The eleventh chapter of Genesis includes the well-known story of the Tower of Babel. As described in the story, humanity at the dawn of its history comprised a single people speaking a single tongue. With the help of novel architectural technology, men built a tower high enough to reach heaven itself – a tower embodying the arrogance of humanity, which sought to subvert the boundaries separating it from its creator. God responded to this presumptuous act with rage and fury, deciding to scatter humanity all over the world and confuse its speech. As a result of this admixture of languages, the city in which the tower was built was named Babel – and the tower itself was called the Tower of Babel.[[1]](#footnote-1) This ancient myth is generally read as an etiological allegory explaining how it came to be that human beings, despite being descendants of Adam, did not constitute a single, united human community. The story of the Tower of Babel can therefore be understood as a mythic retelling of the origin of nations, showing as it does that humanity has, since time immemorial, has been divided into heterogeneous human frameworks, each one made distinct from the next by diverse, particular characteristics – such as language and geographical location – while, at the same time, testifying to the existence of a shared foundational principle: the one distinct moment that brought them into being. It is reasonable to assume that such an etiological explanation for the origin of nations would appeal to historians of the primordialist school, who claim that nations and nationalism are ancient phenomena, which, in the guise of ethnic and cultural affinities, remained dormant throughout earlier historical periods, only to reassert themselves as an organizational framework for human existence in the new era. As this approach implies, nationalism is perceived as a fixed, eternal, and natural characteristic of human existence, and thus it is possible, even legitimate, to treat the ancient Biblical myth as important cultural proof of the antiquity of the national phenomenon.

Benedict Anderson, a specialist in the history of Indonesia and southeast Asia, would forcefully oppose such a claim. As a historian of the modernist school, Anderson would assert that ancient myths, including this Biblical one, can only be read and understood as testimony to the transhistorical existence of peoples and nations under the influence of a certain historiographical consciousness, one that would not be described in national terms until the end of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteeth. Historians of the modernist school, including Anderson, are opposed to the idea of nationalism as an ancient phenomenon and essential expression of human existence. Nationalism and peoplehood, according to this school, are something of a novelty – phenomena whose roots cannot be located in ancient historical eras because their very creation is the result of existence in the modern world with all its associated processes, such as capitalism, urbanization, and industrialization. Therefore, seeing in Biblical myth a testimony to the historic and ancient existence of peoples is nothing more than an anachronistic projection of modern conceptions onto a historical moment to which they are foreign; a testimony to what Anderson calls the “subjective antiquity” of nationalists, who use stories like this one, woven together and repeated by a specific people, to construct a collective memory and common past that allow their compatriots to feel themselves an integral part of the collective in which they live. National existence, as Anderson sees it, is suffused with a plenitude of such stories, which nationalism uses to cloak itself in the mantle of eternal, preordained destiny. As Anderson asserts, however, this “destiny” is no testament to the determinist imperative of national existence, for it too is immersed in history and based on historical exchanges and creative human activity that strives to construct a common past. Ancient myth therefore constitutes a highly significant cultural resource, which, when harnessed for the creation of a sense of historical continuity, becomes an important means of establishing the imagined national community.

In this essay, I wish to present the interpretive-historical process outlined by Benedict Anderson in his influential 1983 book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* After presenting Anderson’s primary arguments concerning the imagined national community and the historical processes that made the creation of national consciousness possible, I will offer a critical reading intended to shed light on a number of theoretical, methodological, and interpretive problems that arise in his analysis. This critical reading will be carried out in two stages: first, through the presentation of general issues, touching on various topics in Anderson’s book, in need of a critical perspective; and second, through concentrating on the criticism, levied by postcolonial scholars belonging to the Subaltern Studies Group, Partha Chatterejee and Homi Bhabha, of the Eurocentric and Western nature of Anderson’s historical project, which testifies to the fact that the construction of national identity is inextricably bound up with the creation of a politics of identity based on the ongoing exclusion of certain identities from the process of national imagination.

**Imagined Communities: From National Consciousness to Modular Forms**

At the foundation of Anderson’s historical scholarship lies the effort to explain the deep attachments nationhood inspires among human beings; why so many are enchanted by their nation, giving up their lives for it and killing others in its name. In an attempt to build an intellectual bridge between social sciences and the humanities, and to provide an explanation befitting his constructionist assumptions, Anderson claims that the modern era created a certain type of collective, in which the affinity between its members is not based on personal acquaintance or continuous, direct communication. This collective establishes its members’ sense of acquaintance and affinity through ceaseless mental activity, and thus Anderson describes the nation as an imagined community: “…it is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings” (Anderson 7).

The act of imagination, Anderson explains, aids in outlining the national collective – because no nation perceives itself as encompassing the whole of humanity, and its imagination necessarily distinguishes between those who are part of it and those who lie outside it: “The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie over other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind. The most messianic nationalists do not dream of a day when all the members of the human race will join their nation in the way that it was possible, in certain epochs, for, say, Christians to dream of a wholly Christian planet” (7).

Yet the term “imagined community,” Anderson stresses, does not imply that the community itself is imaginary and baseless, or that its existence is counterfeit, fraudulent, and false. Imagined community is the result of a continuous process of creation, and its presence is tangible, concrete, and very much real. Therefore, Anderson explains, imaginary communities should not be defined and differentiated according to the criteria of truth and falsehood, but rather according to their style of imagination – that is, according to the creative and productive force that forms them, and the manner in which they are imagined. Anderson presents the appearance of the imagined national community as the result of a complex encounter between historical forces and processes, which can be assigned to one of three central axes: the diminishment of religious communities and dynastic realms, changes in the conception of time, and the emergence of print capitalism, which enabled the large-scale commercial distribution of books and the rapid growth of a public that began to conceive of itself in entirely new ways.

The dynastic realm derived the legitimacy of its existence and authority from God (and not from citizens, who were no more than subjects), and it organized itself around monarchic centers of control whose boundaries were fluid and hazy. Over the course of the seventeenth century, Anderson writes, “for reasons that need not detain us here – the automatic legitimacy of the sacral monarchy began its slow decline in Western Europe” (21). This process, Anderson asserts, was preceded by an even more important and fundamental process, namely the diminishment of religious communities, a result of the discovery and exploration of the non-European world, which expanded Europe’s cultural and geographic horizons, exposed Europeans to alternative modes of living, and led to the formation of religious relativism. The diminishment of religious communities was also closely related to the gradual decline of the sacral languages that helped preserve these communities’ cohesion. Latin, Anderson explains, was the dominant language of the European intelligentsia, and the only language formally taught in medieval western Europe. The development of print capitalism allowed new administrative languages to flourish, which undermined Latin’s status and allowed the masses faster and easier access to the religious texts which were now being translated into their native languages. Latin ceased to serve as the language of the European high intelligentsia, and the religious communities that had once coalesced around sacral languages increasingly crumbled. In their place arose myriad geographically delineated linguistic entities, speaking and reading in local languages identified with their native geographical regions. The devaluation of religious worldviews and the reduced status of leaders who ruled by divine right, Anderson asserts, unraveled dynastic and religious communities, and necessitated the appearance of an alternative, secular authority to aid in the creation of meaning and continuity, and render the arbitrary dimension of existence rational, tolerable, and comprehensible. The presentation of the nation as an eternal entity, with roots shrouded in the past and a future stretching out towards infinity, allowed the individual to ascribe “cosmic” significance to his hardships and fleeting existence, providing him with a kind of comfort.

Still, Anderson notes, it would be too simplistic to say that nations developed and appeared only as an immediate substitute for religious communities and dynastic realms. The disintegration of these communities was the basis for another significant process, one that helped human beings “think” and imagine the existence of the nation: the change in the medieval Christian conception of time and the transition to the modern one. In the medieval conception of time, different events in the past, present, and future were understood as connected to one another by divine providence, rather than chronologically or causatively. Within the framework of this simultaneous, vertical conception of time, in which past, present, and future exist beside and encompass one another, the word “meanwhile,” Anderson writes, is bereft of meaning, relying as it does on the modern conception of horizontal simultaneity (25). In the modern era, Anderson asserts, an alternative conception of time began to develop, leading to a fundamental and significant change in human beings’ worldview. This alternative conception was founded on the clear distinction between past, present, and future, and history in this framework was understood as an infinite chain of events linked by cause and effect. Anderson, under the influence of Walter Benjamin, describes this conception by reference to the idea of “homogeneous, empty time”: horizontal simultaneity, based on the randomness of events occurring in parallel temporality, measurable by clock and calendar. This new conception of time made it possible to imagine the nation as a “sociological organism” moving through history (Anderson 26).

In his book, Anderson explains how the products of culture and communication that began to flourish in nineteenth-century Europe – the newspaper and the novel – provided a technical means of representing the modern conception of time, thus participating in the creation of the imagined national community. The newspaper’s circulation ensures that the individual reader’s ritual of reading will be duplicated, carried out in parallel to that of millions of others with whom the reader is not personally acquainted. When the individual reader sees that his neighbor, the commuters waiting with him at the train station, or the person next to him at the barber shop read the same newspaper, he receives reinforcement of his sense that this collective, sharing with him the ritual of reading, is rooted in the same quotidian and routine framework of life (Anderson 34-35). The newspaper presents different, independent events alongside one another, and it is the very arbitrariness of their integration that confirms that the link between them is imagined, and aids in the creation of the continuity and simultaneity of existence of the people and places the newspaper covers. The novel, Anderson argues, provides a profound and significant representation of the imagined community and the conception of homogeneous, empty time. To illustrate this point, Anderson describes a basic novelistic plot in which there are four characters, some of whom do not know one another, who nevertheless constitute sociological entities living within the same fixed and stable framework of reality, thereby maintaining indirect collective affinities between each other. It is not merely that the activities and actions of the characters exist within the same calendrical continuity; rather, the reader, like God, is granted the opportunity to read about different, unacquainted characters and thereby weave their disparate narratives into a common simultaneous existence. This is the process by which “fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations” (Anderson 36). In other words, Anderson points out not only the importance of the newspaper and novel in drawing attention to and representing national existence’s modern conception of time, but also the way in which various cultural products can be employed as a means of constructing identities that serve a particular national collectivism.

According to Anderson, the most decisively influential factor in making the creation of the imagined national community possible was print capitalism. The development of capitalist modes of production in the print realm, beginning in the sixteenth century, led to the printing of non-Latin texts for an increasingly literate public on a massive scale.[[2]](#footnote-2) The motivating logic of the capitalist method – continuous accumulation of profit and capital – encouraged publishers, who saw that the market for products aimed at the Latin-speaking elite was saturated, to spread into new markets, reaching out to the monolingual masses through the production of inexpensive materials in local languages. This trend led to the consolidation of various dialects into accessible and shared written languages, which created “unified fields of exchange and communication” (Anderson 46), thus setting the stage for the emergence of the modern nation.

After explaining the factors that allowed human beings to imagine themselves as a national community, Anderson returns to the specific historical context in which the first forms of nationalism arose. Anderson argues that national consciousness, or the imagined national community, first developed not in Europe, but in the creole communities in European colonial settlements in America. Creoles, whom Anderson defines as the first generation of whites (of pure European extraction) born on American soil (49), created the first model of nationalism while living in a reality defined by cultural limbo, which motivated them to sever themselves from the imperial European metropolis. Despite the penetration of liberal European ideas, which provided the ideological basis for the criticism of imperialism, and the problematic political relations with the various European motherlands, it was this administrative and bureaucratic structure of the colonies that brought about the genesis of national consciousness among the creoles. The wide expanses of the American continent forced creole officials and bureaucrats to embark on pilgrimages between America’s administrative units, which allowed them to develop a sense of a common collective reality. During their pilgrimages, these creole functionaries encountered colleagues hailing from various places across the American continent, and this spatial movement not only encouraged them to mentally delineate their communities into distinct geographical areas, but also provided them with a comprehensible and accessible social interpretation of the fact of their shared existence within them. For these reasons, Anderson explains, the people of the creole settlements described the rebellion against their European motherlands in terms of nationality, rather than class, religion, or ethnicity (50-53).

During the eighteenth century, after creole nationalism was already at its zenith, and under the influence of print capitalism and the steady erosion of religious communities’ and dynastic monarchies’ power, nationalism began to flourish and spread throughout Europe too. Creole nationalism thus constituted a precedent, and from the moment of its creation – much like the two forms of European nationalism that appeared in its wake – it was made modular; that is, portable, “replantable,” reproducible. European nationalism, in Anderson’s estimation, was different in character from that of the creoles; it emerged in the third decade of the eighteenth century in the guise of “popular nationalism,” based on the cultural and geographical consolidation of linguistic communities, a process spurred by print capitalism. Afterwards there emerged, particulary in Russia, “official nationalism,” which developed in response to the ruling classes’ fear that these newborn “imagined communities” would lead to their exclusion from the corridors of power and the decline of the dynastic realm. “Official nationalism,” therefore, espouses a pre-existing model of nationalism, imbued with a reactionary interpretation by elites hoping to impose cultural homogeneity and preserve their power within a nationalist framework. These three models – creole nationalism, popular nationalism, and official nationalism – were open, from the very moment of their emergence, to imitation, revision, and copying, and thus, every subsequently developing nationalist movement or organization, Anderson argues, can be understood as a response to one of these models of nationalism (89).

Anderson concludes that anti-colonial nationalism, which developed at the end of the nineteenth century and flourished throughout the twentieth in the various colonies controlled by the European powers, was the product of existing models of nationalism, and based on casting political material into the administrative molds left behind by the colonial empires. This final stage of nationalism, Anderson argues, was based on the overlap between the colonial territory as outlined by the empire and the territory the new community imagined for itself as habitat.[[3]](#footnote-3) Anderson goes on to say that the flourishing of anti-colonial nationalism was made possible by the accelerated development of colonial administration, which required the creation of a new social stratum comprising native-born colonists who carried out bureaucratic tasks for the European mother country. This led to the establishment of new educational system, by which there came to be a bilingual, native-born elite who, through their European-style education, could gain access to models of “nation,” “nation-ness,” and “nationalism” that were “distilled from the turbulent, chaotic experiences of more than a century of American and European history” (Anderson 173). The European educational system’s students, who came from settlements and villages across the colony, began to imagine themselves as a national community: “And they knew that from wherever they had come they still had read the same books and done the same sums. They also knew, even if they never got so far – and most did not – that Rome was Batavia, and that all these journeyings derived their ‘sense’ from the capital, in effect explaining why ‘we’ are ‘here’ ‘together’” (124). Anderson’s statement emphasizes the mobility and modularity of the nationalist idea: here was an idea of a particularistic character (emphasizing the singularity of the nation) that was nonetheless transformed into a universal necessity, duplicatable in different cultural and territorial spaces. For this reason, anti-colonial nationalism is a combination of pre-existing nationalist models, and even though the nation-states born in the post-World War II era have their own distinct character, they cannot be understood, Anderson argues, without reference to these three preceding models.

**A General Critical Look at Imagined Communities**

I wish to begin my critical discussion of Anderson’s historical narrative by unpacking the central term suggested by his book: “imagined communities.” In his words, in order for separate individuals to be able to function as a sociological organism, they require the capacity for imagination, which provides them with a kind of existential glue and allows them to perceive the bonds that constitute them as a national collective. But the nation is not the only collective whose existence is not predicated on its members’ total acquaintance with one another, and thus, by this definition, there exist other, non-national communities that can be thought of as “imagined.” Other well-understood categories, such as people, class, gender, and ethnicity, require a certain measure of imagination in order to establish themselves as collective units founded on bonds of brotherhood and solidarity, without these bonds needing to be translated or interpreted according to nationalist terms (Smith). Moreover, Anderson’s comments on the historical emergence of national consciousness imply that the act of imagination is based on the creation of narratives that instill in members of the community a sense of belonging and historical continuity. Unpacking these narratives into their constituent pieces reveals that they are based on a series of cultural characteristics – language, myths, historical events, and the sense of a shared origin and destiny – constructed by members of the community in an effort to interpret and understand their existence in a national-collective framework. But these constituent pieces do not necessitate the creation of a national collective, and could serve in equal measure in the construction, or post-facto description, of other collective categories. Anderson, it is reasonable to assume, would argue that other communities (ethnic, gender-based, class-based, professional) differ from one another in the style of imagination upon which they are founded, yet throughout his book, he fails to offer any precise information that might clarify the nature of the style of national imagination, on what it depends, and how it competes with the other styles of imagination always existing in parallel to it.

When presenting the methodological foundation of his book, Anderson characterizes it as an effort “to combine a kind of historical materialism with what later came to be called discourse analysis; Marxist modernism married to postmodernism *avant la lettre*” (223). But this intermediate position Anderson adopts in relation to these two critical methodologies sometimes causes the formation of lacunae in his theoretical and historical explanations. As a scholar hewing to a Marist perspective, Anderson assumes that the source of the imagined national community lies not in the realm of ideas and ideals, but rather in the material, socio-economic sphere: the bourgeois capitalist pursuit of new markets and target audiences, made possible by the invention of the printing press, instigated a revolution in communication that gave birth to new national communities that took the place of those religious communities relying on a sacral language.[[4]](#footnote-4) Print capitalism, based on the capitalist mode of production, is what made the act of nationalist imagination possible. Yet at the same time, Anderson’s discussion of the material circumstances leading to the emergence of a new type of consciousness, that of nation, is steeped in the rhetoric of spontaneity and coincidence, which undermines the strength of the described causative link between material reality and the realm of ideas. Anderson describes the national community as “the spontaneous distillation of a complex ‘crossing’ of discrete historical forces” (4), and the formation of print languages as “a gradual, unselfconscious, pragmatic, not to say haphazard development” (44), even concluding: “What, in a positive sense, made the new communities imaginable was a half-fortuitous, but explosive, interaction between a system of production and productive relations (capitalism), a technology of communications (print), and the fatality of human linguistic diversity…” (44).

In the framework of Marxist theory, Anderson’s remarks create a fundamental problem for his central assertion regarding the material conditions that led to the formation of the imagined national community. The Marxist conception of history as a movement of dialectical materialism is firmly based on a strict, rigid mechanism of causality. According to Marx, there is nothing coincidental about the emergence of capitalism, a new class, and a new consciousness interpreting social existence in nationalistic terms (Marx and Engels; Wollman and Spencer 9). Material reality can be described as a sequence of stages progressing from one another, directly influencing the non-material whole of human life. Therefore, the emergence of the imagined national community must be explained with recourse to a direct causative connection to material reality – to the forces of production and to capitalist mode of production’s attitudes toward production.

An additional problem weakening the materialist argument presented by Anderson stems from the great power he imputes to language and the products of culture, such as the novel and the newspaper, in the creation of the imagined national community. In a relatively early stage of his analysis, after presenting the principle materialist argument concerning the circumstances of the imagined national community’s emergence, Anderson moves to a discussion of the phenomena and aspects that constitute part of its superstructure (print languages, the novel, and the newspaper), without explaining in a sufficiently comprehensive manner why precisely the act of imagining the national community (rather than other types of collective affinities) is an identifying mark of capitalist modes of production. Anderson repeatedly examines national consciousness in light of cultural phenomena that also constitute a product of the material substucture and part of the material superstructure, which, from the Marxist perspective, cannot therefore offer an sufficiently comprehensive explanation for the emergence of this unique consciousness.[[5]](#footnote-5) It is possible that his presentation of a comprehensive explanation of the causality linking capitalism and national consciousness might aid in the precise clarification of the various aspects and styles of national imagination in its capacity as the consequence of the internal development of capitalism itself and of its differentiation into dialectical stages. However, if we consider the lack of a sufficiently strong causative connection between the national phenomenon and historical, material reality, then add to our consideration the significant role Anderson ascribes to language in the establishment of the imagined community, as well as his claim that, at any time, through the study of language, one can “invite” others to join the ranks of the imagined national community,[[6]](#footnote-6) we find ourselves without a sufficiently convincing explanation of why it was capitalism that set the stage for the act of national imagination.

Even at the outset of his book, Anderson seeks to make clear that he does not see nationalism as a kind of ideology: “It would, I think, make things easier if one treated it as if it belonged with ‘kinship’ and ‘religion,’ rather than with ‘liberalism’ or ‘fascism’” (5). Viewing nationalism as an ideological category would, from a Marxist perspective, present it as false consciousness – a distorted and deceptive representation of social and economic life. With these assertions, Anderson, who seeks to prove that there is nothing false in the imagined community, and that there is no cause to see in it a fraudulent and deceptive representation of reality as it truly is, finds himself closer to the perspective of discourse, according to which nationalism (or any cultural category whatsoever) can be discussed not in terms of truth and falsehood, but rather only as the product of practices of the production of knowledge and the power relations to which they are subject.[[7]](#footnote-7) But Anderson’s decision not to see an ideological category in nationalism leaves his argument open to the primordialist trap, for his aforementioned remark implies that nationalism is a continuation of the existing collective organizations and affinities which led to, among other things, the creation of the family unit, or that of the religious community.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The decisive role Anderson ascribes to novel technologies (such as the invention of the printing press and print capitalism) in the context of the creation of national consciousness echoes many of the fundamental assumptions of the Enlightenment school’s ethos of modernity, according to which the human history of the last three hundred years can be described as a linear and unidirectional movement along an axis running from religion to secularity. Anderson explains the emergence of nationalism as the result of the disappearance of traditional social structures (among them religious community), and in so doing makes a connection between what he considers a more sophisticated and developed form of communal imagination and humanity’s general repudiation of divine rule. The assumption that nationalism is an advanced historical stage automatically following the decline of the influence of theological hermeneutics and religious foundations denies the way in which various historical and sociological contexts are likely to result in violations of or deviations from the trend towards secularization associated with nationalism. It is not only that the processes of modernization themselves are neither uniform nor realized with the same force in different socioeconomic frameworks, but also that national collectives too distinguish themselves from one another by the role they assign the theological dimension in the context of their act of national imagination. In his remarks, Anderson overlooks historical examples testifying to the fact that national imagination does not constitute part of the secularizing effort to cast off divine authority, but rather perceives itself as the realization of a divine edict, or as the fulfilment of an ancient covenant between God and his people (Gat and Yakobson 224). The influence of the theological dimension on processes of national imagination raises the possibility that the conception of homogeneous, empty time described by Anderson will always be mixed, to varying degrees, with other conceptions of time – theological, messianic, cyclical – which undermine it and color its various aspects. Anderson’s overlooking of the theological dimension inherent to the act of national imagination turns him into an uncritical and insufficiently suspicious participant in the accepted historical axiomatization, which points to the Enlightenment as a turning point heralding the transition from medieval theologies to a modern, secular existence.

Anderson’s treatment of the novel and the newspaper as central cultural objects that take part in the representation of homogeneous, empty time, and therefore advance the possibility of imagining the national community, also demands meticulous critical examination. The novel, Anderson argues, provided a technical means of representing the imagined national community, and aided in the act of imagining it.[[9]](#footnote-9) As his arguments allude to, the creation of a nation and national consciousness demands processes of abstraction and unification, which make it possible for a mass of anonymous individuals to be joined into a single national body. For this reason, for example, print capitalism, to which Anderson ascribes paramount importance in the process of creating modern nations, led to the simplification and consolidation of multiple diverse dialects and jargons into unified national languages. The novel, too, as Anderson’s remarks imply, gives voice to a similar trend of assembly and homogenization, as the private, individual act of reading allows multiple readers to internalize a conception of time that makes it possible for them to imagine themselves as part of a single collective superseding their existing differences.

The principle of homogenization inherent in this process stands in opposition to the possibility of understanding the novel as a cultural instrument aspiring to a heterogeneity and multiplicity that resist consolidation into a single complete, integrated collective. In this context, it is instructive to compare Anderson’s perception with Bakhtin’s perception of the novel as a polyphonic genre (Bakhtin), which, to a great extent, challenges the consolidated and homogeneous form Anderson ascribes to the novel. If, for Anderson, the novel should be thought of as a means of emphasizing shared national existence for various individuals, for Bakhtin, the novel is designed to foreground the social heterogeneity that comes before all national homogenization, by way of a ceaseless struggle between languages, ideologies, classes, and values that refuse to coalesce into a unifying center, and force the reader into a sort of “carnival” of tumult and garbled tongues – a space of multiplicity that allows the reader to experience the stubborn hetereogeneity of the social fabric.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The fact that Anderson refrains from dealing with the heterogeneous aspects of the novel, which make it impossible to view it as a tool for the act of national imagination or the representation of modernist, homogeneous temporality, is in keeping with the absence of a complex critical treatment of the position of the reader. Anderson assumes that the individual reading the novel uncritically accepts the position of the subject “imagined” by the novel itself, and, furthermore, is self-evidently willing and able to become part of the imagined national community suggested by the novel.[[11]](#footnote-11) Thus, for example, Anderson describes José Rizal’s 1887 novel Noli Me Tangere:

Extensive comment is surely unnecessary. It should suffice to note that right from the start the image […] of a dinner-party being discussed by hundreds of unnamed people, who do not know each other, in quite different parts of Manila, in a particular month of a particular decade immediately conjures up the imagined community. And in the phrase “a house on Anloague Street” which “we shall describe in such a way that it may still be recognized,” the would-be recognizers are **we-Filipino readers**. The casual progression of this house from the “interior” time of the novel to the “exterior” time of **the [Manila] reader's everyday life** gives a hypnotic **confirmation of the solidarity of a single community, embracing characters, author and readers, moving onward through calendrical time** (emphasis mine).” (27-28)

Anderson’s treatment of Rizal’s novel produces a kind of trivialization of its function as a tool for cultural representation, and emphasizes the creation of the reader’s self-evident sense of belonging to both the fictive collective and that which remains outside it (“we-Filipino readers”).[[12]](#footnote-12) As his remarks imply, Anderson assumes the existence of an ideal reader, whose affinity to the national community in which he exists, and his ability to imagine it, are affirmed by both the narrative technique of parallel plot structures and the system of representations disseminated through the novel. Anderson’s overlooking of the reader’s unique position as subject within the social and cultural order, and the potential for conflict inherent in the encounter between reader and text during the act of reading, results in the de-politicization of the act of national imagination made possible by the novel. His assumption that the act of imagination carried out through the novel automatically leads to a sense of similarity, closeness, and belonging prevents Anderson from examining the violence and exclusion inherent to the creation of this sense, as well as the way in which the novel takes part in creating the political distinction between “I” and “Other,” between “ally” and “enemy,” between those included in the imagined community and those who, from the very beginning, are imagined outside it. In this light, the novel does not invite all its various readers to join equally in the act of national imagination, and in order to serve as an inclusive means of highlighting the imagined national bonds existing between its readers, it must necessarily mark another portion of readers as an “unimagined community,” one that does not share the interests, viewpoints, and values of the national collective the novel aids in imagining.

Anderson does not see in the novel a diverse literary form – one of minority status, of nonconformism, of cultural distance – or, alternatively, a literary form capable of working against processes of universalization, homogenization, and uniformization induced by national time, which applies a deconstructive mechanism to the idea of the “sociological organism.” Yet it is exactly this dual attitude of the novel (exclusionary and inclusionary) towards its readers that is likely to offer a key to understanding its latent subversive potential. As a cultural instrument for the identification and construction of a particular imagined national collective, the novel, to a great extent, becomes a means for the parallel (or opposing) imagination of a different collective potential, one unanticipated by the “central” or “official” act of imagination.[[13]](#footnote-13) In other words, not only does the novel delineate the temporal, cultural, and spatial stage shared by members of the imagined national community, it also, at the same time, aids in the development of a collective consciousness – alternative, competitive, oppositional, subversive – among those who do not constitute part of this stage, and who are imagined on it only as a means of rejection.

The newspaper, Anderson argues, is “merely an ‘extreme form’ of the book, a book sold on a colossal scale, but of ephemeral popularity” (35). Yet while Anderson focuses on emphasizing the similarities between the novel and this “extreme form of the book,” he fails to take note of how the differences between these cultural products are likely to result in different forms of communal imagination. The novel, as Walter Benjamin describes it in his essay “The Storyteller,” is an artistic form that immortalizes the individual in his isolation, for the act of reading a novel is silent and discrete. The need for the novel as a cultural product and the act of reading it are thus different in purpose from the act of needing and reading a newspaper, which inherently includes, as Anderson’s description makes clear, a tangible and material – not simply imagined and abstract – experience of collective existence. The newspaper, unlike the novel, is identified with “extraordinary mass ceremony”: “it is performed in silent privacy […]. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by […] others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion […] the newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop or residential neighbors, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life” (Anderson 35). Despite the pronouncement of equivalence Anderson makes in regards to the novel and newspaper, his descriptions reveal a significant and important rift between these cultural products: the need for the newspaper is bound up in visibility and subordination to clear external law – the act of reading it is carried out in the presence of other subjects, representatives of the imagined national community, and in the framework of a defined timetable subject to its daily editions’ publication times. Reading the newspaper is thus part of a ritual over which the subject lacks complete control, and together with the effect of visibility granted by reading in a public space, the act of imagination receives concrete and tangible support. According to the internal logic of Anderson’s interpretative method, these material differences necessarily influence the forms and styles of national imagination made by possible by the novel and the newspaper. The partial anonymity, the subordination to an explicit external regularity, and the certain, direct act of identification on the part of community members signified by their reading of the newspaper – all contribute to the newspaper-aided act of imagination a concrete dimension, which deviates from the principle of abstraction at the act’s foundation.

Even the question with which Anderson begins his book – why human beings are willing to sacrifice their own lives for the sake of the nation – runs, in the framework of his historical discussions, into a dead end, and is largely left unanswered over the course of the book. Anderson sees in the national community’s use folk songs and anthems confirmation of the way it fosters through them a profound emotional connection among its members; yet these songs struggle to respond to the fundamental question at the root of the explanation he offers for the emergence of the national community. To wit, the birth of nationalism was made possible after material conditions paved the way for a new conception of time in human society, in whose context reality could be interpreted, and then experienced as national community. But from the very moment these conditions ripened, it would always be the highest social stratum – the aristocracy, the educated, the intelligentsia, the monarchic dynasties – that would be responsible for directing and delineating the various potential formulations of national imagination. Anderson assumes that the act of imagination sustains and even anticipates the existence of each and every national society, and that this act constitutes a creative process sensitive to all layers of society without being directly connected to social stratification itself. But in actual fact, Anderson describes the genesis of the national community as an elitist project – as the fruit of the highest social strata’s imaginations. Whether they were creole bureaucrats, European intellectuals and aristocrats, or the highly select group of native-born colonists who received European education and, thus, limited access to Western culture – such people would always be a high-status, elite few, with the power, according to Anderson, to influence and direct the character of nationalism and the ways of imagining it.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Yet the emotional force that causes the common man to give up his life for the nation cannot be explained by describing him as a marginal social agent passively hewing to nationalist viewpoints and modes of imagination handed down from on high. Anderson devotes an exceedingly small amount of attention to the broad popular underpinnings of nationalism, and pays no mind to either the involvement of the masses in the creation of national consciousness or their contribution to the national community’s methods of imagination. Moreover, he refrains from discussing the question of whether there exists a possibility for the masses to suggest another, alternative, form of imagining a national collective, different from that already fashioned through the initiative, and according to the needs of, the social elite. Nothing in this critique should be taken as an argument that social elites do not maneuver the broader public and manipulate its perceptions of nationalism. Yet at the same time, it behooves us to examine how popular outlooks and traditions, coming from “below,” influenced these elite perceptions, as well as whether these popular forces can create alternative spaces for imagination – even ones opposed to those of the elite.

In this context, it should be pointed out that the incompleteness of Anderson’s explanation for the problem of social stratification’s relationship to the act of national imagination is largely connected to his refusal to investigate nationalism as an ideological category (as would be demanded by an analysis influenced by the Marxist school and materialist interpretations of history). He also fails to contend with the question of the mediatory and adaptative processes that translate the originally elitist national idea into something popular and accessible to the masses. If nationalism is a hegemonic instrument, and the most elite segments of society are largely responsible for the production of the axioms and practices of nationalist discourse, it is important to examine the means by which these segments of society present the national project and the requirements thereof as something natural, neutral, and self-evident. In other words, it may be that Anderson’s presentation of nationalism as a unique form of modern politics, through which the hegemony maintains its power and legitimizes its aspirations, constitutes a significant missing link in his historical analysis.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Anderson makes sure to emphasize, both in his book and his various statements in interviews, that unlike his colleagues in the modernist school, such as Ernest Geller and Eric Hobsbawm, he views nationalism as a positive force for invention and human creativity.[[16]](#footnote-16) Yet despite Anderson’s insistence on depicting himself as an ardent supporter of a positive and supportive approach to nationalism, his descriptions of the dissemination and historical development of various nationalist models raise the question of whether these descriptions ultimately depict nationalism as a reactionary, limiting, and oppressive force. As my earlier arguments suggest, Anderson’s reluctance to examine the possibility of alternative forms of imagination, or the possibility of oppositional imagination, wrenches the act of imagination from the realm of creativity, originality, and the human capacity for invention, transforming it into an oppressive mechanism of an elite few who reserve for themselves the true right to imagine.

But beyond the problem of social power dynamics, it appears that the reactionary tendency, or what might be called the a priori limitation of the act of national imagination, is inherent to Anderson’s assumption that nationalism is, in fact, a series of modular patterns; fixed building blocks, which, after being created and formed in one of the three Western test cases – creole nationalism, linguistic-cultural nationalism, and official nationalism – are available for the use of, and imitation by, communities the world over, especially those in the Third World: “They can, and do, draw on more than a century and a half of human experience and three earlier models of nationalism. Nationalist leaders are thus in a position consciously to deploy civil and military educational systems modelled on official nationalism's; elections, party organization, and cultural celebrations modelled on the popular nationalisms of 19th century Europe; and the citizen-republican idea brought into the world by the Americas” (137). Once these national models are immortalized in the history books, all that remains for human societies – in Europe and elsewhere – is to constitute a reflection or variation thereof, through a combinatorial analysis that adapts and conforms these models to each society’s unique nature. It is not just that these ready models fail to take into account the panoply of changes, variations, repressed possibilites, conflicts, and contradictions of national existence, but also that they confine the act of imagination within a narrow and limited cognitive and intellectual range and, to a certain extent, make it redundant. If all that remains, now that Western nationalism has said its piece, is to rely on that which has already been invented, imagined, and given tangible form, then it should be asked: what is left to imagine? This question constitutes one of the central points of origin for the postcolonial critique of the “imagined national communities” described by Anderson.

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1. The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built.And the Lord said, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth (*New Revised Standard Version,* Genesis 11.5-9). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Anderson describes three central factors that brought about Latin’s reduced status in the era under discussion, and helped create a broad reading public in regional languages: first, the severing of Latin’s unique association with the Christian church by the growing humanistic and intellectual interest in pre-Christian, classical Latin texts; second, the influence of the Reformation and the coalition struck between Protestantism and print capitalism, which created an expansive readership that could be called upon to serve political and religious ends; and third, the transformation of regional languages into administrative ones (Anderson 14-16). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It should be pointed out that Anderson’s arguments concerning this territorial overlap, and concerning the link between European nationalism and the centers of dynastic monarchy, indirectly testify to the importance of delineating geographical boundaries when carrying out the act of national imagination. Anderson does not explicitly address the question of whether the ability to imagine the national community necessarily entails either a sense of territorial continuity or existing geographical structures (his way of defining imagined community, in fact, implies otherwise), but it seems that the forms of national imagination he refers to are unintentionally based on an existing spatial organization that provided material support to the act of imagining the ontological borders that define the national community. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It should be pointed out that, even though the importance of capitalism for the creation of a bourgeois class is well-founded in Marxist theory, it cannot be determined with absolute certainty that the penetration of Marxist modes of production into various areas around the world automatically explains the emergence of nations and nationalism. As history makes clear, capitalism was not the heritage of, for example, Ukraine and Serbia in the nineteenth century, or of West Africa at the outset of the twentieth, when national movements began to appear in these areas. Moreover, since capitalism emerged well before the eighteenth century, the point in time Anderson identifies as the moment of the imagined national community’s development, it can be argued that one should examine manifestations of national consciousness in earlier historical periods. (Motyl) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. From this point of view, print capitalism too cannot, in fact, serve as the sole cause for the emergence of national consciousness, for it too is a product (and not a cause) of capitalist modes of production. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Anderson writes: “It is always a mistake to treat languages in the way that certain nationalist ideologues treat them – as *emblems* of nation-ness, like flags, costumes, folk-dances, and the rest. Much the most important thing about language is its capacity for generating imagined communities, building in effect *particular solidarities*. After all, imperial languages are still *vernaculars*, and thus particular vernaculars among many. […] Language is not an instrument of exclusion: in principle, anyone can learn any language. On the contrary, it is fundamentally inclusive, limited only by the fatality of Babel: no one lives long enough to learn *all* languages. Print-language is what invents nationalism, not *a* particular language per se” (133-134). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. It is possible that an increased tendency towards a conceptual and discourse-based analysis of nationalism would aid in explaining, by way of constructivist logic, what are often seen as manifestations of nationalism in earlier historical periods (such as the *polis* in ancient Greece). An examination of the history of the varied and diverse knowledge structures through which were understood and perceived various practices of collective existence (which, as previously stated, began to be perceived in nationalist terms in the eighteenth century) would likely strengthen the argument for a link between nationalism and capitalism, which is insufficiently supported by a Marxist perspective alone. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The anthropologist Michael Herzfeld argues that Anderson fails to describe the concrete mechanism by which the sense of national communal belonging is created, and that this mechanism is based, in his opinion, on the important connection between existing sociological structures, such as the family unit, and the national community. Herzfeld agrees with Anderson’s assertion that the national community is based on the act of imagination, but he explains that what makes the nation’s collective imagination possible is what he calls “cultural intimacy” – the constant manipulation by bureaucratic bodies of the symbols of family, carried over to the public sphere in order to foster national bonds, deep solidarity, intimacy, and a sense of mutual responsibility between members of the community (Herzfeld). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Zionism, based on language and a theological heritage and outlook, constitutes a prominent confirmation of this argument. Despite its secular perspective and goals, Zionism never fully succeeded in divorcing itself from the theological roots that lent it legitimacy, as well as provided an explanation for the persistence of the Jewish people and its physical connection with the land of Israel. From the very beginning, Jewish nationalism was largely based on the attempt to bring about the normalization of Jewish life and adapt Judaism to the modern lifestyle. Thus, even though Zionism often conceived of itself as a secular movement, it never disentangled itself from its theological heritage, or succeeded in establishing Jewish (and later sovereign) national existence as a complete and final alternative to religion and God (Hever). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In this context, I wish to make three important comments: first, in my discussion of the novel, I follow Anderson’s own movement from a fundamental treatment of the problem of structure and form (parallel narratives that create a sense of simultaneity) to a discussion of content (the worlds presented by novels, and the anthropological and cultural spaces to which they refer). Second, as Jonathan Culler demonstrates, Anderson’s argument is inherently limited by being structured according to the conventions identified with the European novel of the nineteenth century, which was characterized by reliance on an omniscient and omnipotent narrator, unbound by either a specific character’s point of view or any limitations on knowledge whatsoever. This issue limits from the outset the inclusiveness and universal applicability of Anderson’s arguments concerning the novel as a literary genre. Third, concerning Bakhtin’s treatment of the novel a heterogeneous locus, which works against the unifying function of the novel implied by Anderson’s arguments, it is instructive to bring up the critique leveled by Franco Moretti, who sheds light on the deceptive and artificial difference between these points of view. Moretti argues that the novel does not lead to true social polyphony, and that the polyphony Bakhtin ascribes to the novel ultimately vanishes in the face of the parallel unifying and homogenizing force the novel brings to bear. He explains that the polyphony of the Russian novel is not the rule, but rather the exception to it, in the evolution of the modern novel. From Anderson’s perspective, and in keeping with Moretti’s remarks, it can be said – contrary to Bakhtin – that the existence of polyphony ultimately relies on the assumption that the multiplicity on display within it is made possible in the context of a single imagined collective, and on the existence of a preliminary assumption of this multiplicity’s consolidation into one social and cultural framework (Culler; Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel*). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. As Jonathan Culler puts it in a similar critique: “What is common is the novelistic address which creates a community of those who pick up the book and accept the readerly role that it offers” (Culler 29). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Though Anderson is not a scholar of literature, the comparative research he undertakes in the framework of his discussion of the novel should be critically appraised. Anderson uses non-European novels as support for his arguments about the novel’s role in the representation of the temporal simultaneity vital to the act of national imagination. This attempt certainly offers a fitting response to those who would argue that the validity of Anderson’s assertions about the novel is limited to the European culture that gave rise to it. But the central problem that remains is Anderson’s use of methodological tools that fail to take into account the adaptive processes the novel, originally a European literary form, undergoes when being adopted into non-European cultural contexts. As Franco Moretti demonstrates, the novel’s integration into the contexts of non-European cultures was always founded on a compromise between the foreign Western form and local content (Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature" 54). Thus, Anderson’s employment of non-European novels in an effort to point to a shared, uniform foundation (that is, the representation of the imagined community and the structuring of homogeneous, empty time) ignores the complex reciprocal relationship between the characteristics of the adopting culture and those of the genre, and this relationship’s influence on the novel’s function as an instrument of national imagination. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, for example, shows how the novel (and literature in general) undermines national temporality’s principle of homogenization, standard and habitual language, and fixed, territorial identity. The novel is likely to serve as a material means of solidifying a certain collective’s connections to a national system of identities, law, territory, and language, while, at the same time, it is likely to be written in light of a minoritarian literary ideal. This literature is written in a language that subverts limited, fixed majority usage, and thus expresses the conditions for the possibility of an alternative use of language – one that reveals the variability and heterogeneity that precede all homogeneous and unified language use. This minoritization of language, therefore, neutralizes national existence’s self-evidential nature, and makes it possible for the literary text to imagine a minoritarian collective that refuses to unify itself within existing power frameworks. To use Deleuze’s and Guattari’s terms, one can say that Anderson deals with the majoritarian forms of imagination the novel makes possible, without examining how it is likely, at the same time, to work against the act of national imagination; to challenge the coordinates of collective national identity and express the potential for the existence of a minoritarian community that the national imagination can neither perceive of nor include: “to summon forth a new earth, a new people” (Deleuze and Guattari 126). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Anderson describes how print literacy, which was reserved for the educated and the intellectuals of Europe, is what made possible the creation of the imagined national community in the context of second-wave cultural-linguistic nationalism in Europe. In the context of this second-wave European nationalism, an alternative form of national structure, official nationalism, is presented by Anderson as the product of Machiavellianism, through which the aristocracy, by combining the dynastic control structure with the new concept of national citizenship, carried out a manipulative strategy intended to ensure its own control. Third-wave nationalism, which arose in European colonies, is also described by Anderson as the product of the transfer of control from one cultural elite to another – the European elite created a non-European native-born elite in the colonies by allowing the children of the colonial intelligentsia to study at European schools founded in the colonies by the European mother country. As Anderson explains, through the European state language, these children were granted a sensitivity to modern Western culture and especially to models of nationalism, nation-ness, and the nation-state Western culture created, and were thus able to disseminate them among the masses (148). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. It should be pointed out that, ironically, it is in the course of his description of official nationalism as the product of aristocratic manipulation, doomed to serve personal interests and political egoism, that Anderson brings the act of national imagination back into the realm of the “deceptive” and “counterfeit” he so assiduously avoids in his definition of the imagined national community. Reading Anderson’s arguments seems to imply that these aristocrats, who make Machiavellian use of nationalist ideas, adopt a position that is not nationalist at all, or completely outside the bounds of nationalist thought and imagination, and thus the official nationalism they create becomes a type of false consciousness, something fundamentally untrue. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Thus, for example, Anderson tells us we should “remind ourselves that nations inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love. The cultural products of nationalism… show this love very clearly in thousands of different forms and styles. On the other hand, how truly rare it is to find analogous nationalist products expressing fear and loathing” (141-142), and when asked in an interview at the University of Oslo whether he sees himself as a nationalist, he admitted: “I must be the only one writing about nationalism who doesn’t think it ugly. If you think about researchers such as Gellner and Hobsbawm, they have quite a hostile attitude to nationalism. I actually think that nationalism can be an attractive ideology. I like its Utopian elements” (Khazaleh). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)