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Anderson and the Imagined Nation*

Marc Sanjaume i Calvet
INSTITUT D'ESTUDIS DE L'AUTOGOVERN
UNIVERSITAT OBERTA DE CATALUNYA
marcsanjaume@gmail.com
ORCID: ORCID: 0000-0001-8723-1618

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ABSTRACT
This article is a synthesis of the Theory of Nationalism in Anderson's work and argues its applicability to 'Stateless Nations'. The author's point of departure is the interpretations that have been made of Anderson's definition of nations as 'imagined communities'. Anderson's definition is presented as universal, realistic and capable of embracing diverse facets of nationalism — oppressive or liberating as the case may be. The paper ends with a short reflection on the complexity of The Catalan Lands from an Andersonian point of view.

Keywords: *nation, nationalism, Anderson, imagined, realism, community.*

Corresponding author: Marc Sanjaume i Calvet. Institut d'Estudis de l'Autogovern. Generalitat de Catalunya. Departament de la Presidència. C/ Baixada de Sant Miquel, 8 08001 Barcelona.
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Benedict Anderson was not a researcher with just one work to his name. A glance at his list of publications reveals many remarkable contributions and a deep knowledge of history and politics around the world, especially in the colonies. Yet by far and away his best-known and most translated work is *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the origin and Spread of Nationalism*, which was published in 1983 and translated into Catalan by the Afers[1] publishing house a little over a decade ago. This book is a reference work for students of Political Philosophy and Political Sciences alike.

In this seminal academic work, Anderson sets out a general theory of national identity and the phenomenon of nationalism. In his view, nationalism was born out of Capitalism, the Press, the novel and vernacular languages. Thus at the end of the 18th Century, the first national consciousness sprang into being and spread rapidly to Europe and other continents. The break with The Divine Right of Kings, Latin (or the languages of the great religions) and the old concept of the cosmos required a new way of thinking about the community. According to Anderson, this was when the nation was born as a shared story between equals and through the written language (especially the Press and literature). This created a new, extremely powerful political entity — the Nation State. Thus in the Andersonian vision,

1 See: Anderson, B. (2005) Comunitats Imaginades. Valencia: Afers.

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nations are 'imagined communities' and are the fruit of the march to modernity. For Anderson, the nation cannot predate nationalism, given that the former emerges from the latter to form a community that is shaped by the Press and later by the gradual definition of the bounds of said community.

Another nationalism scholar — Anthony Smith — places Anderson in what he terms Classic Modernism, together with other authors including Gellner, Nairn, Giddens, Tilly, Breully, Hechter, Kedourie (Smith, 1998). This current of thought on nationalism was consolidated in the 1980s and shares the same idea, namely that the phenomenon is a product of modernity (in its broadest sense — the emergence of the State, market economy, public administration and so forth). One should note that this school of thought was influenced by Weber, Deutsch and Simmel, and shared their rejection of perennialism or primordialism (that is to say, the notion that nations are millenarian entities with an adaptive or immutable ontology over time). Such an idea was dismissed as 'romantic' and as merely a mythification of nationalism[2].

The novelty of Anderson's work — which also characterises that of Hobsbawm (1983) — was of offering a Marxist perspective on Classic Modernism. Here, Anderson considered nationalism and nations as cultural artifacts that were mainly based on a narrative that could be analysed. This approach opened the door to a post-modernist critique enabling one to deconstruct nationalism. That said, as Bevir notes, it would be unfair to classify Anderson's theory within the post-modern current, which tends to belittle the importance of nations (Bevir, 2010). First, Anderson had already stated his intention of analysing nationalism in his foreword to *Imagined Communities* — a phenomenon that Marxism had forecast was doomed to vanish. Anderson pointed out the error of such predictions and noted the emergence of nationalism in new States and lands around the world. Second, Anderson's theory basically explains the emergence and importance of nationalism, and defines the nation as an 'imagined community'. He also revindicated this definition as a category that should be considered a category of belonging in the same way that an individual feels kinship or membership of a religion. Thus the mistake the Marxists made was in considering nationalism to be just another 'ism', as if it were an ideology that was merely a passing fad.

REVINDICATING ANDERSON

The philosopher Joan Vergés (2013) has also highlighted Anderson's radical modernism, which saw the nation as a product of the emergence of nationalism. Vergés has also denounced a mistaken or ill-intentioned reading of Anderson to deny the existence of nations (which are often Stateless Nations). These 'small' nations in the Kunderian sense[3] tend to be given short shrift by the nationalists of the States in which they are straight-jacketed. These State 'nationalists' (often in the guise of would-be cosmopolitan intellectuals) do not shrink from using Anderson as a pretext to label these nations as figments of the imagination.

> Catalonia and The Basque Country as homogeneous cultures are pure invention (an "imagined community" in the words of the anthropologist Benedict Anderson). The rise to power of the [Catalan and Basque] nationalist elites leads to attempts to mould society in their image and to institute a new official culture, repressing dissenting minorities — if necessary by force (Álvarez, 1996).

2 An amusing and instructive example of this in the French case can be found at: Lluís, J-Ll. (2011).

3 Kundera wrote, speaking of the Czech Republic and its fragility in the centre of Europe: "ce qui distingue les petites nations des grandes, ce n'est pas le critère quantitatif du nombre de leurs habitants ; c'est quelque chose de plus profond: leur existence n'est pas pour elles une certitude qui va de soi, mais toujours une question, un pari, un risque; elles sont sur la défensive envers l'Histoire, cette force qui les dépasse, qui ne les prend pas en considération, qui ne les aperçoit même pas", Kundera, M. (2000).

However, careful reading of Anderson provides no support for such tendentious interpretations. First, for theorists of nationalism, there are no nations that are more 'real' than others. Thus anyone who spends his time scribbling accusations that other nations do not exist because they are 'imagined' must at the very least be willing to accept that his own nation is equally 'imagined'. If this were not the case, we would be dealing with a 'selective' (and hence either a mistaken or ill-intentioned) application of Anderson's theory. Second, the most surprising feature of the confusion (deliberate or not) is that considers 'imagined' to be the same as non-existent. At the end of the day, the setting in which we find ourselves is woven from institutions and shared consensus that are not necessarily either palpable or material. As Vergés says:

> Social reality is spun from shared beliefs (...) and that is the stumbling block for anti-nationalists when they deny that nations may be based on people's beliefs. Such nay-sayers owe us an explanation of how social reality is formed Vergés (2013: 17–57).

The third factor, which in my view is vital for understanding Anderson's vision of nationalism, is his ability to distinguish among the various forms taken by nationalism since its emergence. From a global perspective, linked to his studies of Asia and the colonial world, the philosopher and anthropologist distinguishes various forms of nationalism that have arisen through history. In his view, what drove the emergence of nationalism was 'creolisation', especially in Latin America. This was a kind of revolutionary nationalism that sought to throw of the yoke of the metropolitan power. It was led by the elites in European colonies. This avant-garde led the struggles for freedom, beginning with Britain's American Colonies in 1776 and ending with the Latin American and Caribbean Colonies of other powers in 1830. According to another scholar — Seton-Watson — one should distinguish this nationalism from what he calls 'official nationalism'. While the first was of a revolutionary nature, the second was led by aristocrats and the metropolitan powers — that is to say, the rulers of the great Imperial States such as the Tsar of Russia. The latter nationalism focused on subjugated identities and their respective popular nationalisms (from The Ukraine to Poland and Corsica), not only adopted by the great Russian, German and Ottoman empires but also by the Chinese and Japanese ones.

The theorisation on the various faces of nationalism and its ability to be either liberating or oppressive depending on the use made of national identity is another aspect of the work by this Chinese-born Anglo-Irish anthropologist. Few men knew the nature of The British Empire in Asia as well as Anderson.

ANDERSON AND US

A third channel for the emergence of nationalist movements and national identities identified by Anderson is what he termed 'linguistic nationalism'. This typically arose in Western Europe, especially among those speaking minority languages repressed by the 'official nationalism' of the great empires. These linguistic nationalism sprang into existence in the 19th Century. The defence of culture and language also turned into political defence under the influence of thinkers such as Rousseau and Herder, spawning a new nationalism:

> Hence enormous energy came to be devoted to the construction of dictionaries for many languages which did not have them at that point — Czech, Hungarian, Ukrainian, Serbian, Polish, Norwegian, and so on. Oral literary traditions were written down and disseminated through print as popular literacy slowly began to increase.These productions [culturals] were used to fight against the domination of the big languages of the dynastic empires, such as Ottoman, High German, Parisian French, the King's English and eventually Muscovite Russian, too (Anderson, 2001).

In *Imagined Communities*, this kind of nationalism is the one that defines us best (together with 'official Spanish nationalism'). Yet the Catalan Lands are a clear example of the complexity of the nationalist phenomenon from both internal and external standpoints. Multiple (and sometimes overlapping) national identities (Catalan, Catalan of the Principality, Valencian, Balearic Islands, and so on) has been the cause of many disputes and clashes but has also been part of their very nature. Fuster spoke of it in these terms:

> The terminology was imposed but could not be invented. The lack of a distinctive name for the Catalan Lands as a whole and for the Principality was to have grave consequences. 'Catalonia' and 'Catalan' were circumscribed to the Principality, acquiring a purely regional meaning. Meanwhile, there was no term that covered all Catalan-speakers. As time went on, the regional nuances of *País Valencià* [the Valencian Country] and *Balears* [The Balearic Islands] became stronger in relation to the Principality. This would not have been a stumbling block to collective cohesion had there been a general, binding name for the whole (...). In the absence of a better alternative, our community came to be called the Catalan Lands (Fuster, 1996: 58).

Fuster's definition and his lament in a way proved Anderson right: nationalism makes the nation and there can be no nation without such a movement (be it creole, imperial, linguistic or cultural). Yet one should also recall the caveat made by Smith (an anti-modernist) who always opposed constructivist excesses. He also argued that the results of mixing the primary elements were unpredictable (elements that he termed 'geological' or, as Fuster would have it, "could not be invented'). In other words, the national narrative did not appear out of nothing but rather from a pre-existing cultural and institution fabric that make they viable, providing the raw materials for an 'archaeology' that allowed the growth of a sense of belonging. Here, we do not mean a previous ethnic base but rather a cultural substrate that was necessary (but not sufficient) for creating the preconditions of a national narrative. This material in the Catalan case was difficult to mix and arose from a highly diverse territorial context. Today, being Catalan seems inextricably bound with the Battle of Almansa and Ramon Llull yet these elements were not determing factors, as one can see from the diversity of political projects that have bloomed in The Catalan Lands over the last few years. As Renan (1882) so nicely puts it: "L'existence d'une nation est un plébiscite de tous les jours".

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Marc Sanjaume i Calvet. Advisor and researcher at the Self-Government Institute (IEA) and collaborating lecturer at the Open University of Catalonia (UOC). He gained his PhD in Political Theory and took a post-doctoral course at the Quebec University at Montreal (UQAM). He has been on research training programmes at Laval University and Edinburgh University. His research focuses on theories of democracy, nationalism and self-determination.