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Thinking it through

The nation once again

(June 1992)

From **Socialist Review**, No.154, June 1992, p.7.

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'This is the way the world ends, not with the class but the nation.' That's the view of many people as they look at places like the former USSR, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and the Horn of Africa. The collapse of the old order has produced not class politics, but a proliferation of groupings putting forward rival national claims.

These claims are almost invariably backed up by fabricated histories, as writers as diverse as Eric Hobsbawm, Benedict Anderson, Immanuel Wallerstein and Nigel Harris have pointed out.

The modern nation, with its ideal of a homogeneous body of citizens, enjoying equal rights, expressing loyalty to a single centre of sovereignty and speaking a single language, is as much a product of the last three to four hundred years as is capitalism. It is a notion as out of place in an account of

pre-capitalist societies as that of the motor car or machine gun. Yet governments and insurgents almost everywhere justify themselves by reference to 'age old national ideals.'

It is in pursuit of such myths that people are prepared to slaughter each other and, as always with wars, most of the slaughter is of the poor by the poor, not the rich by the rich. Lebanisation, rather than liberation, seems the shape of the future.

What makes the picture even more grotesque is that the lives of those engaged in mutual slaughter are remarkably alike. They work in similar factories, farms or offices, they watch the same American television serials or international sports events, they listen to the same rock music and they wear the same jeans and trainers.

The mystery of the pervasiveness of nationalism only begins to disappear when you look more fully at its links with capitalism.

The class societies that existed before the rise of capitalism were organised through states but these were external to most activities of the great mass of people. They robbed them through taxation or pillage, and they coerced or bribed them into joining their armies. But they left untouched their basic everyday activity of getting a living.

In such a society the situation which existed in 12th century England could be quite common, with the military rulers using one language (Norman French), the literate elite of administrators another (Medieval Latin) and the mass of the population a variety of dialects (forms of Anglo Saxon).

Under capitalism the market impinges on every aspect of life. But the market can only function if it is backed by an equally pervasive state.

Such a state cannot operate efficiently without an easy means of communication between its functionaries – a language in which they are all fluent. It also wants this to be the language of most of those who live under it: it makes the prying of the secret police and the tax collector easier. In the first fully developed capitalisms – those of Holland and England – the spread of trade drew people in different regions into increasing contact with each other, so that different dialects merged into a single tongue used by the state and population alike.

This also provided an apparent tie between the exploiters and the exploited. However much they differed in their incomes and lifestyles, they had one thing in common – they spoke a language which others could not understand. This became particularly important to a section of the middle class who could get jobs in the state machine which were denied to national minorities at home and colonised populations abroad.

What applied to the oldest capitalisms applied as new ones grew up in competition with them. Businessmen saw the creation of a national state as a means to strengthen themselves, the middle class, as the way to advance their own careers. Both could use slogans of national unity and liberation to mobilise behind them workers and peasants who resented oppression by the old rulers.

The framework established in the youth of the capitalist world system persists in its dotage. As crisis has ravaged whole continents and shaken the world's second superpower apart at the seams, national divisions often appear the easiest thing to cling on to.

Even where language differences don't exist (for instance, between Bosnia's Serbs, Croats and Muslims), old religious or territorial loyalties can be resurrected by political adventurers who mobilise the middle classes and sections of

workers behind rival nationalist slogans and ensure that much of the old ruling class is left untouched.

Marx made the point nearly 150 years ago that the ruling ideas are always those of the ruling class. Workers are brought up to take for granted the ideas of the system and one of the key ideas is that of the nation. It is hardly surprising some turn to it in times of crisis. This is especially so when the crisis of the system is accompanied by a crisis of much of the left internationally due to its inability to come to terms with the collapse of its old Stalinist illusions. There is a vacuum on the left which often leaves those who preach nationalism or religious fundamentalism with little socialist competition.

But the crisis itself can create conditions which throw that nationalism into question. Where there is bloody fighting over rival 'national claims' to a diminishing economic cake, eventually there is also revulsion against the fighting – as with the huge peace demonstrations in Bosnia at the beginning of the most recent carnage. Workers who have been drawn into the nationalist frenzy, as Serbia's were when Milosevic began his agitation in 1987, can begin to think again as their sons are sent to die and their living standards are slashed. Even in Lebanon the collapse of the currency last month led to riots against the government that cut across the old religious divides.

The rise of rival nationalisms is not the 'end', but rather marks just one stage in a long process of crisis and confrontation, in which class politics will, again and again, begin to emerge spontaneously. Groups of socialists who defend the rights of national minorities but also struggle for workers' unity offer the alternative to a bloody morass.

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