



Remembering Benedict Anderson and his Influence on South Asian studies.

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Review

Remembering Benedict Anderson and his Influence on South Asian studies.

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In a letter to the Indian publisher Naveen Kishore, Benedict Anderson writes that he has left instructions that after his death he be bequeathed with the epitaph 'He was a Translator' (31 March 2010). 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 built on two main theses- one that nations which we believe as ancient and a historical construct is a very modern phenomenon, one that has been brought about through capitalism (particularly print capitalism) and secondly 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 rather these are 'imagined' into existence. In a chapter entitled 'Cultural Roots' Anderson begins with the image of the Unknown Soldier, one whose identity is irrelevant as he is posited as an icon of 'national imagining.' Anderson claims that nationalism has a 'profoundly modular character' (Anderson, 1983: 123), which is drawn on more than a century and 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 on to other settings. Chatterjee was scathing in his attack implying that if the West had already imagined what nationalisms would look like followed by the 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, 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, only being allowed to

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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 ten years. However nearly thirty years later since the 'Indonesian Holocaust' his books continue to remain banned. Anderson discusses Pramodeya 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. Anderson argues that whilst writers from regions such as India (Tagore), Africa (Soyinka) and Middle East (Mahfouz) could count on being a symbol for the region as a whole, Southeast Asia had no such candidate. Anderson puts forward Pramodeya 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 homogenisation. Anderson's work would be of importance in this context notwithstanding Chatterjee's earlier critique. Spivak and Butler in a recent conversation engages with Anderson's central thesis when they argue that the nation state one which 'binds' people through a bond of commonality was 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. (Spivak and Butler, 2007: 4-5)

Whilst Spivak and Butler are not explicitly citing Anderson, their assertion 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. Spivak and Butler (2007: 59) further explain, citing the example of the American national anthem which George Bush famously argued should only be sung in English, that language was 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 fight for belonging through language are most acute in South Asia. One only has to think of the on-going civil strife in Sri Lanka between the Tamil and Sinhalese speakers and the 1971 war of Independence by Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan) from Pakistan (erstwhile West Pakistan) over the hegemony and colonisation of the Bengali language and script with Urdu. The current Hindutva (an ideological

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3 position that India is not secular but a Hindu country) led the Indian government's
4 revival of Sanskrit, which has its root in a Brahminical upper caste Hinduism,
5 continues to create belonging through linguistic hegemony. Anderson's work whilst
6 mainly concerned with the emergence of the nation as an idea and the complex
7 interactions between the state institutions calls to question how belonging is
8 conferred and taken away. In fact since the 2014 election in India; discrimination
9 against queer people, people of the Islamic faith and people of the Dalit caste have
10 been on rise. Similarly in Bangladesh, violence against secular bloggers has been on
11 rise and in Sri Lanka the non-judicial killing of the Tamil leader of the LTTE militant
12 group has left many questions unanswered. Anderson is right that nation states are
13 an act of imagination; one that compels us to commit the grossest forms of
14 misconduct; and nationalism as the recent Syrian migrant crisis has shown us is far
15 from obsolete. It is only sad that Anderson will not be here to be a part of these
16 dialogues. Anderson's work on nation states, belonging and nationalism is
17 undoubtedly one of the most influential in the last two decades and will remain an
18 important theoretical framework for future work especially in the global South. As a
19 champion and advocate for global culture the fact that he died in Indonesia, the
20 same country he was expelled from almost thirty years ago, is perhaps testament to
21 the layered complexities of histories, languages and peoples that his work has
22 helped to define.
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Bio:

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