

Imagined Communities Book Summary, by Benedict Anderson

by Allen Cheng

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1-Page Summary of Imagined Communities

Overall Summary

Benedict Anderson's study of nationalism starts by rejecting the assumption that nations are a natural or inevitable social unit. Instead, he describes them as cultural constructs with particular histories and features. To understand why nations exert such power over people, he points to continuities among different nations, including those in different eras and places. He also explores how they differ from one another to show how they depend on history but preserve many structures inherent to older forms of social organization.

Anderson begins by describing what makes nationalism different from other political ideologies. Nationalism is powerful, while liberalism and communism are not. Nationalism can motivate people to die for their country, while no one would die for a liberal or communist regime. The idea of the nation is so strong that everyone assumes everyone else belongs to one; the most important international political body is called the United Nations; and since World War II every successful revolution has defined itself in national terms. But despite how much we talk about it, nobody really knows what "nation," "nationality" and "nationalism" mean. They seem to have no concrete definition because they're more like emotions than tangible things—they're imagined communities. According to Anderson's definition, nations are emotional phenomena where citizens feel like part of a family with shared origins, mutual interests and horizontal comradeship. Nations also seem very limited (borders) and sovereign (the only legitimate

authority within those borders).

In the next chapter, Anderson argues that one of nationalism's most important effects is to give meaning to people's lives. After religion declined in importance and lost its political role after the Enlightenment, nationalism conveniently took its place in giving meaning to people's striving for improvement, service to their overlords, and even deaths. People began thinking about history as an endless chain of cause-and-effect rather than as God's will. The rise of vernacular languages also contributed a lot towards creating a sense of community among different communities. Nationalist novels written in vernacular started portraying communities living together on bounded territorial entities while newspapers constructed imagined communities out of their readers through their cultural products like advertisements and news stories.

In the next chapter, Anderson explores how printed texts helped to spread ideas and influence people. He explains that this was possible because of the Protestant Reformation which dethroned Latin as Europe's common language for scholars and political leaders. Then, he discusses how publishers chose a standard dialect to print in so their audience would be able to read it. These standard dialects became prestige versions of languages, changing much less than oral languages through time.

In the fourth chapter, Anderson discusses how nationalism developed in America. The American revolution was led by educated elites who were familiar with European ideas and philosophies. They revolted against their rulers because of economic oppression and cultural differences, which led to a democratic republic rather than a monarchy. In the second half of this chapter, he explains why it took so long for people to unify into one country: the British colonies were close together while those in Spanish territories were spread out; and there wasn't as much communication between them since bureaucrats could only work at home but not travel far away from where they lived. As a result of these constraints, each region had its own economy, newspaper system (which contributed to national identity), and sense of independence that eventually led to revolutions against Spain's control.

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