

## NEUE LITERATUR

*Anderson, Benedict: Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.*

Verso Editions and NLB, London 1983, 160 S.

This clever little book has all that it takes to become a primary source of inspiration to anyone interested in the issue of nationalism, its causes and transformations. Written with admirable clarity and a good deal of humor, its nine chapters present the reader with a refreshing way of looking at this Modern Age universal. To the student of East Central Europe this work offers the possibility of seeing his favorite subject matter placed within a comparative framework (one that goes beyond the usual West European perspective) by an author whose own 'expertise' lies with Indochina and who feels comfortable using the work of anthropology and literary theory to draw insight on political history. Nation-ness remains as legitimate a political value today as it has been for the past two centuries. It has, equally, remained an enigma to social analysis. Rather than seeing it as another ideological 'ism', Anderson prefers to treat the related phenomena of nationality, Nationalism and nation-ness as cultural artifacts, akin to kinship and religion. He defines the nation as "an imagined political community," since it is impossible for all members to know each other 'personally'. What distinguishes it from other kinds of imagined communities is "the style by which it is imagined." (p. 15) It is imagined as limited since it rests on the notion of membership and thus exclusion. And it is sovereign; the nation connotes the sense of freedom within its protective shell (the reality of oppression notwithstanding).

Anderson is certainly not the first to trace the cultural roots of nationalism to the development of mercantile capitalism, to the increased contact with non-European worlds and to the invention of the printing press, both of which gradually undermined the vast imagined dynastic and religious communities of the Middle Ages. The originality of the author's argument comes from showing how print-capitalism accounts for the development of a new sense of co-presence, a key component in the "obscure genesis of nationalism." The vertical world of the Middle Ages was one in which the 'now' coexisted with the past and future in one simultaneity of presence given by Divine Providence. "In such a view of things, the word 'meanwhile' cannot be of real significance." (p. 30) The medieval 'simultaneity-along-time' is replaced "by an idea of 'homogeneous, empty time,' in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar." (p. 30) The novel and the newspaper provided, in different ways, the possibility of presenting an earthly simultaneity in which the reader is made present to a multiplicity of actions and actors who coexist as a 'sociological' community 'in time'. The newspaper draws together events related often only

by 'calendrical coincidence'. Unique as a perishable ('one-day best-sellers'), it is consumed almost simultaneously by an actively imagining community of readers.

Print consumerism can then claim the responsibility for the new experience of temporal sequence and for making a new kind of imagined community possible, but why should this lead to the rise of national consciousness? Anderson draws on the work of Febvre and Martin<sup>1</sup> when he argues that "a strong case can be made for the primacy of capitalism." (p. 41) 20 million books had been printed by 1500. It was 200 million volumes by 1600. The success of the business depended on the availability of markets which lay in the untapped see of 'native' speaking monoglots. This "revolutionary vernacularizing thrust of capitalism" (p. 42) received additional impetus from the Reformation ("Luther was the first best-selling author *so known*") and on the initially independent rise in the use of vernaculars for internal, administrative purposes by the ruling aristocracy. The process was a gradual one. It predated the invention of print and lasted well into the 19th century (Austria). Conquering new market territory required the invention of print-languages which, since the printing technology was based on the arbitrariness of phonological transcription, could easily draw together linguistically related *ideolects* into a single vernacular market. The basis was laid for an imagined community of people that included *all and only* those who knew the vernacular. The fixation of meaning in an infinitely reproducible form also helped to establish a sense of permanence and thus of antiquity. At the same time, since the print-language worked more out of one 'suitable' *ideolect* rather than another, languages of power were established as did the notion of proper usage that placed the other *ideolects* in a subordinate ('sub-national') status.

Print capitalism was not only crucial to the rise of national consciousness. It transformed the idea of nation-ness, as well as its historical experience, into a blue-print for others to adopt. The 'prototype' first took shape in the Americas, where the penetration of print capitalism provided the Spanish and English speaking Creoles (locally born Europeans) with a vehicle for the gradual formation of a shared world, a community independent of the European metropolis. In contrast to the Americas, where the old and new order shared a common vernacular, the commercial and bureaucratic demand for vernaculars in Europe reinforced the sense that language, population and territory were intrinsically linked. Herder's "Denn jedes Volk ist Volk; es hat seine nationale Bildung wie seine Sprache" is symbolic of this early stage of European nationalism. The history of the gradual 'liberation' of vernaculars – be it Czech, Russian, Ukrainian or Finish – is a familiar one, as is the role of the increasingly politicized elites in the process that placed the old dynastic orders in the dangerous situation of losing control over a heterogeneous population as well as their own place in it. The spread of official nationalism (the author borrows this concept from the work of Seton-Watson<sup>2</sup>) marks the second stage in the European elaboration of the model. A response to the spontaneous nationalisms that led to the upheavals of 1848, it was a

<sup>1</sup> Febvre, Lucien and Martin, Henri-Jean: *The Coming of the Book. The Impact of Printing 1450–1800*. London 1976.

<sup>2</sup> Seton-Watson, Hugh: *Nations and States. An Enquiry into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism*. London 1977.

conscious policy characterized by the 'naturalization' of European dynasties. "Stretching the short, tight, skin of the nation over the gigantic body of the empire," (p. 82) marked the Russification policy pursued by Czar Alexander III, the last 50 years of Austro-Hungary, the transformation of isolated Japan into an expansionist Imperial rule as well as the policy of Asian and African colonialism. The educational system, and the bureaucratic and military system that it fed, provided opportunities and hence 'corrupted' the population. Yet, as in the case of the Creoles in the Americas, a double standard applied to the 'non-native' speakers of the official vernacular. German speaking Czechs, Magyar speaking Slovaks, English educated Indians or Japanized Koreans made for excellent nationals, but that is all. Their upward mobility remained restricted to the administration of their own lot. This world-wide contradiction accounts for the final transformation of empires into nation states after 1918 and for the popularity of the blue-print around the globe today.

There are other important insights on language and nation-ness that Anderson draws from his cross-cultural analysis. The early American and recent Third World experience demonstrate that it is language's capacity to generate particular solidarities that is essential: "Print language is what invents nationalism, not a particular language per se." (p. 122) Czech was 'reinvented' and formalized starting in the late 18th century, Indonesian is a development of the 'administrative Malay', an ancient lingua franca used by the colonial Dutch, while English (not Ashanti) is the national language of Ghana. Today multilingual broadcasting can create the imagined community without the need for literacy or even a common language. It is language again that helps the author shed some light on 'political love', "on the *attachment* that peoples feel for the inventions of their imagination." After all, ideological rhetoric notwithstanding, millions have lost their lives to patriotic causes, few to any political party or club. The idioms of kinship (*Vaterland, patria*) and home (*Heimat, domov*) place nation-ness next to other 'naturals' (such as skin colour, sex or parentage); it is pre-given. "For most ordinary people of whatever class the whole of the nation is that it is interestless. Just for that reason, it can ask for sacrifices." (p. 131) Language connects us not only with the living others but across time with our ancestors. Racism, conceives of 'others' as "an endless sequence of loathsome copulations: outside history." (p. 136) In contrast, historicity is the credo of nationalism as historical memory becomes inseparable from a linguistic history. Like language the nation is both open to newcomers and closed to those who are not a part of it, who do not speak or read it. "What the eye is to the lover - language - whatever language history has made his or her mother tongue - is to the patriot. Through that language, encountered at mother's knee and parted with only at the grave, pasts are restored, fellowships are imagined, and futures dreamed." (p. 140)