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Remembering Benedict Anderson and his Influence on South Asian Studies

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Abstract

This article was written shortly after the death of Benedict Anderson. It contextualizes Anderson's contribution to studies of nationalism and the Global South, particularly Asia. It then revisits some of the key debates of Anderson's scholarship and its particular significance and importance to the study of South Asia.

Keywords

Anderson, nationalism, South Asia, Spivak, state

In a letter to the Indian publisher Naveen Kishore, Benedict Anderson (31 March 2010) writes that he has left instructions that after his death he is to be bequeathed with the epitaph 'He was a Translator'. Anderson was much more than a translator. As one of the most well-known cultural commentators of contemporary politics in Southeast Asia, his contribution to area studies and cultural politics is immense.

Benedict Anderson, who died at the age of 79 in Malang, Indonesia, is well known for his 1983 book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, one of the most influential books on studies

of nationalism. Anderson's book is founded on two main theses: first, that our belief that nations are ancient and a historical construct is a very modern phenomenon, one that has been brought about through capitalism (particularly print capitalism); and, second, the belief that everyone belongs to a nation in some capacity. Anderson notes that, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that individuals might face, the nation is still framed as one of equal 'comradeship'.

Anderson argues against the notion that nations are created through determinants such as race or religion within a given cartographic border but instead asserts

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that they are 'imagined' into existence. In a chapter entitled 'Cultural Roots', Anderson begins with the image of the Unknown Soldier, someone whose identity is irrelevant as he is posited as an icon of 'national imagining'. Anderson (1983: 123) claims that nationalism has a 'profoundly modular character', which has drawn on more than a century and a half of human existence. One might recall Partha Chatterjee's *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1994) in this instance, where he makes a classic rebuttal of Anderson's assertion that certain modular nationalisms could be superimposed onto other settings. Chatterjee was scathing in his attack, implying that if the West had already imagined what nationalisms would look like after subsequent colonial exploitation, by that logic the postcolonial nation's 'imagination must forever remain colonised'. Chatterjee looks at Bengal as his example and, whilst agreeing with Anderson about the spread and consolidation of nationalism through print capitalism, he argues that the nationalist elite in Bengal, India, drew its strength from the 'spiritual inner domain, which unlike the material outer domain was not monopolised by or annexed to the colonising West' (Das-Chaudhuri, 2007: 68–69).

Whilst Anderson is not without his critics (see Brubaker, 2004; Chatterjee, 1994; Hirschi, 2012; Varshney, 2003), his work in producing scholarship that challenged status quo and hierarchy has much to be admired. His most vociferous attack was on the American-

supported anti-communist dictator Suharto of Indonesia. The violence of his regime was a crucial juncture for Anderson, who went on to publish the anonymously authored 'The Cornell Paper' that challenged the official history of the coup. This led to his expulsion from the country in 1972 and only being allowed to return after Suharto's fall. In an article for the *New Left Review*, 'Radicalism after Communism' in 1993, Anderson takes the example of the novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer (Pram), whose vocal leadership of the left intelligentsia during Suharto's regime led to his imprisonment for more than 10 years. However, nearly 30 years after the 'Indonesian Holocaust', his books continued to be banned. Anderson discusses Pramoedya again in a more recent article in the *New Left Review* in 2013 about the Nobel Prize for Literature that has consistently failed to award anyone from the Southeast region. He argues that, whilst writers from regions such as India (Tagore), Africa (Soyinka) and the Middle East (Mahfouz) could count on being a symbol for the region as a whole, Southeast Asia had no such candidate. Anderson puts forward Pramoedya as a possibility but then argues that, as a left activist who wrote in the vein of socialist realism, he would be unpalatable for Stockholm. On top of that, it was only after his death that he became an accepted writer in Indonesia, where he was met with hostility for several years, and by then it was too late for Stockholm. Here again, Anderson attacks the

Western language imperialism that has consistently overlooked countries such as Indonesia and Thailand. Through a consideration of national literatures in Indonesia he helps to show how literary texts can explore and contest social and political ideas.

South Asian nationalism, as Sayantan Dasgupta aptly puts it, is 'monstrous', with much of the discourse surrounding it tending to stoke further the conflict between the notion of nationalism as empowerment and as an exercise of homogenization. Anderson's work would be of importance in this context notwithstanding Chatterjee's earlier critique. Spivak and Butler (2007: 4–5) engage with Anderson's central thesis when they argue that the nation-state, which 'binds' people through a bond of commonality, is also one that expels and rejects:

If the state is what 'binds,' it is also clearly what can and does unbind. And if the state binds in the name of the nation, conjuring a certain version of the nation forcibly, if not powerfully, then it also unbinds, releases, expels, banishes.

Whilst Spivak and Butler are not explicitly citing Anderson, their contention that the state asserts criterial control over its people by either bringing them into the fold of belonging or banishing them has resonance with Anderson's own thesis. Citing the example of the American national anthem, which George Bush famously

argued should only be sung in English, Spivak and Butler (p. 59) further explain that language is one mode through which belonging is conferred. Anderson (1983: 47) too argued that print capitalism created languages of power and cites the example of the Thai government, which actively discouraged any form of translation and transcribing for the benefit of the hill tribes. Languages of power and struggle for belonging through language are most acute in South Asia. One only has to think of the ongoing civil strife in Sri Lanka between Tamil and Sinhalese speakers and the 1971 War of Independence in Bangladesh (previously East Pakistan) from Pakistan (previously West Pakistan) over the hegemony and colonization of the Bengali language and Urdu script. The current Hindutva (an ideological position that India is not secular but a Hindu country) led the Indian government's revival of Sanskrit, which has its roots in a Brahmanical upper-caste Hinduism, and continues to create belonging through linguistic hegemony. Anderson's work, whilst mainly concerned with the emergence of the nation as an idea and the complex interactions between state institutions, calls into question how belonging is conferred and taken away. In fact, since the 2014 election in India, discrimination against queer people, people of the Islamic faith and people of the Dalit caste has been on the rise. Similarly, in Bangladesh, violence against secular bloggers has been increasing and in Sri Lanka the non-judicial

killing of the Tamil leader of the LTTE militant group has left many questions unanswered. Anderson is right that nation-states are an act of imagination – an act that compels us to commit the grossest forms of misconduct; and, as the recent Syrian migrant crisis has shown us, nationalism is far from obsolete. It is only sad that Anderson will not be here to be a part of these dialogues. His work on nation-states, belonging and nationalism is undoubtedly some of the most influential in the last two decades and will remain an important theoretical framework for future work, especially in the Global South. As a champion and advocate for global culture, the fact that he died in Indonesia, the same country from which he was expelled almost 30 years ago, is perhaps testament to the layered complexities of histories, languages and peoples that his work has helped to define.

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