
BENEDICT RICHARD O’GORMAN ANDERSON



COURTESY OF CORNELL UNIVERSITY

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ONE OF THE WORLD'S GREAT EXPERTS on Southeast Asia, and a leading theorist of nationalism whose *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* became required reading for students in a wide range of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, Benedict Anderson was born in Kunming, China, to an Irish father who worked for the Chinese Customs Service and an English mother. The family left China for Ireland ahead of the massive Japanese invasion of northern China in 1941, but submarine warfare in the Atlantic led them to stay in California until after the war. Anderson won scholarships to Eton and then to Cambridge, where he took a first in Classics, read widely, discovered Japanese cinema, and was radicalized in demonstrations by students from former colonies against the Anglo-French invasion of Suez. Later, he came to especially value this traditional education and the learning of languages, noting that he took his old-fashioned education for granted, having no idea that he was a member of almost the last generation to benefit from it. He attributed his success to this education and his cosmopolitan experience of marginality, as an English boy in California, an Anglo-Protestant in Catholic Ireland, and a scholarship boy among the privileged at Eton. Others were more inclined to credit his amazing ability to learn languages and immerse himself in foreign cultures and his insatiable curiosity about a wide range of topics that enabled him to see his objects of investigation in a different light.

After graduation from Cambridge, he had no concrete plans, until a school friend who was joining the Foreign Service arranged for him to take over for him as a teaching assistant in Government at Cornell, where he was to teach until his retirement in 2002. There, he taught a range of courses on politics but was inspired to focus on Indonesia by George Kahin, the foremost expert on Indonesia, director of the leading Southeast Asia program in the country, and active supporter of anti-colonial struggles. Anderson set about learning Indonesian, in which he achieved remarkable fluency, and Javanese and became deeply involved in the country during his fieldwork. He wrote his doctoral thesis on Indonesia under Japanese occupation and went on to produce a highly original account of conceptions of power and revolution in Indonesia. However, he also wrote with his Cornell colleague Ruth McVey an analysis of the attempted coup of 1965, showing that it was provoked by conflicts within the Indonesian military and not by communists as the government claimed, using this deception as an excuse for the massacre of more than 500,000 communists and sympathizers. The anonymous "Cornell paper," as it was known, was privately circulated, but word leaked out and when it was published, Anderson

was expelled from Indonesia by the dictator Suharto and remained banned for 27 years, until the fall of the regime.

Although he continued to follow Indonesian politics closely through readings and friends, he had to find another subject of research. After the fall of the dictatorship in Thailand in 1973, he turned his attention there, immersing himself in Thai and exploring comparisons with Indonesia and other nations. He later wrote that he had Suharto to thank for *Imagined Communities*, the wide-ranging comparative investigation of nationalism that he published in 1983.

At that time, nationalism was generally treated in progressive circles as an unfortunate, outmoded force, a holdover from more benighted times. But in fact, as Anderson showed in his path-breaking *Imagined Communities*, nationalism is a recent phenomenon (despite nationalists' claim to link to an ancient past), and modern theories did not explain its considerable power, which had repeatedly defeated socialist internationalist ideals and made people willing to die for their country. It is a remarkably universal force despite each nation's claim to distinctiveness (just as each nation has a tomb of the unknown soldier—unknown but theirs alone). Citing the power of what he called “print capitalism,” which involved the standardization of vernacular languages and a revolution in communication that produced newspapers, he argued that such forces encourage people to understand themselves as part of communities that are large but nevertheless bounded and distinct. He also cited the special temporality of novels, in which one character is hosting a dinner party and meanwhile, elsewhere, another character is setting out on a journey: novels, like newspapers, make it easier to imagine a large but bounded community in which events occur. These communities are “imagined” in that most members will never meet one another but nonetheless come to feel part of a “deep, horizontal comradeship.” His broad comparative study of the construction of nationalism showed that nationalism was not, as scholars had assumed, a European phenomenon that was later exported but one that appeared earlier in Latin America. With its global perspective, lively prose, amusing examples, and unexpected juxtapositions, *Imagined Communities* transformed the discussion of nationalism and nations.

In addition to his many specialist studies of Southeast Asia, such as *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia*, he published other works of considerable general interest. *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* expanded his thoughts on nationalism and included essays on the Philippines (to which he had turned his attention after 1988), as well as Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Storyteller* and the fate of indigenous peoples in Latin America. *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial*

Imagination studies the relation between global anarchism and anti-colonial violence in the late nineteenth century.

Anderson was tireless in translating writers from the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia and was instrumental in drawing the attention of the international reading public to the writings of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, whose work was banned in Indonesia. In the last years of his life, he championed the writing of Eka Kurniawan, whose recently translated novel, *Man Tiger* (2015), was shortlisted for the 2016 Man Booker International Prize. He was working on a literary-political biography of Kwee Thiam Tjing, the Indonesian Chinese writer from the 1920s whose polyglossic writings combining Indonesian, colonial Dutch, Hokkien Chinese, Javanese, English, and Japanese expressed a demotic cosmopolitanism that Anderson regarded as a model of cross-cultural and inter-lingual creativity. At the time of his death, he had completed a memoir, *A Life Beyond Boundaries* (2016), which also explains Western scholarly practices and institutions to students and teachers from other regions.

Retiring from Cornell in 2002 as the Aaron Binenkorb Professor of International Studies, Government and Asian Studies, he made Bangkok a second home and spent much time in the region. Along with Clifford Geertz, he established Southeast Asia studies as a much greater presence in the world of humanistic and social science scholarship. He was an influential political theorist who was deeply conversant with the languages and cultures of other regions and who loved talking with peasants and workers as well as digging in the archives.

Elected 2009

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