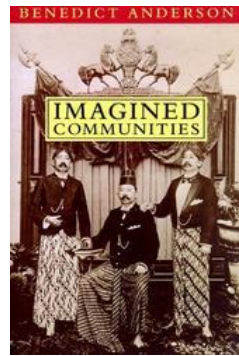


# The Inadvertence of Benedict Anderson: Engaging *Imagined Communities*

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Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* London: Verso, 2006, second revised edition (first published 1983, revised edition, 1991). xv + 240 pp. ISBN 9781844670864

Like celebrities who ‘need no introduction’, Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (hereinafter *IC*) should need no review. After all, it is one of the most widely cited works in its field and such academic ubiquity is surely review enough. Indeed, no single phrase occurs as widely and frequently in the literature on nationalism as ‘imagined communities’.



That it is not always attributed to its original creator is testimony to its pervasive acceptance and adoption. However, I am probably not alone in having long felt a certain unease with *IC*: not on individual points, though many of these have been criticized (see Özkırıklı, 2000, for a convenient summary of the principal criticisms of *IC*), but with slippages between its stated aims and arguments and their real logic. My unease was recently heightened when I tried to place *IC* – the conjuncture in the development of nations and nationalisms at which it intervened and the contribution it made – within a larger historical perspective on nationalism’s evolution over recent centuries, and an intellectual historical perspective on attempts to comprehend it (Desai 2009b). Re-reading *IC* in its new edition – now including a post-face detailing the impressive history of its translations and editions – nearly a quarter century after its original publication has served to crystallize vague unease into overall assessment.

Inevitably, this assessment is made against the backdrop of the rather drastic swings of fortune which *IC*’s object of study – nationality, nation-ness, nationalism (p. 4 [all numbers in brackets indicate page references in the 2006 edition]) – underwent since the book’s publication, including being consigned to the proverbial ‘dustbin of history’ by many, Anderson included (see Desai, 2009b). When *IC* was originally published in 1983, and in its 1991 new and expanded edition, Anderson insisted that ‘the “end of the era of nationalism,” so long prophesied, is not remotely in sight. Indeed, nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time’ (p. 3). Then came that complex historical conjuncture when the Soviet Union broke up into its constituent national units and ‘globalization’ hit the newsstands. (The two were connected: one of the least fuzzy of globalization’s many meanings was the extension of the capitalist world over the former Communist bloc, re-establishing the global reach that had been broken by the Russian Revolution although even those who subscribed to it (Rosenberg 2005) overlooked the fact that this process had begun decades before the collapse of the Soviet Union with the US rapprochement with China.) This conjuncture seemed to have opposing implications for nations and nationalisms. While the fall of Communism added many more nations to the roster of the

United Nations, complete with outpourings of national sentiment, in its more widely accepted meanings, 'globalization' was deemed corrosive of nation-states and nationalisms, its increased commercialization and commodification dissolving national institutions and borders, rendering nation-states irrelevant.

Though Anderson had, until at least 1991, insisted on the crucial importance of nations and nationalism, he now changed his assessment, relying not on any lines of analysis developed in *IC*, indeed, not even referring to them, but on the popular understanding that 'globalization' – migrations, the fall of Communism, technological, transport and communications revolutions, transnational investments and the like (Anderson, 1996: 8) – had made the future of nations and nationalisms unsure. While the central claims of globalization, including the claim that it was rendering nation-states ineffective and irrelevant, were beginning to be contested, (Hirst and Thompson 1999, Wade 1996, Weiss 1998; cf. Desai 2009e forthcoming), Anderson swallowed globalization discourse whole. He claimed that the break-up of the Soviet Union had merely created 'a congeries of weak, economically fragile nation-states . . . some entirely new, others residues of the settlement of 1918; in either case, from many points of view a quarter of a century too late'. They were 'unlikely to disturb global trends' which portended 'the impending crisis of the hyphen that for two hundred years yoked state and nation'. The hyphenation of the nationalist aspiration to statehood and the state's need for loyalty and obedience had become radically uncertain and '[p]ortable nationality, read under the sign of "identity" is on the rapid rise as people everywhere are on the move' (Anderson, 1996: 8). Older and better established states could also be expected to have their problems, particularly given the acceleration of technological change and cost-escalation in the military sphere:

[s]tates incapable of militarily defending their citizens, and hard put to ensure them employment and ever-better life chances, may busy themselves with policing women's bodies and schoolchildren's curricula, but [he asked] is this kind of thing enough over the long term to sustain the grand demands of sovereignty? (Anderson, 1996: 9)

Anderson's new position was only apparently similar to Eric Hobsbawm's complex historical verdict on post-Soviet nationalism. Hobsbawm had said already in 1990 that nationalism had 'become historically less important' (and was probably the interlocutor against whom, a year later, Anderson had insisted on the continuing historical importance of nations and nationalisms). For Hobsbawm it was already clear then that nationalism was 'no longer . . . a global political programme, as it may be said to have been in the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries' (Hobsbawm, 1990: 191).

'[N]ation' and 'nationalism' are no longer adequate terms to describe, let alone analyse, the political entities described as such, or even the sentiments once described by these words. It is not impossible that nationalism will decline with the decline of the nation-state, without which being English, Irish or Jewish, or a combination of all these, is only one way in which people describe their identity among the many others which they use for this purpose, as occasion demands. It would be absurd to claim that this day is already near. However, I hope it can at least be envisaged. (Hobsbawm, 1990: 192)

This judgement was merely confirmed by the apparent resurgence of nations and nationalisms produced by the fall of Communism: they were merely ‘The chickens of World War I coming home to roost’, a settling of past accounts, frozen by the rise of Communism and unfrozen by its fall (Hobsbawm, 1996: 259). This was the verdict of a historian of nations and nationalisms who had remained, throughout, sceptical of their claims and uneasy with their particularising thrust. It said merely that nations and nationalism had ceased to actively remake the map of the world, in effect that the generalisation of the nation-state system was substantially complete. Though it also recognised that nations and nationalisms were declining, they were doing so very gradually. Hobsbawm’s position differed from Anderson’s not only in its consistency with his earlier work, but also in having no truck with voguish ‘globalization’.

That Anderson’s critical *volte-face* is not referred to, discussed or reflected upon, let alone made the basis of any reassessment of *IC*’s principal theses in the new edition, that *IC*, in its turn, is not referred to in the 1996 piece, makes one wonder how deep Anderson’s intellectual convictions really go, how firmly his scholarly judgements are rooted in an investigation and weighing of the evidence, and how seriously he takes the normal scholarly injunction to consistency. The only new material in the 2006 edition is a largely self-congratulatory, not to say cute, account of *IC*’s ‘subsequent travel-history in light of some of the book’s own central themes: print-capitalism, piracy in the positive, metaphorical sense, vernacularization, and nationalism’s undivorceable marriage to internationalism’ (p. 207).

In this essay, I explore what I take to be the more important contradictions and ambiguities of *IC*. A first set of criticisms concerns the relationship of the book to the political occasion which avowedly inspired it: the relation turns out to be far more complex and ambiguous than Anderson gave his readers to understand. This leads on to an assessment of the book’s fulfilment of its aims, as originally stated in 1983 and later elaborated upon in the post-face to the new edition of 2006. The critical nature of these reflections must not be taken to mean that *IC* broke no new ground. Two major achievements are noted: however, in the first case, Anderson himself seems unaware of the true significance of his theoretical move and, in the second, there is an inadvertence which makes full accreditation difficult. The essay closes with reflections on the inadvertent achievements and failures of the work.



### **Political imposture**

The opening pages of *IC* inform us that it was occasioned by the wars in Indo-China which began in the late 1970s. They underlined, for Anderson, the enduring importance of nationalism.

While it was just possible to interpret the Sino-Soviet border clashes of 1969, and the Soviet military interventions in Germany (1953), Hungary (1956) Czechoslovakia (1968), and Afghanistan (1980) in

terms of – according to taste – ‘social imperialism,’ ‘defending socialism’ etc., no one, I imagine, seriously believes that such vocabularies have much bearing on what has occurred in Indochina. (p. 1)

Quite why ‘it was just possible’ to see European events in terms of class politics and ideology and not the events in Indochina is not explained and one cannot help wondering if, like so many writers, Anderson also reserves class categories for the West and national ones for the rest (Ahmad 1992). At any rate, the sub-text positions Anderson as a Marxist or someone sympathetic to Marxism, who was forced, at long last, to admit that the forces of narrow nationalism had betrayed Marxist ideals of socialist fraternity and internationalism.

Casting around for an explanation, he then discovered that despite ‘the immense influence that nationalism has exerted on the modern world, plausible theory about it is conspicuously meagre’ (p. 3). Thus *IC*. Framed in this way, *IC* appears as a work of one with deep sympathies with the left, emerging at a critical moment to reflect on its past mistakes and failures.



This is misleading in several respects. Though the wars in Indo-China disillusioned many Marxists, this was hardly because of they betrayed a hitherto unacknowledged nationalism, because disputes between European Communist nations were somehow possible to understand within Marxist terms and those between the Asian communist ones were not. While the Stalinist defence of ‘socialism in one country’ was certainly seen by Marxists to be a compromise of Communism’s global aspirations, national realities were not simply opposed to class ones by Marxists. The Soviet regime had to deal with nationalities internally from its earliest days and it supported national liberation abroad.

Anderson’s stance is quite audacious and could only be credible to those ignorant of Marxist theoretical traditions and easily susceptible to stereotypes of it. Consistently *IC* attributes to Marxism a simplistic opposition between nation and class, between nationalism and Communism. In reality, of course, while there were always tensions, slippages and gaps in Marxist understandings of nationalism, such an opposition was a creation of Cold War anti-Communism, not of Marxism or Communism. These intellectual and political traditions aimed, instead, to comprehend the *interaction* between these two principles, however well or badly this or that thinker accomplished the task. Whether it was Marx and Engels’ injunction to each working class to settle scores with its own bourgeoisie in the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx’s clarity about the importance of India’s independence for even her capitalist, let alone socialist, development, Engels’ notion of peoples with and without history, Luxemburg’s interventions on the question of Poland, Lenin’s and Bolshevik support for self-determination and their theorization of imperialism, Gramsci’s ideas about the ‘national-popular’ or the Austro-Marxists’ insights about the interaction of nationalism and social democracy in the context of the empire, classical Marxism sought to theorize the interaction of nationalism and Communism, of nation and class, in concrete circumstances of capitalism and imperialism. Nowhere does Anderson

acknowledge this. Indeed, he hitches his horses to the idea of the opposition between the two, not to mention the suppression – political and intellectual – of the one by the other through the deployment of ‘fictions like “Marxists as such are not nationalists” or “nationalism is the pathology of modern developmental history”’ (161). Needless to say, Anderson provides no references for these pernicious fictions. It is noteworthy that although Anderson wishes to be,



and is, taken for a major authority on the subject of nationalism, and one particularly well-informed about left scholarship on the subject, he has never acknowledged the complexity of the interaction of Communism and nationalism in the Soviet Union, a theme on which some of the most insightful work on nationalism has been published in the years since the break-up of the Soviet Union (Suny, 1993, 1998; Martin, 2001).

*IC* is not an easy work to locate in any tradition of writing about nationalism, usually dominated by historians and scholars of politics. As the work of an area studies specialist, it draws, in particular, from the author’s long study of South East Asia, although as much, if not more space is devoted to the countries most familiar to him personally – the UK, his country of origin, and the US, where he has lived and worked for decades. Indeed, these latter countries form the real basis of *IC*’s most distinctive theses, as we shall see. Discussions of these specific national experiences are inserted into some broader arguments about nationalism more generally. While literature on nationalism has certainly become more plentiful after 1983, as Anderson points out in the Preface to the second edition (p. xii), it was not meagre before then. In any case, Anderson nowhere discusses the literature either before or since 1983 to any extent, nor does he point to the specific manner in which it falls short and how *IC* helps fill the gaps. Indeed, Anderson identifies himself as something of an outlier of this field of scholarship, referring to his ‘idiosyncratic method and preoccupations’ being ‘on the margins of the newer scholarship on nationalism’ if only to claim that ‘in that sense at least, [*IC* is] not fully superseded’ (p. xiii).

In fact, *IC*’s relations to other traditions of scholarship on nationalism are murkier than this posture of happy, even productive, idiosyncrasy acknowledges. When Anderson declared liberalism and Marxism intellectually bankrupt in the face of nationalism, he did so on the strength of two very brief quotations: Hugh Seton-Watson’s conclusion that no scientific definition of the nation could be devised and Tom Nairn’s statement that nationalism was ‘Marxism’s greatest historical failure’. Neither can support the weight. Seton-Watson’s inability to find a ‘scientific’ definition was due precisely to the substantial elements of subjectivity in the phenomenon (Seton-Watson, 1977: 4–5), elements which Anderson would himself emphasize as one of the chief themes of *IC*. Seton-Watson’s remark should, therefore, have led Anderson to explore this kind of scholarship further, and acknowledge its insights, not dismiss it. As for the quotation from Nairn, further investigation reveals that Nairn’s account of Marxism’s ‘failure’ was far more complex than Anderson allowed. Not only was Nairn aware that Marxism could lay claim to the substantial corpus of theory and reflection on the subject of nationalism mentioned

above (not to mention Leninist practice: on this see Mayer, 1964), but Nairn went on to say that the failure of his Marxist forebears

was not a simply conceptual or subjective one. No amount of brass-rubbing will compensate for that. The fact is, that if they could not put together a tolerable theory about nationalism, nobody could, or did. Historical development had not at that time produced certain things necessary for such a ‘theory’. The time was not ripe for it, or for them. Nor would it be ripe until two further generations of trauma had followed 1914. There is nothing in the least discreditable to historical materialism in the fact, although it is naturally lethal to ‘Marxism’ in the God’s-eye sense. (Nairn, 1981: 331)

“‘Marxism’ in the God’s-eye sense’ was, of course, Stalinism, in contrast with which Nairn invoked other Marxist and historical materialist traditions of reflection, theory and practice – in particular the Bolshevik idea of ‘uneven and combined development’ – on the strength of which he made his own very substantial Marxist contribution to the theory of nationalism. Certainly his statement gave no warrant for the loose invocation of oppositions between class and nation, between socialism and nationalism, which Anderson resorted to so consistently as a stand-in for knowledge of Marxist traditions.

### **Anderson’s Miscarried Agenda**

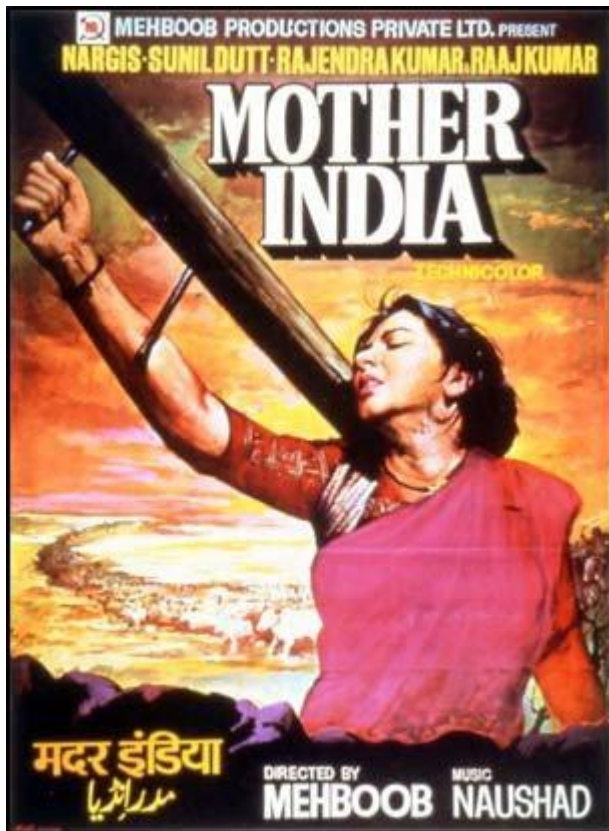
The aims of *IC* were both modest and swaggering. On the one hand, Anderson claimed no more than to ‘offer some tentative suggestions for a more satisfactory interpretation of nationalism’. On the other, he breathtakingly claimed to be bailing out both Marxism and liberalism – universalist ideologies, ill-at-ease with nationalism – as their lender of last resort, to be imparting the liberal and Marxist study of nationalism, both ‘etiolated in a late Ptolemaic effort to save the phenomenon’, an urgently required Copernican spirit (p. 4). Anderson would mount this intellectual rescue operation, conjure this ‘Copernican spirit’, by looking for resources where, he claimed, neither Marxism nor liberalism had been looking – in culture:

nationality, . . . nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are *cultural* artefacts of a particular kind. To understand them *properly* we need to consider carefully how they have come into historical being, in what ways their meanings have changed over time, and why, today, they command such profound *emotional legitimacy*. (p. 4, emphasis added)

In addition to these originally stated aims, he added in 2006, that he had had three others: first, to ‘critically, of course,’ support Tom Nairn’s claim that the UK was ‘the decrepit relic of a pre-national, pre-republican age and thus doomed’ and his indictment of ‘classical Marxism’s shallow or evasive treatment of the historical-political importance of nationalism’; second, to ‘widen the scope of Nairn’s theoretical criticisms’ to include ‘classical liberalism and, at the margins, classical conservatism; and third, ‘to de-Europeanize the theoretical study of nationalism’, an aim which ‘derived from long immersion in the societies, cultures and languages of the then utterly remote Indonesia and Thailand/Siam’ (pp. 208–9).

To deal with the originally-stated aims first, if Marxism and liberalism were not bankrupt – and we have seen that Anderson’s claims about their bankruptcy were ill-founded – they were

clearly in no need for Anderson's rescue operation. Declaring them bankrupt was merely Anderson's flawed attempt to free himself from the burden of engaging with them. Nor was it clear that nationalism was only 'cultural'. Anderson did not explain why it was not also political and economic. Certainly, neither a Nehru nor a Nkrumah nor yet a Sukarno or a Ho, neither a Jefferson nor a Bolivar nor yet a Mazzini, imagined otherwise when they led nationalist struggles. Projects of national development lay at the core of nationalist movements and even after they became the settled nationalisms of established states, nationalisms always embodied a distinctive political economy – typically its own version of national development – and not only



a cultural politics (Desai 2009c). Each reflected the particular concerns of the classes that led them but these had to be compromised by the concessions each was forced to make to equity and other such popular concerns to the extent that their success was reliant on popular mobilization. This was as much the case in Europe and the Americas as it was in de-colonized Asia and Africa in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The cultural content of these nationalisms were intimately tied to the requirements of their economic and political tasks (see the various contributions in Desai 2009a). Few could afford to celebrate inherited culture in simple ways, given the tasks of modernization. In the nationalism which lay at the core of the Communist revolution in China, for example, where traditional society and polity had failed so spectacularly against imperial pressures, 'Anti-traditionalism' dominated and most intellectuals 'believed that the Chinese national character had so many serious shortcomings that cultural and spiritual restructuring programs were urgently needed to cure and

even, for some . . . to remake the nation'. Even conservatives who 'advocated . . . restoring China's traditional Confucian cultural values . . . admitted the necessity of a fundamental remaking of Chinese culture'. (Wu 2008: 477). In post-war Japan, political economy and cultural politics were even harder to distinguish: the largely cultural ideas of Japanese uniqueness which had powered pre-surrender nationalism were so comprehensively discredited by defeat as to that for the next several decades ideas about Japan's national distinctiveness attached themselves to the national economy rather than to any specifically cultural themes (Hein 2008). To what extent could a theory which focused on the cultural aspects of nationalisms alone 'properly' understand them?

There remains the matter of the emotional legitimacy which nations enjoy, to which Anderson devotes a whole chapter (pp. 141–54). Emotional legitimacy forms the ineffable core of nationalism and it looms so large for Anderson that, incredible as it may seem, faced with it he brushes aside his own previously built up explanations of the phenomenon. Although he 'tried to

delineate the processes by which the nation came to be imagined, and, once imagined, modelled, adapted and transformed', such accounts of changes in society or consciousness do not

in themselves do much to explain the *attachment* that peoples feel for the inventions of their imaginations – or to revive a question raised at the beginning of the text – why people are ready to die for these inventions. (p. 141)

But Anderson cannot seem to make up his mind. Though ruling out explanation, and devoting the chapter exclusively to lyricizing this 'emotional commitment', Anderson goes on to invoke the 'fatality' of national belonging, its 'purity' and 'disinterestedness' as explanations for people's emotional attachment to their nations. This is what elicits the sort of commitment which is capable of the ultimate sacrifice.

A number of things may be said here. First of all, at a logical level, if all the long pages of explanation which precede this chapter ultimately fail to explain this deep core of nationalism in the way 'fatality' does, why bother to write them? What is their relationship to the lyric exposition in Chapter 8? Secondly, Anderson surely draws too easy and stark a contrast between national belonging, a 'fatality', and other forms of association which one may join and leave 'at easy will' (p. 142). All forms of enduring commitment – to democracy, science, socialism,



religious belief, or human rights, e.g. – create attachments which are hardly possible to join or leave 'at easy will'. As for willingness to die, people have fought and died for a variety of things other than nations – from crassly material things like land and resources to elevated ideals such as truth, democracy, rights and socialism. The nation is hardly the only form of community to elicit the ultimate sacrifice. Thirdly, as the history of deserters, conscientious objectors and the realities of soldiers' responses in battlefields have recounted, the willingness to die for nations is not as ubiquitous as Anderson imagines. Finally, while Anderson is willing to suspect 'official nationalism' of a lot, he does not entertain the possibility that the imputation of such profound devotion to the nation as to elicit the willingness to die for it, including the putting up of tombs of unknown soldiers, may be the work of official nationalism too. There is no doubt that national belonging has considerable force – emotional and ideological.

However, Anderson's lengthy discussion of the matter remains unconvincing: is national belonging really stronger than other forms of belonging always, everywhere and in all circumstances? Is it not more forceful in some countries than others? Here, as at so many other



places, Anderson clears space for his own reflections only by brushing a great deal under the proverbial carpet.

To go on to the aims retrospectively announced in 2006, two of them were to ‘critically’ support Nairn, and to overcome not just Marxism’s but liberalism’s limitations on nationalism. We find, however, that *IC*’s few theoretical criticisms are reserved for Marxism: in *IC* Anderson does not have two interlocutors, only one: the Marxist Tom Nairn. All the references to Seton-Watson are exegetical: relying on the rich historical detail, particularly on matters Eastern and Central European, of *Nations and States*, to illustrate this or that point, agreeing rather than disagreeing with him on all critical issues.

Anderson’s theoretical thrusts against Nairn miss their mark. When he berates Nairn for applying the terms ‘pathology’, ‘neurosis’ and ‘dementia’ to nationalism, despite his broad sympathies for it (p. 5), Anderson overlooks the double-sidedness of Nairn’s appreciation of nationalism encapsulated in his designation of nationalism as the ‘modern Janus’, looking forward as well as back, emancipating as well as oppressing, modern as well as, avowedly at least, antique. In a largely imaginary contest which Anderson sets up between nation and class, Anderson surely has a point when he says that racism has its roots in class (pp. 148–9). But to claim that it has nothing to do with nationalism is to ignore how national inequality has been productive of racism from an international perspective as much as class inequality had been productive of racism in domestic contexts.

Finally, we come to Anderson’s criticism of Nairn’s argument that nationalism was ‘tied to the political baptism of the lower classes’ (Nairn 1981: 41). Anderson’s refutation is inconsistent. In reference to Spanish America’s pioneering nationalisms, for example, he tells us at one point how the Creole nationalists feared the Negro working population and, a few lines later, that they sought to make nationals and citizens out of it (p. 49). This is a critical issue because Anderson uses this as an opening for the central argument of his book: that nationalism spread around the world in the wake of the American Declaration of Independence (and the French Revolution that came so close on its heels) because later nationalists were

able to work from visible models provided by their distant, and after the convulsions of the French Revolution, not so distant, predecessors. The ‘nation’ thus became something capable of being consciously aspired to from early on, rather than a slowly sharpening frame of vision. Indeed, as we shall see, the ‘nation’ proved an invention on which it was impossible to secure a patent. It became available for pirating by widely different, and sometimes unexpected, hands. (67)



Rather than the entry of the lower classes into politics, nationalism's origin and spread were, according to Anderson, better explained by the 'modular' character of nationalism and the 'piracy' of nationalism's original 'Creole' model by nationalists who came later. But such 'political baptism' was merely an aspect of nationalism for Nairn, and not an explanation for the origin and spread of nationalism, to be supplanted by 'piracy' and the 'modular character of nationalism'. In attempting to best one of Nairn's more insightful comments

about the centrality of popular mobilization in nationalism – that 'The new middle class intelligentsia of nationalism had to invite the masses into history; and the invitation card had to be written in a language they understood' (Nairn, 1981: 340). Anderson claims that 'it will be



hard to see why the invitation came to seem so attractive, and why such different alliances were able to issue it, unless we turn finally to piracy' (p. 80). This simply rings false. First, while usually educated middle-class nationalist leaders were aware of nationalist struggles of other times and places and undoubtedly applied aspects of this knowledge to their own situations (Why would they not? Why re-invent the wheel?), they also faced unique historical circumstances in which they had to lead

struggles against actual or threatened foreign domination. They had to fashion nationalisms out of an equally unique set of resources offered by history. It was the structural similarity of the task that fell upon one nationalist leadership after another in the long story of the emergence of the nation-states system, and not some modular character it had, that imposed the broad similarities on nationalisms which have been so widely observed. Within the parameters of such structural similarities, however, nationalists could be more or less creative and more or less effective in accomplishing their tasks. Secondly, people responded to such 'invitation cards' on the basis of their understanding of the gains being offered – prosperity or equality, land or electricity, jobs or dignity, peace or revenge – not because they were sold on the idea of being nations in the image of some other nations.

If Anderson's criticisms of Nairn all fail, what remains of his promise to 'critically support' Nairn's theory? Not much, given that he completely ignores the substance of Nairn's account of nationalism in *The Break-up of Britain*. This is hardly the place for an exegesis of this argument and only its broad thrust may be outlined so as to gauge the extent of Anderson's elision. Nairn's argument is fundamentally materialist and in good part his 'indictment' of official Marxism was made with a view to invoking critical currents of Marxism to present a more fully historical materialist, i.e. Marxist, theory of nationalism. For Nairn took the development *together* of nationalism and capitalism, that is, of nation and class and nation, seriously. He criticized most accounts of nationalism for being 'vitiating from the start by a

“country-by-country” attitude . . . that human society consists essentially of several hundred different and discrete “nations”, each of which has (or ought to have) its own postage-stamps and national soul’. He argued, instead, that ‘the only framework of reference which is of any real utility here is world history as a whole’. Keeping in mind the overall evolution of the world order of capitalism, he insisted that ‘[I]t is the forest which “explains” the trees’. In this materialist and world-historical view, the origins of nationalism lay



[n]ot in the folk, nor in the individual’s repressed passion for some sort of

wholeness or identity, but in the machinery of world political economy. Not, however, in the process of that economy’s development as such – not simply as an inevitable concomitant of industrialization and urbanization . . . [but in] the *uneven development* of history since the eighteenth century. This unevenness is a material fact; one could argue that it is the most grossly material fact about modern history. The conclusion, at once satisfying and near-paradoxical, is that the most notoriously subjective and ‘idealistic’ of historical phenomena is in fact a by-product of the most brutally and hopelessly material side of the history of the last two centuries. (Nairn, 1981: 335–6).

Nairn’s critical point was that capitalism produced not one but two kinds of inequality – social and regional or spatial – and these were productive of classes and nations. Nations were, therefore, material realities as much as classes were. How material they are can be appreciated from the fact that economic inequality within nations, great though it is has long been and though it has become even greater in recent decades, remains small compared to economic inequality between nations (Milanovic 2005, Freeman 2004). How material nations are can also be



appreciated from the centrality of the ‘developmental state’ – whether the US, German and Japanese, or more recent Asian and Latin American, and above all the Chinese – in earlier cases overcoming, and in later ones, at least mitigating – these international economic inequalities (Chang 2002 and 2008; Reinert 2007). Of course, materiality could also work the other way, as the increase in class and regional inequalities in most countries under recent market-driven policies have also attested. And along with these new political economies came distinctly new forms of cultural politics in nations, as I and my

contributors attested in our recent work on developmental and cultural nationalisms (Desai 2009a). If one is to engage critically with Nairn in order to insist that nations were merely 'cultural artefacts', it is essential to address this issue frontally. Not surprisingly, Anderson's attempt to carve out a specific explanatory space for culture does not succeed. It cannot unless the equally specific explanatory weights of political and economic factors are duly considered and acknowledged. Anderson claimed that his theory of nationalism was

intended less to explain the socio-economic basis of anti-metropolitan resistance in the Western Hemisphere between say, 1760 and 1830, than why the resistance was conceived in plural, 'national' forms – rather than in others. The economic interests at stake are well-known and obviously of fundamental importance. Liberalism and Enlightenment clearly had a powerful impact, above all in providing an arsenal of ideological criticisms of imperial and *anciens régimes*. What [he was] proposing is that neither economic interest, Liberalism nor Enlightenment could, or did, create *in themselves* the kind, or shape, of imagined community to be defended from these regimes' depredations; to put it another way, none provided the framework for a new consciousness – the scarcely-seen periphery of its vision – as opposed to centre-field objects of its admiration or disgust. (p. 65)

However, Anderson could only claim this by ignoring the fact that, for Nairn, the geographical and social contours of uneven development explained precisely the kind and shape of the imagined community and that the focus on the 'wood' rather than the 'trees' enabled the reasons for the plural and national forms of resistance as opposed to single universal resistance based on class or some vaguer common humanity required by liberalism or the Enlightenment to emerge clearly in relief.



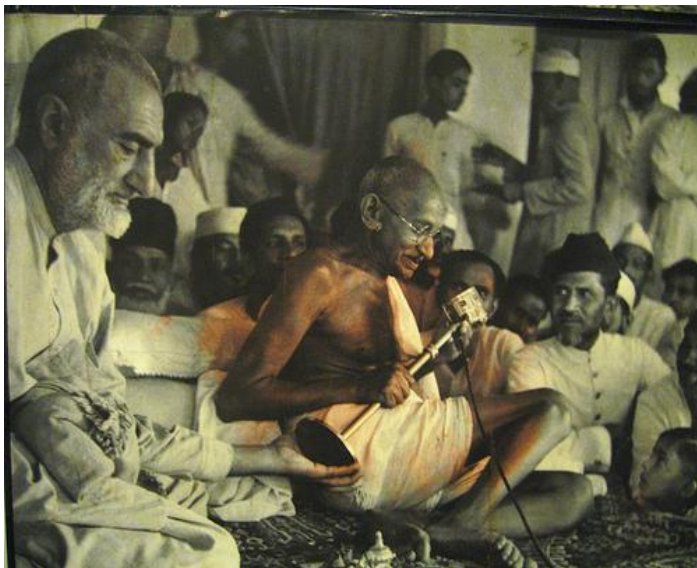
Finally, how did Anderson 'de-Europeanize' the study of nationalism? The short answer is, by Americanizing it, and worse, by Americanizing it in the sense of the USA, rather than of the Americas as a whole. By Anderson's account, the USA was the first nation-state and founded the first of the models (the other two were European) which all others had to follow, as his argument about nationalism's 'modularity' required. What little Anderson offered by way of a sociology of nationalism's origins is confined to explaining the emergence of his three 'models' which the rest of the non-Euroamerican world was bound to imitate. One wonders how much of Anderson's knowledge of Indonesia or Thailand was involved in coming to this conclusion.

In the homelands of these models,

according to Anderson, the origins of nationalism lay in the process of secularization. Nationalism, as Anderson conceives it, displaced religion in a number of critical ways.

[T]he very possibility of imagining the nation only arose historically when, and where, three fundamental cultural conceptions, all of great antiquity, lost their axiomatic grip on men's minds . . . the idea that a particular script language offered privileged access to ontological truth . . . the belief that society was naturally organized around and under high centres . . . [and] a conception of temporality in which cosmology and history were indistinguishable, the origin of the world and of men [being] essentially identical. (p. 36)

Rather than any political economy of uneven and combined development, 'print-capitalism' and the new secular pilgrimages of the functionaries of the new centralized absolutist and colonial states determined the 'shape' and 'kind' of the new consciousness and community, making it national. Print-capitalism denoted 'a half-fortuitous, but explosive, interaction between a system of production and productive relations (capitalism), a technology of communications (print), and the fatality of human and linguistic diversity' (p. 43). Under its impact, while Latin itself became 'more Ciceronian . . . increasingly removed from ecclesiastical and everyday life', vernacular print languages rose to displace Latin both in the religious and political spheres (pp. 39–41), serving as the basis of new, smaller but much more centralized entities in the latter. The new vernacular print languages laid the basis for national consciousness by unifying 'fields of language and communication below Latin and above spoken vernaculars'. They gave 'a new fixity to language'. And they made out of dialects which were closer to the print languages privileged 'languages of power' (pp. 44–5). The first widened the community as print made mutually incomprehensible dialects mutually intelligible, the second laid the basis for the antiquity which would so often be claimed for nations and the third marginalized more distant dialects in ways which occasionally led to 'sub-nationalisms'. The rise of modern centralized absolutist and colonial states on the other hand gave rise to 'journeys' which defined the extent and limits of the units which would come to be conceived as national. Just as pilgrims of the past marked the ever-expanding limits of the sacred world of religion by undertaking pilgrimages to distant sacred centres, so state officials now undertook journeys to and from provincial centres, creating the experiential basis on which the extent and limits of the new national community would come to be imagined.



Rich as the discussion of print capitalism and official pilgrimages is, and suggestive of how cultural phenomena such as secularization, Protestantism, vernacularization, literacy and others contributed to the nationalisms of Europe, it is hardly surprising. One can expect cultural phenomena contemporaneous with the rise of nationalism in any part of the world to have been connected with the shaping of the national culture: much as, e.g., emerging religious movements

in India structured the participation of many communities in the Congress in the 1920s and 1930s (Hardiman 1977) or, to take another example, radio became a carrier of nationalist messages beginning in the 1930s and TV frames new forms of nationalism today – whether in Thailand, India or the former Soviet Republics.

Although they were originally ‘unselfconscious processes’, Anderson suggested, these Euroamerican developments soon crystallized into ‘formal models to be imitated, and, where expedient, consciously exploited in a Machiavellian spirit’ (p. 45). American nationalists pioneered a model which, by the second decade of the 19th century at the latest (p. 81), was available for imitation and ‘piracy’. Later nationalisms were able to work from visible models provided by their distant, and after the convulsions of the French Revolution, not too distant, predecessors. The ‘nation’ thus became something capable of being consciously aspired to from early on, rather than a slowly sharpening frame of vision. Indeed, as we shall see, the ‘nation’ proved an invention on which it was impossible to secure a patent. It became available for pirating by widely different, and sometimes unexpected, hands. (p. 67)

The ‘last wave’ of decolonized nations which would have been critical to any project of ‘de-Europeanizing’ theories of nationalism became, in *IC* ‘incomprehensible except in terms of the succession of models we have been considering’. Their retention of European languages of state resembled the American model, their populism, the European and their ‘Russifying’ policy orientation, the official Model (p. 113). The bilingualism of its elites ‘meant access, through the European language-of state, to modern Western culture in the broadest sense, and, in particular, to the models of nationalism, nation-ness, and nation-state produced elsewhere in the course of the 19th century (p. 116). How Anderson’s largely Eurocentric discussion, not to mention the idea that non-European nationalisms were modelled on Western models served to ‘de-Europeanize’ the study of nationalism is hard to fathom. Rather than de-Europeanising the study of nationalism, this was surely adding an extra, hefty, layer of Eurocentrism.



The implication of Anderson’s argument is that while there is a sociology of nationalism for Europe, there need not be one for the Third World because countries in it were merely imitating, nay ‘pirating’, pre-fabricated models. This would certainly seem insulting if one considered it to be true. Partha Chatterjee, for one, decided to take offence at Anderson’s implication that Third World nationalism was merely ‘derivative’ (Chatterjee 1986). He needn’t have: Anderson’s argument would only work if Third World societies were clean slates onto which Westernized nationalist intellectuals could write Western stories of nationalism, if they had no sociologies of their own which might resist and complicate such attempts.

The second edition seemed to abandon the idea of the imitation and piracy of ‘models’ altogether, because, ‘a brilliant doctoral thesis by Thongchai Winichakul, a young Thai historian’, stimulated Anderson to think about space, mapping and the role of the colonial state in both (p. xiv). The addition of a new chapter on the ‘census, map and museum’ corrected Anderson’s ‘short-sighted assumption . . . that official nationalism in the colonized worlds of Asia and Africa was modelled directly on that of the dynastic state of nineteenth-century

Europe'. Now, as Anderson saw it, 'the immediate genealogy should be traced to the imaginings of the colonial state' (p. 163). Anderson is surely dissimulating when he suggests that this conclusion might appear 'surprising' because colonial states 'were typically *anti-nationalist*' (p. 163). The view that nationalisms of the Third World borrowed from their colonial masters is simply too widespread. In any case, borrowing from Europeans when 'at home' as it were, was hard to distinguish from borrowing from them when 'away' in the colonies. Now the explanation of the shape of the nationalisms of the 'last wave' even dispensed with the agency of 'bilingual' elites who did the work of imitation and replaced it entirely with that of largely European colonial elites. Some 'de-Europeanization'! Some nationalism!

As already noted, the real problem with the argument about the modular character of nationalism was the implication that the similarities were the result of 'copying', not of the structural similarities in material circumstances and possibilities. While the idea of Third World nationalists copying American and European models hardly served to de-Europeanize anything, it completely neglected the *level* at which the true creativity of any nationalism may be found: below the level of the broad structural similarities where one found the various ways in which the nationalists deployed the differing social, political, economic and cultural resources they had and the effectiveness with which they were able to formulate and fulfil the equally various tasks of building nations.

Reading *IC*, one might never suspect that third world nationalists coped with qualitatively new problems, economically, politically and culturally. One might never suspect that they sought to stem colonial resource and economic drain, to reverse deindustrialization and reorient economies from imperial to national priorities, e.g. by creating food self-sufficiency and recovering resources controlled by foreigners. One might never suspect that they overthrew or reformed *ancient regimes* – Empires, Caliphates or kingdoms – created national out of colonial bureaucracies, concocted 'unity in diversity' and 'pancha sila' long before anyone had ever thought of 'multiculturalism', displayed a precocious modernity in modernising available 'traditions' to serve new ends as in India's Panchayati Raj or Tanzania's Ujamaa. One might never suspect that they laboured to unite nations against colonial 'divide and rule', gave entirely new meanings to terms like secularism, as in India, or communism, as in China or Vietnam, or produced critiques of oppressive 'traditional' cultures often in the face of European romanticizations of the same. Many of these initiatives failed or misfired. The fact remains that they testified to a creativity which is rarely referred to, let alone acknowledged in Western discourses, including western discourses on nationalism.



Ironically, Anderson arguably overlooked the real significance of his idea of 'Creole pioneers.' Anderson had complained in the Preface of the 1991 edition that this move had been

more or less completely neglected in the reception of the book's first edition. To draw attention to it he re-titled the chapter about it 'Creole Pioneers'. Neither the prefatory comments nor the new title substantially altered the situation, however, perhaps because Anderson himself did not fully grasp the implications of his move. Locating the origins of nationalism in a 'first wave' in the Americas – beginning with the revolt of Britain's American colonies in 1776, thus predating the French Revolution, from which scholars of nationalism usually dated the beginnings of nationalism, by a critical few years – was *IC*'s most important theoretical move, and potentially its most original contribution to the study of nationalism, on two counts.

First, it had the potential to link discussions of the geo-politics of capitalist modernity, including the politics of uneven and combined development and the spread of nation-states in response to it, with discussions of nationalisms: the two are undeniably, but still all-too-obscurely, intertwined (see Desai, 2009a and 2009d), though the complete absence of any discussion of Holland's 16<sup>th</sup> century overthrow of Spanish rule and of England's 17th-century Civil War and revolution was problematic. The potential could not be realized, however, given Anderson's exclusive focus on matters cultural. Secondly, in order to locate the origins of nationalism in the Americas, Anderson argued against the grain of the study of nationalism



hitherto, so long focused not only on Europe but also taking as paradigmatic its mid-19th century 'ethno-linguistic' nationalisms. The 'Creole Pioneers' of nationalism were distinguished neither by ethnicity nor language from the mother countries against whom they defined their nationhood. This was a theoretical move which potentially could theorize (and legitimize) a greater variety of nationalisms, detaching nationalism from ethnicity and language, and potentially other 'primordial' elements with which nationalism has all too long been associated to the detriment of the understanding of its real historical and political character.

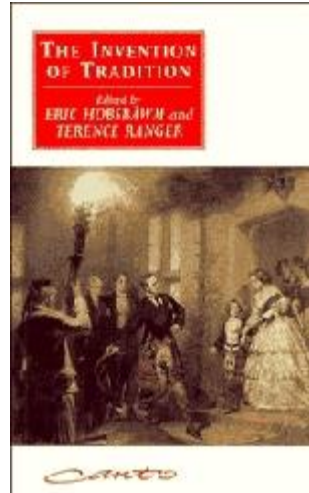
### **Inadvertent success**

The most famous thing about *IC* was, of course, its title: Anderson lamented in the 2006 post-face that 'the vampires of banality have by now sucked almost all the blood' (p. 207n) from it. However, there was a profound irony here, which Anderson did not note. As a catch-phrase, 'imagined communities' inspired a great deal of scholarly output, largely of a humanist and postmodern sort. However, most of this writing worked themes of imagination, creativity, forging and forgery, and inventedness of this or that nation and, less frequently, of nationalisms in general (because so little of postmodern and humanist scholarship tends to be theoretical, and so much about particularities which are celebrated as such), themes which it was not Anderson's aim to invoke at all. What he meant by the phrase turns out to be, in retrospect, rather banal: the nation's imagined, as opposed to experienced character. In this sense, the nation was not the only sort of imagined community: a nation was *'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 ... In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even those) are imagined. (p. 6)



The idea of the inventedness of nations and nationalisms would have gone against the grain of Anderson's very respectful treatment of the phenomena. Anderson complained about how there was 'among cosmopolitan and polylingual intellectuals ... a certain condescension [towards nationalism]. Like Gertrude Stein in the face of Oakland, one can rather quickly conclude that there is "no there there"' (5). Such condescension also laced the work of scholars of nationalism



who, like Renan, could, for example, be exasperated by the distance that separated nationalist from reliable accounts of history (Renan, 1996). The idea of the inventedness of nations, with all the irreverence that came with the formulation, was better expressed in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's exploration of the inventedness of so much culture, in this case, imperial as well as national, that appeared in the same year as *IC*, *The Invention of Tradition* (1983).

### The effects

As I reflected on this strange record of failure to achieve declared aims and inadvertent success at that which was not even attempted, an analogy insistently forced itself on me. The failure of *IC* was no ordinary failure. James Ferguson (1990) showed how, in the case of development projects in Lesotho, the importance of certain undertakings lay not in their success in achieving their stated aims, but precisely in the political effects of their failures.

'Development' institutions generate their own form of discourse, and this discourse simultaneously constructs Lesotho as a particular kind of object of knowledge, and creates a structure of knowledge around that object. Interventions are then organized on the basis of this structure of knowledge, which, while 'failing' on their own terms, nonetheless have regular effects, which include the expansion and entrenchment of bureaucratic state power, side by side with the projection of a representation of economic and social life which denies 'politics' and, to the extent that it is successful, suspends its effects. The short answer to the question of what the 'development' apparatus in Lesotho does, then, is found in the book's title: it is an 'antipolitics machine', depoliticizing everything it touches, everywhere whisking political realities out of sight, all the while performing, almost unnoticed, its own pre-eminently political operation of expanding bureaucratic power. (Ferguson, 1990: xiv-xv)

*IC* 'while "failing" on [its] own terms, nonetheless [has] regular effects' on the scholarly field in which it intervenes, inflecting it to the right, primarily by de-politicizing it and making nationalism a part of inconsequential cultural erudition while neoliberalism attempted to roll back the gains of national independence for so much of the Third World. For a whole generation of scholarship in the age of neo-liberalism, *IC* smoothed the path away from the rich traditions of theorizing politics, political economy and history, not to mention culture, in historical materialism by giving false reports of its bankruptcy. And, most ironically, it made the study of nationalism more Eurocentric than ever before while de-legitimizing Third World nationalisms as Western constructs at precisely the historical moment when neo-liberalism needed to be countered by progressive politics along national as well as class lines. At least part of the popularity of *IC* was the product of neoliberalism and its derivatives, 'globalization' and new

formulations of 'empire', all of which opposed national and social attempts to undo the harms of markets and capitalism. As these come crashing down in the world-wide economic crisis which marks the end of the century's first decade, as it becomes clear just how national the responses to the crisis have been despite decades of neoliberal and postmodern and postcolonial anti-state discourses, one hopes that those interested in nationalisms and nation-states will turn to the traditions of scholarship which have better illuminated the dynamics of nationalist and revolutionary change than has *IC*.

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