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ARTICLE

Ethno-Imagined Communities: Rethinking Benedict Anderson and Anthony Smith's Theories of Nations through Bernard Stiegler's Theory of Epiphylogenesis

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Abstract

This article explores Bernard Stiegler's concept of *Epiphylogenesis* as an alternative framework for understanding modern nations while aspiring to resolve major gaps in the classic theories of Benedict Anderson and Anthony Smith. *Epiphylogenesis* offers a fresh perspective and broader scope for the study of nations, with a view to critically enlarging the dynamic interaction between modern mass media and cultural traditions, particularly as conceptualized by Anderson and Smith. Stiegler classifies modern nations as chapters in the broader narrative of technical evolution. In *epiphylogenesis*, cultural traditions and technical artefacts function as a working partnership; modern nations are seen as the outcome of this co-constitutive process, wherein mass media technical systems (that is, print capitalism) exteriorize cultural traditions (ethnié), dressing them up in distinctive, open, pervasive, and standardized forms. This discussion concludes by exploring the relevance of epiphylogenesis for assessing the impact of networked communications on contemporary national identities.

Keywords: nationalism; epiphylogenesis; imagined communities; ethnié; mass media; print capitalism

This year commemorates the fortieth anniversary of Benedict Anderson's seminal work, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 1983). The notion of nations as modern "imagined comminutes" that Anderson depicted in the book swiftly became a staple concept embraced by a long line of historians, sociologists, and political scientists who sought to conceptually ground the view of nations as emerging from modern industrial societies (Cubitt 1998; Palmer and Epstein 2016; Schinkel 2017; Stephens 2013; Terpstra 2009). While previous works have presented similar arguments, Anderson brought a distinct novelty to the discourse about the origins and nature of nations and nationalism. What set Anderson apart was his remarkable breadth of sources, his deep understanding of non-European cultures, and his keen sensitivity to the influence of technical factors in shaping the modern "mode of apprehension" (Anderson 1991, 22; see also Anderson 1973). These qualities enabled him to craft a sweeping yet nuanced portrayal of the national imagination as conjured by the open, pervasive, and standardized features of what Anderson termed "print-capitalism", which emerged as late as the 17th century and resulted in individuals imagining themselves as members of a limited, exclusive, and sovereign nation (Anderson 2006, 3; see also Tamir 1995, 419–427).

One of the most notable theoretical challenges to Anderson's theory came from Antony Smith, notably in his book *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Blackwell 1986). While Smith drew extensively from Anderson's analysis (as we will soon explore), he called into question Anderson's assertions

that nations are inherently modern and should be understood in the context of the emergence of vernacularized print capitalism. Though acknowledging the significance of the modern forces (or, as he called them, the "triple revolution") in shaping the modern national consciousness, Smith placed the reconstruction of cultural traditions (whether genuine, selective, or fabricated) at the heart of nations and nationalism (Smith 1991).

Over the past three decades, an evident shift has occurred in the scholarly discourse regarding nationalism, moving away from Anderson and Smith's sweeping theories. Instead, the focus has moved towards more targeted research agendas, delving into specific issues or examining individual case studies (Anand 2016; Anderson 2012; Barrington 2006; Billig 1995; Brubaker 2009; Brubaker et al. 2006; Byrd 2023; Citrin et al. 1990; Fuchs 2018, 2020; Fuglerud 1999; Leibold 2016; Suny 2006). However, the theories proposed by Anderson and Smith continue to loom large in the existing literature (Conforti, 2021; Dar 2022; Harris and Tudor 2021; Malešević 2004, 2022; Maxwell 2020; Motyl 2002; Skey 2022; Xidias 2017; Weeda, Blok and Kuitenbrouwer 2018; Wódka 2019; Zimmer 2017). Their enduring relevance serves as a testament not only to their still considerable explanatory powers but, perhaps more significantly, indicates that the questions regarding the nature of the relations between modern technologies and cultural traditions underpinning nations remain unsettled.

This study suggests leveraging Bernard Stiegler's concept of *Epiphylogenesis* as a viable approach to reevaluate the relations between print capitalism and cultural traditions as they are treated in Anderson and Smith's works. As an alternative theoretical framework, it cuts through Anderson and Smith's binaries, thus re-centering the analysis of nations on the intertwined interaction between cultural production and technological progress. In Stiegler's view, modern nations evolve inside an ongoing epiphylogenic process, wherein cultural traditions and technical systems shape one another reciprocally. As I will attempt to demonstrate below, this approach offers a subtler formula for dissecting the formation and transformation of modern nations. In the final analysis, it potentially offers a fresh spectrum for appraising the influence brought to bear by networked communications on contemporary national identities.

This article is structured as follows. The first section offers a comparative analysis of Anderson and Smith's contesting presuppositions regarding the role of mass media and cultural traditions as determining factors in the creation of modern nations. The subsequent section introduces Bernard Stiegler's concept of *Epiphylogenesis*, specifically examining his original treatment of the interrelations between technics and culture. This is followed by the third section, which juxtaposes the main reasoning guiding *epiphylogenesis* with Anderson and Smith's theories. This analysis, in turn, opens the door to proposing an *epiphylogenic* perspective regarding the origins and nature of modern nations. Finally, the conclusion section explores the utility of applying *epiphylogenesis* to understand the impact of networked communications on present-day nations.

Anderson and Smith: nations, media, and culture

Both Anderson and Smith's works have been extensively studied and compared. Much of the discussion has centered around whether nations are modern constructions or grounded in premodern ethnic communities (see Berdúm et al. 2010; Kaufmann and Zimmer 2004; Kowert 1998; Schnee 2001; Tamir 1995; Wimmer 2006). In the analysis that follows, I wish to initiate the discussion by focusing on Anderson and Smith's disparate views regarding the role of mass media and cultural traditions in the creation of modern nations.

A convenient starting point is Anderson's discussion in the section entitled "Apprehension of Time" in Chapter II of *Imagined Communities*. Building extensively on Erich Auerbach's classic work, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Anderson describes in this section medieval temporality as originating from and premised on medieval scribal culture. He points out that so long as communication was carried out by the "medium of sacred language and written script," languages like Latin, Pali, Arabic, and Hebrew were regarded as "truth languages"

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and "emanations of reality," embodying simultaneity-along-time truths (Anderson 2006, 13–15). Thus, Anderson draws a direct connection between the closed and localized architecture of medieval scribal culture and the temporality underpinning medieval religious and dynastic communities.

Anderson continues and identifies the origins of the modern national imagination in the waning of medieval scribble culture and its displacement by an entirely new media system. He notes that, given the limited reach of medieval written script, it was impossible to conceive of events taking place in different locations simultaneously. Terms such as "meanwhile" and "in the meantime" had only limited and localized meanings in medieval times (Anderson 2006, 25–26). However, thanks to advancements in communications (for example, the industrialization of print) since the end of the 17th century, human beings gained the ability to conceive of events occurring in different locations across the globe at the same clocked time. To illustrate his point, Anderson refers to a seemingly mundane industrial print product – the daily newspaper. "The date at the top," he notes on the front page of the *New York Times*, "is the single most important emblem on it, [and] provides the essential connection – the steady onward clocking of homogeneous, empty time" (2006, 33). To further illustrate his point, Anderson describes modern national identities as evolving in the minds of 18th- and 19th-century "omniscient readers," as he calls them, of mechanically produced daily novels and schoolbooks (2006, 25). "Only they…", he writes about these new type of readers, "like God … watch A telephoning C, B shopping, and D playing pool all at once" (emphasis in the original, Anderson 2006, 26). "That all these acts are performed at the same clocked, calendrical time …" he continues, "… but by actors who may be largely unaware of one another, shows the novelty of this imagined world …" (Anderson 2006, 26).

Anderson, then, identifies print capitalism as a determining factor in the displacement of premodern temporalities that paved the way for a modern type of temporality he identifies as underpinning the modern national imagination (see especially Anderson's discussion in 2006, 24–36). He particularly refers to mechanically produced newspapers and novels as "technical means" that made possible the new national consciousness (2006, 25). In this context, Anderson makes the controversial claim that nationalism first emerged in the Creole communities of the late 18th century in the Americas, well before Europe, since they were the first to develop standardized language-of-the-state and local print cultures (2006, 64).

Anderson's reasoning regarding the role of mass media in the construction of modern temporality evidently draws on Walter Benjamin's notion of "homogeneous, empty time," which he discusses in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (see Anderson's references to the concept in 2006, 24, 37, 194, 204; see also Anderson 1993, 15; for secondary literature on "homogeneous, empty time," see Bhabha 2013; Chatterjee 2001; Chowdhury 2008; Hamann 2016; Mitchell 2000). Yet, there is a marked difference between Benjamin's original concept and Anderson's use of the term. Benjamin describes modern spatial temporality as "empty," in the sense that it can be filled with any number of events (Benjamin 1985, 261–262). As such, he underscores how modern time, measured by mechanical clocks and calendars, is infused with contemporary content, most notably capitalist visions of progress and so forth. Anderson, by contrast, focuses his analysis not so much on the contents that fill modern temporality, but rather on the void they create. He posits that modern nations first emerged in the late 17th century when "horizontal comradeship," fostered by modern communication, generated "amnesias and estrangements exactly parallel to the forgetting of childhood brought on by puberty" (Anderson 1993, 15; see also Anderson's later discussion in Anderson 1998, 29–46).

Anderson, then, emphasizes the "profound sense of newness" characterizing the first national movements (Anderson 2006, 193). He adds in this context: "It is difficult to recreate in the imagination a condition of life in which the nation was felt as utterly new" (Anderson 2006, 193). In this regard, Anderson describes how the open, pervasive, and standardized, features of print-capitalist products "emptied" medieval cultural substances, giving the first national movements a sense of "blasting open the continuum of history," a term Anderson borrows from

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Benjamin (Anderson 2006, 193–195; see also Anderson 1998, 62). To illustrate this point, Anderson refers back to the *Convention Nationale's* decision in October 1793 to abolish the Christian calendar and replace it with a new one, marking the abolition of the *ancien régime* as Year One (Anderson 2006, 193). For Anderson, this decision exemplifies the "radical break with the past" that underpinned modern nationhood in its purest and embryonic form (2006, 193).[1]

While Anderson perceives nations as emerging from print capitalism's ability to "empty" cultural traditions, Smith posits cultural traditions as the foundational elements of modern nations. According to Smith, nations may not be understood as just modern political entities, but are deeply rooted in historical and cultural traditions. He argues that nations emerge from pre-existing ethnic or cultural communities that share common myths, symbols, memories, and traditions. Thus, according to Smith, it would be absurd to assume that being German, Iranian, or French is solely based on some simultaneity-across-space that separated them from their past cultural traditions. In his view, the heritage of the German Volk, the Shite creed, or the Frankish and Gallic traditions are essential for fully understanding these modern national identities (Smith 1988, 13–15).

To conceptualize the centrality of cultural traditions in the formation and endurance of modern nations, Smith calls forth the notion of *ethnié* (he adopts the French term) (see Smith 1988, 13–14; 2008, 19; 2013, 191). His treatment of the term varies throughout his works. However, across all its formulations, *ethnié* encompasses "myths," "symbols," "values," and "traditions" that Smith deems decisive in the establishment and shaping of modern nations (refer to Smith's comprehensive survey of the term in 2008, 191). One should note that Smith takes pains to distance himself from any form of primordial understanding of nations. He stresses that *ethnié* does not denote a physical reality of any sort, but rather the "social memory" embodied by customs, rituals, linguistic codes, and sacred places (2013, 191–192). For Smith, *ethnié* are cultural units rather than sourced in actual descent. In Smith's *ethno-symbolic* view, as he terms it, what binds present-day Greeks or Armenians may be traced not to their ancestral connection to the pre-historic Greek and Armenian communities. It is rather a symbolic connection premised on sacred scripts, liturgies, and other cultural artefacts that were encoded and circulated over vast spans of time (Smith 1995, 9–10).

Interestingly, an inspection of Smith's works reveals the extent to which his analysis builds on Anderson's "vivid" and "sensitive" study, as he refers to it (Smith 1988, 133; see also Smith's analysis of Anderson's thesis in Smith 1991, 359). Echoing Anderson, Smith particularly highlights the crucial role played by new modes of communication in integrating the numerous, faceless masses into modern nations. He describes "the distant, anonymous, but realistic sources (that is, newspapers, telephones, radio, etc.)" as endowing modern nations with "power and majesty such as no *ethnié* possessed" (Smith 1988, 171). Nonetheless, whereas Anderson describes print capitalism as "emptying" cultural traditions, Smith puts mass media to work in its service. Smith associates nations with "secularized intellectuals," as he calls them, who "recombine" (Smith 1988, 178), "reconstruct" (Smith 1988, 5, 15, 72, 177), "recover" (Smith 1988, 29, 53, 180, 190), and at times even "fabricate" cultural traditions (Smith 1988, 180, 171–172; see also Smith 1995, 6). He subsequently contends that modern national intellectuals did not simply nullify traditional priests; modern states did not merely invalidate churches, mosques, or synagogues; nor did national cultures abolish traditional religions. Instead, they utilized new modes of communication to bind elites and masses, imbuing past cultural traditions with a civic, rational, and territorial form (Smith 1988, 160–161).

Both Anderson and Smith's perspectives undoubtedly offered novel and sophisticated insights into the role of mass media communications and cultural heritages in shaping modern national consciousness. However, when contextualizing their ideas within contemporary discourse on media technologies and cultural production, it becomes apparent that their presuppositions may not fully capture the complexities inherent in the interaction between communication technologies and cultural production. In this regard, Bernard Stiegler's notion of *Epiphylogenesis* emerges as an alternative theoretical framework, effectively bridging the gap in Anderson and Smith's conceptions of mass media and cultural formations. As I attempt to illustrate below, *epiphylogenesis* proposes an

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original approach to understanding the interrelations between technical progress and cultural traditions, thereby laying the groundwork for a more nuanced theoretical exploration of how nations form and evolve.

Stiegler's epiphylogenesis: unraveling the relationship between technics and culture

In the past three decades, a vast array of works has deepened our comprehension of how past and present media technologies shape cultural traditions (Bauman 2013; Dean 2003; Giddens 2013; Hassan 2007; Peters 2015; Rosa and Scheuerman 2009; Turkle 2011; see also Virilio 1977). Among the most original and intriguing works in this context is Bernard Stiegler's multivolume work *Technics and Time* (*La technique et le temps*). In his work, Stiegler engages in complicated dialogue with various philosophical traditions, ranging from Marx and Nietzsche to Heidegger and Husserl, and from Derrida to Leroi-Gourhan. Comprehensive coverage of Stiegler's multifaceted ideas would not be possible within the constraints of the present discussion (for such accounts, see Abbinnett 2017; Colony 2011; Howells and Moore 2013; James 2010; Turner 2016, 2023). The subsequent analysis will particularly explore possible ways in which Stiegler's framework of *epiphylogenesis* may be utilized to reevaluate the relations between print capitalism and *ethnié*, as they were conceptualized by Anderson and Smith.

Central to Stiegler's approach is the notion of human beings as "technical forms of life" (1998b, 2). Unlike other species, Stiegler notes, humans are uniquely defined by their capacity to graft their lived memory onto non-living matter, a process he terms "exteriorization" (1998b, 4). This act of exteriorizing human memory involves transferring information onto technical objects and systems. Through stone tablets, scribes, print products, and cell phones – which Stiegler describes as prosthetics or artificial extensions – humans "exteriorize" parts of themselves, enabling the transmission of knowledge, skills, and experiences over time (Stiegler 1998a, 17). He writes in this context:

> The epigenetic experience of an animal is lost to the species when the animal dies, while in a life proceeding by means other than life, the being's experience, registered in the tool (in the object), becomes transmissible and cumulative: thus arises the possibility of a heritage (1998b, 4).

As we may infer from the above passage, Stiegler highlights the human ability to "exteriorize" living memories onto technical objects as the means for recording, transmitting, and producing cultural traditions (that is, heritages). He regards stone tools, bronze weapons, and hard drives as "technically inscribed memory systems" that enable social groups to generate cultural traditions. Whatever we know about ancient cultures, Stiegler observes, we deduce from the objects, tools, and relics unearthed by archaeologists (Stiegler 1998a, 45). It is through technical prosthetics that past and present-day human societies have shaped their cultures (Stiegler 1998a, 17).

To conceptualize the interplay of biology, technology, and culture, Stiegler introduces the notion of *Epiphylogenesis*. *Phylogenesis* refers to the biological evolution of a species over generations, while *epigenesis* denotes the development of an organism from an undifferentiated state (such as a fertilized egg) to a mature, differentiated state. *Epiphylogenesis* combines these concepts to describe the unique human capacity not only to evolve biologically (*phylogenesis*) and develop as individuals (*epigenesis*) but also to evolve technologically. According to Stiegler, human evolution is unique, unmatched anywhere else in the animal kingdom, in that it is profoundly influenced by the use and creation of tools and technology (Stiegler 1998a, 177).

Stiegler utilizes *epiphylogenesis* as a wide-ranging formula to account for the ways in which the interwoven nature of biological, cultural, and technological evolution bears on the shaping of human history. From this angle, historical tools are singled out as the primary "technical systems" that constitute, within each period, the manner in which human beings establish their relations with

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matter (Stiegler 1998b, 4). Prehistoric stone tools, medieval mechanical clocks, and electric grids have each served their purpose as a singular historical "technical system." The way these systems store, process, and transmit information, Stiegler observes, generates a distinctive "temporal unity" that synchronizes human beings and societies, infusing them with cultural meaning (Stiegler 1998a, 31). Each epoch in human history can be defined by its prevailing technical system, thanks to its role in generating a particular temporal unity, whether it occurs in the age of stone tools or our contemporary digital age (Stiegler 1998a, 29–32).

As we may gather from the preceding discussion, Stiegler articulates his *epiphylogenesis* as a constant evolutionary process in which humans craft new technologies, which in turn mold existing cultural traditions. In each stage of this process, the technical systems in current use are likewise constantly evolving, so rendering obsolete the systems underpinning cultural production. The adjustments or symbiosis between these two evolutionary processes is rarely smooth; therefore, cultural traditions and technical evolution are periodically beset by "moments of resistance" in which technical change to a greater or lesser extent disrupts the familiar reference points upon which all culture is built (Stiegler 1998b, 4).

Nations, media, and culture: the epiphylogenic view

Now, how may Stiegler's arguments relate to Anderson and Smith's theories of nations? On the face of it, *epiphylogenesis* supports Anderson's view of print capitalism as the infrastructure underpinning modern nations. From the perspective of *epiphylogenesis*, 18th- and 19th-century newspapers, curricula, and novels serve as "prosthetics" or "artificial extensions" of modern human beings. In this respect, Anderson treats print capitalism as an historical "technical system." Stiegler, then, would concur with Anderson's observation about the pivotal role standardized print capitalist products played in fostering the pervasive and steady temporality that enabled modern human beings to imagine themselves to be parts of modern nations.

Epiphylogenesis further seems to support the various works associated with the Modernist School of nationalism. Like Breuilly, Gellner, Hobsbawm, and others, it would place emphasis on the fact that the peasant masses in Poland, Indonesia, or Italy had still not perceived themselves as members of nations in the modern territorial and political sense as recently as the latter part of the 19th century (see Breuilly 1993; Connor 2018; Gellner 1996; Hobsbawm 2012; Weber 1976). Stiegler would concur with the essential argument of these works: that it was only after the spread of mass communication systems that being Polish, Indonesian, or Italian became a source of collective identity in the modern political and territorial sense.

However, that said, the epiphylogenic precept takes exception with Anderson's association of print capitalism with the "emptying" of cultural traditions. In epiphylogenic terms, the print capitalist products at the center of the Anderson analysis do not deserve their rating as "technical means for re-presenting homogeneous, empty time" (2006, 25). This is because Stiegler assumes *technics* to be innately bound up with culture. Therefore, although an *epiphylogenic* analysis would indeed consider mechanically produced newspapers and novels as decisive factors in the development of modern national identities, it would stop short of accepting their power to divorce those who use them from their cultural traditions.

To illustrate this point, we may juxtapose Stiegler's treatment of technical artefacts against Anderson's portrayal of the *New York Times*: Stiegler would not likely buy into Anderson's contention that the newspaper's front page should be exclusively defined by the date at the top. An epiphylogenetic analysis would rather point to the article's deliberate use of the *New Roman* typeface taken from the sturdy design found in 18th-century print materials (see Dreyfus 1973 for context). Furthermore, he would have noted that multiple sections of dailies like *the New York Times* provide not just current news, but are also valuable resources for conveying and producing cultural content. The same could be said about the print capitalist products Anderson describes as conjuring the modern national imagination. In the epiphylogenic view, mechanically reproduced

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stamps, maps, and postcards are all "technically inscribed memory systems" that perpetuate cultural traditions.

In this context, Stiegler's perspective seems to equally align with Smith's treatment of print capitalism and mass media as "inter-generational repositories" of cultural traditions (Smith 2013, 187). Much like Smith, Stiegler also emphasizes the capacity of mass media to enhance the human ability to record, reconstruct, and transmit cultural traditions. He would also concede that mass media acts as prosthetics, specifically for a new class of modern intellectuals who reconstruct and reappropriate ethno-histories from myths, symbols, and traditions (Smith 1988, 132).

Yet, while concurring with Smith's principal understanding of mass media as conveyers of cultural traditions, Siegler would challenge him on another fundamental issue: do nations revolve around "ethnic cores?" As just mentioned, since *epiphylogenesis* takes humans as "technical forms of life," it considers cultural heritages as innately bound up with the "exteriorization" process in which humans graft their lived knowledge and experience onto technical objects. Thus, in the epiphylogenic view, cultural content is bound up with *technics*. As such it is precluded from assuming ephemeral and perennial form like Smith's *ethnié*. Thus, while *epiphylogenesis* does count myths, symbols, and traditions as important in the building of modern nations, it would question whether they constitute a "socio-cultural model for social organization and communication from the early third millennium BC up until the present," as Smith conceptualizes them (Smith 2008, 31–32).

Perhaps more importantly, Stiegler calls into question the direct connection Smith draws between modern nations and pre-modern ethnic cultures. In Stiegler's framework, artefacts, scribes, printed texts, and hypertexts—each emerge from and reflect a particular technical phase. Thus, *epiphylogenesis* brings into question the continuity that Smith supposes between pre-modern scribes, artefacts, and liturgies, and mechanically produced newspapers, telegraph systems, and radio networks. *Epiphylogenesis* conceptualizes these media techniques as bound up with distinctive technical systems found within particular "technical milieus" (Stiegler 1998a, 61). It thus locates the ability of modern Egyptian intellectuals to "recombine" and "reconstruct" ancient Egyptian heritage with later Islamic culture in a distinctive historical stage and a particular technological environment. Hence, whereas Stiegler acknowledges the importance of cultural traditions as determining factors in modern nations, he abjures direct links between modern nations and pre-modern ethnic communities.

As evident from the preceding discussion, *epiphylogenesis* presents a more malleable framework for conceptualizing the relations between print capitalism and cultural traditions when theorizing about modern nations. Epiphylogenic thinking does not view print capitalism and mass media as simply eliminating religious and dynastic pre-modern cultures. Concurrently, myths, symbols, and traditions do not posit immutable and universal forms. Stiegler puts forward an alternative formula whereby, when conceptualizing modern nations, we look at the epiphylogenic co-constitutive process in which mass media systems exteriorize cultural traditions, while these cultural forms gain a particular material form.

In this sense, José Rizal's novel, *Noli Me Tangere*, the Mercantorian Maps, and printed copies of the American Declaration of Independence that loom large in Anderson's works indeed serve as the infrastructures that enabled the Southeast Asian, European, and American national imaginations. Their pervasive and standardized nature allowed individuals in far-flung places to imagine themselves as being part of limited, sovereign communities with fellow members who they will never know, meet, or hear from, as Anderson describes them (2006, 6), However, despite the "newness" Anderson ascribed to these print capitalist products, they did not posit a "radical break with the past" (2006, 193). These print materials all carried mechanically produced images and symbolic representations that resonated with existing cultures (Protestant culture in the American context, and Buddhist cosmology in the case of South-Eastern national identities). As such they were part of a long line of *technics* through which first, religious and dynastic, and later on national communities, have exteriorized their cultural heritages. Nevertheless, the way these cultures have

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been processed and transmitted by mechanically print products posits a new stage in the ongoing technical evolution, and thus ought to be conceptualized as cut off from pre-modern ethnic cultures.

Comparing the *epiphylogenic* logic to Anderson and Smith's theories suggests that their contrasting views on nations are largely based on their emphasis on differing aspects of mass media technologies, without fully considering their multifaceted nature. *Epiphylogenesis's* nuanced treatment of technics opens the door to conceptualizing the composite techno-cultural epiphylogenic process when theorizing about the nature and evolution of modern nations.

Taking the *epiphylogenesis* analysis a step further yields an understanding of modern nations as ethno-imagined communities. They emerged as such from originating and evolving within the epiphylogenic process in which cultural production and technical development dynamically coalesce. Birthed and bred amid the broadly based relations between human beings and artefacts, modern nations posit a distinctive stage of development in which the recording and reconstruction of cultural traditions settle on a point of equilibrium concertized by the open, standardized, and pervasive structure of print capitalism and other mass media systems. Naturally, the precise manner in which technical and cultural elements converge depends both on cultural wealth and the state of technical advancement in each case. Where print capitalist and mass media systems are well-established and widespread, one would anticipate more civic-oriented national identities to emerge. This would result from the prevalence of these technologies as contributors to the formation of national identities centered around the "horizontal comradeship," using Anderson's terminology, generated by print capitalism and mass media (2006, 32). Conversely, in circumstances where cultural traditions are rich and technological infrastructures are underdeveloped, national identities are more likely to be culturally oriented. This implies that mass media technical systems are less influential in shaping the identity of such nations because they lean more heavily on their historical heritage and cultural practices to define their national identities.

Furthermore, an e*piphylogenic* analysis does not exclude the possibility that cultural traditions (that is, *ethniés*) that make up modern nations may have appeared in pre-modern periods. By and by, it would recognize that the architecture of the mass media systems had afforded other types of sub-national and supra-national identities. Nonetheless, Stiegler would identify the co-constitutive dynamic between *ethnié* and print capitalism as the dominant factor in the makeup of the kind of techno-cultural community that represents the modern nation.

Further application of *epiphylogenesis* to the theorizing of nations draws attention to the intersection between the "horizontal comradeship" generated by the mass media technical systems emphasized by Anderson and the cultural depth stressed by Smith in the creation of national collective sentiments. In this sense, epiphylogenesis highlights the concept of "temporal unity," using Stiegler's terminology, as the cohesive force that binds members of modern nations together. From the epiphylogenic perspective, newspapers, radio, and other mass media outlets synthesize cultural heritages into a shared modern mediated reality. Thus, through the epiphylogenic lens, nations are seen as embodying a convergence between individuals' chronological and technical sensibilities (see Tomlinson 2007 for context). They represent the outcome of the merging of technical-horizontal and cultural-genealogical lines (Mumford 2010, 20–21). According to this perspective, national identities are shaped by the alignment of grand historical narratives with the distinctive architecture of mass media, while also being grounded in individuals' ability to contextualize their modern national coexistence within the broader continuum of history.

Nonetheless, while *epiphylogenesis* renders a view of modern nations as exhibiting a certain "temporal unity," it also emphasizes its transitory nature. This logic allows that although modern nations represent a specific stage in this progression, they are also constantly evolving. To elucidate further, since the ongoing technical evolution is anticipated to make print capitalism and mass media technical systems obsolete, it will likely also alter the whole process of exteriorization, thereby either shifting or transforming the essence of modern nations. This appears to be happening in our own digital time and age. Additional insights on this matter will be provided in the concluding section of the article.

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Conclusions

How, then, can *epiphylogenesis* assist us in evaluating the influence of digital media on contemporary nations?

First, notwithstanding the obvious differences among the various web platforms such as social networks, search engines, streaming services, AI chatbots, and so forth, present-day networked communications clearly emerge as a new technical system that constitutes a new stage in Stiegler's *epiphylogenesis* evolution. This is the case because their mobile, instantaneous, and interactive features generate a distributed (that is, many-to-many) media structure that differs markedly from the centralized (that is, one-to-many) and standardized architecture of mass media. This novel technical system, namely networked communications, appears to have a disruptive effect on the modern co-presence Anderson associates with modern nations. In the age of digital networks, the pervasive and uniform "mode of apprehending the world"—as Anderson describes it—seems to collapse into countless tailor-made, commodified micro media environments, each generating its own distinctive virtual space (Bennett 1998, 2012; Dahlgren 2009; Dean 2003; Lübbe 2010; Schmidt 2014; Tomlinson 2007). Merely scrolling through one's social media feeds, wish lists, or search histories reveals how they challenge any notion of the standardized, uniform, and homogenous newspapers and novels presupposed by Andersen when he conceptualized the modern national imagination.

The disruptiveness of the new networked technical system becomes even more evident when today's online culture is juxtaposed against Smith's depictions of the reconstruction of cultural traditions (Kearney 2012; Koselleck 2009; Rosa 2009). Smith's accounts of "intellectuals" weaving cultural traditions—to be ultimately evaluated by the masses who are the "final court of appeal"—now appear to be little more than a pipe dream in today's chaotic digital culture. Certainly, one can find attempts to reconstruct coherent cultural narratives by certified historians, scholarly associations, and governmental agencies. Nonetheless, the overwhelming body of content consumed by the networked masses appears steeped in extreme and heightened forms of "ethnicism," as Smith describes it (1988, 140–143; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Krämer 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019).

Viewing present-day network communications as a new technical system—and placing it within the epiphylogenic process—points to how networked communications provoke what Stiegler calls "violent disruption" in the "temporal unity," which Anderson and Smith ascribe to members of modern nations (Stiegler 1998b, 7). It indicates that tweets, posts, memes, and hashtags disturb the "stabilization of technical evolution"—as Stiegler calls it—which maintains the delicate equilibrium upon which modern national identities converge (Stiegler 1998a, 29). Such disruptions undoubtedly owe much to larger causes, including demographic shifts, neoliberal policies, and the emergence of additional technical systems. However, the proliferation of mobile, instantaneous, and interactive networked communications—particularly social media platforms—has clearly created fertile ground for the instability of present-day national identities. Individuals living in heavily networked societies appear to hold disparate modes of apprehension and differing cultural traditions (Lohmeier 2020; Ling and Campbell 2017; Papacharissi 2010; Peters 2015, 1–12; Sharma 2014; Rasmussen 2014; Thompson 1995; Turkle 2011).

Applying *epiphylogenesis* to evaluate the influence of digital media on contemporary nations urges us to consider whether the hyper-national movements and discourse that have emerged online in the last two decades can be associated with nationalism in the first place. Viewing these hyper and often populist forms of "digital nationalism" (Skey 2022, 843; Skey et al. 2016; Mihelj and Jiménez-Martinez 2021) as distinctive stages in the overriding *epiphylogenesis* process suggests that they may be conceptualized as a new type of social formation. These formations may overlap with, but should be conceptually separated from, the modern nations discussed in the works of Anderson and Smith (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Fuchs 2018, 2020; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Shifman 2014; Udupa 2019).

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These types of "networked national consciousness" are not based on standardized modern perceptions or cohesive cultures. Instead, they are constructed from a variety of personalized viewpoints and miscellaneous cultural legacies. They encompass a multitude of technical and cultural experiences that can coexist within a single national community (Fornäs 2016; Hassan 2007, 37–45; Keightley 2012, 1–20; Leccardi 2007; Lohmeier et al. 2020; Nowotny 2018). Thus, within today's networked nations, differing, and at times contesting, types of "togetherness-in-time" and "togetherness-in-space" may coexist simultaneously (Keightley 2012, 7).

Stiegler's concept of *epiphylogenesis* sheds light on yet another critical dimension of today's networked communications. Stiegler notes that, ever since the Industrial Revolution, there has been a significant change in the epiphylogenic evolutionary process itself. He observes how the continued acceleration of technical progress had the impact of "dramatically widening the distance between technical systems and social organizations as if, negotiation between them appearing to be impossible, their final divorce seems inevitable" (Stiegler 1998b, 3). In this regard, Stiegler is often associated with the post-humanist tradition that emphasizes the ontological independence of technology and its ability, for better or for worse, to shape and even determine human conduct (see, in this context, Lindberg 2022; Rose 2017; Wolfe 2010).

In this regard, algorithms, especially with the advent of language model-based chatbots and other applications of Artificial Intelligence, seem to represent an unprecedented stage in the ongoing technical evolution, elevating the ability of "inorganic matter" to "organize itself"—as Stiegler puts it—to new levels (Stiegler 1998a, 71–72). While Anderson and Smith characterized human agents—whether novelists, journalists, intellectuals, or the masses—as the architects of modern national identities in the era of mass media, in today's digital landscape, they are superseded by algorithms that curate, select, and produce content through a process that might not be assumed to be entirely human (see Goode 2021). Thus, Stiegler's concept of *epiphylogenesis* encourages us to reconsider whether autonomous individuals are indeed the building blocks of contemporary nations. In the vistas opened up by his notions, we ask what a post-human concept of nationhood could entail. Might we have to reimagine nations in ways that could conceive of agency as being shared between biological human beings and technical objects as Stiegler envisioned all along?

Surely, additional explorations are necessary to further probe into these trajectories. This article aims to serve as an initial reference for such endeavors, providing a potential starting point for using Stiegler's notion of *epiphylogenesis* to explore the complexities and implications of the nexus between historical media structures, cultural traditions, and the modern national imagination.

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Notes

1 Since Anderson exclusively associates nations with the modern national imagination, this leads him to attribute the presence of pre-modern cultures in modern national identities to instrumental motivations. In this context it should be noted that in the first edition of *Imagined Communities*, Anderson doesn't say much about this matter. However, in the preface to the second edition of the book (published in 1991), he states his intention to offer an "…intelligible explanation of exactly how, and why, newly emerging nations imagined themselves as antique" (Anderson 2006, xiv). Indeed, in Chapters ten and eleven, added to the second edition, Anderson details how the sense of newness underpinning the first national movements was tainted by 19th-century self-interest forces, which began to interpret nationalism genealogically as an expression

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of historical traditions of serial continuity, a concept foreign to the original national movements (Anderson 2006, 209). In his view, when the European dynastic states (discussed in Chapter six), followed by the colonial states (discussed in Chapter ten), and later the second-generation national movements (discussed in Chapter eleven), imagined themselves as "awakening from sleep," they were driven by self-interested political motives, rather than pure national sentiments (Anderson 2006, 194–195; Berlin 2013).

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