

The Influence of Walter Benjamin on Benedict Anderson

Anthony Taylor

Biodata: Anthony Taylor recently completed Honours in Indonesian studies at Monash University, Australia. He also holds a Bachelor of Laws degree. His research interests include Indonesian literature, law and politics. His contact email is taylor.af91@gmail.com

Abstract

The influence of Walter Benjamin is clearest in the late Benedict Anderson's often-cited theory of nationalism. Anderson argues that the combination of print-capitalism and the 'fatality of linguistic diversity' made the origin and spread of nationalism possible. He interprets nationalism as a cultural phenomenon, not an ideology. In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson attempts describe the real historical spread of nationalism without making the claim that any particular nationalism was original or authentic.

The key texts from which these ideas are drawn are *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* and *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. From a reading of these texts, we can see that Benjamin has influenced Anderson's understanding of the origin and spread of nationalism through: (1) the importance afforded to print-capitalism; (2) the linkage between 'homogenous, empty time', modernity and nationalism; (3) the image of the Angel of History.

Following an explanation of these three points of influence, two criticisms of Anderson's theory of nationalism that relate to his interpretation of Benjamin are then considered. The first is that Anderson overuses Benjamin's concept of aura in explaining the spread of nationalism, most clearly when he seeks to establish a clear binary between authentic, "popular" nationalism and inauthentic, "official" State nationalism. The second is that the idea of nation and modernity should not be as strongly linked as Anderson proposes; there should be something more emancipatory awaiting us in modernity. I argue that the use of cosmology in Anderson's last major work on nationalism, *Under Three Flags*, is a response to these criticisms. It demonstrates that Anderson has taken into account the simultaneous optimism and pessimism that characterises Benjamin (particularly in his attitude towards Communism). The two criticisms considered were, implicitly, a claim that Anderson had overemphasised the optimistic or pessimistic side of Benjamin in his treatment of nationalism. Rather, Anderson acknowledges the relationship of nationalism, politics, State and modernity to be highly ambiguous.

Keywords: Benedict Anderson, Walter Benjamin, Indonesian Studies, nationalism.

Introduction

In *Language and Power*, the late Benedict Anderson acknowledged his scholarly debt to 'three Good Germans: Karl Marx, Walter Benjamin and Eric Auerbach, who helped me think about the modern world'.¹ This essay will scrutinise Anderson's reliance on the thought of Walter Benjamin, particularly his essay *The Work of Art*

¹ Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Language and Power : Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press, 1990), 14.

in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (herein 'Mechanical Reproduction') and *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (herein 'History').² The overarching aim is to better understand how Benjamin influenced Anderson's theory of nationalism.

I begin with an overview of Anderson's theory of nationalism. The theory is presented in light of Anderson's later modifications to the original theory in *Imagined Communities*.³ Following this, I analyse the elements of this theory that are most obviously inspired by Benjamin's *Mechanical Reproduction* and *History*: the notion of print-capitalism, the notion of homogenous, empty time and the image of the Angel of History. Through a focus on these three points of influence, the broader commonalities between Anderson and Benjamin on questions of materialism, culture and politics emerge. Finally, I consider some critical responses to Anderson's theory of nationalism that relate to the influence of Benjamin on Anderson. I argue that Anderson's most recent comment on nationalism, *Under Three Flags*⁴, makes clear both his relative fidelity to Benjamin and his subtle stance towards nationalism.

Anderson's Theory of Nationalism

In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson seeks to define the nation and account for both the origin *and* spread of nationalism. For Anderson, the nation is an imagined political community that is imagined as limited (territorially) and sovereign (State). It is imagined as a horizontal community regardless of a hierarchical reality.⁵ Anderson emphasises that the nation and nationalism is a 'cultural artefact', rather than a political ideology.⁶

How did nationalism first emerge? For Anderson, 'print-capitalism' – the tandem development of print technology and its use in capitalist enterprise made the nation something imaginable. The growth in markets for print commodities (particularly the demand for popular language material) undermined the sacredness of script languages, the legitimacy of international dynastic orders and of cosmological world-views.⁷ Basically, print-capitalism undermined old ways of imagining the world. Following this, Anderson argues that print-capitalism,

² Both found in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (Schocken Books, 2007).

³ Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, ed. Societies American Council of Learned, Rev. ed. ed. (London New York: London New York : Verso, 2006). Also *Language and Power : Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia*. And *The Spectre of Comparisons : Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (New York London: New York London : Verso, 1998).

⁴ *Under Three Flags : Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination*, Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination (New York, NY: New York, NY : Verso, 2005).

⁵ *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.*, 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

combined with the fact of ‘the fatality of human linguistic diversity’, not only negated an old cultural imaginary but made the nation (as a new way of imagining the world) a positive possibility.⁸ The growth of print languages (and commodities) ‘unified fields of exchange below Latin and above spoken vernaculars’, gave a sense of antiquity, through fixity, to the print language which would be important for subjective ideas of nation, and created culturally central ‘languages-of-power’.⁹ The vernacular newspapers and novels that, more and more, came to be sold, were the key print commodities that made new forms of consciousness and subjectivity possible.

Anderson argues that nationalism, while owing a lot to historical forces in Western Europe, first became a political reality under the leadership of creoles in the Americas. The glass ceiling faced by talented creoles in the colonies is posited as a key factor in the development of nationalist opposition alongside the publication of provincial newspapers.¹⁰ Opposition to colonialism was what made the cultural imagining of the nation important politically. Once established, nationalism ‘became “modular”’, capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with...a wide variety of political and ideological constellations.’¹¹ Anderson goes on to describe the later “waves” of nationalism, including European nationalisms and twentieth century anti-colonial nationalisms.

Both the State and popular movements around the world could make use of the national “model” for their own purposes. In *The Spectre of Comparisons*, Anderson argues that collective subjects (including nations) are formed by unbound serialities (exemplified by print mediums such as newspapers, and by references to open categories like “worker” or “citizen”) and by bound serialities (exemplified by the counting of ethnic categories in a census).¹² On the one hand, there is popular nationalism, seen in revolutions where the State is virtually disabled and where unbound seriality is dominant, and on the other is what Anderson calls ‘official’ nationalism, which is promoted by the State and is in line with dominance of the bound seriality.¹³ As well as allowing for analysis of contemporary nationalisms, the distinction between bound and unbound seriality is an important methodological clarification of how we should understand the process by which nationalism originated and spread. With the notion of seriality, there is no ontological distinction between the original historical national model and its replicas around

⁸ Ibid., 42-3. Note: ‘it would be a mistake to equate this fatality of linguistic diversity with that common element in nationalist ideologies which stresses the primordial fatality of particular languages...The essential thing is the interplay between fatality, technology and capitalism.’

⁹ Ibid., 44-5.

¹⁰ Ibid., 57.

¹¹ Ibid., 4.

¹² *The Spectre of Comparisons : Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World.*, 29.

¹³ *Language and Power : Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia.*, 95-7.

the world; none should be evaluated in terms of authenticity or against the first historical nationalisms.¹⁴ As a (modern) cultural phenomenon, nations should be judged by their style (historical particularities, official/popular) rather than their truth (fidelity to the authentic original). This allows for an account of the historical origins of nationalism in certain locations (Western Europe, the Americas) and in reaction to certain forces (colonialism) without privileging these historical facts as constitutive of *the* authentic nationalism.

The Influence of Benjamin

How is Anderson's account of nationalism influenced by Benjamin? The key ways in which Benjamin has influenced Anderson's understanding of the origin and spread of nationalism are in: (1) the importance afforded to print-capitalism; (2) the linkage between 'homogenous, empty time', modernity and nationalism; (3) the image of the Angel of History. Alongside this schema, it should be remembered that it is Benjamin's views on materialism, culture and politics in modernity, as a whole, that inspire Anderson. Nevertheless, I elaborate on these three notions, focusing heavily on print-capitalism, in a way which hopefully also introduces and explains the most relevant aspects of Benjamin's thought.

Print-capitalism

Anderson's notion of 'print-capitalism' is inspired by Benjamin's essay on *Mechanical Reproduction*. In the 1930's, Benjamin opens that essay with the premise that he is at a sufficient historical distance to reflect on the effect of the rise of the capitalist mode of production on art. He argues that:

'For the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual'¹⁵

Benjamin argued that before the development and spread of printing and other technologies that allowed for reproduction, art had possessed a more significant aura. Aura is that which is 'authentic'; that part of an object which cannot be reproduced. In the case of the artistic object, authenticity had its basis in ritual and religion.¹⁶ To explain further the disappearance of aura, Benjamin argues that there are two poles that art can tend to: on the one hand there is the cult, where the art is rarely seen (for example, a religious statue that is mostly kept from public view), while on the other hand there is the exhibition (in which the public are encouraged to view the art as much as possible).¹⁷ Mechanical reproduction

¹⁴ Andrew Parker, "Bogeyman: Benedict Anderson's "Derivative" Discourse," *Diacritics* 29, no. 4 (1999), 43.

¹⁵ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 226.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 226.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 227.

favours the latter pole significantly, to the extent that, for Benjamin, the quantity of the shift becomes qualitative.¹⁸

Mechanical reproduction, in favouring this latter (“exhibitory”) pole, changes the relationship between author and public, reducing the earlier divide between the two that was based on the genius or creativity of the author. With high circulations and publicity of modern forms of art, there are more readers than before, and more of them, in turn, can become engaged as writers (I will explain later how this claim is important for Anderson).¹⁹ In the absence of (religious) aura, these new mass-produced mediums would serve a (secular) political purpose: they would foster a Communist collective subjectivity. Benjamin concedes that an alternative course is presented by Fascism,²⁰ which seeks to ‘organise the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate’. Fascism does this by allowing the masses ‘expression’ rather than their ‘right’ through the aestheticisation of politics (as opposed to the politicisation of art); for Benjamin, the artistic glorification of war and military technology is an important example.²¹

What does Anderson take from these ideas? For Benjamin, the development of ‘print is merely a special, though particularly important, case’ of mechanical reproduction, but one which is not as significant as film²², Anderson, though, wants to refocus the attention on print. This is because while Benjamin seems to view meaningful levels of mechanical reproduction as coinciding with the emergence of *industrial* capitalism, Anderson’s holds that mechanical reproduction was significant much earlier.²³ Anderson states that ‘at least 20,000,000 books had already been printed by 1500’ and so the age of mechanical reproduction had begun by that time.²⁴ Essentially, Anderson takes the general trends that Benjamin attributes to industrial capitalism’s effect on art, and applies it to the impact of print-capitalism on an earlier cultural world of holy languages and imagined religious communities.

¹⁸ The idea of a qualitative changing arising from a quantitative change comes from Hegel and Marx. Another example is when the quantity of private property becomes significant it marks a qualitative change in power relations.

¹⁹ Benjamin, *Illuminations*., 234. More clearly in *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 2007)., 225.

²⁰ Lunn (and others) have noted that while Benjamin is optimistic in this essay, he was deeply pessimistic elsewhere about the same set of circumstances. His concerns about Fascism are perhaps a hint of this pessimism. Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism* (University of California Press, 1982)., 255.

²¹ Benjamin, *Illuminations*., 243.

²² *Ibid.*, 220. But see *Reflections*., 225.

²³ Critics of Benjamin pointed out that mechanical reproduction had been around much longer than industrial capitalism. Anderson is therefore justified in shifting the focus from linking impacts of industrialism on culture and politics to the impact of a pre-industrial/non-industrial capitalism on culture. It is likely, given his brother’s involvement in *Verso*/*New Left Review*, that Benedict Anderson is aware of such criticisms. See Theodor; Benjamin Adorno, Walter; Bloch, Ernst; Brecht, Bertolt; Lukacs, Georg, *Aesthetics and Politics* (Verso, 2007)., 108 n5. See also Marc Redfield, “Imagi-Nation: The Imagined Community and the Aesthetics of Mourning,” *Diacritics* 29, no. 4 (1999)., 64 n11.

²⁴ Anderson, *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*., 37.

Anderson agrees that mechanical reproduction undermines the aura of cultural objects and therefore has potential political impact (through changed consciousness/subjectivity). However, given his own starting points, he finds that it is not the specific political impact that Benjamin had predicted.²⁵ Rather than serving communism by being a type of the self-destructive tendency of capitalism that Marx had pointed to, the loss of 'aura' of religious world-views caused by print-capitalism made a national consciousness possible. Anderson explains (Marx and) Benjamin's miscalculation thus: 'whatever superhuman feats capitalism was capable of, it found in death and languages two tenacious adversaries'.²⁶ What Anderson means is that firstly, capitalism has not destroyed our desire, traditionally religious, to moralise death, and secondly, capitalism has yet to eliminate global linguistic diversity, which continues to provide a grounding for territorially limited imaginings. In this way, nationalism is a cultural product of capitalism (but not only capitalism!), which in some ways has replaced religion (as a secular moralising of death tied to linguistic diversity). Nevertheless, Benjamin correctly pointed to the impact of mechanical reproduction on cultural objects and, in turn, the impact in such a context of culture on politics.

Anderson's theory about the worldwide *spread* of nationalism also relies on *Mechanical Reproduction*. Since the idea of the nation circulates globally, there is no "authentic" nationalism. This idea that nationalism is modular or a series of replicas without an original, mirrors, to some extent, Benjamin's hope that readers or viewers of mass produced art would increasingly become "writers" (of nations for Anderson, of Communism for Benjamin).²⁷ Anderson's view of the State (per his distinction between bound and unbound seriality) and its potential to co-opt nationalism seems also to mirror the concern of Benjamin that mass-produced and circulated art could lead to Communism (meaning genuine participation of the workers) or Fascism (a State-sponsored spectacle of participation).

Homogenous, empty time

The concept of homogenous, empty time that Anderson uses to distinguish cosmological and modern imaginaries comes from Benjamin's *History*:

'History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*].'²⁸

History offers a more pessimistic outlook on modernity than *Mechanical Reproduction* and we gain more of an understanding of both Benjamin and

²⁵ In fairness to Benjamin, his references to Fascism suggest he was not blindly optimistic or set in his predictions.

²⁶ Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.*, 43.

²⁷ Just as Benjamin had, with the benefit of hindsight, sought to critique the "liberal progressive" elements of Marxian thought, Anderson, looking back at Benjamin, could see Benjamin was overly optimistic (even taking into account his ambivalence elsewhere) about the link between international Communism and mass art.

²⁸ Benjamin, *Illuminations.*, 261.

Anderson from considering it.²⁹ In *History*, Benjamin suggests that homogenous, empty time is the time of capitalism where one moment is equal to and regularly follows the next (basically, clock time).³⁰ Our cultural common sense under capitalism is attuned to experience the world through this sense of time. It can be contrasted with a cosmological sense of time in which time is experienced as passing between important events. For Benjamin, a real sense of history does not see all moments as equal (revolutionary moments, are more important, for example).³¹ In *History*, Benjamin establishes this distinction to critique the idea of historical progress held by the Left³², as he sees it as opening the door to Fascist technocracy. According to Lunn, Benjamin sought to reduce the remnants of liberal progressivism latent in Marx, replacing it with a ‘hope in the past’³³, or in Benjamin’s own words, rather than being future-oriented and motivated: ‘our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption’.³⁴

Anderson puts the notion of the empty time of modernity to his own use. The nation is an imaginary possibility that was embedded in the experience of time as homogenous and empty that was not accounted for by Marxist theory, including by Benjamin.³⁵ Benjamin never located nationalism in the category of cultural ideas alongside the idea of “progress”. Anderson does; and following from this re-categorisation, he argues that the imagining of events as taking place simultaneously in time, rather than allegorically (as part of a cosmological experience of time) constituted ‘a fundamental change...in modes of apprehending the world, which, more than anything else, made it possible to ‘think’ the nation’.³⁶

This ‘fundamental change’ was from a consciousness that understood the present as a ‘simultaneity of past and future’ – ‘something close to what Benjamin calls Messianic time’³⁷ to a consciousness that saw time as horizontal, flat, a series of events, though one in which different actors may be doing different things.³⁸

²⁹ Eugene Lunn argues that while *Mechanical Reproduction* was overly optimistic, most of Benjamin’s other works were decidedly pessimistic about the future. Overall, he was ambivalent but critical of vulgar Marxist views. See Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism.*, 223. Habermas (and others) consider his views as unsynthesizable, see generally Jurgen Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin," *New German Critique* 17 (1979).

³⁰ Benjamin, *Illuminations.*, 258-261.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 261-2.

³² His critique is directed at the German Social Democrats. *Ibid.*, 260.

³³ Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism.*, 228. This position made Benjamin more like an anarchistic Nietzsche; this is something of a return to his intellectual roots.

³⁴ Benjamin, *Illuminations.*, 254 and 260.

³⁵ This is why Anderson quotes Tom Nairn, ‘The theory of nationalism represents Marxism’s great historical failure’, at the beginning of *Imagined Communities*. Anderson, *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.*, 3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁸ Here Anderson is also drawing heavily on Eric Auerbach. His unreferenced example of the importance of ‘meanwhile’ in modern as opposed to mediaeval literature – and the concomitant consciousness of each, is from Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, trans. William Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013)., 180.

Simultaneity of events moves from being seen as prefiguration and fulfilment to a temporal coincidence. The formal features of the novel and newspaper, two key print commodities, promoted a sense of flat, progressive time. Thus, they contributed to the breakdown of cosmological imaginings. In contrast to Benjamin's pessimism towards the "progress" of homogenous, empty time, Anderson finds a silver lining in its facilitation of the imagining of egalitarian communities.

The Angel of History

The metaphor of the Angel of History also comes from Benjamin's *History*. Anderson quotes the ninth theses in closing *Imagined Communities*, and also begins with a quote from it in the most recent introduction to *Imagined Communities*.³⁹ As has been alluded to already, Benjamin turned to Messianism as a hope of redeeming the past in the face of homogenous, empty time, while the Angel can be understood as a loss of that hope: it is the idea of progress as piles of 'wreckage upon wreckage'.⁴⁰ In choosing to conclude with the Angel, Anderson suggests he is more pessimistic than Benjamin, or, at least, does not endorse Messianism in the same way. From the 'wreckage', he salvages nationalism. In the following sections I further consider, in light of criticisms of Anderson, the way in which the use of the Angel reveals that Anderson's stance towards Benjamin, and to nationalism, is more subtle than some critics would have it, and perhaps what this initial explanation can suggest.

Criticisms of Anderson

I now consider two criticisms of Anderson that relate to his reading of Benjamin. The first criticism is that Anderson sometimes stretches the application of Benjamin's views on aura (namely, that when cultural objects are mass produced and circulated, they lose aura, or, authenticity) too far in explaining both the spread of nationalism and the maintenance of contemporary nationalism through bound and unbound serialities.⁴¹ For Redfield, Anderson's use of this idea too strongly juxtaposes a lack of aura in late official nationalisms with a "genuine" popular imaginary.⁴² He believes that overstating the aura-less nature of official

³⁹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, xi and 161-2. 'His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.', Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 257-8.

⁴⁰ John Kelly, "Time and the Global: Against the Homogenous, Empty Communities in Contemporary Social Theory," *Development and Change* 29 (1998), 847.

⁴¹ I agree with Harootunian that while Anderson has used other metaphors to explain the manner in which nationalism spread (telescope, spectre of comparison) they amount to much the same thing as the circulation of copies reducing the aura of the original. H.D. Harootunian, "Ghostly Comparisons: Anderson's Telescope," *Diacritics* 29, no. 4 (1999), 140.

⁴² Marc Redfield, "Imagi-Nation: The Imagined Community and the Aesthetics of Mourning," *ibid.*, 72.

nationalist cultural objects does not do justice to the ambivalent relations between nation, State and modernity. Redfield does not appear to have read *Language and Power* in which Anderson propounds his view on the nation and State as discrete but intertwined, suggesting that Anderson would also accept a level of “ambivalence”.⁴³ Nevertheless, Redfield may also be right that Anderson at times pushes the explanatory power of aura to its limits, perhaps like Benjamin himself.⁴⁴

A second, more sustained criticism focuses on Anderson’s linking of homogenous, empty time to nationalism.⁴⁵ Kelly, for example, argues that while Anderson begins with a critical stance towards nationalism, he ends by linking the nation intimately with modernity.⁴⁶ Greater emphasis on Messianic time, since it ruptures homogenous, empty time and what is imagined in it, is needed in contrast to what is taken to be Anderson’s overly positive stance towards the nation. Kelly believes that Anderson’s decision to drop Benjamin’s Messianism (against the nation) plays into the hands of the status quo - the ‘fictional global genealogy of American geopolitics’.⁴⁷

Chatterjee extends similar concerns to the notions of bound and unbound seriality, and therefore, to Anderson’s hopes (‘utopian’ according to Chatterjee) for popular nationalism against official nationalism.⁴⁸ Chatterjee argues that the real time of modernity is heterotopic and combines local particularities (customs, ethnicity) with global capitalism and its utopian time (the imaginary time of capital that makes markets, prices and nations possible).⁴⁹ The real, those customs and ethnicities, is linked by Anderson to bound seriality. Chatterjee believes that Anderson’s views stem from his one sided view of modernity, one which emphasises the dominance of homogenous, empty time.⁵⁰

⁴³ The fact that not many commentators on *Imagined Communities* read this volume is also noted in Pheng Cheah, "Grounds of Comparison," *ibid.*, 4 n1. Anderson, *Language and Power : Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia.*, 95-7.

⁴⁴ Anderson is most probably aware, and takes account, of criticisms of Benjamin’s *Mechanical Reproduction* essay such as those found in *Aesthetics and Politics*. However, he may not have addressed all of them. Adorno, *Aesthetics and Politics.*, 106-8. Lunn argues that both Adorno and Benjamin had a tendency to see aesthetic theory as easily generalisable; perhaps this applies to Anderson also. Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism.*, 140.

⁴⁵ In a longer essay I would elaborate how the first criticism and second criticism are complementary and overlap to some extent.

⁴⁶ For a useful definition of modernity see Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987)., 42-4.

⁴⁷ Kelly, "Time and the Global: Against the Homogenous, Empty Communities in Contemporary Social Theory.", 868. Kelly also believes a realist take on nationalism – the nation as collective will to power. This is not particularly related to Benjamin, however. In contrast, Redfield sees Anderson as part of a Romantic tradition that sees the nation as willed: Redfield, "Imagi-Nation: The Imagined Community and the Aesthetics of Mourning.", 65.

⁴⁸ Partha Chatterjee, "Anderson's Utopia," *ibid.*, 130.

⁴⁹ See generally *ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

In the same collection of essays, Harootunian is sceptical of Chatterjee's claims (and we can extend this scepticism to Kelly).⁵¹ Chatterjee misreads 'Anderson's view of the role played by capitalism in the serial spread of nationalism and modernity', by assuming identity between capitalism and modernity.⁵² However, as Anderson stresses, death and linguistic diversity cannot be subsumed by capitalism but are part of the cultural imaginary of modernity. Chatterjee misunderstands or does not engage clearly with this point, only remaining hopeful that capitalism will undercut postcolonial nationalism, making room for an "authentic" alternative. However, capitalism destroys authenticity but has also allowed for the 'spectre of comparisons' in which anticolonial nationalism emerged.⁵³

Anderson himself offers something of a response to Chatterjee and Kelly, implicitly, with *Under Three Flags*. I believe this text provides something of a counterpoint to his decision to place the Angel of History at the end of *Imagined Communities* (therefore it goes against both the interpretation I have mostly followed until now and to which critics such as Kelly responded to). Anderson introduces the text as 'political astronomy' aiming to make connections between various anti-colonial nationalisms and European anarchism of the *belle époque*.⁵⁴ This is a cosmological approach, demonstrating Anderson's willingness to engage with the Benjamin of *History*. But further, this cosmology is presented as a prefiguring of our own time: in our contemporary era of globalisation, according to Anderson, anarchism is again dominant on the Left.⁵⁵ The title of the text makes clear that Anderson, while critical of some anti-nationalist cosmopolitans⁵⁶ is not uncosmopolitan; one can be sympathetic to multiple flags (anarchism, nationalism). Against Kelly and Chatterjee, Anderson makes clear that he is not adverse to non-nationalist politics as they seem to think, but rather is suspicious of the State and governmentality⁵⁷ and is willing to make use of Benjaminian cosmological 'redemptive criticism'⁵⁸ in the process. The real line of cleavage that remains, then, is not about whether Anderson discards Benjamin's Messianism or even about nationalism but on the nature and (Left) political usefulness of the State.⁵⁹

⁵¹ H.D. Harootunian, "Ghostly Comparisons: Anderson's Telescope," *ibid.* See also Andrew Parker, "Bogeyman: Benedict Anderson's "Derivative" Discourse," *ibid.*

⁵² H.D. Harootunian, "Ghostly Comparisons: Anderson's Telescope," *ibid.*, 141.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 141-144.

⁵⁴ Anderson, *Under Three Flags : Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination.*, 1-2 and 5.

⁵⁵ 'It remains only to say that if readers find in this text a number of parallels and resonances with our own time, they will not be mistaken'. *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁵⁶ *The Spectre of Comparisons : Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World.*, 29.

⁵⁷ See Lunn n31 above regarding Benjamin's own anarchistic tendencies.

⁵⁸ I take this phrase from Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin."

⁵⁹ Anderson seems to be aware of Benjamin's own anarchistic outlook, perhaps more than the critics.

Conclusion

In formulating his theory of nationalism, Anderson remains remarkably true to the spirit of the two texts by Benjamin that I have focused on in this essay: *Mechanical Reproduction* and *History*. Anderson shares a materialist and modernist outlook with Benjamin in which capitalism destroys religious imaginaries (or aura) and allows for new cultural meaning. The “optimistic” Benjamin was hopeful that new cultural meaning would be of political significance (for Communism). Analytically, Anderson sides more with this Benjamin, albeit moving the analysis to pre-industrial print-capitalism. As a result of this shift in focus, Anderson sees nationalism (rather than Communism), as a cultural product of fatality (death, language), capitalism and technology, which comes to be of political significance. Meanwhile, the “pessimistic” Benjamin was aware that the processes allowing for his optimistic view of mechanical reproduction were undercutting the thrust of Communism through the cultural idea of progress. Kelly comments that ‘the nation first commands Anderson’s attention as the killer of a utopian political aesthetic [Communism]’ and reveals this utopia as fantasy.⁶⁰ In a sense, while Anderson shares less outward affinity with the “pessimistic” Benjamin, his starting point is the same. Benjamin offered redemptive criticism as a way out of the idea of progress. Anderson, while certainly eliciting a preference for the Angel of History over Messianism, does not ignore this option of redemptive criticism as much as some critics would have it.

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⁶⁰ Kelly, "Time and the Global: Against the Homogenous, Empty Communities in Contemporary Social Theory.", 847.

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