

## **Benedict Anderson: Reimagined, Re-engineered, and Restored Communities**

**Article by Edouard Gaudot**

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To build a narrative with the power to inspire a sense of allegiance, the power of education and the media must be harnessed. A tribute to the great scholar of “imagined communities”, this essay evokes the challenges and opportunities presented by globalisation. It proposes a green reimagination of our sense of belonging anchored in our identity as global citizens and fostered by our educational establishments and creative industries.

*This article is part of the series “Schools for Thought” – a collection of reflections on the contributions of four thinkers to our understanding of education today and its potential: Maria Montessori, Pierre Bourdieu, Simone Weil, and Benedict Anderson.*

As the dim light of post-ideological times fades, politics is increasingly called upon to produce overarching and comprehensive narratives. From providing a semblance of legitimacy to the contested neoliberal order to responding to the growing search for a sense of meaning in secularised, materialistic societies, “grand narratives” – as predicted by Peter Sloterdijk – are back.

First to come ashore on this rising historical tide were the remnants of the past. Weaving together abundance and freedom, modernist grand narratives of growth and nationhood are reviving the fury of the Steel Age as sovereign nations vie for access to resources. In post-colonial, Islam-obsessed France, the national narrative revolves around discussions on the “roman national” and the dubious benefits of colonisation. For a jingoist United Kingdom, it evokes the buccaneering glory of Global Britain. In nationalist Poland and Hungary, it manifests as an aggressively revisionist political approach to memory and history in museums and schools. Concurrently, India, China, the United States, and Putin’s Russia are all redeveloping their civilisational narratives in support of their soft power globally and as a justification for their hard power nationally.

Fed by the economic imbalances and cultural misgivings fostered by globalisation, a new generation of left-leaning populist movements has been gathering momentum over the past decade, attempting to form a discursive coalition based on a galvanising public narrative. However, these efforts were unable to reconcile the Left’s old internationalism with the new normal of globalisation and lacked institutional underpinning. As a result, they were ultimately unstable alliances. In stark contrast, the right-wing project has tapped the deep well of nationalism, its institutions, and its forms of expression. Gradually shaping the whole public conversation, such efforts demand a streamlined national history celebrating grandeur and obscuring society’s darker moments in order to strengthen and mobilise the

national community. Shaking up the comfortable belief in the rationality of ruling elites, they solicit nostalgia, pride, and anger to conjure a powerful alternative narrative that is strongly nationalist in nature.

The author of arguably the most influential book on the origins of nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson (1936-2015) was a historian and political scientist as well as a devoted student of south-east Asia. Investigating the “origins and spread of nationalism”, he famously defined it as “an imagined political community [...], imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign”.<sup>[1]</sup> Against the cold-blooded realism of his contemporary Ernest Gellner, who saw nationalism as merely the instrument of the modern industrial state,<sup>[2]</sup> Anderson insisted upon the warmth, comfort, and solidity of a community held together by a shared creed, song and, more often than not, language: a Verdian “chorus of the slaves”.

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Through his work on language in relation to power, Anderson demonstrated the crucial historical role played by the media – especially the print media – and the schooling systems of modern states in imparting knowledge of the history, geography, and literature of a community in order to build a sense of belonging stronger than any other allegiance. This was the primary historical achievement of the Republican school: transforming France’s conservative, predominantly peasant population into a community of French citizens, *enfants de la Patrie* ready to take up arms and die in muddy trenches.

After 70 years of European integration designed to forestall any resurgence of the nationalisms that led to the horrors of the past, Europe’s nations have grown wary of the concept of patriotism, now relegated to football stadiums and the Eurovision Song Contest. But the EU has yet to put forward an equally compelling narrative about what it stands for, and there is no sense of the sacrifices Europeans as a whole might be willing to make in order to protect their “European way of life”. This stands in clear contrast to the dedication with which Finnish citizens, for example, are prepared to defend their “imagined community”.

In this context, especially following the Russian invasion of Ukraine and given the conflicting narratives surrounding it, Anderson’s lessons are valuable and worthy of reflection – for Greens in particular. The existence of the modern nation-state and the extraordinary resilience of the emotional link it established with its populations is an everyday reminder of the power of education.

Over the years, the Green approach to a better world has evolved from whistleblowing on environmental destruction to a technocratic portfolio of policies designed to address the ecological crisis. But both at national and European levels, Greens often struggle to identify the tone and substance of their own “imagined community”. Lest they forget, schools have an important role to play in developing ecological awareness and this educational process continues through the broad diversity of media forms as a type of lifelong learning.

The Green role in developing a citizenry that identifies with and is able to bring about a better, safer, greener world must go far beyond election campaigning. It is a question of building up a Gramscian “eco-hegemony” – in schools and within public debate, in the world of trade and industry and within trade unions, and in organised civil society – that also touches the average person on the street.

For this, the Greens will have to overcome an important obstacle that has arisen since Anderson’s times, marked as they were by the dominance of the printed press: the increasing division of the public sphere into ever-shrinking “imagined communities”. An overhaul of the media ecosystem poisoning our minds and societies should become a priority as urgent and necessary as banning the fossil fuels and chemicals contaminating our air and food.

An opportunity presented by today’s globalised, interconnected world is the possibility of extending our imagined communities to encompass the whole planet. As the war in Ukraine threatens to starve people in Africa and triggers fuel-related riots in Lima, Marshall McLuhan’s “global village” is more real than ever.[3] From the Covid-19 pandemic to the geopolitical situation, a positive externality to these global crises is the fact that they pave the way for an “imagined community of planetary dimensions”. With public opinion increasingly connected and mobilised, in addition to unprecedented levels of interdependency, it may be time for Green political discourse to reconnect with its alter-globalist roots, drawing on Anderson’s lessons to forge a compelling narrative.

It is high time for education to instil a form of “Earth patriotism”, a sense of belonging and devotion to the planet on which we live. This would not take the form of the ludicrous nationalism of Hollywood blockbusters that pit humanity against space invaders, but rather integrate the inclusive and democratic thinking of scientists and even sci-fi pioneers. Asimov’s Gaia, the Spaceship Earth of Lovelock and Margulis, and Kim Stanley Robinson’s Ministry for the Future, to name just a few, offer striking examples of such narratives.

How it might be possible to combine these elements to generate a sense of togetherness, of a shared common destiny, of belonging to an “imagined community”, is still uncertain. What is certain, however, is that our schools and our creative and intellectual projects – from action movies to scientific essays – will be instrumental. It is time to take Anderson’s legacy to the next stage.

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[1] Benedict Anderson (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso Books.

[2] Ernest Gellner (1983). *Nations and Nationalism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

[3] Marshall McLuhan & Bruce R. Powers (1992). *The Global Village*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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