

Benedict Anderson

IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

EXCERPT

In 1983, historian *Benedict Anderson* coined the term “*Imagined Communities*” with his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. In this book, he provides his readers with a theory on what defines a nation which is still one of the most common definitions of the nation used by scholars today.

WHILE READING

- ✦ Take notes for the following questions while you read.
 - Why are nations, according to Benedict Anderson, *imagined*, *imagined as limited*, *imagined as sovereign*, and *imagined as communities*?

Imagined Communities

In an anthropological spirit, then, I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.

It is *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 [...] With a certain ferocity Gellner makes a comparable point when he rules that “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist.” [...] In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. [...]

The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind. The most messianic nationalists do not dream of a day when all the members of the human race will join their nation in the way that it was possible, in certain epochs, for, say, Christians to dream of a wholly Christian planet.

- anthropo'logical** (adj) – antropologisk. Antropologi er læren om mennesket og dets kultur og sociale liv.
- pro'pose** (vb) – foreslå
- in'herently** (adv) – iboende
- 'limited** (adj) – begrænset
- 'sovereign** (adj) – suveræn, selvstændig
- Gellner** (prop) – Ernest Gellner. Britisk socialantropolog (1925–1995)
- fe'rocidity** (subst) – voldsomhed
- self-'consciousness** (subst) – selvbevidsthed
- pri'mordial** (adj) – oprindelig
- di'stinguish** (vb) – skelne
- 'falsity** (subst) – falskhed
- 'genuineness** (subst) – ægthed
- en'compassing** (adj) – omfattende
- 'finite** (adj) – begrænset
- co'terminous** (adj) – sammenfaldende
- messi'anic** (adj) – messianisk, missionerende
- 'epoch** (subst) – tidsalder

CHAPTER 2

En'lightenment (subst) – oplysningstid
le'gitimacy (subst) – lovlighed
di'vinely –or'dained (adj) – guddommeligt forordnet
dy'nastic (adj) – dynastisk
realm (subst) – rige
ma'turity (subst) – modenhed
de'vout (adj) – gudfrygtig
ad'herent (subst) – tilhænger
ine'scapably (adv) – uundgåeligt
'pluralism (subst) – flersidethed
allo'morphism (subst) – enkel variation
onto'logical (adj) – ontologisk. Ontologi er læren om hvad der er virkeligt, og hvad der eksisterer
g'age (subst) – udfordring
'emblem (subst) – symbol
pre'vail (vb) – herske
con'ceive (vb) – opfatte
'comradeship (subst) – kammeratskab
fra'ternity (subst) – broderskab
ab'ruptly (adv) – brat
'scarcely (adv) – knapt
'sacrifice (subst) – opofring

It is imagined as *sovereign* because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm. Coming to maturity at a stage of human history when even the most devout adherents of any universal religion were inescapably confronted with the living pluralism of such religions, and the allomorphism between each faith's ontological claims and territorial stretch, nations dream of being free, and, if under God, directly so. The gage and emblem of this freedom is the sovereign state. 5

Finally, it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings. 10

These deaths bring us abruptly face to face with the central problem posed by nationalism: what makes the shrunken imaginings of recent history (scarcely more than two centuries) generate such colossal sacrifices? I believe that the beginnings of an answer lie in the cultural roots of nationalism. 15

WORKING WITH THE TEXT IN CLASS

PAIR WORK AND GROUP WORK

- ✦ Find a partner, and take turns explaining your notes on each of the four characteristics that define the nation according to Benedict Anderson: *imagined*, *limited*, *sovereign* and *community*. Add points made by your partner to your own notes.
- ✦ Compare your findings to the findings of another pair, and if there are major discrepancies, or points you can't answer, ask your teacher for help. Again, if the other pair has good points you didn't include in your answers, you may be inspired by them and use their ideas.
- ✦ Together with your first partner, record a sound file (e.g. by using www.audioboo.fm) in which you briefly answer the following questions based on Benedict Anderson's text.
 - Why is a nation imagined?
 - Why is it imagined as limited?
 - Why is it imagined as sovereign?
 - Why is it imagined as a community?

CLASS DISCUSSION

- ✦ Listen to one or two random sound files in class, and comment on what you hear. Do you agree with the answers you just heard, or do you have something to add?

INDIVIDUAL WRITTEN WORK

- ✦ Spend five minutes writing a small paragraph on how you think it affects national identity to view a nation in this manner.

GROUP WORK

- ✦ Read your texts aloud to each other in groups of four, and note down good points made by your class mates.

CLASS DISCUSSION

- ✦ Sum up in class by presenting the best points from the texts read aloud in your group. You are allowed to present any point you want to, not just your own!