

# Indonesia, In Search of Nationalism: Remembering Benedict Anderson

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Region: [Asia](#)

Global Research, January 28, 2016

The modern world has shown us sufficient examples of nations that have broken up because too many of their citizens have had shrivelled hearts and dwarfish minds. *Benedict Anderson, Jakarta, 1999*

Nationalism has often had a deservedly bad press. Ernest Gellner, for instance, suggested in *Thought and Change*(1971) that nationalism “invents nations where they do not exist.” It was a means of deception, an existence engineered under false pretences.

Benedict Anderson, who died last December in Indonesia, saw things differently. For years, he spent his time understanding nationalism’s other functions. He found it particularly useful as a counterpoint in explaining how various communist states – fraternal, at least on the paper of revolution – could war against each other. The 1978-9 wars between Vietnam, Cambodia and China piqued his curiosity; Marxist analysis on such conflicts simply would not do, since it dismissed the notion of nationalism as essentially a symptom of “false consciousness”.

*Imagined Communities* (1983) was the analytical product, dealing with nationalism as a global phenomenon. It could not be dismissed as entirely negative; indeed, it could also be integrative in unitary form, rather than one specifically based “in fear and hatred of the Other, and its affinities with racism”. Nationalism could even “inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love.”

As for the nature of such a community, it is “imagined because the members of even the smallest nations will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives an image of their community.”

From that imaginary staple, the desire to associate and be connected, come concrete, and, argues Anderson, reassuring offspring in the face of “ebbing religious belief”. The poets and prose writers busy themselves with filling libraries of record; musicians compose tracts for posterity; the artists of the plastic arts create. Instead of diving into European examples to justify his case, Anderson sought American examples, arguing that it was Creole communities who developed “so early concepts of nation-ness – *well before most of Europe*”.

But one striking manifestation of an imaginary community stands out: reading the newspaper. The example from the German idealist philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, who claimed that newspapers had become a modern substitute for morning prayer, was hard to avoid. While the act was conducted in “private ceremony”, it was one “incessantly repeated at daily or half-daily intervals throughout the calendar.”

This is “print capitalism” in action, solidarity of the word through press and discourse. These days, one would have to find new variants of this community, a form, argues T. J. Clark, of “screen capitalism” and its various technics.[1] Little wonder, then, that critics have suggested that more is needed to explain collective identities than reading newspapers.

And thus, with two words, Anderson had captured an immortal combination, though he would write with irritation about “the vampires of banality” which had “sucked almost all the blood” of *IC* by the 2006 edition.

It was seemingly fitting that Anderson would write about nationalism with such clarity, having himself been a varied product of numerous national experiences. An Irishman born in Kunming, son to Veronica (nee Bigham) and Shaemas Anderson of the Chinese Maritime Customs service, he found being “English” difficult. “Though I was educated in England [at Eton] from the age of 11, it was difficult to imagine myself English.” Nor was being Irish itself an elementary assumption. *The New Republic* even went so far as to suggest that he was a “man without a country”.[2]

The 1956 invasion of Suez, engineered as an indulgent, last gasp of Anglo-French colonialism against the regime of General Gamal Nasser, pushed Anderson into a more radical fold. Reading classics at King’s College, Cambridge, he found himself in sympathy with the politicised south Asian students protesting the measure.

On invitation, he became a teaching assistant at Cornell University, and a graduate student of George Kahin. This was what Anderson was waiting for, a light to shine on south-east Asian nationalism. Indonesia would become his love interest, one which he absorbed linguistically, culturally and politically. “Traditional Javanese culture”, as he termed it, captivated him, but it was also such culture in resistance to Dutch colonialism that mattered.

Injecting culture into the study of political behaviour shook the establishment, not merely those from the dry settings of traditional political science, but the Marxist scholars themselves. Having attempted to subscribe to some Marxist interpretation of the Indonesian resistance, Anderson found himself looking more intensely at the role of culture, using his language proficiency in Indonesian, Javanese, Tagalog and Thai. The result was *The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture* (1972).

His focus on Indonesia should also be remembered from another perspective: that of political interrogator and sceptic. 1965 and 1966 were brutal years for Indonesia, and emotionally crushing for Anderson. Numbers of the slaughtered in the Suharto-directed purge against communists and left-wing sympathisers vary, though half-a-million is often cited as a figure. While the Central Intelligence Agency had backed the response in the name of Cold War consistency, its own scribblers would admit in 1968 that it was “one of the worst mass murders of the twentieth century.”[3]

Anderson was also shaken by a very personal experience regarding the general secretary of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), whose 1967 show trial and July 21 testimony before a Special Military Tribunal he witnessed. Anderson would subsequently make the testimony of the doomed Sudisman available via translation.

In the distorting context of Cold War debates, Anderson and his co-contributor Ruth McVey attempted to provide a balancing account in “The Cornell Paper” about what transpired in

the October 1965 coup. The thrust of the argument was sensible enough: the PKI had been the convenient scapegoat for internal disagreements within the Indonesian military.

Written as a confidential working paper, it was leaked to *The Washington Post* in 1966. Published in full, and without amendments in 1971, it would see Anderson banned from Indonesia. Papers sympathetic to the New Order, as a US-backed Suharto termed it, wasted no time targeting the publication, with the weekly magazine *Chas* running the headline: "Cornell Scholars: Useful Idiots." The New Order would brutalise and strangle Indonesia for over three decades.

It was only with the fall from power of General Suharto in 1998 that Anderson could return, allowing him to give an "eye-popping" lecture, as the *Time Literary Supplement* termed it, to his audience of generals, journalists, professors, former students and the generally curious.[4] "We can see that the entire 'opposition' today," he chided, "is not fundamentally a real opposition to the Dry-Rot Order and that the Indonesia they wish to build will, consequently, still have a mountain of skeletons buried in its cellars."

This was theory rendered into practice - or at the very least an effort to throw Imagined Communities at audience and policy makers. But such projects in nationalism tend to be difficult ones to achieve. The line between an open, celebrated nationalism, and one that insists on pious, dedicated bloodletting, is a fine one indeed.

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## Notes

[1] <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n18/tj-clark/in-a-pomegranate-chandelier>

[2] <https://newrepublic.com/article/125706/benedict-anderson-man-without-country>

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