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The Return of the National Question



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Introduction

It has become almost orthodoxy to say that the great divide in the world today is between nationalisms. The talk of “*a new world order*” and “*the end of history*” may not have lasted long. But what has replaced it does not seem to have been class politics, but rather the rivalry of reborn – or sometimes completely new – nationalisms.

Yet those who speak in these terms have great difficulty in defining what makes up a “*nation*”. It cannot just be those people who inhabit a certain geographical entity – otherwise what sense are we to make of minorities declining to be part of the “*nation*” of the majority among whom they live? It cannot just be language – or what are we to make of Serb, Croat and Bosnian speakers of a single language declaring themselves to be separate nationalities, or of the founders of India attempting to impose Hindi, their own recently sanitized version of a regional dialect, Hindustani, as the “*national language*” of a whole subcontinent? It cannot be that fashionable catch-all “*culture*”, since everywhere differences in culture, or ways of living, are greater between the rich and poor, or the workers and peasants, within a national state than they are between neighbors from the same class on different sides of national borders.

There is no single objective criterion by which to determine whether a group of people – or their would be leaders – will decide they should constitute a nation. On this, at least, such diverse authorities as “old left” academic Eric Hobsbawm [1], “new left” academic Benedict Anderson [2], liberal academic Ernest Gellner [3] and former editor of this journal Nigel Harris [4] are in agreement. Nations are, in Anderson’s words, “imaginary” entities – although in this case imagination in power can use

all the nastiest weapons of the state to impose its beliefs on those who dissent from them.

The ideologists of nationalism nearly always try to trace the ancestry of their particular nation back many hundreds of years – as when English history is said to begin with King Alfred and his burnt cakes and Ethelred the Unready, when Tudjman’s government speaks of “*the thousand year old Croatian nation*”, when the Serbian government invokes the battle of Kosovo in 1389, or Romanian nationalists claim a continuity going back to the Roman Empire’s settlement of Dacia. [5] But these claims are invariably based on fictitious histories. For nations as entities have not always existed.

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 relatively recent history as capitalism itself. It is a notion as out of place in any serious account of the pre-capitalist societies which dominated the whole world until the 16th century, and more than 90 percent of it until little over a century ago, as that of the motor car or machine gun.

In fact, it is the connection between the rise of the nation state and the rise of capitalism which enables us to understand the strength of the myths that lead people to slaughter each other – as always with wars, most of the slaughter being of the poor by the poor, not the rich by the rich.

Capitalism and the Nation

The class societies that existed before the rise of capitalism were organized through states. But these states were external to most of the activities of the great mass of people. They robbed them through taxation and pillage and they coerced or bribed them into joining their armies. But they left untouched their basic everyday activity of getting a living, which took place mainly through subsistence agriculture even if a small portion of their output was traded. The peasantry were, of course, heavily exploited and subject to vicious legal repression but it was by particular lords and particular clerics (often the same people), who themselves owed only a distant and fragile allegiance to any central state.

In such a society the situation which existed in the 12th century monarchy called England (in fact made up of modern England, much of western France and parts of Wales, Ireland and Scotland) was typical, with the military rulers using one language (Norman French), the literate elite of administrators using another (medieval Latin), and the mass of the population using a variety of disparate dialects (various forms of Anglo-Saxon, French, Welsh and Gaelic).

The state in such a society might be centralized and powerful or weak and fragmented. But in neither case was it a *national* state as we understand it today. Whatever else its subjects thought, they did not think of themselves as citizens speaking a common language or owing an undivided loyalty to a single geographic entity.

Under capitalism things are very different. The market impinges on every aspect of everybody's life, from the work they do through the food they eat and the clothes they wear

to how they amuse themselves. And with the growth of the market there is a massive growth of administration, both within individual companies and in the state.

The ideological mythology of capitalism claims it needs only a minimal state. But, in fact, the market can only function on an extensive, enduring basis if it is backed up by an equally pervasive state – issuing money, ensuring debts are paid, limiting the scale of fraud, building roads and ports, keeping the poor from getting their revenge on the rich, engaging in wars and, above all, enforcing regular taxation on the mass of people.

But an administrative apparatus cannot operate efficiently without an easy means of communication between its functionaries, a language in which they are all fluent. It also prefers this to be the language of most of those who live under it: it makes the prying of the secret police and the tax collectors so much easier, the cohesion between those who give orders at the top and those who enforce them at the bottom so much more efficient.

The First National States

Capitalism first began to develop fully in Holland and England from the 16th century onwards – although market relations and, with them, the first nuclei of capitalist production, were already present in parts of 14th century Italy and Flanders, and 16th century Germany, France and Bohemia. In each case the rise of the market began, spontaneously, to give rise to the elements that were to come together to create the national state.

The spread of trade caused people in different regions to have increasing direct and indirect contact with each other.

Traders from the towns travelled through the countryside, buying, selling and talking to people in the most remote villages, picking up the bits of dialect they needed to make themselves understood and mixing them into the colloquial idiom of the town, creating, without thinking about it, new standard forms of communication which it was an advantage for everyone connected with the new commerce to learn. Along with the traders went itinerant preachers – often out to profit their pockets as well as their souls – and recruiters looking for men for the new mercenary armies. Meanwhile, the poorest in the villages would leave for the towns in search of work, and the richest to cut out the middleman and to trade directly themselves. While in rural France, the average peasant never travelled more than about five miles from his or her home in a lifetime of toil, by the late 17th century one in seven of England's population would pass at least part of their life in London. [6]

Spontaneously, unconsciously, trading networks started to become linguistic networks. It was then that the administrators of the state, keen to tax the profits of trade, saw the point in carrying out their transactions in the language of the market, not that of the court or the church. It was then, too, that the innovative writers saw that using the new colloquial tongue was the way to win an audience – as Dante did in early 14th century Florence, Chaucer in England half a century later, and Luther and Rabelais in 16th century Germany and France.

The change took a long time to complete – even as late as the 17th century, Hobbes in England and Spinoza in Holland could still write major works in Latin – but where capitalism conquered, so did the new tongues. By contrast, where capitalism had a false start and then succumbed to a revival of the old order, so too the new languages suffered: the increasing refeudalisation of late Renaissance Italy

meant much literature was in Latin rather than in Dante's Italian [7]; the smashing of Bohemian Protestantism by the armed counter-reformation at the battle of the White Mountain in 1618 was also the destruction of Czech as a written language for nearly 200 years; Latin continued to be the language of administration in the Habsburg empire until the 1840s.

What became the first nations began their life as networks of trade, administration and language which grew up in the hinterland of major cities. Everywhere in Europe the administrators of late feudal monarchies tried to increase their power over members of the old feudal ruling class by allying themselves with the traders and manufacturers of the towns. These "*burghers*" were often already at the centre of geographically compact networks of trade and language. Some of the administrators could see great advantage to themselves in making the language of the burghers the language of the state, so cementing the alliance and beginning to create a linguistically homogeneous state, able as none previously had been to insist on the allegiance of all those who lived within its boundaries.

The growth of the new linguistically based state had great advantages for the rising bourgeoisie. It made it more difficult for traders from elsewhere, who spoke "*foreign*" languages, to challenge their "*home*" markets. And it made the administrators of the state increasingly subject to their influence and eager to pursue their interests, especially when it came to helping them compete with rival groups of traders on world markets – as with the state backed struggle for control over the East India trade between the English and Dutch chartered companies in the 17th century. Even where the form of the state remained feudal, as in 17th century France, it was increasingly attentive to the interests of the nascent capitalists.

But if the creation of the national state began spontaneously, elements of consciousness were soon involved as well. Political philosophers from the time of Machiavelli (at the very beginning of the 16th century) onwards began to urge policies on states which would speed up the spontaneous process. [8] Political economists elaborated the “*mercantilism*” doctrines, which identified the interests of the state with the accumulation of trade surpluses by its merchant class. Playwrights, poets and pamphleteers began for the first time to celebrate what would later be called “*national*” traditions.

The new “*national*” state proved in practice to have an additional advantage for those who ruled over it, whether they came from the old aristocracy or from the rising class of capitalists. It 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, knowing the language and proving their loyalty to the state, could get jobs in the state machine itself which were denied to national minorities at home and colonized populations abroad.

The Drive to Create New National States

The spread of capitalism through the globe was characterized by combined and uneven development. The first centers of capitalist accumulation in Britain and Holland had a double effect on the rest of the globe. They robbed and impoverished whole regions. But they also drew them into a worldwide network of market relations and so eventually encouraged the rise of new groups of capitalists – or of new middle classes who saw their future as lying with capitalism.

But these groups found themselves in a world already dominated by existing capitalists using national states to protect their interests. If new centers of capitalism were to develop beyond a certain point, they needed states of their own to fight for their interests. So it was that French mercantile interests looked to the absolutist state that had grown out of feudalism to fight for its interests in a war for global influence with Britain, that land owners and traders in the North American colonies began to resent the dictates of the British state and create state structures of their own in opposition to it, and that sections of the middle class in Dublin and Belfast began to mutter about their own “right” to independence from Britain.

Those who looked to the creation of new national states to advance their interests could not wait hundreds of years for spontaneous economic and social developments to bring such states into being. The path forward was at least partially blocked by the existing capitalist nation states, particularly Britain, on the one hand, and by the old absolutist, pre-capitalist states on the other. Conscious revolutionary action was required if they were ever to emulate, let alone out-compete, British capitalism. And revolutionary action had to be motivated by an ideology that laid out, in however confused a way, the key points about the sort of state they wanted.

The French revolutionaries went furthest in this direction, with their proclamation of “*the French republic, one and indivisible*”. They forcibly replaced the old administrative divisions, with their plethora of differing taxes and privileges, by a centralized structure run through government appointed prefects. They imposed a single standard of citizenship, demanding the allegiance of everyone, an allegiance which found expression in the universal conscription of young males to fight for “*the*

nation in arms". They established a single national educational system, and used it to propagate a single language in place of the regional dialects of the southern half of France, the Breton of the west and the Germanic tongue of the northern frontiers.

Theirs became the model of what the national state should be for all those who sought to make the breakthrough to a "*modern*", capitalist development of society elsewhere in the world. Soon young revolutionaries were striving to copy it in Ireland, Latin America, Greece, Italy, Germany, Poland, Hungary and Spain. By the beginning of the 20th century there were carbon copy nationalisms in the Czech speaking regions of Austro-Hungary, the Balkans, Asiatic Turkey, China, India, the Ukraine and the Russian Caucasus. The next half century saw their spread through the empires of Britain and France, which between them controlled all of Africa and most of South Asia and the Middle East.

Nation, Language and Religion

The new nations were conscious products, in a way that the earlier ones had not been. There were Italian and German, Greek and Czech, Indian and Indonesian national movements long before the nation states themselves were established, whereas in the earlier English, American and French cases the idea of nationality had only taken hold as, or even after, the national state was coming into being. However, life was usually much harder for the creators of the new nations than for their predecessors. Not only did they often encounter vicious persecution from those in charge of the states they wanted to replace or reform, but the raw material – the people – from which they wished to construct a nation, was far from ready.

Centuries of long drawn out capitalist development had created in north west Europe – and in its transplant in North America – fairly large geographic regions in which single languages predominated: in most of England and part of Scotland, in much of northern France, even in Germany as a result of Luther's success in establishing a church which used a single local dialect. By contrast, in southern and eastern Europe, in Asia and Africa, the late arrival of capitalism meant the task of linguistic homogenization had hardly begun.

It was still quite usual to find the same picture as in medieval Europe: a state administration using one language, a church another, local landlords a third, the peasantry a fourth and often the inhabitants of the towns a fifth. Thus in any particular part of the Balkans, the religious language would be a dead language – Latin, Old Church Slavonic, archaic Greek or classical Arabic. The language of administration would be German, Hungarian, Turkish or Greek. The language of the peasantry would be a Slav or occasionally a Romance or Hungarian dialect, and the language of the towns quite likely a German dialect. What is more, the language of the peasantry would vary from village to village, or sometimes from household to household within the same village.

This did not lead to any great problems so long as pre-capitalist forms of production dominated. The peasants would know enough of the languages of administration and of the towns to cope in their limited number of transactions with them and indeed would often switch from one language or dialect to another without difficulty as the occasion demanded. They might not have been able to achieve examination level standards of competence – particularly written competence – in any of them, but they could cope very well without doing so.

But this plethora of languages and dialects was a headache for the modernizing nationalists, with their aim of achieving linguistic homogeneity not only in the spoken language, but also in the written forms required for the advance of the market and the modern state. The only way they could achieve their goal was to pick on one or other spoken idiom and proclaim this was the “national” language that everyone had to learn, not merely to speak, but to read and write.

The choice was not always completely arbitrary. Capitalist development, however slow, usually meant there were sections of the peasantry already in continuous contact with part of the urban population, with a dialect that was already more influential than others. So for instance in early 19th century Prague there was already a growing Czech speaking petty bourgeoisie that could act as the link with the peasantry that the nationalists wanted. But there was often a powerful, arbitrary element to it – as when Italian nationalists finally opted for the Tuscan dialect [9] (spoken by only 2.5 percent of the population of the peninsular) as the “national language”, or when the first Indian nationalists decided the regional dialect of Delhi, Hindustani, could be the national language once it was purged of all words of Persian origin, or when South Slav nationalists residing in Vienna rejected the idea of using Old Church Slavonic as the national language and instead gave the accolade to the Stokavian dialect (spoken by sections of both Croats and Serbs, but not by all of either) which they baptized “Serbo-Croat”. [10]

But deciding what was the national language was only the beginning of the problem. The mass of people then had to be persuaded to accept it. Here again, things were much harder with most late arriving, more economically backward nations than with their predecessors. For where capitalist

development was successful, providing markets for peasants and jobs for growing urban populations, it was not that difficult to get people to put up with the discomforts of not being fluent in the official language. In France most of the non-French speaking minorities embraced the revolution and the nation because it seemed to offer them a better life. In the US generation after generation of non-English speaking immigrants treasured their new nationality, even if they could not speak its language very well. By contrast, in Spain Catalans resented having to speak the language of economically more backward Castille and Andalusia, in Romania Hungarians and Saxons insisted on using their own languages, in Ireland a mass of inducements by the state could not stop the people of the far west abandoning their native Gaelic for the economically much more useful English, and in India the peoples of the south simply refused to accept the Hindi of the north.

The late-coming nationalists had similar problems when it came to the question of religion. The model for nationalists was strongly secularist. For religion was a product of the pre-capitalist societies they were trying to transform. It usually encouraged them to take on obligations that cut right across the new state boundaries they were trying to establish. And it often encouraged divisions among the people they were trying to win to a sense of a single national identity. So 19th century South Slav nationalists wanted the unity of Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim; Indian nationalists of Hindu and Muslim; Irish nationalists of Catholic and Protestant; Arab nationalists of Muslim and Christian.

But the temptation was always to compromise with religion so as to find a base among a mass of peasants who were still fairly remote from the market and the modernizing schemes that went with it, and who found the

“national language” incomprehensible. So the leaders of the Irish national movements always combined talk of secularism with attempts to win at least limited support from the Catholic Church, the Indian National Congress’s most popular figure, Gandhi, sought to compromise with peasant prejudice by adopting the garb of a Hindu saint, and the founder of the Arab nationalist Ba’ath party, Afleck, converted to Islam towards the end of his life.

These problems over language and compromises with religion had very important effects. The founder nationalists did not usually identify with one ethnic group against another, and did not embrace what today is euphemistically called “*ethnic cleansing*”. Their aim was to unify the population of a particular region so as to enable them to “*modernize*” it in a capitalist sense. They were ready if necessary to force a certain language and culture on people, and if necessary to use the full power of the state against those who resisted – as the French Revolution did in Brittany, or the combined forces of the English and Scottish bourgeoisies did in the Highlands. But their aim remained to unite the whole population, not to use one section to eradicate another.

However, they began to move away from this aim every time they picked on one minority dialect as *the* national language or identified with one particular religion. The national movement became based in one part of the population, not the rest. And it was very easy to make a virtue of necessity – to see the German speakers as excluding themselves from the Czech nation, the Protestants from the Irish nation, the Muslims from the Indian nation, the Catholics and Muslims from the Serbian nation.

The Class Base of Nationalism

Nationalism grew up as part of the ideology of capitalist development. The idea of the nation is inseparable from a range of other ideas associated with the bourgeois revolution. If nationalism has conquered the globe, with every individual anywhere in the world today slotted into one national identity or another, it is because capitalism has conquered the globe.

This does not mean, however, that the pioneers of nationalism have necessarily been capitalists themselves. There have been such cases. For instance, the first nationalist party in Catalonia, the *liga*, was the party of the Catalan capitalists. [11] More commonly, however, the promoters of new nationalisms have come from sections of the middle class frustrated by the stagnation and backwardness of the society in which they have found themselves. They have seen the only way out as being to turn their country of origin into a “nation” like every other nation, and using that to encourage economic advance. Since every other nation is capitalist, this involves, in reality, encouraging capitalist development, however much it is dressed up in talk of the virtues of the traditional way of life: the Celtic twilight may have inspired Irish nationalists of a century ago, but the programme of the founder of Sinn Féin, Arthur Griffiths, was to create “*a Gaelic Manchester*” [12]; Mahatma Gandhi may have preached the virtues of homespun cloth, but his Congress was financed by the big Indian capitalists and the building up of heavy industry was central to its economic programme; Nkrumah of Ghana may have praised African “communalism”, but on gaining control of state power he set about trying to build modern industry. [13]

The nationalists were more often middle class intellectuals – poets, playwrights, teachers, lawyers – than big capitalists. But their programme depended on the encouragement of capitalism, even if this meant turning some of their own number into state capitalists by the establishment of new nationalized industries. Before being able to do any of these things, the nationalists had to find a base of support in society at large.

The middle class itself, or, rather, certain section of the middle class, was usually an important part of the base. The backwardness of society was reflected in the feebleness of career opportunities for the literate middle class, especially when state power was in the hands of a pre-capitalist ruling class or some already existing foreign nation state. Then an obvious way for the middle classes to improve their chances in life was to fight for their own right to work in the state machine – using their own language if this was a problem – and to go even further and fight for a revolutionary reconstitution of the state machine under their own “national” control.

In a similar way the small shop keeping, trading and petty manufacturing bourgeoisie could rally behind the nationalist course. They did not have the ability to extract concessions from a pre-capitalist or foreign state machine which big capital sometimes had. The creation of a new national state would provide them with influence over political decisions and with the government contracts and protected markets that went with it.

Finally, the peasantry and the incipient working class were always possible allies for the national cause. They suffered from the general backwardness of society and faced continual humiliation and repression from those who ran the old state machine. Nationalist agitation could act as a

focus for a mass of discontents and stir the lower classes into action.

But there was always a problem for the nationalist in relying on the workers and peasants. Their discontent was not merely with pre-capitalist forms of exploitation or the behavior of the old state; it was also with the new, rising forms of capitalism, often presided over by the new “*national capitalists*”, and with the privileges of the “*national middle class*”. A movement of workers and peasants which began with hostility to the old rulers and exploiters could all too easily spill over into confrontation with the new, home born variety. This could destroy all the plans of the nationalist leaders. That is why the history of nationalist movements often involves spells of agitation among workers, but these spells have always been brought to an end with a sharp turn to placate “*national*” propertied interests, even if the price of doing so is to derail the national movement itself. Hence the “betrayals” of Germany in 1848-9, Ireland in 1921-2 or China in 1925-7.

The workers movement may be a temporary ally for the nationalists. But it cannot constitute a firm and reliable base for their schemes. For this they have to look to sections of the bourgeoisie or petty bourgeoisie.

Reactionary Nationalist Movements

The classic nationalist movements were part of the bourgeois revolution which swept Europe and the Americas in the 18th and 19th centuries. Later nationalist movements were often associated with the struggle of colonial peoples to throw off imperialist rule. To this extent they involved a challenge to existing oppressive state structures – even if they intended only to replace them with new oppressive state structures.

But from very early on movements arose which seemed to have certain “national” characteristics, but which served to protect, not undermine, the old structures. One such movement was that of Highlanders who joined the reactionary risings of the Stuart pretenders to the British throne in 1714 and 1746 in the belief that this would protect them against the new, bourgeois organization of society being imposed by the Lowlanders and the English. Another was the *chouan* movement in Brittany in the 1790s, with priests and royalists manipulating the fears of Breton peasants about threats to their traditional way of life so as to ignite a counter-revolutionary revolt. A third was the Carlist movements of northern Spain in the 1830s and 1872, with Basque and Navarese peasants expressing resentment at the loss of traditional rights by fighting under the leadership of the most reactionary forces (their first demand was the restoration of the Inquisition!).

In the same league, although with a rather different social base, was the Orange Order in Ireland – consciously established by the British state around the slogan of Protestant supremacy to help smash the Irish national movement in the late 1790s, and revived for the same purpose in 1832, 1848, 1884, 1912 and 1920-1. These movements did not proclaim themselves to be national, although some present day nationalists have claimed them as precursors. But a movement which emerged during the revolutions of 1848 did present itself as part of the more general nationalist upsurge. This was the movement of the Slavs living within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Its leaders aimed to create new national entities for the Czechs, the Ruthenes (western Ukrainians) and the South Slavs (the common name for Serbs, Croats and Slovenians). But with the partial exception of the Bohemian Czechs, these peoples were still in their overwhelming majority economically backward peasants, speaking mutually incomprehensible

dialects, with the idea of any common national ties restricted to a handful of urban intellectuals. The mass of peasants could not be drawn into battle to replace the old traditions of economic backwardness and local parochialism by some new model of national unity. But some of them could be persuaded to play the role of the Bretons and the Basques – to fight in defense of the old feudal order against the challenge to it from the German and Hungarian nationalists. So in 1848 they fell in behind the counter-revolution and helped the Habsburg monarchy to crush the revolution in Vienna. As Marx wrote at the time, “In Vienna we have a whole swarm of nationalities which imagined the counter-revolution will bring them emancipation”. [14] No wonder, “in those months all of Europe’s democracy came to hate the small Slavic nations ...” [15]

As “*nationhood*” became the established, generally recognized symbol of legitimacy in an increasingly bourgeoisified world, so not only movements fight the old order but those striving to reinforce it inscribed “*national*” slogans on their banners. By the second half of the 19th century even the dynastic empires which had previously been the bitterest opponents of national movements began to redefine themselves in nationalist terms. The Prussian monarchy took over the German nationalist ideology. The Habsburg monarchy split its domains into two halves, in one of which Hungarian replaced Latin as the official language, in the other, German. The “Tsar of all the Russia’s” – whose court had spoken French and relied to a considerable extent on German speaking administrators – for the first time began to encourage a Great Russian nationalism, which regarded other ethnic groups as innately inferior. “*It was not until Alexander III (1881-94) that Russification became official policy.*” [16]

The absolutist monarchies, which had established themselves in the late middle ages by using the urban burghers as a counterweight to the feudal lords, were now trying to prolong their life by renegotiating terms with sections of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie. The monarchy would give privileges to traders, bankers, manufacturers, gentry and literate intelligentsia which spoke one language, if they would ally with it against its enemies – inducing those sections of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie who spoke other languages.

But it was not only the old absolutist monarchies who adopted the policy of pushing one nationalism and oppressing others. So did the already capitalist states which were dividing the whole of Africa and most of Asia between them. The second half of the 19th century saw a new celebration of “British” nationalism, with the establishment, for the first time, of a state run educational system that indoctrinated children in the glories of “national” history, the writing of nationalist popular novels, plays, poetry and songs by literary admirers of the empire and the conscious invention of traditions aimed at encouraging popular identification with the monarchy. For the middle classes the identification with “nation” and empire was not to be simply ideological but contained crude material incentives: the bureaucracy that administered the empire was English speaking, and the career structures in it were open to the middle class English or Scots in a way in which they were not to the Irish Catholic or the Australian, still less the Indian or African.

The use of reactionary nationalism was combined with the deliberate exploitation of linguistic and religious differences to weaken movements against British rule in the colonies. Just as the Orange slogans of Protestant ascendancy had been used with effect in Ireland, in India

the British sought to play the Muslim card against the incipient national movement by splitting Bengal along religious lines in the early 1900s, in Palestine they encouraged European Jewish immigration at the end of the First World War to undercut the power of Arab resistance to British rule. In Cyprus they recruited the police force mainly from the Turkish speaking minority, and in Ceylon (present day Sri Lanka) from a section of the Tamil speakers.

Contradictory Nationalisms and Communalism

There was one further twist to the spread of the national ideal across the whole world from the late 19th century onwards. Rival nationalities were soon battling for the same territory.

The model of the early nationalists assumed they would easily be able to absorb minorities into their new national states. And so it was with many of the first national states: the English did succeed in getting the Scots to identify with “Britain” and the empire, the French did absorb the southerners who spoke the Occitanian dialect and even gained the support of many German speaking Alsacians, the German empire did win the allegiance of Saxony, Thuringia, Hanover, Hamburg and Bremen (although separatist currents persisted in Bavaria and the Rhineland).

But things were very different with many of the later developing nationalisms. As we have seen, the late arrival of capitalism meant there was rarely one predominant language or dialect among the people who were supposed to make up the new nation. The nationalists might be able to gain support from one section of the population by declaring its language the new national tongue – but only by antagonizing other groups.

Even where a degree of capitalist development did take off, it did not always make things easier. For it drew new sections of the peasantry, not fluent in the national tongue, into market relationships and created a new petty bourgeoisie from among them. Intellectuals from this milieu began to codify peasant dialects into new tongues, to fight for official status for them and eventually for nation states based on them. Thus, as a continual influx of former peasants transformed Prague from a mainly German speaking city into a mainly Czech speaking one, so the demand grew to establish a new Czech state out of the Austrian provinces of Bohemia and Moravia. But at least by the late 19th century there was a clear Czech speaking majority in Prague. In many major east European, Balkan and Caucasian towns all the competing linguistic groups grew, without any one necessarily predominating: Hungarian and Romanian speakers in Transylvania; Italian and Slovene speakers in Trieste; German and Polish speakers in Silesia; Lithuanian, Polish and Yiddish speakers in Vilnius; Ukrainian, Yiddish and Polish speakers in the western Ukraine; Turkish, Greek and Armenian speakers in Istanbul; Greek and Slav speakers in Macedonia; Russian, Armenian and Turkish speakers in Baku.

The capitalist world was a world organized into linguistic nation states, and so, as each ethnic group was drawn into this world, its petty bourgeoisie wanted its own language and its own state. But it had arrived too late on the scene to get this through the long drawn out, spontaneous processes that had brought linguistic homogeneity to England, Holland, France or Germany. The different nationalisms could only achieve their goals if they waged bloody wars against each other as well as – or sometimes instead of – against the old absolutisms.

What this meant was shown in all its horror with the Second Balkan War of 1913, as the rival national states of Romania, Serbia and Greece ganged up against Bulgaria and sliced Macedonia in two, causing some half a million deaths. It was shown again in 1915 when, in an effort to draw behind them the Turkish and Kurdish speaking populations of the old Ottoman Empire, nationalist “Young Turk” officers organized the extermination of the great majority of the empire’s Armenian speakers; in 1918-19 when rival Azer and Armenian nationalist groups murdered each other in Baku; in 1921-2 when the war between Turkey and Greece led to each army expelling hundreds of thousands of civilians of the other nationality. In Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the Caucasus the point had been reached where nationalism came to mean “ethnic cleansing” – pogroms, forced expulsions and even extermination camps.

Classical Marxism and the National Question

Marx and Engels were part of the revolutionary movement of the 1840s. They began their political life on its extreme liberal democratic wing, but came to realize very quickly that human emancipation could only be achieved by a movement that went further and looked to working class revolution. Such a revolution would end “national differences and antagonisms among peoples”:

In proportion as the exploitation of one individual by another is put an end to, the exploitation of one nation by another will also be put an end to. In proportion as the antagonism between classes within the nation vanishes, the hostility of one nation to another will come to an end. [\[17\]](#)

This did not mean, however, that they abstained from the struggle of bourgeois democratic forces against absolutism.

They threw themselves into the revolutionary upheaval of 1848-9, criticizing from the left the attempts of the bourgeois democrats to conciliate the old order. A key role in the upheaval was played by the four major national movements: the struggles to unite Germany and Italy as bourgeois national states in place of the various monarchies that divided them, the struggle to free Hungary from the Habsburg dynasty based in Vienna, and the struggle to free Poland from Tsarism, the gendarme of reaction right across Europe. A success for any one of these movements was, in the context of 1848-9, a gain for the revolution as a whole, and a defeat for them was a victory for the counter-revolution. Marx and Engels therefore looked to revolutionary war to establish new national states in Germany, Hungary, Italy and Poland, and to inflict a final defeat on the last remnants of feudalism in Europe. Among the enemies who would have to be fought in this war were those Slav politicians in the Austro-Hungarian Empire who used the phraseology of nationalism to justify their support for absolutism. Their defeat would be part of the process of clearing the ground for the full development of bourgeois democracy and so for the struggle of the working class against the system.

Marx and Engels did not require any particularly sophisticated analysis of nationalism to see what needed to be done in such a situation. And their time was absorbed, remember, not only in engaging in revolutionary agitation, but also in elaborating a completely new view of history and society. So Engels, in particular, simply took over the terminology of Hegel's philosophy of history and distinguished between different national movements on the basis of whether they represented "historic peoples" who had a long and dynamic history or "*non-historic peoples*" who were doomed to be marginalized by historical development. At this stage neither Marx nor Engels seem to

have grasped what a new historical phenomenon the nation was [18], how it differed from previous states or ethnic groupings, and how distant most of the movements they condemned were from sharing the characteristics of modern national movements. [19]

They began to shift their position on national movements in the 1860s, faced with a renewal of the agitation against British rule in Ireland. Previously they had opposed British repression in Ireland, but had looked to revolutionary change in Britain to bring it to an end. They now changed their views. Marx wrote to Engels:

I have done my best to bring about a demonstration of the English workers in favor of Fenianism ... I used to think the separation of Ireland from England was impossible. Now I think it is inevitable, although after separation there may come federation. [20]

What the Irish need is ... self government and independence from England.. Agrarian revolution.. .Protective tariffs against England. [21]

And to Kugelmann:

The English working class ... will never be able to do anything decisive here in England before they separate their attitude towards Ireland quite definitely from that of the ruling classes, and not only make common cause with the Irish, but even take the initiative in dissolving the Union established in 1801. And this must be done not out of sympathy with the Irish, but as a demand based on the interests of the English proletariat. If not the English proletariat will forever remain bound to the leading strings of the ruling classes, because they will be forced to make a common front with them against Ireland ... [22]

In his approach to the Irish issue, Marx was making a very important point: the nationalism of workers belonging to an

oppressor nation binds them to their rulers and only does harm to themselves, while the nationalism of an oppressed nation can lead them to fight back against those rulers. What is more, he was supporting the struggle of a nationality which could never be included in the list of “the great historic nations of Europe”. However, it was not until after Marx’s death that Engels began to present a new, historical materialist account of nations. An unfulfilled plan to rewrite *The Peasant War in Germany* – about popular unrest during the Reformation – led him to study the transformation of society at the end of the Middle Ages and to see material factors as giving rise to the beginnings of the nation state as a new historical phenomenon. He stressed that as the towns grew in prominence and allied with the monarchy against the rest of the feudal ruling class, “out of the confusions of people that characterized the early middle ages, there gradually developed the new nationalisms”. But this was in a manuscript that remained unpublished until 1935. [\[23\]](#)

Deeper historical materialist analysis of nationalism did not begin until the end of the 19th century, when new political developments suddenly made it an urgent issue.

The growth of the socialist movement in the German empire was followed by a similar growth in Austria (which then included the present day Czech lands of Bohemia and Moravia, and present day Slovenia), and many of the best known German language Marxists came from there: Otto Bauer and Rudolf Hilferding were Austrians, and Karl Kautsky a Czech. But just as the Austrian party was enjoying its first real successes in the 1890s it was plunged into bitter arguments by the growing nationalist agitation among Austria’s Slavs.

Otto Bauer tried to resolve the disputes by making a new analysis of nationalism. He argued that the nation is “a community of culture” or “a community of destiny”, which causes all those who belong to it to experience things differently to those who belong to a different nation. [24] The nation gives all its members certain character features in common, so that an English person and a German, making, for instance, the same journey would experience it differently. This diversity of culture meant that even when people spoke the same language, as with the Danes and Norwegians or the Serbs and Croats, they remained separate nations. [25] “It is the diversity of culture which rigorously separates nations, despite the mixing of blood.” [26]

Bauer argued that national culture went through three historic stages. It began with the period of primitive communism, when “*all the compatriots are related as much by community of blood as by culture*”, then went through a period of class society, in which it was bound together by the culture of the ruling class, and finally would be “represented by the socialist society of the future”. [27] So the “nation” can be seen in terms of the development of the productive forces, as constituting “*what is historical in us*” [28], as a “*condensation of history*”. [29]

He went on to attack, in the most forthright terms, those who did not see the value of the nation and instead opted for “*proletarian cosmopolitanism*”, “*the most primitive taking of position by the working class as against the national strife of the bourgeois world*”, for instance talking of “*Czech and German speaking comrades*” rather than “*Czech and German comrades*”. They were falling into the trap of “rationalist, enlightenment” thinking, of “*an atomistic-individualistic conception of society*” which failed to see that “the individual man is himself a product of the nation”.

Bauer's conclusion was that socialists should embrace the idea of nation as an important social and historical factor in human existence, and tell the different nationalities that only under socialism would national culture reach its full development. "*Socialism announces to all nations the realization of their aspiration to political unity and freedom. It does the same for the German nation.*" [30] Such support for cultural nationalism, he argued, would enable socialists to prevent the fragmentation of the large states which were, in his view, necessary for economic development.

The Austrian socialists drew up an elaborate programme, based in part upon Bauer's views [31], which promised all the different peoples of the Austro-Hungarian Empire their own national institutions within the existing imperial state structure. A national grouping in any particular locality would be given autonomy over educational and cultural affairs, and then would federate with groupings in other localities so as to form a single "*autonomous*" structure right across the empire. There would be no official language, although "whether a common language is required, a federal parliament can decide". The whole structure was intended to encourage "*the nurturing and development of the national peculiarities of all the peoples of Austria*". [32]

The practical outcome of such a scheme was to encourage the members of the socialist movement to make continual concessions to those who stressed cultural differences within the working class, until first the socialist party and then the unions split into different national organizations – something which must have been rather gratifying to those employers, whether German or Czech speaking, who exploited linguistically mixed workforces.

The first theoretical onslaught against Bauer's position was led by Karl Kautsky. He had already begun to deepen the materialist analysis of the origins of modern nationality in the late 1880s, and went on to write numerous articles dealing in one way or another with the same issue. These were the starting point for other Marxists like Lenin. As George Haupt has noted, "Kautsky, who formulated theories, opened parentheses and made distinctions, without engaging in systematisation, remained the indispensable reference point for a long time". [33] His disagreement with Bauer was "*the confrontation between two conceptions of nations, to be labelled by Lenin the 'psychological-cultural' and the 'historical-economic'.*" [34]

Kautsky recognised the virtual impossibility of defining what a nation is:

"*Nation*" is a social formation difficult to apprehend, a product of social development, that rules have never been able to transform into a precisely defined social organism. Nationality is a social relation that transforms itself ceaselessly, which has a different signification in different conditions ... [35]

But he nevertheless insisted it could be understood in relation to economic development. "*The concentration and separation of societies into nation states was one of the most powerful levers of economic development*". [36] This alone, he argued, explained why German speakers in, say, northern Bohemia regarded themselves as part of the German nation, while those in Switzerland did not. [37] Because of its role in economic development, "The classical form of the modern state is the nation state. But classical forms exist in general only as a tendency. It is rare that they are developed in a perfectly typical fashion". [38] What is more:

To the extent that economic antagonisms deepen, each economic region tries to develop its own urban and rural industry, but can do this less and less without hurting the industry of its neighbours. The different Austrian regions tend to separate, and the “reconciliation” of nations becomes more difficult. [39]

He criticized Bauer for downplaying the importance of language. There was, he said, only one example of a nation that included more than one “*linguistic community*”, the Swiss. As for the cases where different nationalities shared the same language – he mentions the English and the Irish, the Danes and Norwegians, the Serbs and Croats – “this does not prove that each national community is a linguistic community it simply proves that sometimes a linguistic community can comprise two nations, that linguistic community, is not the sole distinctive sign of a nation”. [40] In fact, “*the powerful role of language in social life can make us understand a good part of the force of national sentiment*”. [41]

He went on to ascribe the rise of the national state to a series of factors. First, the bourgeoisie’s desire to provide itself with a market for its own commodities, free from the hindrance of feudal territorial divisions or from interference by old state structures. Second, the growing importance of administration in modern society, which gives unprecedented importance to the language question: “*The bureaucracy is a structure that finds it difficult to function without a single language*”. Third, the way in which the “*commercialization of society*” laid the ground for linguistic unification by increasing the frequency of intercourse between people in different localities and produced a more uniform language: “*uniformisation rarely succeeded just through the channel of education, but through the development of commercial relations at the interior of the state*”. [42]

It was this, finally, which explained the rise of rival nationalities within a single state. Where the economic forces were not powerful enough to get the speakers of different tongues to learn the national language, government attempts to enforce uniformity increased the divisions between different linguistic groups. Some gained material advantages from the official status given to their language: it gave them preferential chances of promotion into and up the ranks of the state bureaucracy. But others suffered and tended to turn to national identities of their own in opposition to the official one:

When, in professional life or in front of a tribunal, the dominant language was spoken, the members of the other nations were at a disadvantage ... Promotion of the children of artisans and peasants into the bureaucracy was made very difficult for nations which did not speak the official language. [43]

Kautsky thus provided an account of the rise of rival nationalisms that was more historical and more materialist than Bauer's – which is perhaps why Bauer receives the praise today from those who damn Marxism for being “reductionist” and not taking account of “ethnicity” and “gender”. [44] But there was an unresolved problem with Kautsky's own analysis. He saw capitalist economic development as leading to a withering away of national struggles, despite his insights into how minority groups could turn to new nationalisms. In his early writings he argued that capitalist development doomed the Czech nation to disappear. And even after he had dropped this view he still saw national conflicts as dying away as capitalist commerce became increasingly international:

As [social] intercourse grows with economic development, so the circle of people using the same language must grow as well. From this arises the tendency of unified languages to expand, to swallow

up other nations, which lose their language and adopt the language of the dominant nation or a mixture ...

The joining of nations to the international cultural community will be reflected in the growth of universal languages among merchants and educated people ... [\[45\]](#)

There was an important insight here which led him to denounce Bauer for encouraging national antagonisms among socialists:

Never was a purely national culture less possible. Therefore it strikes us as very strange when people talk always of only a national culture, and when the goal of socialism is considered to be the endowing of the masses with national culture ... When socialist society provides the masses with an education, it also gives them the ability to speak several languages, the universal languages, and therefore to take part in the entire international civilization and not only in the separate culture of a certain linguistic community. [\[46\]](#)

But the insight was buried within a wider analysis which vastly underrated the way in which capitalism provokes national antagonism at the same time as creating the possibilities of overcoming it.

Luxemburg and Lenin

Rosa Luxemburg began from a different starting point to Bauer and Kautsky. She was trying to build a revolutionary party in Poland, where the socialist movement split in the 1890s between those – like the future Polish dictator Pilsudski – who were moving increasingly in a nationalist direction and those who stood resolutely for internationalism. Yet when her party attended the congress of the International in the 1890s and of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party in 1903, it found the majority of

delegates embracing the right of Poland to independence in a way which seemed to her to give solace to her nationalist opponents at home. Right up to her death in 1918 she was to argue vehemently against any “right” of nations to self determination and against any involvement of socialists in national uprisings.

She backed up this position with arguments that combined elements of Kautsky’s view with elements of Bauer’s. She located the origins of nationalism squarely in economics – in the economic needs of this or that ruling class. Her interpretation of Kautsky’s account of the rise of nationalism in countries like Germany and Italy puts all the stress on the role of the big bourgeoisie. [47] She argues that its desire for domestic markets led it to promote the national movement, and gave this a realistic character. She then goes on to use this “*economistic*” analysis to tear late 19th and early 20th century Polish nationalism apart:

The material base of Polish national aspirations (in the first half of the 19th century) was determined not as in central Europe by modern capitalist development, but on the contrary by the nobility’s idea of its social standing, rooted in the natural feudal economy.

The national movements in Poland vanished with these feudal relations, whereas the bourgeoisie, as the historical spokesman of capitalist development, was with us, from the beginning, a clearly anti-national factor. This was due, not only to the specific origin of the 19th century bourgeoisie, alien and heterogeneous, a product of colonization, an alien body transplanted on to Polish soil. Also decisive was the fact that Polish industry was from its beginning an export industry ... Export to Russia ... became the basis for the existence of and development of Polish capitalism ... and the basis of the Polish bourgeoisie. As a consequence, our bourgeoisie showed political leanings ... towards Russia ... The class rule of the bourgeoisie in Poland not only did not demand the creation of a

united nation state, but, on the contrary, it arose on the foundations of the conquest and division of Poland. The idea of unification and national independence did not draw its vital juices from capitalism: on the contrary, as capitalism developed this idea became historically outlived ... In Poland there arose an opposition between the national idea and the bourgeois development, which gave the former not only a Utopian but also a reactionary character. [48]

For her, if the bourgeoisie did not want a nation state somewhere, since that state was part of capitalist development, the idea was both doomed and reactionary.

Her argument arose out of the Polish context. But she extended it further. She argued, correctly, that Kautsky was wrong to see the needs of capitalism for international trade leading to a peaceful growing together of national states. Instead, she insisted, there would be increasing conflict between states, and these states would increasingly not be states with a homogeneous national population, but rather states which forcibly annexed whole peoples against their will:

Historical development ... lies ... not in the tendency toward the idea of a “national state” but rather in the deadly struggle among nations, in the tendency to create great capitalist states.. .The form that best serves the interests of exploitation in the contemporary world is not the “national” state as Kautsky thinks, but a state bent on conquest. When we compare the different states from the point of view of the degree to which they approach this ideal.. .we look to the British and German states as models, for they are based on national oppression in Europe and the world at large – and to the United States, a state which keeps in its bosom like a gaping wound the oppression of the Negro people and seeks to conquer the Asiatic people.

This, she concluded, destroyed any possibility of a new, viable national movement emerging:

The development of world powers, a characteristic feature of our times growing in importance along with the progress of capitalism, from the very outset condemns all small nations to political impotence ... “Self determination”, the independent existence of smaller and petty nations, is an illusion, and will become even more so ... Can one speak with any seriousness of the “self-determination” of peoples which are formally independent, such as the Montenegrins, Bulgarians, Romanians, the Serbs, the Greeks ... ? From this point of view, the idea of “insuring all the nations the possibility of self determination is the equivalent of reverting from great capitalist development to the small medieval states, far earlier than the 15th and 16th centuries. [49]

The characteristic feature of this part of her argument is the way in which she moves from a brilliant, dialectical account of the economic and military trends in capitalism to a completely mechanical view of the political consequences – big capital does not want national struggles and national insurrections, therefore these count for nothing.

This did not mean that her position was one of simple opposition to nationalism. For she combined her ultra-Kautskyite analysis of the roots of the nation state with a Bauerite attitude to cultural nationalism. She praised the Austrian party’s Brno programme, with its scheme to divide the population into autonomous national groupings. She referred to “national sentiments” as among “the higher forms of psychic phenomena”, and foresaw the survival of “*Polish national identity*” as socialism led to “*the opening up of new vistas for the deliverance of Polish national culture*”. [50] She claimed that “*the cause of nationalism in Poland is not alien to the working class – nor can it be*”, on the grounds that “*the working class cannot be indifferent to the most intolerable barbaric oppression, directed as it is against the intellectual and cultural heritage of society*”. [51] She believed, “*The proletariat can and must*

fight for the defense of national identity as a cultural legacy, that has its own right to exist and flourish”, but the “national identity cannot be defended by national separatism”. [52]

By far the most theoretically sophisticated of the classic Marxist theorists of nationalism was Lenin. [53] The analysis of the new nationalisms being thrown up by the continued development of capitalism was not, for him, some academic exercise. The Russian Empire was an even more ethnically mixed state than Austro-Hungary and it was a much more explosive mixture. The revolution of 1905 was to be as much a revolution of the national minorities as of the workers, the peasants and the liberal bourgeoisie. If his party got the national question wrong its whole revolutionary strategy would be in tatters. This led him to a sharp conflict with the positions of both Bauer and Rosa Luxemburg.

Lenin’s analysis of the rise of nations is based on Kautsky’s materialist interpretation. Writing early in 1914, Lenin argues:

Throughout the world, the period of the final victory of feudalism over capitalism has been linked up with national movements. For the complete victory of commodity production, the bourgeoisie must capture the home market, and there must be politically unified territories whose population speak a single language, with all the obstacles to the development of that language and its consolidation in literature eliminated. Therein is the economic foundation of national movements. Language is the most important means of human intercourse. Unity and unimpeded development of language are the most important conditions for genuinely free and extensive commerce on a scale commensurate with modern capitalism, for a free and broad grouping of the population in all its various classes as, lastly, for the establishment of a close connection between the

market and each and every proprietor, big or little, and between seller and buyer.

Therefore the tendency of every national movement is towards the formation of national states, under which these requirements of modern capitalism are best satisfied ... Therefore, for the whole of Western Europe, nay, for the entire civilized world, the national state is *typical* and normal for the capitalist period. [54]

The spread of capitalist relations internationally would mean the throwing up of more and more national movements:

The greater part of Asia ... consists either of colonies of the Great Powers or of states that are extremely dependent and oppressed as nations. But does this shake the undoubted fact that in Asia itself the conditions for the most complete development of commodity production and the speediest growth of capitalism have been created in Japan, i.e. only in an independent national state? ... It remains an undoubted fact that capitalism, having awakened Asia, has called forth national movements everywhere in that continent too; the tendency of these movements is towards the creation of national states in Asia; that it is these states that ensure the best conditions for the development of capitalism ...

The national state is the rule and the norm of capitalism ... From the standpoint of national relations the best conditions for the development of capitalism are created by the national state. This does not mean, of course, that such a state, which is based on bourgeois relations, can eliminate the exploitation and oppression of nations. It only means that Marxists cannot lose sight of the powerful economic factors that give rise to the urge to create national states.

By 1916 he was developing the analysis, to attack those who, in the manner of Rosa Luxemburg [55], used the argument about the connection between the development of capitalism and the growth of the national state to draw the

conclusion that national demands were “*Utopian*” and “*reactionary*” once the most advanced capitalisms began to spread beyond their old national boundaries. This, he said, was to fall into “imperialist economism”, to try to reduce politics to a direct mechanical product of economics. Economism, he said, is the argument: “capitalism is victorious, therefore political questions are a waste of time”, the new theory was that “imperialism is victorious, therefore political questions are a waste of time. Such an apolitical theory is extremely harmful to Marxism”.

What is more, he no longer maintained the old, Kautskyist view that the proponents of national capitalist development had to be the capitalists. He noted that the Irish uprising of 1916 had involved “street fighting conducted by a section of the urban petty bourgeoisie and a section of the workers ...” He drew the conclusion that:

To imagine that social revolution is conceivable without revolts by small nations in the colonies and in Europe, without revolutionary outbursts by sections of the petty bourgeoisie with all its prejudices, without a movement of the politically non-conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against oppression by the landowners, the church and the monarchy, against national oppression, etc. – to imagine all this is to repudiate social revolution.

He drew sharp practical conclusions from his analysis. He defended the slogan of the right of self determination against Rosa Luxemburg and those with similar views, like Karl Radek and Nicolai Bukharin. And he rejected the Bauerite programme of “cultural national autonomy”.

There were two components to his defence of the self determination slogan. The first was concerned with the political consciousness of workers having the same nationality as those who ran the oppressing state:

If, in our political agitation, we fail to advance and advocate the right to secession, we shall play into the hands, not only of the bourgeoisie, but also of the feudal landlords and the absolutism of the oppressor nation ... When, in her anxiety not to “assist” the nationalist bourgeoisie in Poland, Rosa Luxemburg rejects the *right* to secession in the programme of the Marxists *in Russia*, she is in fact assisting the Great Russian Black Hundreds. She is in fact assisting the opportunist tolerance of the privileges of the Great Russians ... The interests of the freedom of the Great Russian population require a long struggle against such oppression ... The long centuries old history of the suppression of the movements of the oppressed nations and the systematic propaganda in favour of such suppression coming from the upper classes have created enormous obstacles to the cause of freedom of the Great Russian people itself, in the form of prejudice ... The Great Russian proletariat cannot achieve its own aims or clear the road to its freedom without systematically countering these prejudices ...

In Russia, the creation of an independent national state remains, for the time being, the privilege of the Great Russian nation alone. We, the Great Russian proletarians, who defend no privilege whatever, do not defend this privilege either. [\[56\]](#)

Against the claim that this encouraged a split in the workers’ movement along national lines, Lenin replied insistently that it did the opposite. So long as the workers in the oppressed nation could see no one defending their right to national equality among the people of the oppressing nation, they would fall for the nationalist demagogy of their own bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie. But if they found the workers’ party in the oppressing nation standing full square for the right to self determination, then they would see it as standing for their interests and turn their back on their own bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie. He used the example of Norway’s secession from Sweden in 1905 to back up his argument. Rosa Luxemburg had argued the secession was

reactionary, simply replacing one monarchy by another. Lenin acknowledged that the outcome was no great step forward for the workers. But he insisted that the attitude of the Swedish socialists, who had supported the Norwegian right to secede, ensured it was not a step backwards either:

The close alliance between the Norwegian and Swedish workers, their complete fraternal class solidarity, gained from the Swedish workers' recognition of the right of the Norwegians to secede. This convinced the Norwegian workers that the Swedish workers were not infected with Swedish nationalism, and that they placed fraternity with the Norwegian workers above the privileges of the Swedish bourgeoisie and aristocracy. [57]

By standing by the right of self determination, socialists in the oppressor country encouraged internationalism among both their own working class and that in the oppressed country: *"In reality, the recognition of the right of all nations to self determination implies the maximum of democracy and the minimum of nationalism"*. [58]

Lenin's first reason for advancing the slogan of the right to self determination was, then, to do with the *principle* of fighting against reactionary ideas within the working class of the oppressing country. This did not mean he ruled out exceptional situations. He admitted there were situations in which the slogan could be misused (as Marx claimed the Czechs and South Slavs had misused it in 1848):

There is not one of these (democratic) demands which could not serve and has not served, under certain circumstances, as an instrument in the hands of the bourgeoisie for deceiving the workers ... In practice the proletariat can retain its independence only by subordinating its struggle for all democratic demands to the revolutionary struggle for the overthrow of the bourgeoisie ... On the other hand Marx... put the fundamental principle of internationalism

and socialism in the foreground – no nation can be free if it oppresses other nations.

So Lenin's first argument was of a general, if not completely unconditional, character. But he combined with it a second argument, about the impact of the fight for self determination by the oppressed nation in certain concrete situations. This was an argument about revolutionary strategy and tactics rather than principle.

Supporting the right to self determination was not inevitably to favor the secession of a particular nation from the state. The socialists in the oppressor country could fight for the right for secession as a way of fighting against reactionary ideology, while the socialists in the oppressed country could argue for workers to oppose the practice of secession – just as the right of divorce leaves it open to the married couple to decide freely that they want to stay together:

This demand [for the right of self determination] is not the equivalent of demand for separation, fragmentation and the formation of small states ... The closer a democratic state system is to complete freedom to secede, the less frequent and the less ardent will the demand for separation be in practice ... [\[59\]](#)

But there were situations in which the fight of the national movement of an oppressed nation aided the international working class struggle, even if the national movement was under bourgeois or petty bourgeois leadership. For it weakened the dominant states and their ruling classes. This, Lenin believed, was the case with the Irish uprising of 1916 and with the risings among the various other peoples oppressed by the Tsarist regime and the Western imperialisms which he rightly expected the impact of world war to bring about. For this reason not only should socialists

in the oppressing countries support the right to self determination in these cases, but socialists in the oppressed countries should be part of the struggle for secession. *“If we do not want to betray socialism, we must support every revolt against our chief enemy, the bourgeoisie of the big states, provided it is not the revolt of a reactionary class”*. [60]

However, there were situations when socialists had to oppose nationalist agitation – as with the Polish national movement in the concrete circumstances of the First World War, when it became intricately connected with the struggle of German imperialism against British, French and Tsarist imperialism.

The bourgeoisie, which naturally assumes the leadership at the start of every national movement, says that support for all national aspirations is practical. However, the proletariat’s policy in the national question (as in all others) only supports the bourgeoisie in a certain direction, but never coincides with the bourgeoisie’s policy ...

The demand for a “yes” or “no” reply to the question of secession in the case of every nation may seem a very “practical” one. In reality it is absurd ... in practice it leads to subordinating the proletariat to the bourgeoisie’s policy.

The proletariat ... assesses any national demand, any national separation, from the angle of the workers’ class struggle. [61]

It is impossible to estimate beforehand all the possible relations between the bourgeois liberation movements of the oppressed nations and the proletarian emancipation movement of the oppressor nation. [62]

This point leads on to the other central feature of Lenin’s position on the national question – the one which has often been forgotten by supporters of national movements who

have quoted him at length in defence of the right to self determination. He condemns Otto Bauer's scheme for "national cultural autonomy" – and Rosa Luxemburg in so far as she is favorable to it – for making concessions to bourgeois nationalism.

The argument had first arisen in the Russian socialist movement at the time of the Second (effectively the foundation) Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party in 1903. At that point the socialist movement was still more advanced among the pockets of Jewish workers in the western Russian Empire than among the mass of other workers. Some of those involved in organizing the Jewish workers had founded an exclusively Jewish socialist party, the Bund, which argued that Jewish workers had to have their own separate organizations and concentrate on agitating for separate Jewish schools and cultural organizations. They were opposed, not just by Marxists of Russian nationality, like Lenin and Plekhanov, but by many of the best known Jewish Marxists such as Martov and Trotsky. Martov, for instance, argued that to accede to the Bund's demands would be to weaken socialist organization in every workplace and locality:

We cannot allow that any section of the party can represent the group, trade or national interests of any section of the proletariat. National differences play a subordinate role in relation to common class interests. What sort of organization would we have if, for instance, in one and the same workshop workers of different nationalities thought first and foremost of the representation of their national interests. [\[63\]](#)

Lenin extended these arguments into a challenge to the whole Bauerite approach, by making a sharp distinction between the fight against every element of discrimination

against any group on the basis of their language or culture, and exaltation of particular national cultures.

The opposition to discrimination against and oppression of those with particular national cultures meant that socialists had to fight for the children of every group to be taught in their own language, for courts and other tribunals to hear cases in that language, and to reject any idea of the dominant language being the “*official language*” to which others should bow down. “*Whoever does not recognize and champion the equality of nations and languages, and does not fight against all national oppression and inequality, is not a Marxist; he is not even a democrat.*” [64]

This meant that socialists should be for any measure that would guarantee equality. They should be for “*the hiring at state expense of special teachers of Hebrew, Jewish history and the like, of the provisions of state owned premises for lectures for Jewish, Armenian, or Romanian children, or even for the one Georgian child (in one area of St Petersburg)*”. [65]

At the same time socialists should not identify with *any* national culture, even that of the oppressed:

To throw off the feudal yoke, all national oppression and all privileges enjoyed by any particular nation or language, is the imperative duty of the proletariat as a democratic force, and is certainly in the interests of the proletarian struggle which is obscured and retarded by bickering on the national question. But to go beyond these strictly limited and definite historical limits in helping bourgeois nationalism means betraying the proletariat and siding with the bourgeoisie. There is a border line here which the Bundists and the Ukrainian nationalist-socialists often completely lose sight of.

Combat all national oppression? Yes, of course! Fight for any kind of national development, for “national culture” in general? Of course not!

The development of nationality in general is the principle of bourgeois nationalism; hence the exclusiveness of bourgeois nationalism, hence the endless national bickerings. The proletariat, far from undertaking to uphold the national development of every nation, on the contrary, warns the masses against such illusions, stands for the fullest development of capitalist intercourse and welcomes every kind of assimilation of nations, except that which is founded on force or privilege. [\[66\]](#)

There are two nations within every modern nation – we say to all nationalist socialists. There are two national cultures within every national culture ...

If the Ukrainian Marxist allows himself to be swayed by his quite legitimate and natural hatred of the Great Russian oppressors to such a degree that he transfers even a particle of this hatred ... to the proletarian culture and proletarian cause of the Great Russian workers, then such a Marxist will get bogged down in bourgeois nationalism.

The Great Russian and Ukrainian workers must work together ... towards a common or international culture of the proletarian movement, displaying absolute tolerance in question of language in which propaganda is conducted ... All advocacy of the segregation of the workers of one nation from those of another, all attacks upon Marxist “assimilation”, or attempts where the proletariat is concerned to counterpose one national culture as a whole to another allegedly integral national culture and so forth is bourgeois nationalism, against which it is necessary to wage a ruthless struggle. [\[67\]](#)

The slogan of working class democracy is not “national culture”, but the international culture of democracy and the world wide working class movement. [68]

The elements of democratic and socialist culture are present, if only in rudimentary form, in every national culture, since in every nation there are toiling masses whose conditions of life inevitably give rise to the ideology of democracy and socialism. But every nation also possesses a bourgeois culture (and most nations a reactionary and clerical culture as well) in the form not merely of “elements”, but of the *dominant* culture.

In advancing the slogan of the “international culture of democracy and of the world wide working class movement”, we take from each national culture only its democratic and socialist elements; we take them only and absolutely in opposition to the bourgeois culture and the bourgeois nationalism of each nation. [69]

Lenin pointed out that the socialist in an oppressor country had to be very careful how he or she saw the issue of “*assimilation*”:

If a social democrat from a great, oppressing, annexing nation, while advocating the amalgamation of nations in general, were for one moment to forget that “his” Nicholas II, “his” Wilhelm, “his” George, etc. also stands for amalgamation by means of annexation – such a social democrat would be a ridiculous doctrinaire in theory and an aider of imperialism in practice ...

It is our duty to teach the workers to be “indifferent” to national distinctions. .. But it must not be the indifference of the annexationists. [70]

It was precisely to hammer this point home that Lenin was so insistent on defending the right of self determination and secession. At the same time, however, he insisted, “a social democrat from a small nation must emphasise in his

agitation ... ‘voluntary integration’ of nations. He may, without failing in his duties as an internationalist, be in favor of both the political independence of his nation and its integration with the neighboring state of X, Y, Z etc. But he must in all cases fight against small nation narrow mindedness, seclusion and isolation ...” [71]

These considerations led Lenin to bitterly oppose talk of “*national cultural autonomy*”. He argued that separate school systems for each national group would split workers one from another:

On the hoards of joint stock companies we find capitalists of different nations sitting together in complete harmony. At factories workers of different nations work side by side. In any really serious and profound political issue sides are taken according to classes, not nations. Withdrawing school education and the like from state controls and placing it under the control of the nations is in effect to attempt to separate from economics, which unites the nations, the most highly ideological sphere of social life, the sphere in which “pure” national culture or the nationalist cultivation of clericalism and chauvinism has the freest play. [72]

Nationalism since the First World War

There can be little doubt that Lenin was right in his argument against Rosa Luxemburg and others that the development of capitalism was leading to a proliferation of new nationalisms.

Far from these being “*Utopian*”, nationalist movements contributed to the breakup of all the great empires. The Russian Revolution of 1917, like its precursor in 1905, involved the seizure of power by nationalist movements around its periphery as well as by workers and peasants at its centre. The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian war effort

in October 1918 led to rapid secession by the Czechs, the Romanians of Transylvania, the Croats and the Slovenes, leaving behind separate rump Hungarian and Austrian states. Even the victorious British Empire was shaken by a revolt in Ireland, which succeeded in gaining independence for three quarters of the country, by the first massive demonstrations in India and the first revolutionary upsurges in China. The weakening of the European colonial empires as a result of the Second World War was followed by independence for India, Pakistan, Burma and Ceylon, Indonesia and then, after a bloody war, North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, to be followed by Ghana, Nigeria, Malaysia, Kenya, Uganda, Morocco, Tunisia, most of French Africa, the Congo, Zambia, Malawi, and after further bloody wars, Algeria, Aden, the rest of Vietnam, Angola, Mozambique, Guinea and finally Zimbabwe. By this time virtually every member of the world's population would define themselves as a citizen of one or other of 194 national states [73], with the USSR remaining the only sizeable multinational empire. Just as market, commodity production and capital accumulation had conquered the whole world, so had the national state as the archetypical form of organized political power.

The formation of new nations did not always throw the old empires into convulsions: Britain finally abandoned India, Holland abandoned Indonesia and Belgium abandoned the Congo without being thrown into any great domestic crisis. But on occasions it did, with the wars in Indo China and Algeria shaking metropolitan France, the war in Vietnam throwing the US into a deep political crisis, and the wars in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea leading to political revolution in Portugal. To this extent too, Lenin was vindicated.

Indeed, the vindication often went further than he himself could ever have imagined. So much has the ideal of the national state become part of the ruling ideology throughout the world system that it was taken up by movements that differed in some important respects from those he had known.

The movements which fought against the old colonial empires were usually based in the administrative divisions created by those empires themselves. These divisions ignored whatever boundaries there might once have been between groups with different languages or traditional cultures. They separated like from like, and threw like together with unlike. Yet it was within these divisions that those who took over from the colonial empires attempted to create new nations – in India and Pakistan, Burma and Ceylon, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, and throughout black Africa – without a common language for the whole country and sometimes without even a unified market.

Alongside these there have been cases of minorities reacting to their oppression by seeing themselves as a nation, even though they do not live in any defined territory or share a separate common language. This was true by the 1930s of many of Europe's Jewish minorities and by the early 1970s of very many black Americans.

Finally, precisely because the notion of nationhood was so central to the ideology of the system, people's reaction to the economic and political crisis of one existing national state was to look for a way out through the creation of a new nation, based on different criteria to the old – as with the attempts to carve a Biafran national state using the Ibo language out of Nigeria in the late 1960s, Catalan and Basque states out of post-Franco Spain, an Akali state based

on the Sikh religion out of the Indian province of the Punjab, or Serb and Croat states, based on the same language but different religions, out of what used to be Yugoslavia.

In each case, those who preached the nationalist project seemed far less “utopian” and far more “practical” than those who turned to class politics. The nationalists were, after all, cutting with the ideology of nationhood that had come to dominate the world with capitalism.

Nationality and Culture Today

The profusion of nationalities has been accompanied everywhere by a stress on the differences of cultures. In the advanced Western countries the ideology of biological racism has, to some extent, given way in the last quarter of a century to what might be called cultural racism. This does not talk in terms of biological inferiority of non-whites, but of the “*cultural backwardness*”, or at least the “*cultural difference*” of those who come from non-British, non-French, non-German – or more generally non-European or non-Western – backgrounds.

So it was that back in 1978 Margaret Thatcher played the race card shortly before an election, claiming British people were being “swamped by people of a different culture”.

In a slightly less extreme form the arguments goes, “*everyone has their own culture, so we naturally identify with ours, and other groups with theirs*”. Such thinking underlies the stress of the right wing ideologues who increasingly dominate the content of the national teaching curriculum in Britain on “*British history*”, “*English*

literature” and the Christian religion. Interestingly, these ideologues are pressing for the right of both evangelical Christians and Islamic fundamentalists to set up their own schools. [74]

The argument is, at least in part, accepted by some of those usually regarded as being on the left. Many liberal intellectuals stress that everyone must value their own culture, and even go so far as to show concern about the “*bastardisation of cultures*”. [75] And many of those who react against the disguised racism of the various forms of cultural supremacism do so by asserting a cultural separatism of their own – which in a few cases becomes an inverted form of cultural supremacism. They argue that because they are of Irish, Jewish, Armenian, Asian, Arab, Muslim, African, etc. ancestry, then they have to fight to preserve the purity and independence of their “indigenous culture”. They justify their stand with references to the “*fight against cultural genocide*” and “*cultural imperialism*”.

Yet all these different stresses on maintaining the separation of cultures – whether from the conservative right or from those who see themselves on the anti-racist, anti-imperialist left – rest on the same fallacy. They all assume that the growing proliferation of nationalities and nationalisms rests upon a growing diversity of cultures. But the modern world is, in fact, marked by a growing together of cultures, by a trend towards a homogeneous world culture – a trend enormously more marked than when Marx and Engels noted how “*the intellectual creations of individual nations become common property, national one sidedness and narrow mindedness becomes more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature*” [76], or

than when Kautsky and Lenin wrote about the merging of cultures 90 or so years ago.

The word “*culture*” has two different meanings, one broad and one narrow. In its broad meaning it refers to the totality of people’s social practices including such things as the way they get a livelihood, their religious practices, the relations between the sexes, their moral attitudes, their sense of time, their treatment of old people and children, their cooking, and, drawing all these activities together, their language. The more restricted meaning refers to art, music and literature.

The two meanings are connected. For culture in the narrow artistic sense is an expression of culture in the wider, way of life, sense. Art grows out of the soil of the wider culture and displays certain of the elements within it in a form that can bewitch or delight thrill or frighten. When people like a certain artistic product, they do so because they find in it something which, in one way or another, gives expression to their own lives and dilemmas.

It is this which enables “*culture*” in the narrow sense to provide a sense of identity to people from a particular society, something to which they can try to cling at moments of social crisis. This is why conservatives of all sorts seek to extol what they claim is the “traditional national culture. They are endeavoring to appeal to past ways of living so as to oppose any challenges to the old society. It is also why those who seek to establish new nations under their own hegemony search for what they claim are radically different counter-traditions.

But culture in the narrow sense can never be more than a partial expression of people’s wider way of life in a class society. For in such a society there is not one way of life, but

different ways of life for each class. And art and literature tend to express the way of life of those classes who alone have the resources and the leisure to sustain artistic production – the privileged exploiting classes. Even though the best artists are those who attempt to reflect the total social experience, which includes elements of the experience of the oppressed and exploited, they do so from the point of view of those who depend on the oppressors and exploiters for sustenance, even when they are not themselves from the ruling classes.

When we talk of British art, Russian art or Chinese art, we are talking of the art of the rulers of those societies, art which may say something about the exploited classes, but only in an indirect oblique way. This is even true when we talk about Aztec art or much art from pre-colonial Africa, for specialization in artistic production was not possible on any scale until there was at least the beginning of a polarization into classes.

What is more, as society changes, so culture changes? It cannot be a changeless fixed thing. Any attempt to treat it as such is, in reality, a fiction, an ideological device used to bind people to certain approved patterns of behavior. This is especially true in the modern world, a world which has been changed utterly by the development of capitalism. Everywhere on the globe people's lives have been transformed as they have been subordinated to market relations and dragged from the relative isolation of rural life into contact with vast population centers.

When people talk of "*traditional culture*" of any sort, they are harking back to something which no longer fits the reality of their lives anywhere. This is true of attempts to force us to live a traditional "English culture", most of which was historically created by and for leisured gentlemen living

in a predominantly agrarian society. It is true too of those who, out of a justified revulsion against such cultural reaction, would have us turn to “*Celtic culture*”, “*Indian culture*”, “*African culture*”, “*Islamic culture*”, or any other.

In fact, the forms of culture that dominate in every part of the world are products of very recent history, even when the conservatives claim an ancient lineage for them. It was, for instance, only a century ago that Celtic literature was reborn at the hands of modern, bourgeois – and usually Anglo-Irish – intellectuals like Lady Gregory and Yeats, or that modern petty bourgeois nationalists sought to create a Hindi speaking culture in opposition to that of the plebeian market language of the Delhi region, Hindustani, and the courtly version of it, Urdu.

The contemporary “*national*” forms of both high art and popular art are very much the products of the recent, capitalist, period of human existence – thus with the different forms of popular music that tend to dominate different regions of the globe. As an authoritative study, of non-Western popular music tells, these are all relatively recent products, based on the drawing together of elements from different cultures:

The most conspicuous form of acculturation involves Western influence – especially the adoption of Western musical elements (such as instruments, harmony and vocal style) by non-Western musical cultures ... The Western disco, rock and slow ballad have become international styles, promoted by a network of multinational corporations. [77]

But, of course, Western music itself was not a product of the European peoples alone. A central component of it came into being as “*descendants of African slaves in the Americas developed dynamic, hybrid musics synthesizing*

African-derived rhythms and Western melodic and harmonic patterns.” [78]

Similarly, in parts of the globe new regional styles have been based on a synthesis of traditional and Western forms. Thus Indian film music, which today has a multinational audience stretching from Vietnam and Indonesia to the former Yugoslavia [79], is formed by a merging of local styles from south and north India, using “*Western harmony in its own distinctive way*” [80], while modern African popular music arose as “*some... Caribbean... styles – especially the Cuban rumba – became widely popular in the Congo and other parts of Africa from the 1950s on, and generated new hybrids of native African and Afro-Caribbean music*”. [81]

The example of popular music shows how advanced the tendency towards the fusion of cultures can be. There may not yet be a single world popular music, but there are a relatively small number of interacting regional styles, with the trend being towards fusion and the conquest of worldwide audiences, not towards separation and narrow national traditions. That is why its impact is resented by the cultural conservatives in every country. Yet popular music is probably the form of artistic culture that most penetrates the life of the great mass of people: its closest rival in terms of popularity, spectator sport, although hardly an “artistic product”, is even more a uniform worldwide phenomenon.

Such cultural growing together should really surprise no one. The dynamic of capitalist accumulation is creating, in fact, a worldwide way of life (or rather contrasting worldwide ways of life for the opposing classes). Significantly, the creators of modern popular cultures are those thrown together in the great cities by the spread of capitalism:

One of the most remarkable features of the evolution of popular music is its association in numerous cultures worldwide with an unassimilated, disenfranchised, impoverished, socially marginalised class, the lumpenproletariat of hoodlums, pimps, prostitutes, vagrants, sidewalk vendors, drug addicts, musicians, miscellaneous street people and assorted unemployed migrants ... It was such groups ... that gave birth to such diverse and vital forms as rebetika, modern kroncong, reggae, steel band, the tango and jazz ... The lumpenproletariat are city dwellers ... They are inherently predisposed to new forms of cultural expression. [82]

But it is not only the creators of an art form who determine its popularity, and therefore who determine what will flourish and what will die out. It is also the consumers, those for whom they perform. And for the mass of workers and the urban middle class (as well as the lumpens), tempos of work, patterns of consumption, styles of dress, forms of recreation, forms of sexual relations and the rest increasingly cut across the old cultural barriers. Languages remain different, but what they say is increasingly the same.

If there is, in this broad sense, increasingly a world culture, it is not surprising that art – both in its popular and its “highbrow” forms – is increasingly international, with a world audience for films and TV programmes, rock bands and symphony orchestras, for novels and operas.

Just as in popular art there is increasing interaction between regional styles, each the product of capitalist development, so in high art the pre-capitalist forms have been replaced by international, capitalist forms. Thus the novel, which was a literary form created as the bourgeoisie fought for power in Western Europe, has been adopted and mastered by writers from the non-Western world like Ngugi, Achebe, Rushdie, Ben Ochre, Marquez and so on.

Cultural imperialism occurred when dominating powers forced conquered peoples to adopt their language and their view of world history – as the British and French did in various parts of their empires, or as the Russians did first under the Tsar and then under Stalin. It was a by-product of imperialism proper – the bloody and barbaric process by which empires were carved out and whole peoples exterminated.

But the fusion of cultures today cannot be dismissed as simply a product of enforced subjection. Rather, it flows from the irreversible changes wrought by the spread of capitalism. It occurs because throughout the world people are trying to come to terms with living in societies which are molded by the same world system, which are subject to the same tempos of accumulation. As the forms of exploitation undertaken by ruling classes get more and more alike, so do their lifestyles and their culture. By the same token, as the humdrum everyday lives of the mass of people become ever more dependent on their ability to sell their labor power and to fit into the tempo of work in the factory, mine or office, so their forms of recreation, culture and even dress converge. Rhythms of modern pop. For instance, reflect – even if only by trying to provide an escape from – the reality of urban life and the compulsion to paid labor. The novel form dominates in literature everywhere because it gives expression to the way bourgeois and petty bourgeois intellectuals experience a present day worldwide reality.

Nothing brings home the fact of increasingly international culture nationalities more than television images of the civil wars between rival nationalities that have broken out in the former Yugoslavia and the former USSR. For the mass of fighters on either side wear the same jeans and the same trainers, listen to the same Walkmans or ghetto blasters, follow the same sports and quite likely

watch the same soap operas. This is because, if they were not fighting, they would be living essentially similar lives, working at near identical jobs.

The process of transformation is not of course complete. A large portion of the world's population are still peasants rather than wage laborers. Among the wage laborers there are those who live on the brink of starvation, unable to get anything more than the occasional day's work, and those who are in full time employment in large industry. In many cities there is a very large petty bourgeoisie, often merging at its lower reaches with a mass of still barely urbanized former peasants, which can still mobilize behind the demand for a return to tradition – as with the Islamic movements in many middle eastern countries or the Hindu supremacist movements in India. Yet the trend towards fusion of cultures is still overwhelming, simply because the pressures of the world system on the lives of everyone within it are overwhelming. That is why the returns to tradition are always phoney: the traditions are manufactured, with the most modern techniques being used to recast the meaning of the oldest texts.

The culture created by modern capitalism is of course a deficient distorted culture. It is the culture of a class society which drains meaning from the lives of millions of people. It is a culture which has condoned slavery while preaching freedom, producing Belsen as well as Beethoven. The point is not to worship this culture in the manner of so many post modernists, but to recognize it as the only terrain people have to fight on, since the system which created it has made obsolete and destroyed all others.

Modern Theories of Nationality and Nationalism

The two great tendencies of the last 75 years – the proliferation of nations, with many created among groupings that did not fit into the classic 19th century model, and the growing homogeneity of culture worldwide in every respect except language – has led to confusion among certain recent writers on nationalism. They see that, although there no longer seems to be any fixed, objective criteria for saying what is a nation and what is not, an identification with “your own” nation is taken for granted by virtually the whole of humanity.

The result has been a tendency to see nationalisms as arbitrary constructs, detached from the economic development of capitalism. This is the tenor of Nigel Harris’s recent book, *National Liberation*. For Nigel, capitalism is by its very nature an international system, based on the free movement of commodities and finance. It grew up within a system of national states, which were being constructed by pressures – the competition between rival absolutisms – other than itself, but today has an innate tendency to break through the boundaries between these states and to establish a new multinational order. All that holds it back is the continuing ability of political forces to get people to identify with the ideology of nation.

Benedict Anderson’s very influential book, *Imagined Communities*, makes a greater effort to locate the growth of rival national consciousness in material reality. What he calls “print capitalism” plays a very important role in his account. And he sees the rising bourgeoisie as playing a vital role in the creation of the first European nations: ‘The coalition between Protestantism and print capitalism quickly created large new reading publics – not least among merchants and women who typically knew no Latin – and

mobilized them for politico-religious purposes”. [83] The growth of new national consciousness in the 18th and 19th centuries was possible because of “*a half fortuitous but explosive interaction between a system of production and productive relations (capitalism), a technology of communication (print) and the fatality of human linguistic diversity*”. [84]

Once some nations were already established, individuals from certain social groups could imagine establishing new ones, based on giving a printed form to languages, “*The ‘nation’ thus becomes something capable of being consciously aspired to ... rather than a slowly sharpening frame of vision*”. [85] “*A model of the independent nation was available for pirating*”. [86]

The audience for the new printed languages came, by and large, from “*families of ruling classes of nobility and landed gentry, courtiers and ecclesiastics, rising middle strata of plebeian lay officials, professionals, and commercial and industrial bourgeoisies*”. [87] So “in world historical terms bourgeoisies were the first class to achieve solidarities on an essentially imagined basis ... In Europe these solidarities had an outmost stretch limited by vernacular legibilities”. [88]

But once the model was established along linguistic lines in Europe, it could operate if necessary without them. The European powers established administrations in the colonies that cut across old linguistic divisions. The indigenous middle class that was recruited to fill many lower and middle administrative positions began to imagine themselves taking charge and copying the European model: “*Is Indian nationalism not inseparable from the colonial administrative-market unification, after the Mutiny, by the formidable and advanced of the imperial powers?*” [89]

However, Anderson does not succeed in combining these elements into a coherent, total, materialist analysis. For, instead of recognizing the nation state as the typical form of capitalist rule, he puts the emphasis on subjective factors that led people to want to “*imagine*” new forms of community. These factors first emerged, he argues, when social and economic changes in the late medieval period led to the breakdown of “*cultural concepts of great antiquity*” which gave “*a certain meaning to the everyday fatalities of existence (above all, death, loss and servitude)*”. From that point, “the search was on for a new way of linking fraternity, power and time meaningfully together”. [\[90\]](#)

The roots of the nationalist ideology, then, are finally located in existential yearning, not capitalist development, despite the promise of much of Anderson’s argument. This becomes clearer in his more recent *New World Disorder* [\[91\]](#) in which the strength of nationalism is ascribed, not to capitalism as such, but to “two significant factors” linked to “*the rise of capitalism... mass communications and mass migrations*”. “*Print capitalism brought into being mass publics who began to imagine through the media a new type of community: the nation*”, while “the mass appearance in settled communities of thousands of immigrants did not, and will not, fail to produce its own ethnicisations ... Le Pen’s neo-fascist movement in France ... the National Front in Britain ... ‘White Power’ extremists in the United States” This is to repeat the old fallacy that immigration is to blame for racism – despite the very powerful evidence that racism is often strongest where there are fewest members of ethnic minorities (as with anti-semitism in Poland today, or with anti-black racism in virtually all white towns and suburbs in Britain).

The weakness in Anderson's otherwise powerful argument is undoubtedly connected with the starting point of his book. He began to write it, he explains, in the late 1970s under the impact of the first war between what he saw as socialist states – China and Vietnam. His whole aim was to understand what it was about nationalism that made it a central feature of socialist as well as capitalist societies. By refusing to see China and Vietnam as societies dominated by the dynamic of competitive accumulation – as a state organized variant of capitalism – he was driven to look outside capitalist society for the roots of nationalism, to see these instead in the satisfaction of innate psychological needs.

The result, paradoxically, is that Anderson is blind to something which the non-Marxist, Ernest Gellner, does grasp. Gellner sees the development of history not in terms of primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism and socialism, but rather of “primitive” society, agrarian society and industrial societies. Despite the innumerable faults with this approach, it does provide him with one advantage over Anderson when looking at the so called socialist societies of the mid-20th century. He does not expect them to be any different in their essentials to capitalist societies, and looks for material explanations for those shared features which differentiate both from previous societies. Thus he is absolutely scathing about attempts to see nations as eternal: *“Nations as a natural God-given way of classifying men are a myth; nationalism which sometimes takes pre-existing cultures and turns them into nations, sometimes invents them and often obliterates pre-existing cultures – that is the reality”*. [92]

He argues it is the need of each “industrial society” for a “homogeneous” population, literate in a single tongue, that gives rise to the nation:

It is not the case that nationalism imposes homogeneity ... It is the objective need for homogeneity that is reflected in nationalism ... A modern industrial state can only function with a culturally standardized, interchangeable population ... Nationalism is not the awakening of an old, latent, dormant force, though that is how it does present itself. It is, in reality, the consequence of a new form of social organization, based on deeply internalized education-dependent high cultures, each protected by its own stated. [\[93\]](#)

Just as the nation is a result of objective material realities, so too is the striving after nationhood among the masses. With industrialization:

The illiterate, half starved populations from their erstwhile cultural ghettos who are pulled into the melting pots of shanty towns yearn for incorporation into one of those cultural pools which already has, or looks as if it might acquire, a state of its own, with the subsequent promise of full cultural citizenship, access to primary schools, employment, and all. [\[94\]](#)

When entry into the perks of nationhood is easy, he argues, they will forget their old culture and assimilate – thus explaining the reality that there are around ten times more potential languages in the world than there are nations or aspiring nations. But when they are “spurned” they will seek some other way to define themselves. “Nationalism as such is fated to prevail, but not any particular nationalism”. [\[95\]](#)

Gellner can therefore go beyond both Anderson and Harris in seeing why the drive to identify with a nation – and if necessary to try to create new nations – is such a central feature of the modern world:

Nations can be defined only in terms of the age of nationalism, rather than the other way round ... When general social conditions make for standardized, homogeneous, centrally sustained high calderas, pervading whole populations and not just elite minorities, a situation

arises in which well defined educationally sanctioned and unified cultures constitute very nearly the only kind of unit which men willingly and ardently identify ... Only then does it appear that any defiance of their boundaries by political units constitutes a scandal ... Under these conditions, and these conditions only, can nations be defined in terms of both will and culture.[96]

But Gellner has a vast blind area of his own. He does not conceive it possible that industrial society could be organized in a way other than it is. To this extent his much more materialist analysis leads to a conclusion very like Anderson's: the nation dominates all existing societies, and we have to like it or lump it. Gellner, who was involved in protests against the descent into rival barbaric nationalisms in Yugoslavia in the summer of 1991, clearly does not like it all that much. But he can point to no other way forward.

Eric Hobsbawm's work *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* takes for granted a framework very similar to Gellner's, [97] although with far more references to the Marxist tradition which, Hobsbawm points out, was the first to grasp that nations are not timeless entities but constructed with the rise of "modern society". Most of the work is concerned with fixing a mass of historical material into the framework – so much at times that the reader is in danger of getting lost amidst a mass of fascinating facts, unable to see the wood for the trees. But Hobsbawm departs from Gellner at a number of points.

First, he insists the views of those who align with national movements or national states may not be as clear cut as the nationalist leaders claim:

If I have a major criticism of Gellner's work it is that his preferred perspective of modernization from above makes it difficult to pay adequate attention to the view from below.

The view from below, i.e. the nation as seen not by governments and spokesmen and activists of nationalist (and non-nationalist) movements, but by the ordinary persons who are the objects of their action and propaganda, is exceedingly difficult to discover ...

We cannot assume that national identification – when it exists – excludes or is always or ever superior to the remainder of the sets of identifications which constitute the social being ...

National identification and what it is believed to imply can change and shift in time, even in the course of quite short periods. [\[98\]](#)

Later he elaborates the argument further:

Men and women did not choose collective identification as they chose shoes, knowing that one could only put on one pair at a time. They had, and still have, several attachments and loyalties simultaneously, including nationality, and are simultaneously concerned with various aspects of life, any one of which may at any moment in time be foremost in their minds, as occasion suggests. For long periods of time these different attachments would not make incompatible demands on a person ... It was only when one of these loyalties conflicted directly with another that problems of choosing between them arose.

He provides a graphic example of how social concerns and national loyalties have interacted by quoting Peter Hanak's research on letters from soldiers from different ethnic backgrounds serving in the Austro-Hungarian army during the First World War:

During the first years there was not much nationalism or anti-monarchism among the correspondents ... The years of war, but especially the first Russian revolution, raised the political content of the intercepted correspondence dramatically. Indeed, the censors' reports on public opinions unanimously observed that the Russian revolution was the first political event since the outbreak

of war whose shock waves penetrated to the lowest levels of the people. Among the activists of some of the oppressed nationalities such as the Poles and Ukrainians, it even raised hopes of reform – perhaps even of independence. However, the dominant mood was for peace and *social* transformation.

The political opinions which now begin to appear even in the letters of laborers, peasants and working class women, is best analyzed in terms of three interlocking binary opposites: rich-poor (or lord-peasant, boss-worker), war-peace, and order-disorder. The links, at least in the letters, are obvious: the rich live well and don't serve in the army, the poor people are at the mercy of the rich and powerful, the authorities of state and army, and so on. The novelty lies not only in the greater frequency of complaints ... but in the sense that a revolutionary expectation of fundamental change was available as an alternative to passive acceptance of destiny.

National feeling comes into the arguments only indirectly, chiefly because, to cite Hanak, “until 1918 national sentiment had not yet crystallized out, among the broad masses of the people, into a stable component of consciousness ...” Nationality appears most often as an aspect of the conflict between rich and poor, especially where the two belong to different nationalities. But even where we find the strongest national tone – as among the Czech, Serbian and Italian letters – we also find an overwhelming wish for social transformation ... The period when the October revolution made its first impact was the one in which the social element in the public mood was at its strongest ...

It was only when the wave of strikes in Austro-Hungary and Germany in January 1918 failed to bring down the regime and force an end to the war that people began to look away from social revolution and to look for their salvation through nationalism: “But even when, in the course of 1918, the national theme finally became dominant in popular consciousness, it was not separate from or opposed to the

social theme. For most poor people the two went together, as the monarchy crashed...” Hobsbawm argues that “nationalism was victorious... to the extent that the movements which reflected the real concerns of the poor people of Europe failed in 1918. When this happened, the middle and lower strata of the oppressed nationalities were in position to become the ruling elites of the new independent ... petty states”. [\[99\]](#)

The second novelty in Hobsbawm’s account is that he claims the hold of nationalism is declining, despite the widespread belief to the contrary. He bases his claim on a number of arguments.

First, he denies that most of the new states that have emerged in the ex-colonial world since 1945 can really be counted as national states, since confined within the old colonial administrative boundaries they cannot achieve linguistic homogeneity or gain any real loyalty from the mass of their subjects. Yet this only proves they are unsuccessful – because late coming – national states. All aspire to become the focus of identity of their subjects, and some are successful, even if the identification is not total (but then, Hobsbawm’s own analysis shows we should not expect it to be): despite the state’s failure to impose a common language, very many Indian citizens do identify with “their country”, even if they also identify themselves as Hindus or Muslims, workers or employers, Brahmins or untouchables. In Africa and the middle east the fact that state boundaries cross cut linguistic boundaries does not always stop the state becoming a focus of loyalty for the middle classes who depend on it for a livelihood and look to it to “modernize” society, and who in turn exert ideological influence on the workers, the lumpenproletariat and the peasantry.

At the time of writing he had a second, even more dubious, argument, concerning the “socialist” countries:

Inasmuch as such regimes do not, at least in theory, identify with any of their constituent nationalities and regard the interests of each of them as secondary to higher common purpose, they are non-national ... It was the great achievement of the communist regimes in multinational countries to limit the disastrous effects of nationalism within them ... The “discrimination” or even “oppression” against which the champions of various Soviet nationalities abroad protest, is far less than the expected consequences of the withdrawal of Soviet power. [\[100\]](#)

One only wishes at this point that Hobsbawm would take seriously his own injunction to look things “from below” and not just in terms of how official spokespersons present them. He might have asked himself what it meant to be a Tatar or Caucasian temporary worker living in a hostel in Moscow, a Turkic speaking conscript into a Russian speaking army, or a Kazakh speaking child in Alma Ata, a city without a single nursery using the native language. As it is, the realities of oppression are confined to two footnotes, one mentioning the Romanisation of Ceausescu’s Romania (but not persecution of the Turks in Bulgaria, still less the ethnic cleansing which drove Hungarian speakers from Slovakia and German speakers from Bohemia, Moravia and western Poland after 1945) and “the mass transfer of entire populations on the grounds of their nationality which took place after the war” in the USSR (but not the glorification of Tsarist Russia’s conquest of the non-Russian peoples that became the official ideology from that time on).

Whether Hobsbawm likes it or not, all the Eastern European regimes were seen by everyone who lived in them as regimes dominated by single nationalities. [\[101\]](#) It is hardly surprising that, since people have been able to

express themselves freely, there have been revolts of minority nationalities, and attempts – often orchestrated by remnants of the old ruling parties – to mobilise the dominating nationalities against them.

But Hobsbawm makes two other points that have rather more going for them. He argues:

Nationalism ... is no longer a major vector in historical development. In the “developed” world of the 19th century, the building of a number of “nations” which combined nation state and national economy was plainly a central fact of historical transformation ... In the “dependent” world of the first half of the 20th century ... movements for national liberation and independence were the main agents for the political emancipation of most of the globe ... Both were typically unificatory as well as emancipatory ...

The characteristic nationalist movements of the late 20th century are essentially negative, or rather divisive.

There is a correct element in this argument. Capitalism today finds even the biggest existing states too small for its operations. The idea that smaller states will make it easier for people to cope with the vagaries of the system is absurd. But this was already true 80 years ago when Rosa Luxemburg used this argument against Lenin. And in economic terms she was right: the successor states to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, for instance, failed abysmally to advance their economies in the inter-war years [\[102\]](#), cut off as they were by state boundaries from their old raw materials and markets. But politically she was wrong, because millions of people flocked to nationalist movements, tore the old empires apart and created new states anyway.

The fact that nationalism is a blind alley does not automatically stop people going down it, even if it does

mean at some point they are likely to do a U-turn and start coming out again.

Hobsbawm's final point is that much that is loosely called nationalism is not concerned with building new states at all, but rather with mobilising people from certain linguistic or ethnic backgrounds to exercise political pressure on existing states. This, he says, is a product of the way in which economic development has pulled vast numbers of migrants from many different backgrounds into the great cities of the world. The degree of ethnic mixing makes any idea of establishing a new mono-ethnic state impossible. But it also creates powerful constituencies for those who want to make political careers by promising favors to one linguistic, ethnic or religious group rather than another. In extreme cases the result will be horrendous communal bloodbaths. But even if these groups are organized around nationalist identification with a distant land of origin, they cannot be considered nationalist in the way the term is usually used.

His case here is very strong. Yet he still overstates it. In conditions of economic collapse, movements demanding the driving out of other ethnic groups can fight for control even of modern, multinational cities – as we have seen in Bosnia in recent months. Ethnicity can go beyond communalism and aspire to impose new ethnic state boundaries using the most barbaric means.

Some of Hobsbawm's arguments show that the potential exists for resisting nationalism, that it is not the unstoppable juggernaut many people believe. But they do not show how that potentiality can become a reality. To do that Hobsbawm would have to break with his own watered down Eurocommunism, with its residual admixture of nostalgia for Stalinism, and look to the class alternatives he mentions when writing of the First World War.

Social Crises and Nationalism Today

The central contention of this article so far is that the mystery of the nation state disappears when it is seen as the typical form of political administration associated with the advance of capitalism, from its beginnings in the western fringe of Europe to its present day conquest of the whole world. At each stage those who have striven to share in the gains of this advance, whether they themselves have been capitalists, state bureaucrats or members of the literate middle class, have wanted to have a local national state of their own. The fact that in order to gain such a state they have sometimes had to bend the definition of “national” almost beyond belief is irrelevant, as is the failure of many of the new states to deliver the economic gains expected from them.

The system of nation states, then, is the political correlate of the full blown capitalist mode of production. It is the political form which, having aided capitalism in its conquest of the world in its youth, persists into its maturity and old age.

The strength of the ideology of nationalism under capitalism is not, then, surprising. It is part of the reflection in people’s consciousnesses of the experience of living in a capitalist world. Just as living under capitalism makes the great mass of people take for granted that commodity production, alienated wage labor and competition are more common than co-operation, so it makes them take for granted the necessity of the nation state. And nationalist consciousness makes sense so long as they do not challenge the system as a whole: within it the individual capitalist is in a very weak situation unless he has a state to enforce his interests on others [\[103\]](#); the individual peasant family hopes the state will protect it against the inevitable ups and

downs of the market in foodstuffs; the individual worker knows he or she has to belong to a state to be allowed to work and live freely, and to apply for welfare benefits when necessary.

Marx made the point nearly 150 years ago that the ruling ideas are always the ideas of the ruling class. And one of those ideas is the idea of the nation as a “natural unit” for grouping together a section of humanity into its “own” cordoned off part of the planet.

The ruling ideas are not immutable. On this at least Hobsbawm is absolutely right. Great social crises create situations in which ideas and realities move in opposite directions, in which social turmoil and human suffering conflict with old allegiances, in which people find it literally impossible to continue to live according to the old ways, in which the outbreak of sudden confrontations creates new antagonisms and new loyalties.

In such periods people’s consciousness is not monolithic, but contradictory, to use Gramsci’s description. [\[104\]](#) Old ways of seeing things co-exist with new ways of seeing things. People continue to express themselves using concepts while taking actions which imply completely new ones. In the end the contradiction can only be resolved by breaking with the old or abandoning the new. But the end can sometimes be a very long time in coming.

Thus the development of capitalism in the 16th and 17th centuries created forms of social behavior that challenged the whole ideology of medieval Christianity. The logic of this challenge led to the complete rejection of religious ways of thinking by the Enlightenment. But this rejection did not permeate right through into popular consciousness for centuries. In the interim people who identified with the new

ways of living tried to reconcile themselves partially to the old ways of thinking by continuing to accept Christianity, but in new reformed versions.

The speed of the onset of crises and the degree of social turmoil is much greater under capitalism than under any previous mode of production, and the stresses besetting old forms of consciousness accordingly that much more acute. Nevertheless, contradictory, hybrid forms of consciousness are an inevitable feature of mentality for the great mass of people at the first stage of any great convulsion: the mass of workers who overthrew the Tsar and established Soviets in February 1917 did allow Prince Lvov to head the Provisional Government; the German workers who got rid of the Kaiser and ended the war did, disastrously, allow Ebert, Scheidemann and “the bloodhound” Noske to maintain the power of the bourgeoisie and the officer corps; the Polish workers who created a huge independent trade union and inflicted the first major defeat on Stalinism in the summer of 1980 did bow down to the Pope and accept the advice of those who preached compromise with their rulers.

It is in this context that we have to explain the sudden rise of new nationalisms. The idea of the division of humanity into nations is etched into people’s consciousness under capitalism. If one national state fails them, the easiest thing is to turn to the idea of creating a different national state. It seems so much more “practical” to rearrange the pieces on the board than to invent a totally new game.

This can be encouraged by the material interests of wide sections of the middle class – especially where a large part of a region’s population are fluent in a language other than the official one of the old state. For some of them a separate state – or at least a grant of national autonomy – means improved access to bureaucratic posts. Hence the

flourishing of Catalan nationalism in the last couple of years of the fascist regime in Spain, as wide sections of the Catalan speaking middle class joined and exercised influence on a struggle that had previously been spearheaded by mainly Spanish speaking workers. But language is not an indispensable factor: in any formation of a new state identification with the struggle for it can enhance many career prospects.

The directing of discontent into nationalist demands can also be of benefit to important sections of the capitalist or state capitalist ruling class. The most powerful rarely promote nationalism themselves, and they sometimes do their best to resist it as detrimental to their own powerfully established links with the old state. But even then they can come to regard it as the lesser evil compared with the growth of a movement for social revolution. And less powerful elements within the ruling class can see sponsorship of a secessionist state as a very good way of accelerating their own accumulation of wealth. Thus it was not the small Bengali speaking big bourgeoisie who initiated the movement to separate eastern Pakistan from the central state apparatus in western Pakistan in 1971, but some of them managed to profit enormously when separation finally led to the formation of the new national state of Bangladesh.

A final factor is also of immense importance in helping to trigger identification with nationalist slogans – the extent to which the old state carries through policies that can be seen as involving oppression along national lines. The classic form this takes is discrimination against those who speak a certain language – as with the Turkish government's attempts in the 1980s to ban Kurdish or the Sri Lankan government's insistence that Sinhalese, not Tamil, is the official language. Although the middle classes suffer most, workers too face problems every time they come in contact

with the state – with its Police, its courts, or even its post offices. But discrimination does not have to be formal, as black people in Europe and North America are all too aware. A particular linguistic or religious group can find they are treated as second or third class citizens every time they come into contact with police officers, officials or employers. This was always the experience of the Irish (especially, but not only, the Catholics) under British rule, of the Bengalis under Pakistani rule, and of Kurds under Iraqi rule. The logic of the situation leads to a vicious circle of oppression: the minority protest at the discrimination against them, the state regards them as disloyal, arrests their spokespeople, disbands any representative institutions they possess, censors their press, encourages further discrimination against them, and thus heightens their feeling of alienation from it. What begin as mild protests aimed at securing a better place within the existing state often end up as irreconcilable demands for secession?

But the element of real oppression is not always necessary for a movement to gain mass support. Just as there is usually support of a fairly passive nature for the official nationalism of the state among the majority of its population, so great social and political crises can see that support transferred by a section of the population to its secessionist rival. Indeed, because secession offers change and any change seems like improvement, the loyalty to the new nationalism can be stronger than that to the old – although this increased strength need not last long.

Scotland provides an example of how the nationalism of the non-oppressed [\[105\]](#) can fluctuate wildly. Independence, or at least devolved government, seems on occasions to offer a quick way for people to break from the hold of a Tory government and the grim effects of Britain's long drawn out economic decline. Support for nationalism,

and for the Scottish National Party in particular, grows very quickly. Identification with the superficial symbols of British nationalism – the “*national*” sports teams, the “*national*” flag, “*national*” culture and “national” celebrities – becomes overwhelmingly an identification with Scottish symbols. But the support remains passive for the great mass of people and when no breakthrough to independence occurs, can die down as quickly as it arose. And then people see no contradiction in identifying with Scottish symbols (the football team) and British symbols (the monarchy, the armed forces, and even the Olympic team [\[106\]](#), an identification that the Scottish National Party does not challenge!).

This does not mean that the nationalism of the non-oppressed cannot occasionally present problems for the existing state. Fortuitous conditions can turn it into a focus for much wider discontents of a social nature, and the state can react by trying to crush it, so creating oppressive conditions that did not exist before. It is worth remembering that until the mid-1930s Basque nationalism was a right wing force in Spanish politics; it was the actions of the state itself which forced it to align itself with the left and to take up a position of irreconcilable hostility to fascism. [\[107\]](#)

More recently the nationalisms of peoples who are not subject to oppression on the basis of any national characteristics, but who live on different sides of state boundaries drawn by great powers in the past, have had considerable political impact. The movement against the Stalinism of the East German state machine in 1989 transformed itself into a movement for incorporation into the Federal German Republic, while in South Korea much of the reformist left has seen national reunification as the

central slogan – even though parties of the conservative right also call themselves “unification” parties.

In any case, the turn towards nationalism among workers must be regarded as one of the ways the ideas of the ruling class continue to exercise an influence, even when the crisis of the system begins to break people from a conservative attachment to the old order. The extent of this influence depends here, as in other cases, on two factors: the level of collective struggle against the system, and the degree to which socialist organizations exist on the ground, capable of taking up political and ideological arguments in each workplace and locality. Where nationalist influence is greatest is where the crisis results in defeat and demoralization rather than struggle among workers, and where the ideological crisis of most of the left since the collapse of Stalinism has done most damage.

For the rise of nationalism cannot be separated from the crisis of the left internationally which has accompanied the crisis of the system. There is an enormous vacuum on the left, which often leaves those who preach nationalism (or in large areas of the world, religious fundamentalism) with little socialist competition.

Nationalism since the Collapse of Stalinism

The vacuum on the left is greatest and the crisis of the system reaping more havoc than anywhere else outside sub-Saharan Africa in the countries that used to be called Communist. It should be no surprise that these have experienced the greatest growth of rival nationalisms in the last few years.

The fate of the former USSR shows how economic crisis – the “stagnation” that began in the last Brezhnev years

giving way to contraction and mass impoverishment in the last Gorbachev years – can create political crises, and political crises find expression in the growth of national movements. It shows how members of the middle class intelligentsia create movements which make the national question the focus through which all other discontents are meant to be focused – the popular fronts in the Baltic states, Moldavia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, Rukh in the Ukraine, and the Round Table in Georgia. It shows how the very real oppression suffered by very large numbers of ordinary people could allow these movements to gain enormous mass followings (a much larger and more active following than the various democratic movements among the Russians). And it shows how at a time of major political crisis important figures within the ruling class itself could switch to nationalism as a way of maintaining their control over part at least the old state – Kravchuk in the Ukraine, Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan and, most amazingly of all, Yeltsin in Russia beats the nationalist drum and claims the dominant nationality has been exploited by the others.

But it is the Yugoslav case which is the most revealing – if also so far the most horrific.

The state had been carefully reconstructed after the defeat of the German occupation in the Second World War to balance its main Slav constituents – Slovenes, Serbs and Croats – against each other, so preventing political disruption caused by Croats and Slovenes feeling they were being dominated by Serbs (as in the pre-war monarchy) or Serbs feeling they were dominated by Croats (as under German occupation). To this end the Serbs of Montenegro, the Macedonians (regarded by the Serbs previously as “southern Serbs”) and the mixed Serbian-Croat-Muslim population of Bosnia were all given their own republics separate from Serbia proper, while the mixed Serb and

Hungarian speaking area of Vojvodina in northern Serbia were given an autonomous status. All Slavs had an equal chance of rising in the state bureaucracy; the only oppressed nationality was the Albanian speakers of Kosovo, who were denied their own republic and subject to systematic discrimination at the hands of everyone else. But it is important to understand that the structure was not based on any systematic attempt to undermine national allegiances, rather on using each to neutralise the others. Divide and rule was always present.

The structure worked well for its rulers until the late 1960s. The state's cohesion was such that it survived unscathed through the various serious external political crises of 1948, when it split from the Russian bloc, and the economy grew rapidly for the next 20 years. When a loss of economic dynamism led to another political crisis in the late 1960s, with the purging of the interior minister, the weakening of police control allowed discontent to express itself through student demonstrations in Belgrade and a rise of Croat nationalism within the ruling party itself in Croatia. A clampdown succeeded in breaking both movements, but only because it was followed by a growing institutionalization of the rival Slav nationalisms at the governmental level. The heads of each of the republics were able, to some extent, to head off discontent by giving the impression they were fighting for "national" interests within the federal government.

Then in the 1980s an economic crisis broke out with a vengeance. There was growing unemployment, growing inflation and a drop in living standards until they were no higher than they had been in the 1930s. There was an explosion of discontent – and much of it on a class basis. The number of strikes leapt from 100 in 1983 to 1,530 in 1987, when there were powerful calls for a general strike as

workers broke into the federal parliament. But at this point powerful political figures set out to protect themselves against the growing anger from below and to advance their own careers by deliberately inflaming national hatreds.

The first to do so was Slobodan Milosevic, a rising figure in the Serbian party leadership. He launched a massive campaign against the alleged persecution of Serbs in Kosovo and used huge demonstrations of all the classes in Serbia – industrial managers gave workers time off to attend, where they were joined by student organizations, veterans, members of the academy of science and so on – to take over control of the Serbian leadership and then to impose his nominees on Vojvodina and Montenegro. His efforts were soon matched by others. In Croatia a Titoist general who had fallen from grace, Franjo Tudjman, began courting supporters of the wartime Ustashe regime that had butchered Serbs and demanded that Croats police the Serbian inhabited areas of Croatia. In Slovenia leaders of the old ruling party threw in their lot with what had been the leadership of the liberal opposition throughout Yugoslavia to join together to press for secession. [\[108\]](#)

The rival nationalist campaigns of Milosevic and Tudjman reinforced each other. By bringing down the Vojvodina and Montenegro governments, Milosevic frightened Croats with the specter of Serbian hegemony over the whole of Yugoslavia. By attacking the rights of the Croatian Serbs, Tudjman drove them into the hands of Milosevic and forces even further to the right. By supporting the Yugoslav armies onslaught on Slovenia and then parts of Croatia, Milosevic encouraged Croats to rely on Tudjman and the paramilitary groups to his right. The horrific logic of what they were both up to was shown when they agreed secretly to partition Bosnia between them and to destroy the harmony that had existed between Serbs, Croats and

Muslims in its capital, Sarajevo. “Uniting the divided nation” became a slogan which authoritarian right wing parties in both Serbia and Croatia could use to draw support behind them.

What Milosevic and Tudjman had discovered was that in a declining economy nationalist slogans could draw sections of the middle class into a fight for rival state machines and the careers available within them, could divert workers from fighting to defend living standards and could give sudden popularity to individual members of the old ruling class. Because nationalism has always been part of the ruling ideology, it always presents a possible safety valve for sections of ruling classes in moments of acute crisis.

But that is not the end of the matter. For if the movement to form new national states cannot open up new economic possibilities for society as a whole, then it cannot provide more than temporary relief for ruling classes. Here the difference between national movements in capitalism’s youth, when they advanced the forces of production, and their role today, when they constrain any such advance, is important. Having gained power, the nationalists still have to confront the crisis of the national economy, and this at a time when pressure to placate the nationalist desires of their own supporters exerts pressures on them to seize fresh territory and enlarge “the nation”. So long as the nationalist frenzy continues its upward path, the economic problems get greater. The moment the nationalist frenzy fades, the economic problems – and with them the class struggle – suddenly move back to the centre of the stage. The very discontents sidetracked by the nationalist agitation then return to haunt those who used it to hoist themselves into power.

As so often in history, war is used to head off class struggle, but the cost of war then heightens the class bitterness in society, and threatens to end in the overthrow of those who promoted it. At the time of writing, nobody can tell what is going to emerge from the bloody morass in former Yugoslavia – or for that matter in Moldova, Azerbaijan and Armenia, or Georgia. But what is very clear is that there is no stable political outcome to a situation in which nationalism can tear states apart but has no economic programme for carrying society forward. Just as general social discontent switched into nationalist hatreds, so national hatred can suddenly switch back into social struggles, particularly as the violence and cost of inter-ethnic struggles produces war weariness and bitterness against those who run the governments.

A war like that in former Yugoslavia necessarily gives rise to vague desires for peace among vast numbers of people and to anti-government demonstrations. If these feelings can be fused with the struggles of workers against the cost of the war and the effects of the economic crisis, then the wave of nationalism can be beaten back. But class politics does not arise automatically. It has to be argued for. Here an enormous responsibility lies with those small groups, who alone of the genuine left have survived the crisis of Stalinism.

Socialists and Nationalism

The left cannot fulfill its responsibilities unless it is clear on the relation between nation and class. Its starting point has to be a clear understanding that nationalism is about the organization of capitalist society. On this Kautsky and Lenin were absolutely right against Otto Bauer. Internationalism cannot be achieved by the arithmetic addition of different nationalisms, but by a conscious opposition to them all.

There are not Serbian or Croat, English or Irish, Russian or Ukrainian socialists, but socialists who happen to live in one or other of these states. Socialists are not proud of their nationality. They are proud of the denial of their nationality. By the same token, socialists do not stand for the maintenance of “their own” national culture, but for the integration of all that is best in every culture into a new, cosmopolitan, human culture. This is important for those who have been brought up to identify with the culture of oppressor nations – but not for them alone. As Lenin stressed repeatedly, any defense of the separation of cultures ends up in a defense of the separating off of workers from one another, just as the capitalist production process pulls them together. It plays into the hands of reactionaries among both the oppressor and the oppressed nationalities.

At same time, however, socialists have to understand the only way to bring workers of different nationalities together is to insist on free association. Internationalism does not mean identification with existing states. Workers who regard themselves as having a certain nationality cannot unite freely with other workers within the same state unless they know those workers defend their right to secede if they so wish. Croat workers will not unite with Serb workers unless the Serb workers defend their rights – including the right to secession. Serb workers will not unite with Croat workers unless Croat workers oppose every attempt to discriminate against and oppress the Serb minority within Croatia. Only by the workers of different nationalities defending each others’ rights can they create circumstances in which nationality ceases to be of significance to any of them.

There is a difference between oppressor and oppressed nationalities that socialists have to understand. We can fight

on the same side, temporarily, as the bourgeois or petty bourgeois leaders of the oppressed nations against the oppressor. We can never be on the same side as the oppressors against the oppressed. And internationalism can never mean simply balancing between one and the other.

But even when we find ourselves on the same side of the barricades as the leaders of a national movement, we have to understand their goals are not our goals, their methods not our methods. They are out to establish new capitalist or state capitalist states, and that will mean them turning against their own workers and if necessary turning their guns on us. We are out to develop the international struggle of workers, to unite workers of the oppressed nationalities with workers who have mistakenly identified with the oppressor in the past.

We are for the right of secession – and, in certain concrete situations for the struggle for secession – because we are for the unity of workers. Nationalists who are for the same goals are out to break this unity, to put nation before class.

One of the reasons the left is in such poor shape to deal with nationalist challenges like that in former Yugoslavia or the former USSR is that it has not understood these things in the past. It has flipped between wrapping itself in the flags of small “progressive” nationalisms and identifying with the great oppressor states like the USSR – or even, in the present war in former Yugoslavia, calling for the intervention of the major Western imperialisms. It will indeed be tragic if the left does not learn how to fight for internationalism as people become sickened by the nationalist delirium.

Notes

1. E. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge 1990).
2. B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London 1991).
3. E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford 1983).
4. N. Harris, *National Liberation* (London 1990).
5. A typical example is S. Pacu, *A History of Transylvania* (New York 1990).
6. E.A. Wrigley, London's Importance 1650-1750, in J. Patten (ed.), *Pre-industrial England*, pp.196-197.
7. A point made by Gramsci, see A. Gramsci, *The Renaissance, Selections from Cultural Writings* (London 1985), pp.222-234.
8. Which was why Gramsci could see Machiavelli as a theorist of a rising bourgeoisie, even though he looked to a feudal prince to achieve his goals.
9. The key part in this decision is said to have been played by Alessandro Manzoni, who first wrote his enormously influential novel *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*) in the Lombard dialect, and then spent 15 years changing it into Tuscan, see for instance D.M. Smith, *Italy: A modern history* (Michigan 1959).
10. I. Banac, *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics* (London 1984), p.81. See also, E. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, op. cit.
11. G. Brennan, *The Spanish Labyrinth* (London 1960), p.29.
12. The expression was actually invented by a critic of Griffith, but nevertheless was an accurate summary of his economic nationalism, which was modelled on that of the German Friedrich List. See N. Mansergh, *The Irish Question* (London 1965), p.238.
13. See B. Fitch and M. Oppenheimer, *Ghana, The End of an Illusion*, pp.33 and 182-183.
14. *The Counter-Revolution in Berlin*, *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, 12 November 1848, in *Marx Engels Collected Works*, vol.8 (Moscow 1977), p.17.
15. O. Bauer, *Die Nationalitätsfrage und die Sozialdemokratie*, p.271, quoted in R. Rosdolsky, *Engels and "Non-Historic" Peoples* (1987), *Critique*, p.35.
16. B. Anderson, op. cit., p.87.
17. K. Marx and F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *Marx, Engels and Lenin, The Essential Left* (London 1960), p.33.
18. This has escaped some writers on the approach of Marx and Engels to the national question. Thus Ephraim Nimni, a follower of the anti-Marxist Laclau, ascribes to them a sophisticated materialist analysis which they did not, in reality, hold at this time. See his *Marxism and Nationalism* (London 1991).
19. The Czech movement was closer to a modern national movement than those of the Ruthenians and the South Slavs. Even as early as 1848 an incipient Czech bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie was attempting to unite the Bohemian and

Moravian peasantry behind its programme for “national” capitalist development, in a way which certainly was not true for the Highlanders, the Bretons, and the Carlists. Marx’s *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* did show some sympathy for the Czechs, until their leaders threw their weight behind the Austrian monarchy’s attacks on the democratic movement.

20. Letter of 2 November 1867, Marx-Engels Collected Works (Moscow 1987), vol.42, pp.460-461.

21. Letter of 30 November 1867, in Marx-Engels Collected Works, vol.42, op. cit., pp.486-487.

22. Marx to Kugelmann, 29 November 1869, in *ibid.*, vol.43, pp.390-391.

23. See *On the Decline of Feudalism and the Emergence of the National States*, written at the end of 1884 and now available in Marx-Engels Collected Works, vol.26 (Moscow 1990), pp.556-565. Only two years earlier, in his manuscript *On the Early History of the Germans* Engels was still speaking of “the German nation” as existing at the time of Julius Caesar, see *Collected Works*, vol.26, p.30.

24. O. Bauer, *The Concept of Nation*, from *Die Nationalitätfrage und die Sozialdemokratie*, available in French translation in G. Haupt, M. Löwy and C. Weill (eds), *Les Marxistes et la question nationale* (Paris 1974), p.235.

25. O. Bauer, *ibid.*, p.238.

26. *Ibid.*, p.239.

27. *Ibid.*, pp.241-242.

28. *Ibid.*, p.243.

29. *Ibid.*, p.249.

30. *Ibid.*, p.264.

31. Although he was critical of certain aspects of it, according to E. Nimni, *Marxism and Nationalism*, op. cit., p.145.

32. The programme, adopted at the Austrian party congress in Brno (Bruenn) in 1899 is contained in Rosa Luxemburg, *The National Question* (New York 1976) pp.104-105.

33. G. Haupt, *Les Marxistes face a la question nationale: l’histoire du problem*, in G. Haupt et al., op. cit.

34. *Ibid.*, p.49.

35. *Nationality and Internationalism*, *Neue Zeit*, January 1908, translated in French, *ibid.*, p.129.

36. K. Kautsky, *La nationalité moderne*, *Neue Zeit* 1887, translated into French, *ibid.*, p.119.

37. *Ibid.*, pp.114-127.

38. *Ibid.*, p.114.

39. *Ibid.*, p.116.

40. *Ibid.*, p.35.

41. *Ibid.*, p.136.

42. K. Kautsky, *Nationality and Internationalism*, *Neue Zeit*, 1908, *ibid.*, p.136.

43. *Ibid.*, pp.137-138.

44. For a typical example, see E. Nimni, *Marxism and Nationalism*, op. cit.

45. K. Kautsky, Nationality and Internationalism, quoted in R. Luxemburg, The National Question, op. cit., pp.126-127.
46. Ibid., p.127.
47. See The National Question and Autonomy, written in 1908-9, available in ibid., p.159.
48. Ibid., p.177
49. Ibid., pp.129-131.
50. Ibid., p.93.
51. Ibid., p.97.
52. Ibid., p.96.
53. Although on this, as on so many other issues, Trotsky – who had already written brilliantly on the Balkans during the wars of 1912 and 1913 – took up Lenin’s legacy after he joined the Bolsheviks in 1917 and deepened some aspects of it. Stalin’s Marxism and the National Question, written in 1913, used to be quoted by many on the left as a classical exposition of the Bolshevik position. Much of it is a straightforward regurgitation of Kautsky’s account of the origins of the nation state and of Lenin’s argument for self determination and against cultural national autonomy. But it also attempts to define what a nation is using a list of factors. The attempt has been very influential, but in fact breaks with the general approach of Lenin and gives a lot of attention to psychological and “national character” factors in a manner that is closer to Bauer than Kautsky and Lenin.
54. V.I. Lenin, The Right of Nations to Self Determination, in Critical Remarks on the National Question and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination (Moscow 1971), pp.40-41.
55. Although most of his polemic was not directed against Luxemburg but against Radek.
56. V.I. Lenin, On the Right of Nations to Self Determination, op. cit., pp.56-57.
57. Ibid., p.70.
58. Ibid., p.77.
59. Ibid., p.101.
60. V.I. Lenin, The Discussion of Self Determination Summed Up, in Critical Remarks, op. cit., p.124.
61. Ibid., p.83.
62. Ibid., p.83.
63. Minutes of the Second Congress of the RSDLP (London 1978), p.81.
64. V.I. Lenin, Critical Remarks on the National Question, in Critical Remarks, op. cit., p.16.
65. Ibid., p.31.
66. Ibid., pp.22-23.
67. Ibid., p.21.
68. Ibid., p.10.
69. Ibid., p.13.
70. Ibid., p.137.
71. Ibid., p.138.
72. Ibid., p.24.

73. Figures for 1984, from M. Kidron and R. Segal, *The New State of the World Atlas* (London 1984).
74. See *Independent on Sunday*, 2 August 1992, p.5.
75. In a recent televised discussion between Stuart Hall, former guru of Marxism Today, a French new philosopher and Salman Rushdie, only Rushdie showed any sign of understanding that there could be something good about a fusion of cultures.
76. Marx and Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in Marx, Engels, Lenin. *The Essential Left* (London 1960), p.18.
77. P. Manuel, *Popular Music of the Non-Western World* (Oxford 1988), p.20.
78. *Ibid.*, p.20.
79. *Ibid.*, p.20.
80. *Ibid.*, p.21.
81. *Ibid.*, p.20.
82. *Ibid.*, pp.18-19.
83. B. Anderson, *op. cit.*, p.40.
84. *Ibid.*, pp.42-43.
85. *Ibid.*, p.67.
86. *Ibid.*, p.81.
87. *Ibid.*, p.76.
88. *Ibid.*, p.77.
89. *Ibid.*, p.63, see also, for an elaboration of his argument, pp.119-121.
90. *Ibid.*, p.30.
91. A talk for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, printed in *New Left Review* 193, March/June 1992.
92. E. Gellner, *op. cit.*, p.48.
93. *Ibid.*, pp.46-48.
94. *Ibid.*, p.46.
95. *Ibid.*, p.47.
96. *Ibid.*, p.55.
97. It was written after both Gellner's and Anderson's.
98. E. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, *op. cit.*, pp.10-11.
99. *Ibid.*, pp.127-130.
100. *Ibid.*, pp.172-173.
101. With the partial exception of Yugoslavia, where the domination was in the hands of the two nationalities who spoke Serbo-Croat and the third Slav speaking nationality, the Slovenes all of whom united against the non-Slavs, Albanian speakers.
102. The only, partial, exception was the Czech part of Czechoslovakia.
103. Both Nigel Harris and to a lesser extent, Eric Hobsbawm, make great play of the existence of capitals today that are not tied to national states or are tied to very small ones, like Singapore or Hong Kong. But these capitals are overwhelmingly the exception, not the rule. The great corporations that dominate world production may operate across national frontiers, but they all make sure they have at least one national state to fall back on in emergencies. Even Hong

Kong's capitalists are not really an exception: they have relied on the British state in the past, and are now much keener on the statelet merging into the giant Chinese state than are the great mass of Hong Kong people. For the more general arguments against Nigel Harris's view, see my *The State and Capital*, *International Socialism* 2:51.

104. *Il Materialismo storico e la filosofia di Benedetto Croce* (Turin 1948), p.38.

105. For the arguments showing the lack of national oppression in Scotland, see C. Bambery, *Scotland's National Question* (SWP, 1990).

106. Thus the *Glasgow Herald*, 10 August 1992, could emphasise the "achievements" of the British team at the 1992 Olympics and print a list of medals under the title *Britain's Role of Honor*, even if some of the emphasis was on the performance of Scottish competitors. At the same Olympics thousands of spectators in the audience showed their double national identity by waving the Catalan flag when a Castillian athlete won a major event.

107. G. Brennan, *The Spanish Labyrinth*, op. cit., pp.268, 279-280.

108. For a detailed account of developments up to the end of 1991, see D. Blackie, *The Road to Hell*, *International Socialism* 53, Winter 1991.