarchical or religious orders. In this manner, a nation was a new way of conceptualising state sovereignty and rule. This rule would be limited to a defined population and territory over which the state, in the name of nationality, could exercise power:

Finally, it 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. 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; original emphasis)

Nations hold such power over imaginations, claims Anderson, that patriotic calls to arms are understood as the duty of all national residents. Further, in war, national citizens are equal and class boundaries are eroded in the communal struggle for national survival and greatness.

Anderson's second key aspect of the development of nationalism is what he identifies as the role of 'creole pioneers'. In both North and South America, those who fought for national independence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had the same ancestries, languages and traditions as the colonising powers they opposed. Anderson (2006: 47) argues these 'creole pioneers' developed nationalist politics *before* Europe, because colonies were largely self-administrating territorial units. Thus, residents conceived of their belonging to a common and potentially sovereign community, a sentiment enhanced by provincial newspapers raising debate about inter-continental political and administrative relationships. Anderson stakes much of his thesis on 'print-capitalism'; novels and newspapers, he claims, 'made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways' (Anderson, 2006: 36). In addition, standardised national calendars, language and clocks generated a sense of simultaneous national experiences and national difference from elsewhere. Disparate occurrences thus became bound

together as *national* experiences as people felt that all national residents were reading the same publications. Thus, 'the convergence of capitalism and print technology ... created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation' (Anderson, 2006: 46).

The worldwide impact of *Imagined Communities* across academic disciplines led to revised editions in 1991 and 2006. In the enlarged 1991 edition Anderson noted that he had '[become] uneasily aware that what I had believed to be a significantly new contribution to thinking about nationalism – changing apprehensions of time – patently lacked its necessary coordinate: changing apprehensions of space' (2006: xiii–xiv). Utilising South East Asian examples, Anderson corrected this omission by including chapters addressing the construction of national memories and the roles of national census, museums, biographies and maps. Drawing on a 1988 PhD dissertation by Thongchai Winichakul about nineteenth-century Siam/Thailand (published as Winichakul, 1994), Anderson (2006: xiv) argued that maps contribute to the 'logoization of political space' and their myriad reproductions familiarise people with the limitations of national sovereignty and community.

Having examined mass communication with his thesis of print-capitalism, Anderson subsequently turned to the legacy of migration:

The two most significant factors generating nationalism and ethnicity are both linked closely to the rise of capitalism. They can be described summarily as mass communications and mass migrations.

(Anderson, 1992: 7)

Maintaining that nationalist movements were/are often initiated by expatriates, noting again the 'creole pioneers' of Latin

America and financial contributions to the Irish Republican Army and ethno-nationalist factions in the Balkan Wars of the early 1990s from overseas, Anderson assesses:

It may well be that we are faced here with a new type of nationalist: the 'long-distance nationalist' one might perhaps call him (fn. "Him" because this type of politics seems to attract males more than females). For while technically a citizen of the state in which he comfortably lives, but to which he may feel little attachment, he finds it tempting to play identity politics by participating (via propaganda, money, weapons, any way but voting) in the conflicts of his imagined *Heimat* – now only fax-time away.

(Anderson, 1992: 13)

Thus nationalism exists in an 'undivorceable marriage to internationalism' (Anderson, 2006: 207). Drawing primarily on anti-colonial nationalisms in South East Asia, Anderson's (1998; 2005) work demonstrates that, since the nineteenth century, political activists have engaged in multilingual global debates about the possibilities of nationalist revolution. Often expatriates, these individuals imagined their putative national communities by, amongst other things, writing novels and anthropological treatises that articulated the belief that indigenous peoples, often understood by colonial powers to be divided by tribal and ethnic difference, comprised a nation with common roots, traditions and aspirations.

Translated into dozens of languages and arguably the most regularly cited scholar on the topic of nationalism, Anderson has appeared on television, addressed committees of the United Nations and US Congress regarding Indonesia and East Timor, and raised questions about human rights abuses in South East Asia (e.g., Anderson, 1976; 1980; see also 1998: 20–2). One of the most influential

scholars of his generation, although not a geographer by training or career, issues of space, territory and place, critical to nationalist politics, have led to Anderson's work being widely utilised within geographical research.

## KEY ADVANCES AND CONTROVERSIES

*Imagined Communities* received little attention from geographers upon its publication. Largely without review in major geography journals, Anderson's concepts entered geographical debate through their impact on interdisciplinary studies of nationalism. Indeed, Spencer and Wollman (2002: 37) claim that such is the regularity with which articles about nationalism routinely cite *Imagined Communities* that Anderson's conceptualisation 'has become one of the commonest clichés of the literature' the result being that 'invocation has, in some cases, been a substitute for analysis'. Geographers have not been immune to this (see, *inter alia*, Jackson and Penrose, 1993; Smith and Jackson, 1999) and prolonged geographical assessments of Anderson's contentions are few: Blaut (1987), for example, does not assess Anderson's work in his review of Marxist theories of nationalism and Short's (1991: 226) *Imagined Country* simply proposes Anderson's *Imagined Communities* as additional reading. Some geographers, however, explicitly built upon Anderson's contentions: Sidaway (2002), for example, offering an exploration of 'imagined regional communities'. Arguably the most sustained geographical utilisation of Anderson's concept is

Radcliffe and Westwood's (1996: 2) study of how a national imagined community is 'generated, sustained and fractured' in Ecuador. They maintain that Anderson's 'geographical imagination ... permits him to link themes of space, mobility and the nation', but comment that he fails to fully acknowledge or develop the implications of this within his work (Radcliffe and Westwood, 1996: 118). Other geographers extend Anderson's initial thesis to understand imagined *and material* communities of nations and nationalisms. Angela Martin (1997: 90) maintains that although 'intellectuals have been given the power to "imagine" the nation or national community, ... the material dimension, or political economy, of nationalism and the nation have been ignored.' Her assessment of late-nineteenth century Irish nationalism argues for a 'corporeal approach to the nation' to interrogate how gender roles were constructed both in the Irish national imagination and how they restricted behaviour in everyday life (Martin, 1997: 91). Studying the construction of a Swiss heritage community in New Glarus, Wisconsin, Steven Hoeschler (1999: 538) invokes Anderson to explain that specific 'forms of imagining' are utilised by elites to produce place and community identities. These local 'imagined communities' are, Hoeschler demonstrates, often contested by non-elite groups.

The strongest challenges to Anderson's arguments come from post-colonial scholars. Drawing a contrast with Anderson's spatially bounded explorations of nations, **Stuart Hall** (2008: 273) offers a fluid understanding of 'diaspora' as 'an alternative framework for thinking about "imagined communities"' which recognises that many individuals feel allegiances to numerous locations and connections with people who are dispersed globally, not solely nationally. **Edward Said** (1993), in turn, contends that Anderson is too linear

in claiming that political structures and institutions change from dynasties to sovereign nations through the standardising influence of print-capitalism. Scholars of Latin America, although applauding the 'imagined communities' concept, have contended that Anderson's analyses of proto-nationalist creole pioneers and colonial newspapers assume too much homogeneity across the region. Castro-Klarén (2003: 163), for example, suggests the diversity of Latin American nationalisms necessitates 'more complex explanations' than Anderson offers. As historians reassess the chronology of nation formation that Anderson proposes, the assertions made in *Imagined Communities* appear to be, for Guerra (2003: 4, 5), at best 'problematical', and in some instances, 'false'. Such errors in the Latin American case studies do not weaken the utility of the 'imagined communities' theory, and may be partly due, maintains Chasteen (2003: xviii), to Anderson's reliance on a small number of 'egregiously outdated' sources about Latin America.

Arguably, Anderson's most vocal critic has been Partha Chatterjee (1993) who contends that the imagination of political communities has been limited by European colonialism. In imposing specifically nationalist institutional forms on their colonies, upon independence these areas had no option but to follow European paths, with Western powers ready to prevent any seemingly dangerous deviations. 'Even our imaginations', asserts Chatterjee (1993: 5) 'must remain forever colonized.' Nationalism and nations, Chatterjee maintains, operate only within limits formulated in Europe, thus can only be conceptualised within these European strictures. Anti-colonial nationalisms thus typically opposed colonialism using the same nationalist arguments as the colonists. Distinction could not be made through political or economic conceptualisation due to the European

dominance of these realms and thus the limited sovereignty and territory of the colony was already imagined for the colonised by the colonisers. Consequently, anti-colonial nationalism could only be imagined through cultural processes and practices. Echoing other critics, Chatterjee challenges that although the processes of print-capitalism were important, Anderson's formulation of them as standardising language, time and territorial extent is too simplistic to impose on the diverse, multilingual and asymmetrical power relations of the colonial situation.

A second major critique of *Imagined Communities* comes from a feminist perspective. With a focus on the 'fraternity' experienced by members of a nation (Anderson, 2006: 7), the protagonists in Anderson's conceptions of nationalism are typically assumed to be male. Mayer (2000: 6) argues that Anderson envisions 'a hetero-male project ... imagined as a brotherhood', eliding gender, class and racial structures within and between national communities and McDowell (1999: 195) demonstrates that although seemingly neutral, 'the very term horizontal comradeship ... brings with it connotations of masculine solidarity.' Subsequently, McClintock (1995: 353) laments that sustained 'explorations of the gendering of the national imagination have been conspicuously paltry.'

A third challenge comes from Don Mitchell who argues that as well as *imagining* communities, there must be attention to:

The *practices* and exercises of power through which these bonds are produced and reproduced. The questions this raises are ones about who defines the nation, how it is defined, how that definition is reproduced and contested, and, crucially, how the nation has developed and changed over time... The question is not what common imagination *exists*, but what common imagination is *forged*.

(Mitchell, 2000: 269; original emphasis)

Anderson's proposal, therefore, is constrained by its narrowness. What does it matter that a nation is an imagined community? The issue must be to show the work needed to produce and maintain that imagination, how this impacts on people's lives, and how power to enforce the national community that is imagined shapes behaviours across time and space. Anderson's latter work moves in these directions. He notes constructions of gender and sexuality in the nationalist imagination and describes how Filipino nationalist imaginings were internationally produced, promoted, opposed and challenged – with often deadly consequences – by individuals in the nineteenth-century Filipino diaspora (Anderson, 1998; 2005). There is hence much to commend in the concept of imagined communities, although there remains a need to explore power relations inherent in the processes Anderson describes to elucidate their material impacts, be these founded on gender, racial, ethnic, class, sexual or other aspects of individual identity.

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**Euan Hague, DePaul University**