

Title—Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism

Author—Benedict Anderson

Year—1983

Categories: Theory, Nationalism, Politics

Place: The World

Time: 1700-1960

Argument Synopsis:

Anderson's book attempts to provide a workable theory of nationalism. He notes that every successful revolution since the Second World War has defined itself in national terms. And yet, nation, nationality, and nationalism are all very difficult to define, let alone analyze. Anderson seeks to demonstrate how nationalism arose all over the world and persists today across competing ideological boundaries. He identifies three major causes for the rise in nationalism, being: print capitalism, new provincial elites in the Americas, and the bureaucratic weld of nations onto empires. Print technology enabled people to imagine large linked communities that had previously enjoyed no special form of togetherness. He aims to offer some tentative suggestions for a more satisfactory interpretation of nationalism. Anderson's point of departure is that nationality, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts. He argues that the creation of these artefacts towards the end of the eighteenth century was the spontaneous distillation of a complex crossing of discrete historical forces, and once created these artefacts became capable of being transplanted.

Anderson offers a workable definition of the nation—an imagined political community that is imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. Anderson posits that there is a need for a better definition and theory of nationalism because of three paradoxes that have perplexed theorists of nationalism. He identifies these as: the objective modernity of nations to the historians eye versus their subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists; the formal universality of nationality as a sociocultural concept versus the irremediable particularity of its concrete manifestations; and the political power of nationalisms versus their philosophical poverty and even incoherence. He argues that nationalism as a concept has not produced its own great thinkers, i.e. class and Marx.

A central component of Anderson's argument is that all communities, or communities larger than primordial villages, are imagined. They are imagined because even the members of the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, yet an image of their communion lives in the minds of all members. The nation is imagined as limited because every nation has finite, if elastic, boundaries beyond which lie other nations. The nation is imagined as sovereign because the concept was born in an age in which the Enlightenment was destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained hierarchical dynastic realm. He posits that nationalism could only arise when these religious cultural conceptions lost their grip. The nation is imagined as a community because the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship. Anderson argues that it is this fraternity that makes it possible for people to kill and be willing to die for limited imaginings.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The nation is an imagined political community and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign
- Three major causes for the rise of nationalism: print capitalism, new provincial elites, and the bureaucratic weld of nations onto empires
- All communities larger than primordial villages are imagined