

Imagined
communities by b.
anderson essay
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Modern Americans today can easily answer the question “ When was your nation birthed?” Though the details of their answer may vary, the basic idea would place that time around the American Revolution. Some “ older” countries such as Italy, Greece, or China would not have such a ready-made answer because they believe their nation was a natural manifestation of their people. Not so, according to Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities (Anderson 1983). Nations are a purely modern manifestation which are created for political purposes. It is my aim to summarize Anderson’s work, analyze and give critical input on his methodology and biases, and provide a my summary of thoughts on how this work benefits us today. II.

Summary

Anderson sets the stage of this work by defining nations as imagined, limited, and sovereign communities. Each adjective of that definition is an attempt to address a historically recognized paradox in the study of nation building. Regarding the objective modernity of nations for historians versus their subjective antiquity for its citizens, Anderson leans towards the subjective by calling them imagined. For Anderson a nation is far more particular in its manifestation than universal, therefore it is limited. Lastly, though the concept of a nation is rather weak philosophically (according to Anderson) it is nevertheless powerful and therefore sovereign. In short, nations are a small idea shared by a geographically limited area of people that despite its limitations has influence and power in its greater region and sovereignty over its people. The definition is first defended by illustrating the rise of nations, primarily through Western cultural history. Anderson shows how the concept of a nation became more and more realized as three

longstanding institutions faded: linguistic diversity, religious authority, and traditional monarchies.

Whereas the ruling classes maintained their authority through legitimacy to the throne, administrative and inaccessible languages for the lower classes, and religious power and influence, the arising concept of representative government was stripping each of those modes of influence from their power. According to Anderson by emphasizing the native tongue, shifting the source of power from monarchs to the people, and lessening the influence of the church in public life, nations began to be a possibility. All of this was expedited by the arrival and utilization of the printing press. Anderson next illustrates the rise to national consciousness in the Americas, in Europe, and eventually in the colonial nation-states.

Each of these examples benefitted greatly from their various uses of the printing press, how they consolidated power and communication, and education. The last chapters are spent further clarifying nationalism against other powerful influences like racism, history, and geography. Each of these influences can both hurt and help the formation and operation of a nation. Anderson's chapter on Patriotism and Racism, for example, leans the conversation towards political morality though with a focus on how racism can adversely affect the longevity of a nation. Another example is modern-day China; its current nation-building process benefits directly from the West's past two centuries of nation-building history. Anderson concludes with a call for a need for a narrative of identity.