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Benedict Anderson

By Jingqiu Zhang

Benedict Richard O'Gorman Anderson, one of the world's most outstanding historians, political scientists, and polyglots, passed away at the age of 79 on December 13, 2015.¹ Anderson is best known for his 1983 book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, which profoundly explored the origins of nationalism. As one of the most widely cited works in various academic fields, no single phrase occurs as frequently as “imagined communities” in the literature of nationalism. In fact, the author's entire life is closely connected with the questions he asked in his own book – “what is nationalism, and where does it come from?”

Anderson has an extraordinary Anglo-Irish family background. His grandfather used to be a loyal senior officer of the British Empire while his grandmother, on the other hand, belonged to the Gaelic MacGorman clan, the famous active clan that strongly supported Irish nationalist movements for centuries. His father, James Carew O'Gorman Anderson, after failing to pass the entrance examination of Cambridge, moved to the Republic of China and found a position in the Chinese Maritime Customs.²

On August 26, 1936, Anderson was born in Kunming, a major city in southwest China, and two years later, his younger brother, Perry Anderson, who is often identified as one of the most outstanding Western Marxism intellectuals in the contemporary period, was born. During his childhood, Anderson grew up in a special environment full of oriental elements. In 1941, in order to avoid the escalating Second Sino-Japanese War, Anderson's family decided to go back to Ireland via the United States.³ The return trip, however, was shelved because of the unexpected outbreak of the Pacific War. As a result, Anderson had to settle in

¹ Thor Kerr, “Ben Anderson's Legacy for Our Modern Communities,” *The Conversation*, December 15, 2015, <http://theconversation.com/ben-andersons-legacy-for-our-modern-communities-52323>.

² Perry Anderson, “My Father's Career in the Chinese Customs Service,” *London Review of Books* 20, no.16 (1998), accessed February 26, 2016, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v20/n16/perry-anderson/a-belated-encounter>.

³ Ibid.

California where he received his initial education. The family eventually returned to their motherland at the end of 1945. After that, Anderson continued his education in England. He first studied at Eton College, and then went on to attend Cambridge. At the beginning of his college life, Anderson did not show any obvious political tendency. One day in November 1956, when Anderson was roaming the Cambridge campus, he witnessed a public speech launched by several Indian people that criticized Britain and France's invasion of Egypt for control of the Suez Canal. Soon after, the speech was obstructed by a group of upper-class British students. When Anderson tried to stop the British students' attack on the Indian people, he was beaten as well, and lost his glasses in the chaos. After breaking up the Indian crowd, the British students stood together and proudly sang the national anthem.⁴ This incident became Anderson's political enlightenment – an enlightenment that pushed him to be an anti-imperialist, Marxist, and anti-colonialist thinker in the future. It deeply influenced his criticism on imperialism as well as his sympathy towards the colonial nationalism movements.

In 1957, Anderson earned a B.A. in classics from Cambridge University. There, he developed an immense interest in Asian politics, which later led him to enroll in Cornell University's Indonesian studies program. Anderson worked on his Ph.D. under the guidance of experts George Kahin and Claire Holt.⁵ Anderson went to Jakarta, Indonesia in 1961. From 1961 to 1964, Anderson spent most of his time in the countryside areas of Indonesia for his doctoral research.

During this period, many great political struggles occurred in Indonesia. On September 1965, an attempted coup happened in Jakarta, but was shortly countered by the military led by the Major General Suharto. This failed coup was blamed on the Indonesian Communist Party later. As a result, Suharto-led troops led a wide-ranged anti-communist purge, which eventually became one of the worst mass murders of the 20th century.⁶ Meanwhile, Suharto, the military strongman, quickly wrested power from Indonesia's founding president, Sukarno, and started his dictatorship, which

⁴ Ruiren Wu, "Weight of Identity," review of *Imagined Communities*, by Benedict Anderson, *Oriental Historical Review*, March 31, 2014, accessed February 28, 2016, <http://cul.qq.com/a/20140327/005286.htm>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

lasted for the next three decades. After the 1965 communist coup and massacres, Anderson, as a bystander, published three studies. One of which became known as the “Cornell Paper,” in which Anderson argued that discontented army officers, rather than communists, had been responsible for the coup and questioned the military government’s claims to legitimacy.⁷ Unsurprisingly, Anderson was no longer welcomed by the military government. He was banned from entering Indonesia by the authorities for twenty-seven years. Due to the prohibition that he could no longer do his research in Indonesia, Anderson gradually turned his study to other Southeast Asian countries, such as Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines. At the same time, because of the increasing expansion of the Vietnam War, Anderson began to pay more attention to the research of local communist movements as well as participating in various anti-war activities during the entire 1970s. His masterpiece, *Imagined Communities*, was also conceived in the late 1970s. One of the direct contributions to Anderson’s writing was the outbreak of the triangular war between China, Vietnam and Cambodia in 1979.⁸ This historical event raised a significant question in his mind – why would nationalism be powerful enough to force those three self-proclaimed “internationalist” and “socialist” countries to declare war against each other?

Indeed, that is a fact seen again and again in humankind’s history – nationalism is such a powerful idea that could easily induce millions to willingly die for its name. Hence, how is it that such a unique notion became Anderson’s chief concern? In fact, finding the source of nationalism has plagued scholars for several generations. In past studies, the mainstream focused on the relation between “nation” and “nationalism.” Academia tried to find some solid reality, which could be identified as the “nation” at first, in order to construe the origin of nationalism.⁹ Nevertheless, Anderson did not blindly follow the previous experience. On the contrary, he chose the opposite and stood alone. Anderson noticed that all the former research with limited progress was largely due to the preconception that nationalism must be based on the concept

⁷ Kerr, “Ben Anderson’s Legacy.”

⁸ Cynthia Foo, *Invisible Culture*, October 1, 2008, accessed March 4, 2016, http://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/Issue_13_/foo/index.html.

⁹ Rod Benson. “The Nation: A State of Mind,” review of *Imagined Communities*, by Benedict Anderson, *Journal of International Affairs* 45, no. 2 (1992): 640-641.

of a nation-state. In order to break the long-standing deadlock, Anderson boldly proposed his view that “nationalism” is a “cultural artifact of a particular kind.” In other words, nationalism, national identity, and even the nation-state are all realities constructed by human imagination. Anderson believed that this invention of nationalism was full of artificial fabrication. He emphasized the fundamental notion that a nation is actually imagined because “members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members[,]” but “in the mind of each lives the image of their community.”¹⁰ Then, how did such an imagined reality come to be a lived reality? Why did nationalism become so sacred that no mere political ideology could replace it?

Anderson looked for answers by studying the eighteenth century when nationalism arose. The eighteenth century was a turbulent time when ancient verities - religion, dynasty, and cosmological perceptions, were all being rapidly overturned. Anderson deeply believed that the birth of nationalism should be best understood by situating it within the context of culture transformation rather than ideology innovation. For Anderson, the explanation for such significant cultural transformation is due to the intersection of economics and technology as the global market was gradually constructed. Anderson put his emphasis on so-called “print-capitalism” as undoubtedly the greatest driving force of nationalism’s rise.

The dawn of the printed word forever changed Europeans’ consciousness. Because of the advent of printed languages, speakers of the numerous dialects of French, English and Spanish could, for the first time, imagine themselves as part of a united community.¹¹ Thus, language helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of nation. Anderson gives language greater credit for advancing the birth of nationalism. He believed only a nationalism rooted in language, rather than blood, could allow anyone to be “invited in” to the imagined community.¹² Furthermore, Anderson’s theory that a nation is “imagined” does not mean that a nation is unreal. Rather he proposed that a nation is constructed from popular processes through which residents share the same language first, and then the

¹⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹² *Ibid.*, 45.

same culture and tradition, until a uniform national identity is formed. With such strong ideological ties, those “imagined” nations would be eventually conceived as “a deep, horizontal comradeship” regardless of “the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each.”¹³ As a result, patriotic calls become an irrefutable right, and the necessary duty, of all national residents. During war periods, national citizens would be equal, and class boundaries would disappear, because of the communal struggle for national survival and greatness. As Anderson claims, “ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much as to kill, as willing to die for such limited imaginings.”¹⁴

Another remarkable aspect in Anderson’s study of the development of nationalism is the role of “Creole pioneers,” which totally opposed the traditional Eurocentrism research method. Anderson noticed that during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century those who fought for national independence in the New World had the same ancestry, languages, and traditions as the colonial powers they opposed.¹⁵ He affirmed that these American “Creole communities” actually developed conceptions of nation-ness much earlier than the notion of nationalism blossomed in Europe.¹⁶ Anderson believed that conflicts between metropolitan countries’ stricter control and the increase of power in the administrative units of the New World were the reasonable explanation for why American residents conceived their new belonging to a common and potentially sovereign community. The colonies detested the tighter regulations imposed by suzerains, such as imposed new taxes, enforced metropolitan commercial monopolies, and obliged trade ships to first go through the ports of suzerains.¹⁷ Another reason for the early development of national consciousness in the New World was the rising popularity of the newspaper. Reporting both provincial and world news, the newspapers further encouraged and fortified the imagination of nation-ness. By reading about events both local and around the world, the New World elite were able to develop a consciousness

¹³ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

about the existence of other nations, a sense of “us,” versus “them.”¹⁸

Anderson’s historical research is impressive, and it opened an entirely new field of inquiry on nationalism from cultural criticism rather than traditional social science. *Imagined Communities*, first published in 1983, immediately received great attention from scholars in different fields. More specifically, Anderson’s concepts caused academic debates through their impact on interdisciplinary studies of nationalism. The book is widely studied and discussed in the intellectual community, and is continually as much critiqued as it is praised. Primarily, Anderson’s arguments are questioned by many postcolonial scholars. They criticize that Anderson is too linear in his explanation that political structures and institutions change from dynasties, through the standardizing influence of print capitalism, to sovereign nations. The most vocal critic has been Partha Chatterjee, who contends that the imagination of political communities has only been limited by European colonialism.¹⁹ In addition, Chatterjee also challenges that although the processes of print capitalism were important, Anderson’s formulation of them as standardizing language, time and territorial extent is too simplistic to impose on the diverse, multilingual and asymmetrical power relations of the colonial situation.²⁰ Another major critique comes from a feminist perspective. With a focus on the “fraternity” experienced by members of a nation, the protagonists in Anderson’s conceptions of nationalism are typically assumed to be male. Therefore, Mayer argues that Anderson envisions “a hetero-male project...imagined as a Brotherhood,” eliding gender, class and racial structures within and between national communities.²¹ A third challenge comes from Fadia Rafeedie. In her book review, Rafeedie voices concern over the lack of representation of the Arab world in Anderson’s book. She asserts the importance of examining Arab nationalism because Arabic is one of the world’s only languages to have survived throughout history in its classical form. Thus, Anderson’s treatment of language as the key to

¹⁸ Ibid., 62-63.

¹⁹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 5.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ T. Mayer, “Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Setting the Stage,” *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation* (London: Routledge, 2000), 7.

evoking nationalist sentiments has not been proven in the Arab world. Moreover, whereas the nation-nesses of other countries have “modern” origins, Arab-ness has enjoyed mature linguistic, ethnic, and geographic solidarity since 7th century.²²

Overall, Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* has been a profound masterpiece since the first day it was published. Its worldwide impact across academic disciplines led to a revised edition in 1991 as well as its reprints numerous times thereafter. It has been translated into dozens of languages and has become the most regularly cited work on the topic of nationalism. Anderson himself enjoyed a great reputation due to his work. He appeared on television, and addressed committees of the United Nations and the United States congress regarding Indonesia and East Timor in the 1980s and 1990s. Throughout his life, Anderson received praise and backlash in equal measure, but there is no doubt that Anderson has been one of the most influential scholars of our time. His death is a great loss for the entire human community.

²² Fadia Rafeedie, “Review of *Imagined Communities* by Benedict Anderson,” July 19, 1999, accessed March 8, 2016, <http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~mescha/bookrev/Anderson,Benedict.html>.

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Author Bio

Jingqiu Zhang graduated from California State University, San Bernardino in 2015 with a Master of Arts degree in social science, with an emphasis in Chinese history. He also has two Bachelor's degrees in history and finance. As an international student, Jingqiu served on the Chinese Student Association as Secretary and Vice President for two years. He also participated in the CSUSB History Club/Phi Alpha Theta during his graduate study period. He enjoys furthering his interest in modern Chinese history through studying more popular theories in Western academic circles. He would like to express his appreciation for Dr. Jeremy Murray, who continually helped, encouraged, and inspired him in his academic researches. He would also like to thank Elvis Rivera Salinas, the editor of this project, for his great and meaningful advice for the writing.

