

What Benedict Anderson Doesn't Understand about the Imagination

Written by Erik Ringmar

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ERIK RINGMAR, MAR 16 2021

Benedict Anderson's book on nationalism is a modern classic (Anderson 2006). Even forty years after its initial publication, it is widely referenced, and a standard feature on reading lists everywhere. Google Scholar counts some 112,589 citations, a number which should be enough to give you tenure at a major university at least ten times over. While the book is a brilliant exposition of the nature of nationalism, and well worth its fame, it is more than anything the title of the book that has been turned into a meme. Nations are "imagined communities," we are told. That is, they are not natural, organic, or just plain given, but instead the result of an act of creation. Unlike small communities in which everyone knows everyone else, nations have too many members, and the vast majority of whom will never, and can never, meet. Nations, for this reason, only exist since we imagine them to exist. They exist in our minds. No one has ever seen a nation except "in their mind's eye."

If we ask how nations are imagined, Anderson provides two quite separate explanations. According to the first, most commonly invoked account, nations were first imagined by means of the printing press. The Gutenberg revolution of the fifteenth-century gave rise to communities of readers who read the same books at the same time, printed in vernaculars rather than Latin. This is where the nation first appeared. The nation was a part of the taken-for-granted background of the characters in the first novels, but it was also a character in its own right. The nation did things, it acted and interacted with other nations much as a character in a play. And just as a character in a play, the readers could rest assured that even if the nation did not feature in the plot for a while, it would sooner or later reappear. But it was thanks to newspapers that the nation which book printing first had allowed us to imagine was turned into a mass phenomenon. In the nineteenth-century, the invention of the rotary press allowed newspapers to be produced for a mass market, and one of the characters the papers constantly wrote about was the nation. There it was going to wars, concluding treaties, celebrating its anniversaries, remembering its past. Anderson quotes Hegel's description of the newly invented daily ritual of reading newspaper at the breakfast table. Reading the same papers, in the same language, at the same time, the nation simultaneously appeared before the minds' eye of the readers.

But Anderson also has another, quite different, account of how nations are imagined. And this creative act did not take place in Europe, but in the Americas. The nation, he simultaneously claims, was first imagined in the colonial service of the Spanish empire. In order to staff the assorted administrative positions in their colonies, the Spaniards relied on locally recruited personnel. Each administrator, as a result, was forced to leave his place of birth, and make a journey to an administrative center where he came to interact with other administrators who had made the same journey. Anderson compares this to a pilgrimage (Cf. Turner 1975). The nation came to be imagined as these uprooted and displaced officials began asking themselves who they were. Just like pilgrims imagine a religious community on their way to Mecca or Santiago de Compostela, they imagined their nation — Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and so on — once they assembled in their respective regional capitals.

Although Anderson's argument regarding nationalism hinges on the idea of the imagination, he does not discuss the concept much. He simply assumes that we know what he is talking about. As a result, he comes to rely on a received account which almost certainly is flawed. Let us accept that nations are imagined, in other words, but let us see if we can provide a better account of what the imagination is, and how it works. Rethinking the imagination, we have to rethink nationalism.

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What is the Imagination?

When we are imagining something, according to the received wisdom, we are making a picture of that something in our minds. Perhaps we could talk about the “picture theory of the imagination”. This makes imagination similar to perception. The pictures are like photos that we store in our brains, and imagining is a matter of retrieving those photos and looking at them. And neurophysiological experiments have given some credence to this view (Farah 1989). When imagining something, the same areas of the brain are activated as when we actually see something in front of us.

However, there are several problems with this account (Ryle 1949). For one thing, we often imagine things in other sensory modalities — we imagine smells, sounds, a touch, even pains. These are not pictures. And the imagination has an emotional impact which the picture theory alone cannot explain. Imagining things we get sad, happy, wistful, or we experience any number of other emotions. Moreover, imagination is a creative force. Somehow or another the imagination allows us to come up with new things, things no one has seen or heard of before. Artists and poets could never do what they do but for the powers of their imagination. There is also a question concerning how collective imagination works. Many things we do not imagine alone, after all, but together with others. The nation is a prime example. But if to imagine is to see a picture of something, how do we know that we are seeing the same picture as everyone else?

And in any case, the picture theory could never explain what it is that we see when we see a nation. Nations are not things after all, and no photos can be taken of them. Indeed, it is precisely because they do not exist that they have to be imagined. Their existence has to be conjured up. Compare the way we conjure up the existence of other entities which do not exist, such as the characters that appear in novels. Rather than showing us the actual features of a person, to imagine a character is more like allowing someone to present him or herself to us. In a story well told, the reader will feel this presence quite tangibly, and there is no need to provide a detailed account of what the person looks like (Brosch 2017). It is only when we are called upon to do so, such as when faced with a movie-version of a book, that we translate this felt presence into more definite features. The leading man is “much shorter than we had imagined,” we might say, or “we never imagined” the leading lady as a redhead.

Rather than conjuring up pictures, the imagination conjures up experiences (Jansen 2009). A picture merely takes a snapshot of an event, but an experience takes place in all sensory modalities at once. Experiences involve our bodies just as much, or more, than our minds, and they require us to move. To have an experience is to engage with the situations in which we find ourselves. Experiences, as a result, come to feel a certain way. It feels a certain way to be immersed in water, to walk along a mountain path, or to bite into a ripe fig. Imagining we draw on these experiences, and this is how that which we imagine becomes meaningful to us. This explains our instinctive, and often overwhelming, resistance against imagining certain things (Gendler 2000). We do not, for example, want to imagine ourselves torturing babies. But why not, in a way? The horrors we imagine are not happening after all, we are just imagining them. Yet even just imagining makes us feel guilty. Guilty, that is, by means of the associations to which the imagination gives rise, the experiences it evokes, and the feelings associated with those experiences. We cringe, recoil, and shudder.

In addition, experiences have a time-dimension which mere pictures lack. Experiences are dynamic. The situations in which we find ourselves are unfolding; they imply a “further more” or an “on the other hand.” Experiences always take place in relation to something that might be coming up. And strikingly often these anticipations are known by various body-parts. The feelings are in “our guts” or in “our bones”; we have “eyes in the back of our heads,” thoughts “in the back our minds,” and words “on tip of our tongues”. It is by means of such anticipations that the creative process proceeds (Gendlin 1992). Pursuing our hunches, we come up with new things. We add words to a poem, or brush strokes to a picture, until the imagination runs out.

Imagine, for example, what the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul is like. If you have been there, it is easy to do. You recall the old Ottoman buildings, the smells, all the people, the beautiful carpets, the fake brand names, and the overly friendly shop-keepers. But even if you have never been there, you can imagine what the Grand Bazaar is like since you have watched movies and read books about bazaars in far-away countries. This information allows you to imagine since

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you too have experiences of old buildings, unfamiliar smells, crowded places, fake brand names, and so on. This is why it is difficult to imagine things of which we in principle could have no experiences, such as what it is like to be a bat (Nagel 1974). Human beings may have some experiences in common with bats, but probably not that many.

Collective Imagination

Another problem concerns collective acts of the imagination. We often imagine things together with others after all. Nations are an example. That is, it is not just that we happen to imagine the same things as other people, but that we do it together. The question is only how this is done. This is a problem for the picture theory of the imagination, but it is a problem for every theory which confines the imagination to individual minds. In order to imagine something together with others, we need to move out of our skulls. We need to understand collective experiences (Szanto 2017).

Consider what is going on when a group of children play "hospital". One of them becomes a doctor, another becomes a patient, and there may be nurses and concerned family members too; a few chairs are transformed into a doctor's office, and a bed becomes an operating theater. We imagine in the process of pretending (Walton 1990). That is, the imagination unfolds as a result of the game, it is a part of the logic of the activity itself, rather than something pictured in individual minds. Props are crucial here. By enlisting the aid of dolls, hobbyhorses, snow forts, toy trucks, mud pies, and any number of other things, children manifest in physical space that which they imagine together. Props facilitate, coordinate and guide the imagination, and indicate to the participants how the game should go on. More than anything, the props ask to be activated. The doll wants to speak; the toy truck wants to go somewhere; the snow fort must be conquered or defended. It is by sharing props, by making them move and by moving along with them, that we imagine things together with others. In the process new possibilities will continuously present themselves. This is what makes play, and pretending, fun.

Grownups like to play pretend games too of course, and they too use props in order to do so. The nation is one such game (Bottici 2014). The nation is imagined as we play with maps, flags, cuisines, costumes, Uncle Sams and Moder Sveas, borders, institutions, anthems, and many other things besides. In these games too, it is props that initiate movements. The national anthem makes children march up and down a school yard, and it makes an audience stand up, with a hand to their hearts, at the beginning of a football game. The flag unites people in processions at national celebrations, it leads the soldiers into war, and it drapes their coffins when they return. By means of props such as these, we are all paying attention to the same thing, in the same way, and we are doing it together. And we move in a coordinated fashion. This is how we come to share experiences. The collective imagination is something that we do, in other words, and the nation is imagined as we recall the shared experiences of having done something. A community comes into being through communion, that is, etymologically speaking, through a "shared service".

These experiences are not pictures, and the movements required by the games are not representations in anyone's mind. Rather, the imagination is based in our bodies, and in the way bodies engage with the situations in which they find themselves. As a result, to imagine something feels a certain way; it is to bestow meaning on something. Hence the sense of outrage when a meddling adult treats a banana as a fruit rather than as a telephone, or when a skeptic of nationalism treats a flag as a rag on a stick. "You cannot eat our telephone," is the immediate response, and "you are desecrating our flag." "Show some respect!" That is, show some respect for the meanings established by our collective games of the imagination.

There is a neurophysiology at work here too. Whenever bodies in close proximity to each other engage in coordinated movements, a number of physiological processes are synchronized, including breathing and heart beats, blood pressures, gastric and endocrinal processes (Weinstein et al. 2016; Wiltermuth and Heath 2009; Pearce et al. 2016). This in turn leads to a synchronization of various psychological and cognitive processes and states. Thus people who sing, pray or row a boat together are more likely to empathize with each other and to appreciate each other's opinions; they are even more likely to think about the same things, and in a similar way. Moving together we lose ourselves in the interaction, and losing ourselves, we gain a sense of being a part of the group as a whole (McNeill 1995; Ehrenreich 2007). We are one, we share each other's burdens and joys. Once the movement stops, and the

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group disperses, this sensation quickly dissipates to be sure, but what remains — lodged in our bodies, if not in our minds — is the memory of what took place. It is memories such as these that we draw on when imagining our collective selves.

A more sophisticated Anderson

The problem with Anderson's account of the imagination is that it is far too cerebral, too much in the head; it is all about mental representations and cultural interpretations. Like everything else in the 1980s, nationalism too was supposed to be "a text". In fact, according to Anderson, the nation is literally supposed to have been read into existence. But this is not how communities come to be. The nation is imagined to be sure, but the imagination happens as people do things together, playing with their respective props. For example: the first people to advocate a united Germany were Friedrich Ludwig Jahn and his students, but the Turner, as they were known, engaged in very little reading (Kohn 1949). Rather, they did gymnastics. The Germany they imagined was born through physical exercises. And this has been the history of nationalism ever since — from Gandhi's Salt March in India to Mao Zedong's Long March in China, or the Arirang Mass Games in North Korea (Terry and Wood 2015; Roy 2006). On May 17 every year, on *syttende mai*, all Norwegians dress up in their finest, follow the *skolekorps*, the high school marching bands, waving flags and singing the national anthem. It looks quite silly actually, but it makes a lot of sense if you are Norwegian.

Anderson hints at a ritual aspect to the imagination in his brief reference to Hegel's *bon mot* on newspaper reading as a form of morning prayer, but the reading of newspapers does not constitute enough of a shared experience. No bodies meet and no muscles bond. However, Anderson's second account of the imagination — the one that he places in Latin America — is a great improvement in this respect. Here people do indeed move — young men who go off to provincial capitals in order to pursue a career. There must have been all kinds of occasions when these officials found themselves in the same place, at the same time, engaged in a common activity. Anderson should have said much more about this. He compares these migrations to pilgrimages, but this only highlights how underdeveloped even Anderson's second theory of the imagination is. These career-forming journey are pilgrimages only in a metaphorical sense, and again all the imagining happens in the minds of individuals. In an actual pilgrimage bodies move in concert, people walk together to Santiago de Compostela, circumnavigate the Kaaba seven times in a counterclockwise direction, dressed in similar clothing, singing or praying together. This is how a religious community is imagined. The nation is imagined in very similar ways. Too bad Anderson does not discuss it.

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