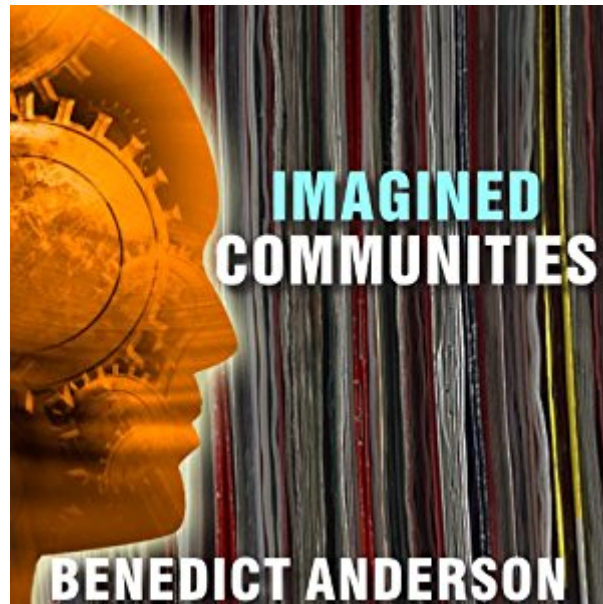


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Imagined Communities: Reflections On The Origin And Spread Of Nationalism



Synopsis

Imagined Communities, Benedict Anderson's brilliant book on nationalism, forged a new field of study when it first appeared in 1983. Since then it has sold over a quarter of a million copies and is widely considered the most important book on the subject. In this greatly anticipated revised edition, Anderson updates and elaborates on the core question: What makes people live and die for nations, as well as hate and kill in their names? Anderson examines the creation and global spread of the "imagined communities" of nationality, and explores the processes that created these communities: the territorialization of religious faiths, the decline of antique kingship, the interaction between capitalism and print, the development of secular languages-of-state, and changing conceptions of time and space. He shows how an originary nationalism born in the Americas was adopted by popular movements in Europe, by imperialist powers, and by the anti-imperialist resistances in Asia and Africa. In a new afterword, Anderson examines the extraordinary influence of imagined communities. He also explores the book's international publication and reception, from its first publication toward the end of the Cold War era to the present day.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The thesis of this book in important ways parallels that of Patrick J. Geary in the "The Myth of Nations," and the international systems analysis of the late Dr. Charles A. McClelland. The present author, Benedict Anderson, offers the thesis that nations are creations of modern communication networks, and remain the shared and collective figmentation of people's imagination. In his view,

both belonging to a nation, and the nation itself, depend on individual perceptions rather than on more objective factors such as borders and natural resources, etc. His view emphasizes the point that political nations exist only to the extent they exist in people's minds. Greary's view overlaps with this one in the sense that nations arise as a result of the coordinated efforts of ethnic elites, who purposefully create legends that are "tacked on before the fact" in a conscious effort to provide a basis for creating national cohesion, pride and fealty, a kind of proto-nationalism. The late Dr. Charles A. McClelland would undoubtedly support Anderson's communications-centered definition of a nation state. In fact, in his World famous research project "The World Event Interaction Survey," known best by the acronym "the WEIS Project," he went much further, by arguing that the international relations of states themselves constitutes a "communications system" composed of millions of discrete day-to-day interactions of both a diplomatic and a cultural nature going on between nation states. These "inputs" and "outputs" or transactions from individual states can be seen as defining the character and personality of those states. He dubbed this global communications arrangement, writ large, as "the international system."

This book is something of a classic of sociology but not a light read. Very briefly, the thesis of "Imagined Communities" is that political nations are the creation of modern communication networks (definition of modern: post-Gutenberg). When one stops to think about it, this insight seems intuitive. After all, how can people relate to other people unless there is first communication among them? In a world in which most people are illiterate and never travel beyond their villages, of course they would not think of themselves as belonging to a great nation of people since they would most likely be unable to imagine such a concept. With widespread literacy, the possibility exists of having communities of people who are not in direct contact with one another. Benedict Anderson takes this insight about nationhood and discusses how these imagined communities of people not directly in contact with one another may be formed. It is not surprising that the nations of Europe have formed around linguistic communities since having a common language facilitates communication. However, a sense of alienation from a ruling class may also facilitate a sense of nationhood, as it did in the Americas in the late 18th century when our founding fathers (and those of Latin America) felt themselves excluded from the political lives of their mother countries. Having the means to communicate throughout their colonies made possible the recognition of common feelings among these colonials. Furthermore, a sense of nationhood may be fostered by a state that creates through its educational system and its media a sense of shared experiences (eg, national holidays, national heroes, and national myths).

Benedict Anderson, professor at Cornell University with a background in Asian studies, complained in the 1983 introduction to *Imagined Communities* that, despite the universally important value of nationalism in our time, "a plausible theory on nationalism is conspicuously meager."

Anderson's study sought to inspire additional work on nationalism. Anderson had in mind the future of socialism (being Marxist-influenced himself), and he was seeking to explain the meaning of nationalism in modern history. Benedict Anderson's study suggests that nationalism rose around the world as a result of three main developments. First, the rise of print-capitalism allowed people to "imagine" themselves as part of a larger community. The process began with the "revolutionary vernacularizing thrust of capitalism," which not only expanded the reading public but also led to the spread of vernacular languages as instruments of administrative centralization. "The convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language," Anderson writes, "created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation."

The second development was the rise of what Anderson calls the "creole pioneers" – "the elite classes who led movements in opposition to the colonial states, especially in the Americas. Here, print capitalism exceeds language itself in importance: New England and the Spanish colonies, for instance, created its own press and spread its own ideas, even though the language in which this process occurred remained the same as the metropole. Thus "pilgrim creole functionaries and provincial creole printmen played the decisive historic role" in the creation of nationalism.

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