THE INFLUENCE OF BENEDICT ANDERSON

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THE INFLUENCE OF BENEDICT ANDERSON

edited by Alistair McCleery and Benjamin A Brabon

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Introduction

1983 was something of an annus mirabilis in the modern study of nationalism. Three works appeared that were to have significant influence in the English speaking world and beyond. The first was *Nations and Nationalism* by the prolific sociologist Ernest Gellner;[1] the second was *The Invention of Tradition*, a collection of essays co-edited by the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger;[2] the third was Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*.[3] Gellner's book pursued some of the issues he had raised in his 1965 volume *Thought and Change* and consolidated his reputation as one of the foremost of the "modernists" in developing a robust perspective that took major issue with claims that nations were of ancient provenance, deeply rooted in the past.[4] Hobsbawm and Ranger's work although not exclusively about nationalism, gave further weight to the argument that the nation, its rituals and ceremonies were profoundly and indisputably a modern phenomenon, a cultural product whose history needed to be critically and severely interrogated.

Anderson's *Imagined Communities* has, however, been perhaps the most influential of these three works, providing a whole set of new directions for the study of nationalism. This was in some ways quite surprising. Unlike Gellner's work at least, it seemed to come out of the blue; the work of a scholar who had not previously contributed to general political or cultural theory or to the field of nationalism. Anderson's background was in none of these areas – he was a specialist (not that well-known) in South East Asian studies particularly of Indonesia, but also of the Philippines. At the point it was published by Verso (formally New Left Books) it was his brother Perry who was far better known, certainly in the UK, as a leading New Left Marxist intellectual of an unfashionably wide-ranging sort, the editor of the influential *New Left Review* and the leading figure in its publishing arm.

Imagined Communities has been extraordinarily successful and one of the most (if not the most) influential books in the contemporary literature on nationalism. It has sold over a quarter of a million copies and has just appeared in a third edition with a new final chapter. Anderson's definition of the nation as an "imagined community" has become one of the most quoted and probably over-quoted phrases by both students and scholars alike. Cited by almost every writer who ventures onto the terrain of nationalism, it has become one of the commonest clichés of the literature. This is not to suggest that the concept (and

the full definition from which it is taken) is without value. Quite the contrary. But its invocation has, in some cases, become a substitute for analysis.[5]

Closer scrutiny reveals a number of problems with the term and its deployment, a set of paradoxes (perhaps even contradictions) that are the focus of this chapter. Some of these paradoxes or contradictions have their roots, we might suggest, in Anderson's formation, personally, politically and academically. Without seeking to reduce an explanation to the merely biographical, there are important respects in which factors at this level provide an essential context for the critical discussion of his work.

Benedict Richard O'Gorman Anderson – cosmopolitan, anti-imperialist and long distance nationalist?

Anderson was born Benedict Richard O'Gorman Anderson August 26, 1936 in Kunming, China. He was the product of an English mother – Veronica Beatrice Mary Anderson – and a father of mixed Irish and Anglo-Irish parentage – James Carew O'Gorman Anderson. "James was an officer in the Chinese Maritime Customs Service in China and according to his son, a Sinophile; he was also of mixed Irish and Anglo-Irish descent, and his family had been active in Irish nationalistic movements. Veronica was English, and came from a family of conventional businessmen, judges and policemen."[6] Following an early upbringing in China and England the family moved to the USA in 1941, then to Ireland.

In an interview, Benedict's brother Perry reveals more about the family background and circumstances:

> It was a very cosmopolitan household; I suppose that would be the decisive thing. After the American experience, the family went back to Ireland, and then I was sent to school in England. And then, you know, we were sent abroad. So from a very early age, I got a sense of the importance of other cultures and other nations.[7]

Anderson himself seems aware of the influence this upbringing on the margins of various cultures and countries has had on his subject matter and on his perspectives on nationalism.[8] He revealingly describes these experiences as an outsider as a "series of estrangements" and even as "various exiles":

> As I look back at it now it seems an odd book to be written by someone born in China, raised in three countries, speaking with an obsolete English accent, carrying an Irish passport, living in America, and devoted to Southeast Asia. Yet perhaps it could only be written from various exiles, and with divided loyalties.[9]

What then, specifically, turned Benedict Anderson to studying nationalism? It was an indirect route that took him there via Cornell and Indonesia. His academic background was initially as a classicist with a degree from Cambridge

in 1957, when he had his first encounters with anti-imperialist politics. His early politics was formed in the wake of the Suez debacle,[10] and his political sympathies, and personal background in Asia, moved him to an interest in Indonesia which was then in the midst of a murderous civil war with active CIA involvement. ("To a young man only recently made aware of politics – one might say imperialist politics – Indonesia seemed both Asian and of immediate political relevance."[11]) It was now that he entered the interdisciplinary Indonesian Studies Programme at Cornell University and embarked on a lifetime of scholarship and research into the history, politics and culture of that country.

The Indonesia of the 1960s and before resonated with a politics of left nationalism and anti-imperialism. Anderson himself has pointed out the importance of the political milieu of the 1960s by which he was influenced, in particular the attractions of third world nationalism: "In the Cold War context, Third World nationalism looked very attractive, and most of my age-mates in academia were very sympathetic …"[12] Anderson cites figures such as Nehru, Nkrumah, Ho Chi Minh and Tito as key figures in an age of admired nationalist leaders. And leaving for Indonesia at the age of 26, he encountered another of these – Sukarno, whose overthrow by General Suharto was to see him exiled from Indonesia for many decades.

But there was also more in Anderson's background that might have produced a sympathy for and interest in nationalism. He proudly relates that "one side of my father's ancestry … was a line of Irish nationalists going back to the last years of the 18th century."[13] And indeed this nationalist provenance is impressive. Two ancestors were part of the 1798 United Irishmen Rebellion and later were close aides of Daniel O'Connell in the movement for Catholic Emancipation; in the next generation one was involved in the 1848 Young Ireland rebellion; and in the third generation – two were members of Parnell's bloc of Home Rule MPs at Westminster. Indeed Benedict Anderson was named after Richard O'Gorman, the leading light of the Young Irelander movement.[14]

It is the Irish part of his ancestry that seems to have left the greatest mark on Anderson. His attitude to England is at best ambiguous, at times bordering on distaste. (He tellingly recounts a story of Cambridge undergraduates beating up a small gathering of mainly third world students demonstrating against the Suez venture and trying to force everyone to sing the national anthem.) And it was Ireland that provided the essential conduit into a broader sympathy for anti-colonial nationalist movements:

In those great times, Vietnam and Indonesia came together for me in a new way. Both countries had fought bloody, and up to a point successful, wars for independence against fading European imperialist powers …

The link was nationalism, and probably deeper down, Ireland. Ireland was exemplary in its long, savage struggle for autonomy from the most powerful imperialist state of the pre-World War II era, in its extraordinary literature, its fratricides, its self absorption, and its economic involution. One could, in those days, fully recognize all this, and still strongly feel: 'She has a right to be what she is.' So with Indonesia and Vietnam.

Perhaps it was out of an inverted Orientalism, but my sympathies, like those of many of my fellow Southeast Asianists, were then strongly with the nationalisms of the region. Vietnamese heroism in the face of the American firestorm, which I saw as a nationalist more than a socialist heroism, linked itself to Indonesia's fate.[15]

Of course any biographical narrative is necessarily selective. We might apply Renan's strictures about the nation to the auto-biographical accounts of both Ben and Perry. "Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation."[16] And so it is too perhaps in the creation of personal identity. Benedict Anderson's own account of his personal, political and intellectual trajectory may provide a more seamless and smooth progression than might actually have been the case. But if the journey seems smooth in hindsight, there is no doubt that the publication of *Imagined Communities* transformed the terrain of nationalism studies and catapulted Anderson to a much wider international fame. But it is a fame, we want to suggest here, that hides and perhaps rests on a number of paradoxes in how the work has been received, interpreted and appropriated.

Paradox One – The Political Scientist and the Literary Scholar

The first of these has to do with one of the book's most attractive features, its extraordinary historical, geographical and disciplinary breadth. This was in many ways a considerable personal achievement and perhaps the paradox here is more apparent than real. A scholar with a background in political science/modern history (his 1967 thesis [in Government] was eventually published in 1972 as "Java in a Time of Revolution – Occupation and Resistance 1944-1946") now produced a work whose influence was to spread far and wide, notably into the fields of cultural and literary studies.

Anderson was able to appeal to such scholars because he put language and literature at the centre of his explanation of the emergence of nationalism, a modern phenomenon which had to be understood in cultural terms, as a product of a particular way of imagining the world as made up of discrete communities. "The nation is ... imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of his fellow members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the mind of each lives the image of their communion."[17] What made such imagining possible was a particular technological and

economic development, what he called "print capitalism," and the production in vernacular languages of, amongst other things, newspapers that could be read across a considerable expanse of space. It was the establishment of these languages which was fundamental in establishing "national consciousness" and it was literature produced in these languages which provided many of his illustrations of how national communities were imagined. Language is central to nationalist consciousness not as he puts it as "*emblems* of nation-ness, like flags, costumes, folk-dances and the rest," but rather, because "much the most important thing about language is its capacity for generating imagined communities, building in effect *particular solidarities*."[18]

Anderson was able to make such references to language and literature, and more broadly to cultural developments, precisely one might suggest because of his academic formation. Moving from a degree in classics to a politics post in the interdisciplinary world of the Indonesian Studies Programme at Cornell, he had developed particular interests in (especially Javanese) literature and culture and opened himself up to a range of rich and diverse influences, including figures such as Claire Holt, an expert on Indonesian dance who had been a research assistant to Margaret Mead. He could appear then as someone who was variously an anthropologist, a historian, a literary scholar as well as (and perhaps more so than) a political scientist.

But this multiple appeal may have come at a price. In becoming, precisely because of his multi-faceted formation and approach, such a pervasive influence across a range of disciplines, he ran the risk of being less than fully persuasive in any or each of the particular claims he made.

Paradox Two: An influential generaliser but wrong in important detail

Take for instance one of his most original arguments, that it was not Europe which was the centre of origin of modern nationalism but Latin America. The thesis, in particular, that it was creole elites who were the "pioneers" of nationalism has been heavily criticised by historians of Latin America as being inaccurate on most points of detail. As John Charles Chasteen puts it (in his introduction to the collection published from a conference of historians and cultural studies specialists to discuss the relevance of Anderson's work to Latin America), "Anderson's premise that a national consciousness preceded the wars of independence and defined the boundaries of the resulting independent republics is entirely at variance with the consensus of Latin American historians and critics."[19] Indeed, he claims, *contra* Anderson, that it was not until the 20th century that mass political participation made for the possibility of imagined communities among large numbers of Latin Americans. Miller too, surveying a wide range of studies of Latin American nationalism, has also criticised his

claims about the significance in practice of print capitalism in this early period. Arguing about the weaknesses of both the treatment of early-colonial newspapers and the role of novels in creating consciousness of empty, homogeneous time, she suggests that "as a causative explanation, Anderson's argument does not withstand close examination."[20]

Similar problems arise when we look at Anderson's discussion of the relationship between religion and nationalism, another central plank in his argument. The nation, he argues famously, "is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, [it] 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."[21] They are limited "because even the largest of them encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind. The most messianic nationalists do not dream of a day when all the members of the human race will join their nation in the way that it was possible, in certain epochs, for, say, Christians to dream of a wholly Christian planet."[22]

But it is this very difference which points the way to an explanation. Nationalism, he suggests, has to be conceived of (in part) as an alternative to religion. It is nationalism that seems to provide the answers to the big questions once the influence of religion starts to wane. (Why are we here? How did we come to be here? Where is it all leading?)

Again this is a very appealing line of argument. It shows a real concern with questions around subject formation and identity that were otherwise asked only by authors more linked to primordial approaches, or by anti-modernists such as Anthony Smith who provide very different answers. It addresses fundamental questions about why nationalism and national identity have such a powerful appeal, how they make emotional appeals to people to sacrifice themselves for the community so imagined, appeals that he argues are central to national loyalties in practice. This concern with the affective aspects of nationalism is unusual among modernists.[23]

But both the concern and the explanation are open to question. Rather than nationalism being a successor to religion, as Anderson argues, many modern nationalisms have surely incorporated religion, not replaced it. Irish nationalism contains a heavy dose of Catholicism, whilst Croatian nationalism has often asserted a close link between the Croat nation and the Catholic Church. Its nemesis and homologue, Serbian nationalism, for its part has long held a special place for Orthodox Christians, whilst many Croatian and Serbian nationalists have only recently made it forcibly clear that there was no place in either "Greater Croatia" or "Greater Serbia" for Muslims. It is hard to think about

Russian nationalism, certainly in Tsarist times (a period and case Anderson himself uses as an example of what he calls "official nationalism") without reference to the Russian Orthodox Church. Nor can this phenomenon be confined to Christianity. Nationalism in Iran today is infused in many ways with a version of Shiite Islamic ideology, whilst in Israel/Palestine, nationalisms on either side have become impregnated with religious elements, Islamic or Jewish.

Not all nationalisms perhaps have this element or manifest it so clearly. French republican nationalism, it can be argued, is anchored in some ways in the separation of Church and nation state, as is American nationalism. And indeed it was Robert Bellah who first argued that nationalism in America *was* what he called "a civil religion."[24] But this was on rather different grounds to those proposed by Anderson and was part of a very different debate about the possible differences between various kinds of nationalism.

Do differences over such details matter? The paradox here – of praise and influence for a book which is heavily criticised by specialists for historical errors and inaccuracies – is not unique to *Imagined Communities*. Other influential scholars whose books have had a lasting impact have suffered or enjoyed the same fate. One thinks here of Edward Said's *Orientalism* – an even more influential tome than *Imagined Communities* in some ways. There are indeed interesting parallels between these two writers – like Anderson, Said is also an outsider of sorts; also an exile and migrant scholar; also a writer on politics who works a great deal with literary texts; also an author who appeals across disciplinary boundaries to literary and cultural theorists, historians and political scientists. It might be argued that the subsequent debates and research stimulated by such generalising works is argument enough in their favour, regardless of the mistakes of detail and interpretation they will perhaps inevitably contain. After all, despite their dismissal of most of the substance of Anderson's historical analysis, many of these same scholars have indicated that nevertheless Anderson's work had been fruitful in stimulating a whole host of studies which drew on his ideas and concepts. Even if the independence movements of the 18th century cannot be seen as forerunner of European nationalist and third world national liberation movements, there has been increasing attention to the presence, alongside republican ideas, of concepts of the nation. Other writers have examined novels and newspapers in more contemporary contexts for their relationship to nationalism.[25] Certainly, without the bold attempts to synthesise, compare and generalise, many disciplines would be the poorer.

Against this, one could argue that the details do matter, that theorising of this kind across social science and humanities disciplines, particularly in its poststructuralist and postmodern versions, has not felt it necessary to provide solid evidence and proof from individual cases. In removing the study of "big

issues" from the hands of specialists, it can too easily dismiss demands for detailed examples as positivist and empiricist. Robert Irwin's recent critique of Said's work has perhaps gone furthest in reacting to this trend. Arguing that Said was wrong, selective and inaccurate, he has concluded that *Orientalism* "was a work of malignant charlatanry in which it is hard to distinguish honest mistakes from wilful misrepresentations" and that the issues it promised to open up for scholars were not those they should be pursuing: "the value of a debate that is based on a fantasy version of past history and scholarship is not obvious."[26]

The issue of theorising, however, points to another area in which a significant paradox in Anderson's work may be identified.

Paradox Three: A modernist and a Marxist who opened the way for a generation of postmodernist approaches to the nation

Anderson is often seen as part of the modernist school of writers on nationalism, connected in his insistence that nationalism is an essentially modern phenomenon to writers such as Gellner and Hobsbawm[27] and (in another, more political vein) John Breuilly.[28] There are of course important disagreements between them, which have some bearing on an issue we discuss later, the extent to which Anderson should be seen as a critic of nationalism. Both Hobsbawm (as the title of his book indicates) and Gellner, for instance, see nationalism as an ideology which rests to a significant degree on invention.[29] Anderson's position has often been mistakenly assimilated to theirs, even by such subtle critics as the anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz who thinks that "the imaginary quality of the national community is also underlined for a political purpose, for Anderson is critical of nationalism and so is intent on showing its historical contingency and its 'invented' nature."[30] But Anderson himself is clear that imagined communities should not be judged in terms of truth/falsity but the style in which they are imagined. It is not a question of the imaginary and false versus the real.

Nevertheless, despite these important differences, all modernists are agreed that nations are essentially modern constructions, and that nationalism is an essentially modern phenomenon. Their shared targets are all those who insist in their different ways on the deep, if not eternal roots of the nation. The most sophisticated and influential writer in what we might call the anti-modernist camp (although he is careful to distinguish himself from primordialists of any kind) is of course Anthony Smith, who has produced many erudite volumes all insisting that nations clearly emerge long before the modern era, however this is conceived and whenever it is dated.[31] But it is Smith, who has been characteristically generous towards Anderson, who has pointed out the paradox here, that Anderson's oeuvre has inspired a whole body of work which seems anything but modernist in key respects. Indeed Smith has gone so far as to argue

that "Anderson's greatest achievement is to provide a postmodernist reading of the nation within a modernist framework."[32] It is this reading which has led others to produce a whole set of explorations that have had a very largely literary focus, analysing the various ways in which, to borrow Homi Bhabha's emphatically postmodernist phrase, the nation has been "narrated."[33] This concern with "writing the nation" has certainly been a fruitful seam of analysis, but it seems to have resulted in something of a surfeit of textual analyses that may illuminate the texts themselves more than they illuminate the nationalisms or nations to which they may be related.

The best of such work focuses on the discursive strategies at work in defining what the nation is and what it is not, on who they include and who they exclude. Insofar as Anderson is an inspiration here (which is probably a great deal), it is an effect very largely of his insistence on the power of the imagination. As he famously argued, the important thing about nationalism is the variety of ways in which the (national) community is imagined and there is then considerable scope for scholars to investigate the manner in which particular national discourses are constructed, the different elements they combine and recombine. And indeed he himself has subsequently recognised that his work performed such a function, that already in 1983 he had "attempted to combine a kind of historical materialism with what later came to be called discourse analysis; Marxist modernism married to postmodernism *avant la lettre*."[34]

But, as is always the case with discourse analysis, there is the difficult question of the material context within which such discursive strategies operate, the material roots of such imaginings. Smith suggests that the bridge Anderson provided between Marxist and postmodernist approaches had the effect of leading to a body of subsequent work which was divorced from the structural and material rootedness of Anderson's work and which ignored other elements of culture – customs, traditions, myths etc. (the focus of much of Smith's own work).[35]

But this raises a further question. What exactly was (historical) materialist about Anderson's work in the first place? What kind of a Marxist was he? It is true that his exploration of the subject appears to be located within a Marxist problematic, or at least Marxism's failure hitherto to understand and explain nationalism. (But you don't have to be a Marxist to be aware of this problem of course.) It is also true that he has very often been taken to be a Marxist of some sort. Smith, otherwise an acute commentator on his work, talks of his "springing from the same Marxist heritage" as Hobsbawm, an acknowledged and self-consciously Marxist historian, and we ourselves have placed him in that category.[36] There is too, to remind ourselves, the not unimportant matter of his publisher, Verso, the provenance of many other Marxist works, including those of his brother. As Anderson himself has noted, he was strongly encouraged in

1982 to embark on *Imagined Communities* by members of the editorial team on *New Left Review*, by both his brother Perry and by Anthony Barnett. And, finally, there is his own overt acknowledgement that it was "three Good Germans, Karl Marx, Walter Benjamin and Erich Auerbach, who helped me think about the modern world" – a hardly unambiguous piece of intellectual accounting.[37]

But there are, it seems to us, at least two problems with considering him as a Marxist, however loosely defined. They have to do with the notion of print capitalism and with the use he makes of Walter Benjamin, and particularly his notion of "homogeneous empty time."

It was, in Anderson's view, a very particular technological and economic development that made nationalism possible.

> [It was] print capitalism which made it possible for growing numbers of people to think about themselves and to relate themselves to others in profoundly new ways ... 20,000,000 books had already been printed by 1500, signalling the onset of Benjamin's 'age of mechanical reproduction' ... one of the earliest forms of capitalist enterprise, book-publishing felt all capitalism's restless search for markets.[38]

Desperate for readers to buy their commodities, publishers fastened on the "potentially huge markets represented by the monoglot masses," at a moment when Latin was being "dethroned" by the Reformation (and by state administrators).[39]

Anderson himself points to the "half-fortuitous" nature of these convergent developments. But this element of chance sits somewhat uneasily within a Marxist frame of reference. Capitalism, in Marx's view at any rate, was after all scarcely a chance development but a mode of production that appeared for profound and not at all accidental reasons at a particular moment in history. Insofar as nationalism is a major feature of the modern world, one which structures so much of the way we think (and he implies now have to think everywhere) about the modern world, his explanation of it seems in Marxist terms to rest on a very thin foundation. It is difficult to see how it can carry the explanatory weight he seeks to place upon it. Or, to put it another way, print capitalism and especially the emergence of newspapers as a particularly decisive product of this branch of capitalist production seems an unlikely basis for such a momentous development. There are few Marxists, one would venture, who would identify newspaper production as central to this mode of production.

The attention of Marxists (and those who easily assumed Anderson was a Marxist) may have been diverted to some extent from such considerations by his use of Walter Benjamin, an iconic figure in his own right and one whose "aura" (to use a Benjaminian term) may perhaps have dazzled some readers of the book. Benjamin's famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical

Reproduction" was certainly a powerful materialist contribution to cultural analysis. It may well have helped inspire the concept of print capitalism and the claims Anderson makes for its relationship to changed forms of consciousness and subjectivity. And there is in particular Benjamin's notion of "homogeneous empty time" which Anderson sees as central to the ideas of the transformations of consciousness that help explain the emergence of nationalism, with its new sense of simultaneity and the perception of the onward march of the nation through time, linking past, present and future in a seamless sequence.

But there are some problems with this reference to and appropriation of Benjamin. This is not only because Benjamin was a rather unusual Marxist, with his interest in theology and mysticism (notably the Kabbalah). The Marxists to whom he was closest, Horkheimer and Adorno, the acknowledged leaders of the Frankfurt School (scarcely the embodiment of orthodoxy) refused to publish some of Benjamin's most significant work, on the grounds it was insufficiently dialectical in its approach.[40] They were suspicious too of his messianism, which was central to his conception of Marxism as a revolutionary creed, a perspective scarcely shared by Anderson.

And it needs to be remembered that Benjamin was not only a revolutionary Marxist but an internationalist one, hostile like a number of others of his generation (particularly in the German context, where Rosa Luxemburg's influence remained strong), to any moves to reconcile Marxism with nationalism. Benjamin's internationalism placed great strains on his closest friendship, with the Jewish mystic Gershom Scholem, who emigrated to Palestine and wanted Benjamin to join him. This Benjamin refused to do, rejecting Zionism as a nationalist movement in favour of the cause of international socialism, a refusal that (as Scholem warned him it would) was to cost him his life.[41]

It is hard to see Anderson sharing Benjamin's politics in what is scarcely an irrelevant area. But perhaps more profoundly, the thrust of much of Benjamin's work actually seems to go against the direction of Anderson's own arguments. Benjamin was a profound critic of all theories of progress, as his posthumously famous *Theses on the Philosophy of History* make dramatically clear.[42] It is hard to reconcile this position with a notion of nationalism as a significant historical step forward, making a fundamental rupture in a hitherto relatively closed, elitist medieval, Christian political and conceptual framework. Anderson seems to suggest that once this break was made, it opened up a whole new way of thinking which was unstoppable, spreading out across the world over the next few centuries in a wave that shows (in his view) no sign of stopping.

The original epicentre of this wave of course was not, as it was for many other modernists, Europe but Latin America. In putting the latter at the centre of the origins of modern nationalism, Anderson certainly offered a novel perspective,

which appeared to break with the mainly European focus of his contemporaries, but this only opens up a further paradox.

Paradox Four: A perspective that reaches out beyond the traditional European focus of much writing on nationalism yet is criticised for an essentially colonialist perspective

It was certainly a deliberate choice, based on what he later admitted was a determined "polemical intent ... to de-Europeanize the theoretical study of nationalism."[42] It is hard not to see some of the impulse behind this stance as deriving from his upbringing and personal sense of being an outsider to a conventional European or US upbringing. In any event, it was clearly an overt challenge to the prevailing Eurocentric view of nationalism as a product of European societies, whether English or French.

And yet this has not prevented him from being the subject of a most interesting line of criticism. Despite arguably bringing the broadest perspective from the third world and indeed globally to bear on nationalism than any other scholar in the English language, he has been criticised, notably by postcolonial writers from the Subaltern Studies group, for still believing at some level that nationalism was originally a western phenomenon and that others outside the west would have to follow an essentially western model. The most sophisticated exponent of this critique has been Partha Chatterjee, who has pointed out quite sharply that:

> If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain 'modular' forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine? History, it would seem, has decreed that we in the postcolonial world shall only be perpetual consumers of modernity. Europe and the Americas, the only true subjects of history, have thought out on our behalf not only the script of colonial enlightenment and exploitation, but also that of our anti-colonial resistance and postcolonial misery. Even our imaginations must remain forever colonised. ... [44]

Anderson's perspective, while ostensibly deeply sympathetic to non-Western experiences, actually blocks him from seeing what was unique and indeed most interesting about many of them. In fact "the most powerful as well as the most creative results of the nationalist imagination in Asia and Africa are posited not on an identity but rather on a difference with the modular forms of the national society propagated by the modern West."[45]

This blindness is not accidental but may be rooted in a deeper methodological flaw. The appropriation (from Benjamin, as we have seen) of the notion of "empty homogeneous time" as the time typical of modernity and enabling the national imagining, obscures other forms of time. These,

Chatterjee argues, co-exist with a western model of modernity. To understand this, we need another notion, what he calls the "heterogeneous time of modernity." "These other times are not mere survivals of a pre-modern past: they are the new products of the encounter with modernity itself."[46] Anderson, he suggests, is too wedded to Enlightenment conceptions of progress and time embedded in nationalist imaginings to measure up to the realities of the postcolonial world.

Chatterjee and others in the Subaltern school have argued elsewhere that elites in the postcolonial world used nationalism to suppress alternative (subaltern) voices.[47] Anderson himself seems to have been surprisingly silent on such possibilities which points to a further set of paradoxes, if not now contradictions, in his work.

Paradox Five: An initially critical stance towards anti-colonial nationalism followed by silence

This silence may be connected to the choice of Latin American nationalism as the centrepiece of his explanation for the rise of nationalism. For nationalism here, on Anderson's own account, had a particularly elitist character. It was driven and articulated primarily by local elites envious of metropolitan ones, frustrated by lack of recognition and unwilling to continue to pay political and financial homage. There is then a paradoxical sense in which Latin American nationalism may well have been a forerunner of anti-colonial nationalisms. Invoking popular support, one of its main accomplishments was to substitute new postcolonial elites for older colonial ones. If the promise of democracy was there at the beginning, it slowly or sometimes quickly faded away in all too many cases.

But the problem is not only one of elitism and a potential divergence of interest between elites and masses inside the new nation. There is also the problem of conflict between new nations themselves. It was, it will be recalled, the acute disappointment caused by the spectacle of two successful national liberation movements turning their arms on each other in the Cambodia-Vietnam conflict that was apparently the immediate inspiration for *Imagined Communities* in the first place. Why, having defeated American imperialism, did these two supposedly socialist states now wage war on each other?

But this characterisation of Vietnam and Cambodia may have been deceptive. It was not originally as a socialist movement that Anderson was drawn to the Vietnamese national liberation struggle. Recall again the precise expressions he used to describe "Vietnamese heroism in the face of the American firestorm, which I saw as a nationalist more than a socialist heroism."[48] But if it was anti-colonial nationalism that he was drawn to, what could he say when this

nationalism was turned against other nationalisms, equally anti-colonial and equally deserving of his sympathy and admiration?

This dilemma is, of course, by no means confined to Anderson. But it is perhaps significant that Anderson said very little about this particular development in the course of a book that was supposedly motivated by its occurrence. It is perhaps particularly significant that the conflict between these two nationalisms took place in the context of (if it was not even caused by) the worst case of genocide since the Holocaust. For this was a genocide in which nationalism played a quite central role. (It is not of course the only such case.) It was after all Pol Pot's obsessive desire to realise his archaic vision of a reborn, cleansed Cambodian kingdom that lay at the heart of the ideology of the Khmer Rouge and led to the murder of an astonishing one–third of the Cambodian population in such a short space of time.

All those who did not fit into his model of the Khmer nation were to be killed. Ben Kiernan has argued persuasively that this was both a nationalist and a racist project[49] and this may be one reason for Anderson's difficulty and silence. For he is at great pains in *Imagined Communities* to draw clear lines between nationalism and racism, which he insists are quite different ways of imagining the world. And this brings us to the last and perhaps most puzzling paradox of all.

Paradox Six: His apparently critical stance towards nationalism when he is often (in the end?) deeply sympathetic

Anderson insists that nationalism and racism have to be kept quite separate, that they are quite different in origin and implication. "The fact of the matter is that nationalism thinks in terms of historical destinies, while racism dreams of eternal contaminations."[50] He argues that racism does not cut across national boundaries but is rather focused internally on hierarchical differences between people living in one society. Whilst racism is depicted as destructive, driven by hatred and fear, nationalism seems to be considered constructive, inspired by feelings of love and creativity, driven by aspirations and dreams for a better future.[51]

This attempt to distinguish the two so sharply is not wholly persuasive, and would certainly be challenged by other writers, who would argue that racial categories are deeply imbricated with national ones in very many cases.[52] This was particularly true in 19th century Europe (and therefore very soon indeed after the emergence of nationalism on Anderson's own account) where pseudo-scientific ideas about "race" informed many nationalist movements, particularly those with imperialist ambitions.[53] But Lomnitz suggests that such linkages could be found too in the Iberian speaking world that forms the basis for much of Anderson's own analysis.

> In the case of Spain, at least, 'racial' identity (in the sense of a bloodline) was coupled with linguistic identity for the formation of an opposition between 'Spaniards' and 'Indians,' and it was descent from Old Christians who had fought holy wars that made Spaniards a chosen people.[54]

This is a side of nationalism that Anderson seems most reluctant to foreground or perhaps even to recognise. This means that he has little to say about some of the most problematic features of nationalism, notably its frequently exclusionary character. For racism is scarcely absent even from the most supposedly civic of nationalisms, where arguments about who and who is not to be included almost invariably take a racialized form.[55] Whenever civic nations (as they imagine themselves) raise barriers against immigrants and even those seeking asylum, they almost always do so on a racialized basis. Australians in the UK, Swiss in France, Austrians in Germany have never been seen in the same way as Bangladeshis, Albanians or Kurds.

The language used to describe those who want to enter the national community is often full of negative, denigrating images of one kind or another, evoking dislike even hatred of the other. But Anderson insists that such themes are at best marginal to the nationalist imagination, that nationalist discourse has a very different character. It is, he suggests at one point, only "progressive, cosmopolitan intellectuals (particularly in Europe?)" who want to "insist on the near-pathological character of nationalism."[56] Against them, he argues strongly that we need

> to remind ourselves that nations inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love. The cultural products of nationalism ... show this love very clearly in thousands [sic] of different forms and styles. On the other hand, how truly rare it is to find analogous nationalist products expressing fear and loathing. (141-142)

This seems a rather partial judgement at best. Even if one were to accept for the sake of the argument that (some) people may wish to sacrifice themselves for love of country, they tend to do so in the attempt to kill large numbers of other people, usually in wars which, as Balakrishnan has pointed out, is largely absent from Anderson's considerations.[57] This is both curious and perhaps revealing, given that war was actually his starting point.

Most of those who fight in nationalist wars may not be quite as spontaneously motivated as this line of argument suggests. Some have to be coerced, even punished for their refusal, if they happen to be (for instance) pacifists or conscientious objectors or internationalists. Most of those who fight and kill have often to be conscripted, mobilised by a combination of legal measures and ideological appeals. These invariably lay great stress on the grave threats facing the nation, threats to its security and even existence.

The converse of these threats is usually a somewhat idealised, even Utopian image of the national community itself, and in the end it is this appeal, aesthetically and morally, that seems to seduce even Anderson himself. "I must be the only one writing about nationalism who doesn't think it ugly. If you think about researchers such as Gellner and Hobsbawm, they have quite a hostile attitude to nationalism. I actually think that nationalism can be an attractive ideology. I like its Utopian elements."[58]

In the final essay of the collection "The Spectre of Comparisons" which contains a number of important literary and political essays, Anderson goes further still, in an essay entitled "The Goodness of Nations," a title that appears at first to be semi-ironic but finally proves not to be ironic at all.

> There is something of value in all of this – strange as it might seem. ... Each in a different but related way shows why, no matter what crimes a nation's government commits and its passing citizenry endorses, My Country is ultimately Good. In these straitened millennial times, can such Goodness be profitably discarded?[59]

In conclusion

This seems a most paradoxical conclusion for someone whose most influential work begins with a question about what might be thought to lie at the very opposite end of the spectrum: war and genocide. But, as we have suggested, it is by no means the only paradox to be found in his work and in its reception.

These paradoxes tell us something perhaps about the broader intellectual and political scene in which Anderson has been such an influential figure and about the audiences, on the left especially, to whom his writing may be addressed. There is a certain fuzziness in crucial areas, an initial appearance of cosmopolitanism sitting uneasily aside and in the end being replaced by an increasingly open advocacy of a certain kind of nationalism. It is part of perhaps broader politics grounded in anti-imperialism more than any kind of overt socialism, with a dose of nostalgia for supposedly progressive nationalist leaders and the national liberation movements they led to initial success; and a reluctance to look too closely at later, post-colonial developments.

Anderson himself seems well aware of the source of his book's appeal. In his partly reflective last chapter in the third edition of *Imagined Communities*, he writes of the book as uniquely biased towards "small countries," a reflection partly of his support for the position of Tom Nairn, another writer on nationalism published by Verso and with some initial Marxist credentials. "In many parts of the world" he writes, "faculty members and students, if they have political commitments at all, are Left, or liberal-left in their sympathies and are open to IC's agenda. That the book, though written in English, was also partly

aimed at British and American imperialism, may also have been a factor [in its appeal]."[60]

If this aim was there from the outset, we perhaps need to think about Anderson as more than simply a major contributor to and influence on the study of nationalism. He has perhaps become (if he was not all along) an important participant in the politics of nationalism itself.

Notes

[1] Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

[2] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[3] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991); all references unless otherwise indicated are to the second edition.

[4] Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1965).

[5] In his afterword to the third edition of *Imagined Communities* (2006) Anderson himself writes: "Aside from the advantages of brevity, IC restfully occludes a pair of words from which the vampires of banality have by now sucked all the blood" (207).

[6] <http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Anderson.html> [accessed 5/5/06]. James Carew O'Gorman Anderson had previously been married to the remarkable Stella Benson (1892-1933) a novelist, poet, short story writer, travel writer and feminist. They married in 1921 in China and she settled uneasily into the role of colonial wife. She campaigned against prostitution and the traffic in women and children and was a friend of many famous writers such as Winifred Holtby, Naomi Mitcheson, Rebecca West, Vita Sackville West and the poet Amy Lowell.

[7] <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/Elberg/Anderson/ anderson-con1.html>

[8] Perry Anderson writes of these feelings of marginalisation:

> When I was a kid here in boarding school in Los Gatos ... Oh, in California? In California, yes. I had an English accent, of course, as did my brother. And so we were picked at, not exactly targeted, but, the mixture of a kind of derision and, you know how it is with small children, 'He's an outsider.' We were treated as English. By the time I got back to England, immediately after the war, we had American accents, so we were treated as Americans. And American kids also were objects, to some extent, of fun, or of attack. Then going back to Ireland, we were treated as English. And the Irish don't like the English very much, so we had that. And then, finally, I came back to England again, by which time, we were treated as Irish. So that process unsettled what one might think of as an unreflective or automatic attachment to one's own country.
>
> (<http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/Elberg/Anderson/anderson-con1.html>

[9] Introduction to his edited essays – Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1990) 2, 10.

[10] "I was then twenty years old and had never had a serious political thought in my life," writes Anderson (Language and Power 1).

[11] *Language and Power* 2-3.

[12] *Responses* 23.

[13] *Responses* 23.

[14] There is something of a mystery surrounding his naming. Books have been written by Ben Anderson, Benedict Anderson, and the full scale Benedict Richard O'Gorman Anderson, although the latter seems to have been abandoned many years ago. (Indeed one confused reviewer, posting on the website of the Institute of Ideas, attributes *Imagined Communities* to two authors – Richard O'Gorman and Benedict Anderson!) (<http://www.culturewars.org.uk/2005-01/ indopak.htm>).

[15] Anderson, *Language and Power* 6-7.

[16] Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?," *Nationalism in Europe – 1815 to the Present*, ed. S. Woolf (London: Routledge 1996) 50.

[17] Anderson, *Imagined Communities* 6.

[18] *Imagined Communities* 133.

[19] John Charles Chasteen, "Introduction: Beyond Imagined Communities," *Beyond Imagined Communities: Reading and Writing the Nation in 19th century Latin America*, eds. John Charles Chasteen and Sarah Castro-Klaren (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003) xi.

[20] Nicola Miller, "The historiography of nationalism and national identity in Latin America," *Nations and Nationalism* 12.2 (2006): 201-21.

[21] Anderson, *Imagined Communities* 6.

[22] Anderson, *Imagined Communities* 7.

[23] Although Gellner attempted in his later work to counter the criticism that he was not at all interested in the emotional appeal of nationalism.

[24] Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Beyond Belief*, ed. R. Bellah (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

[25] Miller, *Nations and Nationalism*.

[26] Robert Owen, *For Lust of Knowing: the Orientalists and their Enemies* (London: Allen Lane, 2006). For a recent defence of Said that asserts the overriding value of his work despite its many errors, see Lawrence Rosen, "Orientalism Revisited – Edward Said's Unfinished Critique": "Said got much of the substance wrong, but his method ... was basically sound" (<http://bostonreview.net/BR32.1/rosen.html> [accessed 7/3/2007]).

[27] Hobsbawm's major work on the subject (so far) has been his wide-ranging set of lectures on *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). The choice of the year 1780 is slightly idiosyncratic but symptomatic.

[28] John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

[29] "Nations as a natural, God-given way of classifying men, as an inherent ... political

destiny, are a myth; nationalism, which sometimes takes pre-existing cultures and turns them into nations, sometimes invents them, and often obliterates pre-existing cultures; that is reality" (Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* [1983] 48-9).

30 Claudio Lomnitz, "Nationalism as a Practical System: Benedict Anderson's Theory of Nationalism from the Vantage Point of Spanish America" in C. Lomnitz, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) 7.

31 See, amongst many others, his *Nationalism and Modernism* (London: Routledge, 1998) and *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

32 Anthony Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2004) 136.

33 Homi Bhabha, "Introduction: Narrating the Nation," *Nation and Narration*, ed. H. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990).

34 *Imagined Communities*, 3rd ed. 227.

35 Anthony Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism*.

36 Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism* 130; Philip Spencer and Howard Wollman, *Nationalism: A Critical Introduction* (London: Sage, 2002) chapter 2.

37 Anderson, *Language and Power* 14.

38 Anderson, *Imagined Communities* 36-38.

39 Anderson, *Imagined Communities* 38-39.

40 This relationship is analysed in some detail by Martin Jay in *The Dialectical Imagination; A History of the Frankfurt School* (Boston: Little Brown, 1973). See especially 197-212.

41 See Scholem's account of their friendship and political disagreements in his *Walter Benjamin* (New York: New York Review of Books Classics, 2003).

42 Particularly in the ninth thesis with its extraordinary use of a painting by Klee, depicting (in Benjamin's mind) the angel of history, with staring eyes and an open mouth gazing at a violent storm, a succession of catastrophes which pile up debris higher and higher. "This storm is what we call progress" (Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt [London: Fontana, 1973] 259-260). Whatever else Anderson thinks of nationalism, it is clearly not as a succession of catastrophes.

43 *Imagined Communities*, 3rd ed. 209.

44 Pathra Chatterjee, "Whose Imagined Community?" *Mapping the Nation*, ed. G. Balakrishnan (London: Verso, 1996).

45 *ibid*.

46 Partha Chatterjee, Delhi Lecture <http://www.globalcult.org.ve/doc/Partha/Partha_1.pdf> [accessed 22/2/07].

47 See for example Ranajit Guha, ed., *A Subaltern Studies Reader*, 1986-1995 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

48 Anderson, *Language and Power* 7.

49 Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime – Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the*

Khmer Rouge, 1975-79 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

[50] Anderson, *Imagined Communities* 149.

[51] *ibid* chapter 8 passim.

[52] Among Marxists by for example Etienne Balibar. See especially the set of essays, also published by Verso, written with Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (1991). A more recent critique of this distinction may be found in Paul Gilroy's *Against Race: Imagining Political Cultures Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2000).

[53] As Robert Miles points out, racism and nationalism were entwined in the ideas of nineteenth century ideologues such as Knox and Gobineau (Robert Miles, "Nationalism and Racism: Antithesis and Articulation" in Robert Miles, *Racism after Race Relations* [London: Routledge, 1983]).

[54] Claudio Lomnitz, "Nationalism as a Practical System: Benedict Anderson's Theory of Nationalism from the Vantage Point of Spanish America" in C. Lomnitz, *Deep Mexico Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) 33.

[55] See Spencer and Wollman, op. cit.

[56] Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (1991) 141-2.

[57] Gopal Balakrishnan, "The Nationalist Imagination," *Mapping the Nation*