

Some reflections on 'The Break-up of Britain'

Nationalism has been a great puzzle to (non-nationalist) politicians and theorists ever since its invention, not only because it is both powerful and devoid of any discernible rational theory, but also because its shape and function are constantly changing. Like the cloud with which Hamlet taunted Polonius, it can be interpreted according to taste as a camel, a weasel or a whale, though it is none of these. Perhaps the error is to apply zoological criteria instead of meteorological analysis. We are—to continue the metaphor—at present living through some sort of climatic change visibly affecting this type of meteorological phenomenon. Let us begin, unlike Tom Nairn, whose recent book suggests these reflections, by charting this change.* The political crux of modern nationalism is the demand for 'self-determination', i.e. to constitute something like a 'nation-state' as today understood: a sovereign and ideally homogeneous territorial unit inhabited as 'citizens' by the members of a 'nation', as defined in a variety of conventional ways (ethnic, linguistic, cultural, historical, etc.). Conversely, the citizens of modern territorial states are believed normally to constitute such a 'nation', those who do

not fit the bill being classified as ‘minorities’ or other ‘nations’ which ought logically to have their own state. The point has been reached where the terms ‘state’ and ‘nation’ are today interchangeable (‘United Nations’). Whatever our definition of peoples, nations, nationalities, etc., it is clear that this identification is historically quite recent, especially in the standardized form which has become fashionable and which misleads incautious observers, including Nairn.¹ In the first place, modern territorial states of the kind now taken to be normal were rather unusual until well into the nineteenth century, whether or not they claimed to be national. In the second place, the enormous difficulties and cruelties to which the attempt to divide Europe into homogeneous nation-states has led in this century (including separatism, partition, mass expulsion and genocide) demonstrates its historic novelty.

The Nation-State in the Nineteenth Century

Nevertheless, a strong case can be and was made in the nineteenth century for a certain type of ‘nation-state’, though it has little to do with nationalism in the current sense, except in so far as this also means a convenient form of emotional cement or civic religion to weld together the citizens of such states, divided by class and in other ways (‘patriotism’). Such nation-states were the main building blocks of world capitalism during a lengthy period of its development, and with it of bourgeois society in the ‘developed’ world; as Marx recognized when he described that society in the *Communist Manifesto* as both a global unity and ‘an interdependence of nations’. They represented that crucial element—the creation of the internal conditions (e.g. a ‘national market’) and the external conditions for the development of the ‘national economy’ through state organization and action. Probably, as recent Marxists like Perry Anderson and Immanuel Wallerstein have argued, the existence of an international complex of separate states was also essential to the global growth of capitalism. World capitalism consisted primarily of a set of economic flows to, from and between such developed national economies. Marx, though in other respects not a nationalist, accepted the historic role of a certain number of such national-state economies, which was indeed generally assumed in the nineteenth century.

The case for such nation-states was not nationalist in the current sense, inasmuch as it did not envisage a world of nation-states irrespective of size and resources, but only one of ‘viable’ states of medium to large size, which consequently 1. excluded a large number of ‘national’ groups from statehood, and 2. *de facto* abandoned the national homogeneity of most accepted ‘nation-states’. The classic statement of this programme was the outline of the ‘Europe of Nations’ produced in 1858 by Mazzini, who incidentally (like Cavour) found it difficult to fit into his scheme one of the few undeniable national mass movements of the time, the Irish. He envisaged a Europe composed of eleven states or federations, *all* of which (with the significant but apparent exception of Italy) were multi-national

*Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain*, NLB, London 1977. All page references in the text and footnotes below are to Nairn’s book, unless otherwise specified.

¹ England is no less a nation than Scotland because Nairn does not think that it is yet ‘a nation like the rest’ (p. 301), i.e. having a nationalist ideology and party of the now standard model like the Scots.

not only by current standards but also by the essentially nineteenth-century Wilsonian ones of the post-1918 peace settlements.² The evidence is overwhelming that at this stage the crux of nationalist movements was not so much state independence as such, but rather the construction of 'viable' states, in short 'unification' rather than 'separatism'—though this was concealed by the fact that most national movements also tended to break up one or more of the surviving obsolete empires of Austria, Turkey and Russia. Not only the German and Italian movements aimed at unification, but the Poles, the Romanians, the Yugoslavs (for whose eventual composite state there was no historic precedent), the Bulgarians (with Macedonia), very notably the Greeks, and even, through their (unhistorical) aspiration to unity with the Slovaks, the Czechs. Conversely, movements for the actual state independence of small nations, however defined, were exceedingly rare, as distinct from various degrees of autonomy or lesser recognition within larger states. Nairn is quite wrong in regarding the nineteenth-century Scots as a striking anomaly ('the country's nineteenth-century lack of nationhood, its near-total absence from the great and varied stage of European nationalism'—p. 144). They were a nation all right and knew it, but, unlike several other small European nations, did not need to demand what they—or rather their ruling class—already enjoyed. It is pure anachronism to expect them to have demanded an independent state at this time.

For the same reason, the prejudice (even among nationalists) against the pulverization of states (i.e. against mini-nations and mini-states) was deeply ingrained, at least in Europe. Petty German principalities or Central American republics were jokes, 'Balkanization' a term of abuse. The Austrians after 1918 could not be convinced of the viability of their small state, though this has been demonstrated since 1945. Danzig was regarded as an abortion, unlike Singapore today. The main significance of such international recognition as was given to most of the surviving pre-bourgeois mini-states was for the purposes of philately and company registration. And indeed, by contemporary standards, they were at best tolerated freaks.

The Separatist Nationalisms of the Present

The present situation is totally different. First, the characteristic nationalist movement of our time is separatist, aiming at the break-up of existing states including—the fact is novel—the oldest-established 'nation-states', such as Britain, France, Spain and even—the case of Jura separatism is significant—Switzerland.³ It is perfectly possible to find *ad hoc* explanations for each of these cases of fission, as Nairn does for the possible break-up of Britain; but these, as he agrees, are beside the point so long as the *generality* of the phenomenon is not recognized and

² Even on the assumption (doubtful in those days) that the Italians formed a single homogeneous nation, post-1945 devolution has rightly recognised the need for a special status for Sicily, Sardinia, the bi- or tri-national South Tyrol and the Val d'Aosta.

³ The major exceptions to this trend in Europe, the German Federal Republic and Italy, have almost certainly avoided separatist tendencies so far—e.g. by Bavaria, Sicily and Sardinia—by virtue of adopting or being forced to adopt a far-reaching devolution after the war, as part of the reaction against fascism which pushed nineteenth-century tendencies of national unification to their logical conclusion.

explained. The problem as such is not British; merely its specific circumstances and political implications.

Second, there has been a complete transformation of the concept of state viability, as is evident from the fact that the majority of the members of the United Nations is soon likely to consist of the late-twentieth-century (republican) equivalents of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha and Schwarzburg-Sondershausen. This is no doubt due, in the first instance, mainly to the process of decolonization, which left a half-globe full of small territories (or large territories with small populations) which could not or would not be combined into larger units or federations. It is also due, in the second instance, to an international situation which, with some exceptions, protects even the very feeble mini-states—once their independent status is ratified—from conquest by larger ones, if only through fear of war between the powers. The international situation also, though to a lesser extent, protects large states against disintegration, since few new states are anxious to encourage the sort of movement which might threaten their own fragile unity.⁴

Nevertheless, this Balkanization of the world of states (or rather, this transformation of the United Nations into something like the later stages of the Holy Roman Empire), also reflects a change in world capitalism, which Marxists have not hitherto brought seriously into the discussion of nationalism: namely, the relative decline of the medium-to-large nation-state and 'national economy' as the main building block of the world economy. Quite apart from the fact that in the era of nuclear super-power even a fairly high potential of production, men and resources is no longer sufficient for the military status which was formerly the criterion of a 'great power',⁵ the rise of the transnational corporation and international economic management have transformed both the international division of labour and its mechanism, and changed the criterion of a state's 'economic viability'. This is no longer believed to be an economy sufficiently large to provide an adequate 'national market' and sufficiently varied to produce most of the range of goods from foodstuffs to capital equipment, but a strategic position somewhere along the complex circuits of an integrated world economy, which can be exploited to secure an adequate national income. While size was essential to the old criterion, it appears largely irrelevant to the new; as it was in the pre-industrial stage of capitalist development, when Genoa or Hamburg saw no reason to measure their viability as states by the criteria of Spain or Britain. By these new standards, Singapore is as viable and much more prosperous than Indonesia, Abu Dhabi superior to Egypt, and any speck in the Pacific can look forward to independence and a good time for its president, if it happens to possess a location for a naval base for which more solvent

⁴ Paradoxically, this means that separatist movements with genuine 'national' or ethnic mass support, are today apt to be discouraged by the bulk of other states, irrespective of ideology; cf. the attitude of most African governments to the Biafran and Katangan secessions. The safest way to win support for independence is to be a dependency of a decolonizing power, i. e. to be already marked on the map as a separate territory—the current equivalent of being a 'historical nation'.

⁵ This is probably the first period in the history of the modern state system when two states generally admitted to be *economic* 'great powers' in the old sense—Germany and Japan—have made only the most nominal attempts so far to acquire corresponding military status.

states will compete, a lucky gift of nature such as manganese, or merely enough beaches and pretty girls to become a tourist paradise. Of course, in military terms most mini-states are negligible; but so are most large states today. The difference between Britain and Barbados in this respect is no longer one of kind, but only one of degree.

This combination of a new phase in the international economy and the past generation's peculiar international balance of nuclear fear, has not *created* the fissiparous nationalisms of our time, but it has taken the brakes off their dreams. If the Seychelles can have a vote in the UN as good as Japan's, and Kuwaitis can, by dint of oil power, be treated like the English milords of old, then surely only the sky is the limit for the Isle of Man or the Channel Islands (to name two candidates whose case for independence is, by current standards, better than most) or the Canaries and Corsica (whose separatist movements are, no doubt, being supported somewhere or other on grounds of Marxist theory). And, of course, the new situation has transformed the prospects of mini-independence for the time being. Without discussing their merits, such proposals as statehood for a part of Northern Ireland or a vast Saharan republic resting on 60,000 nomads can no longer be excluded *a priori* from serious consideration on practical grounds. Moreover, the small 'developed' state is indeed today potentially much more prosperous, viable and taken more seriously than for some centuries. If Iceland and Luxemburg, why not Brittany and Biscay? For nationalists, who are by definition unconcerned with anything except their private collective, and given to the wilder flights of optimism, such arguments are entirely positive.⁶ At most they may find their night's rest occasionally disturbed by what one might call the 'Shetland effect', namely the thought that you do not have to be an old or large state to be vulnerable to fission. Others must see the emergence of the new divisive nationalism in a wider context.

Sovereignty as Dependence

Their first observation will be that the multiplication of independent sovereign states substantially changed the sense of the term 'independence' for most of them into a synonym for 'dependence'—as anticipated by that historic ancestor of modern neo-colonialism, nineteenth-century Latin America. We may leave aside the obvious fact that many of them exist as independent states only on sufferance or under protection. (Cyprus, ex-Portuguese Timor and Lebanon show what may happen when neither is available.) They are economically dependent in two ways: generally, on an international economy they cannot normally hope to influence as individuals;⁷ and specifically—in inverse proportion to their size—on the greater powers and transnational corporations. The fact that these today prefer—or find indispensable—a neo-colonial relationship rather than something like a formalized dependence, should

⁶ However, some small peoples or states have probably learned by long experience to scale down their hopes to more modest size, e.g. perhaps the Welsh (as distinct from the Scots), the Slovenes (as distinct from the Croats). The reasons for such differences may be worth investigating.

⁷ The temporary stranglehold of some oil-producing states over the world energy market is exceptional. No other primary commodity, however uneven its geographic distribution, has given small states possessing it comparable resources or leverage.

not mislead us. On the contrary. The optimal strategy for a neo-colonial transnational economy is precisely one in which the number of officially sovereign states is maximized and their average size and strength—i.e. their power effectively to impose the conditions under which foreign powers and foreign capital will have to operate—is minimized. Even in the 1920s, the real banana republics were small—say, Nicaragua rather than Colombia. And today it is pretty evident that the USA or Japan and their corporations would prefer to deal with Alberta rather than Canada, Western Australia rather than the Australian Commonwealth, when it came to making economic terms. (There are indeed autonomist aspirations in both provinces.) This aspect of the new state system is not to be overlooked, though it cannot, of course, be used as a blanket *a priori* argument for large states against smaller ones, and even less for unitary states against devolved or federal ones.

A second observation is that, irrespective of the merits of any particular national cause, the present situation encourages—and not only among nationalists—the assumption that state independence, or what amounts to it, is the normal mode of satisfying the demands of any group with some claim to a territorial base (a ‘country’), i.e. a potential nation.⁸ This is mistaken on three grounds. In the first place, there is no warrant for this assumption in theory, history, or even current practice. In the second place, it implicitly or explicitly discards the numerous and (with all their problems) far from unworkable formulae for combining national unity and devolution, decentralization or federation. To name but a few: the USA, Canada, Australia, Federal Germany, Italy, Yugoslavia, Switzerland and Austria. In other words, it tends to overlook those problems of the ‘revolt against big states’ and ‘demands for regional self-government’ (p. 253) which cannot be assimilated to nationalist ones which can in turn be expressed as separatism: Brittany is visible, Normandy is not.

In the third place, and perhaps most seriously, the problem is side-stepped of how to organize the actual coexistence of different ethnic, racial, linguistic and other groups in areas which are practically indivisible. These are, of course, the norm.⁹ It is no reflection on the merits of, say, Flemish nationalism to say that to anyone except passionate Flemings the discontents of that nation seem objectively much easier to deal with than the problem of, say, the blacks in the USA or settled immigrant workers anywhere in Europe.

Marxism and Nationalism

Does the present phase of nationalism require any change in the attitude of Marxists to this phenomenon? If Nairn’s book is anything to go by, it certainly appears to require, rather than the by now ritual breast-beating about theoretical deficiencies in this field, a reminder of the basic fact that

⁸ Cf. Nairn’s remark that ‘self-government’ is ‘the boringly normal answer to nationality-conflicts’ (p. 241). As so often, the tendency to use rhetorical epithets (‘boring’) is a warning to readers and should have been to the writer.

⁹ Quebec nationalism, being essentially linguistic, is an excellent example of setting out to solve one language question by putting substantial minorities—of anglophones, immigrants, Eskimos and Indians—into precisely the same situation from which it wishes to emancipate francophones.

Marxists as such are not nationalists. They cannot be so as theorists, given the nature of what passes for nationalist theory. (They certainly cannot be as historians, given Ernest Renan's ancient and true observation that getting their history wrong is an essential characteristic of nations.) They cannot be so in practice, since nationalism by definition subordinates all other interests to those of its specific 'nation'. We need not take the Luxemburgist position to state categorically that any Marxists who are not, at least in theory, prepared to see the 'interests' of their own country or people subordinated to wider interests, had best reconsider their ideological loyalties. This applies not only to Marxists. Israelis and Palestinians may think the maintenance or establishment of their respective states worth a global war, or act as if they did, but the rest of the world's 4,000-odd millions can hardly agree with them. The test, of course, must be the Marxist's *own* country or people, for obvious psychological and other reasons. The test of a Jewish Marxist, even one who wishes to preserve what is now an established Jewish people in Israel, is that he or she is *not* a Zionist. This also applies to Scots.

In practice, naturally, the test is not so clear-cut as in theory. This is not so much because most Marxists, starting with Marx and Engels, were and are proud of the nations, ethnic, cultural or other communities to which they belong, but because for obvious reasons (which Nairn underlines) most actual Marxist socialist movements operate within the confines of some state or people—indeed, in most successful cases as mobilizers and representatives of nations as well as of their oppressed—and the interests of such national entities are often clearly neither congruent nor convergent. This leaves a lot of scope for Marxist rationalizations and justifications of national policies. The problem lies in distinguishing those which are merely rationalizations. Once again, this is easier for outsiders. Few non-Chinese Marxists are impressed by Chinese defences in Marxist terms of a foreign policy which in recent years has not looked designed to advance the cause of non-Chinese socialism. At this moment, Eritreans and the Somali Republic (the latter claiming to be Marxist) are doubtless justifying the break-up of the Ethiopian state with quotations from Lenin, as the (Marxist) Ethiopian government is justifying the maintenance of its country's unity. Outsiders can readily see that their actions (but not their arguments) would be much the same if none of them claimed to be Marxist.

If Marxists, though believers in national development and mostly devoted to their own nations, are not nationalists, they still have to come to terms with the political fact of nationalism and to define their attitudes towards its specific manifestations. Ever since Marx, this has for the most part, and necessarily, been a matter not of theoretical principle (except perhaps for the Luxemburgian minority which tends to suspect nations *en bloc*) but of pragmatic judgment in changing circumstances. In principle, Marxists are neither for nor against independent statehood for any nation (which is not the same as Lenin's 'right to self-determination'), even assuming that there can be other than pragmatic agreement on what constitutes 'the nation' in any particular case. Neither, of course, is anyone else, including nationalists—except for their own nation. If they have any historical image of the international ordering of a future world socialism, it is certainly not a mosaic of homogeneous sovereign nation-

states, large or—as we can now see—mainly small, but as some form of association, or organizational union of nations, possibly proceeding, though this note has been rarely struck with confidence since the *Manifesto*, to the eventual dissolution of national into global or generally human culture. Since they rightly see nations in the modern sense as historical phenomena rather than *a priori* eternal data of human society, their policy cannot regard them as absolute. How indeed could it in, say, the Middle East, where the question of war or peace hinges on two 'nations' which, as territorial state-nations, had hardly, if at all, been conceived in 1918. In short, the Marxist attitude towards nationalism as a programme is similar in many respects to Marx's attitude towards other *a priori* abstractions of what in his day was petty-bourgeois radicalism, e.g. the 'democratic republic'. It is not unsympathetic, but contingent and not absolute. The fundamental criterion of Marxist pragmatic judgment has always been whether nationalism as such, or any specific case of it, advances the cause of socialism; or conversely, how to prevent it from inhibiting its progress; or alternatively, how to mobilize it as a force to assist its progress. Few Marxists have argued that *no* nationalist movement can be supported, none that *all* automatically serve this purpose and are therefore always to be supported. No Marxist (outside the nation concerned) will regard with other than suspicion *Marxist* parties which put the independence of their nations above all other objectives regardless of context.

Lenin and National Liberation

Nevertheless, since Lenin Marxists have developed a national policy powerful enough to associate Marxism and national liberation movements over large parts of the world, and sometimes to build national movements under Marxist leadership. This policy rested essentially on three pillars. *First*, it widened the category of 'national movements' regarded as essentially 'progressive' in their impact much beyond Marx's and Engels's own. It could now include the great majority of twentieth-century national movements, especially when, as during the anti-fascist period, it was extended to embrace any national resistance to the most dangerous reactionary powers. Though Nairn appears not to be aware of this, 'progressive' nationalism was therefore not confined only to the category of movements directed against imperialist exploitation and representing something like the 'bourgeois-democratic phase' in the development of backward countries. *Second*, it therefore made possible and desirable revolutionary Marxist movements which acted not simply as class movements of the exploited and oppressed, but also as leaders in the fight of entire nations for emancipation: in short, movements such as those of the Chinese, Vietnamese, Yugoslavs, etc.—but also of Gramscian communism. *Third*, it recognized the social forces which gave national movements reality, and the political power of such movements, by accepting as a matter of principle the right of self-determination including secession—though Lenin, in fact, did not recommend socialists in the countries concerned to *favour* secession except in specific, and pragmatically identifiable, circumstances.

In spite of its remarkable successes, this Leninist policy should not go uncriticized. Thus there is no denying the fact that only in a few cases

have Marxists succeeded in establishing or maintaining themselves as the leading force in their national movement. In most cases, especially when such movements were already in existence as serious political forces or under the auspices of state governments, they have either become subordinate to, or been absorbed by, or pushed aside by non-Marxist or anti-Marxist nationalism. To this extent, the Luxemburgist case is not entirely unrealistic. Looking back on the Irish movement, for instance, it may well be argued that an Irish workers' party would today be more politically significant and promising if Connolly had not, by his rebellion and death identified its cause with Catholic-nationalist Fenianism, thus effectively making impossible a united labour movement of North and South. So far from transforming it, the Marxist element in Irish nationalism has produced little more than another nationalist saint and martyr, and a social-revolutionary tinge on the radical fringes of the IRA which, as Ulster since 1968 demonstrates, has not been anything like strong enough to overcome the tradition so readily mobilized by and for the Provos. Irish communism is insignificant and the Irish Labour Party weaker than anywhere else in the British Isles. I am not arguing, even if such an exercise in counter-factual (i.e. fictional) history were possible, that the Irish socialist movement would have done better to concentrate on the class interests of its proletarian and agrarian constituency, leaving national insurrection to others. I merely point out that, in its own Marxist terms, the Connolly Marxist-nationalist policy must be regarded as a failure. There is no reason to suppose *a priori* that Scots or Welsh revolutionary Marxists have a good chance of transforming the SNP or Plaid Cymru into some kind of Vietcong merely by offering their services and leadership to the nationalist cause.

Whatever the pros and cons of Lenin's national policy in the abstract, the present situation differs from the one envisaged in his day in four main respects. First, as we have seen, the relation between national states and global capitalist development, internally and internationally, is no longer what it was. Second, the virtual disappearance of formal empires ('colonialism') has snapped the main link between anti-imperialism and the slogan of national self-determination. However real the dependence of neo-colonialism, the struggle against it simply cannot any longer be crystallized round the slogan of establishing independent political statehood, because most territories concerned already have it. Third, the emergence of a large socialist sector of the globe has introduced problems of national friction and potential separatism which plainly cannot have the same relation to the overthrow of capitalism as in colonies and capitalist metropolises, and this may also be true of national problems in non-socialist third-world countries. Finally, as we have seen, the visible problem of nationalism today is largely that of the fission of 'developed' capitalist states. In short, the relationship between nationalism and both capitalism and socialism (present or future) is profoundly changed.

This is of no significance to nationalists, who do not care what this relationship is, so long as Ruritanians (or whoever) acquire sovereign statehood as a nation, or indeed what happens thereafter. Their utopia—by now at least as shopsoiled by practice as some others—consists precisely in the achievement of Ruritanian (and if possible Greater Ruritanian) independence and rule, if need be over the non-Ruritanians

in their midst. On the other hand, it raises considerable intellectual hurdles for nationalists wishing to disguise themselves as Marxists, for Marxists who want to be on the winning side for a change, or for anyone else seeking to score the call of the nationalist bugle for the full historical-materialist orchestra. For the problem does not lie in admitting the fact—reluctant though many Marxists have been to do so—that for most purposes or at most times class exists effectively within the confines of a community, territory, culture, racial or linguistic group or state—i.e. within those of a potential or actual 'nation'. In short, and though Nairn suggests otherwise (p. 82), the main debate among Marxists on the 'national question' has not been between Leninists and Luxemburgians.¹⁰

The Contradictions of 'Nationalist-Marxism'

The real problem for nationalist-Marxists is twofold. First, it lies in the fact that there is no way of turning the formation of 'national communities' (i.e. the multiplication of nation-states *as such*) into a historic engine for generating socialism either to replace or to supplement the Marxian historic mechanism. (This, as we have seen, includes the formation of *some* nation-states as an essential part of capitalist development, and a crucial strategic role for *some* national movements; but not what nationalism requires, namely a charter for *any* such state or movement.) Indeed, Nairn's own admittedly rather improvised theory of nationalism (pp. 334–50) does not set out to provide such a mechanism, but merely to establish that the continuing multiplication of independent states ('socio-political fragmentation') up to an undefined completion (p. 356) is an ineluctable by-product of the uneven development of capitalism, and therefore must be accepted as the 'settled and inescapable' setting of socialist aspirations. This may or may not be so, but it can only become a force which socialists welcome as socialists on the entirely unargued assumption that separatism is in itself a step to revolution.

Second, and crucially for nationalists though not for Marxists, there is no way of using the general argument of growing Balkanization as a specific argument for the independence of any one putative 'nation'. To assume that the multiplication of independent states has an end is to assume that 1. the world can be subdivided into a finite number of homogeneous potential 'nation-states' immune to further subdivision—i.e. 2. that these

¹⁰ In Lenin's period, it was a four-cornered debate between: 1. those who placed the 'national' fact first (like the Polish Socialist Party and Nairn, cf. pp. 350–52); 2. those who placed it nowhere (like Luxemburg and the SDKP); and those who recognized its political reality but wanted to prevent it from weakening the socialist movement—3. under the conditions of Tsarist Russia, and 4. under those of the Habsburg Empire. It so happened that, for historical reasons, 3. and 4. tended to imply different theories of what a nation was—i.e. stressing respectively (to simplify matters) its *territorial* character and its nature as a '*cultural community*'. It also happened that the Bolsheviks, who favoured self-determination (including the right to secession), were revolutionaries; whereas the Austrian social-democratic leaders, who favoured the maintenance of their state's unity in some federal form, were not. And that the Russian party, which had no mass base, maintained its all-Russian unity; whereas the Austrian party failed to. Finally, the Austrians paid no attention to the Russian discussions, whereas the Russians felt obliged to refute the Austrian solution—if only because it was favoured by the (non-territorial) Jewish *Bund*, and might encourage other tendencies to weaken RSDLP unity by national fission. Cf. Perez Merhav, 'Klassenkampf und Nationale Frage zur Zeir der II Internationale' in *Annali Fondazione G. Feltrinelli* 1976, pp. 165–87.

can be specified in advance. This is plainly not the case, and even if it were, the result would not necessarily be a world of nation-states. British imperialism was certainly biased in using the multiplicity of linguistic groups on the Indian subcontinent as an argument against Indian nationalism; but—if we do not actually deny their ‘right to self-determination’—it is far from obvious that the division of the Indo-Burmese-Chinese frontier region into twenty separate sovereign ‘nation-states’ would be either practicable or desirable.¹¹ We need not here discuss the assumption that all ‘nations’ must or are destined to form separate sovereign states, beyond pointing out that any finite number of such states must exclude some potential candidates from statehood. In short, whatever the assessment of the general historical tendency, the argument for the formation of any independent nation-state must always be an *ad hoc* argument, which undermines the case for *universal* self-determination by separatism. The irony of nationalism is that the argument for the separation of Scotland from England is exactly analogous to the argument for the separation of the Shetlands from Scotland; and so are the arguments against both separations.

It would, of course, be absurd to deny that the relation between nationalism and socialism also raises enormous difficulties for non-nationalist socialists. There is the subjective dilemma of, say, the US Marxists, whose country is the major pillar of international capitalism (and reaction), who cannot realistically look forward to its socialist transformation in the foreseeable future, and whose nationalism is largely defined by excluding people like them as ‘un-American’. Like the German anti-fascists under the Nazis, they could (but with less conviction) console themselves with the thought that they represented the ‘true’ as against the falsified ‘nation’; but in reality they cannot avoid swimming dead against the stream of local ‘patriotism’. There is the more general, and alas objective, fact that Marxist movements and states have failed to find a solution to ‘the national question’. Neither Austro-Marxism nor (without state power) Leninist Marxism has been able to prevent the break-up of comprehensive parties into national sections when national pressure was sufficiently great; and Leninism has certainly not been able to prevent the break-up of its international movement on largely national lines. Multi-national socialist states have what appears to the naked eye to be much the same problems of local nationalisms as non-socialist ones. Alternatively, Marxist movements and states have tended to become national not only in form but in substance, i.e. nationalist. There is nothing to suggest that this trend will not continue.

If this is so, the already evident gap between Marxism as the analysis of what is, or is coming into being, and Marxism as the formulation of what we want to happen, will grow wider. A little more of utopia will have to be dismantled, or packed off to a future beyond prediction. The socialist world will, if it comes into being in the present historic constellation—but who will bet much on that?—not be the world of international peace,

¹¹ I use the data given by the late R. P. Dutt in *Modern India* (1940 ed.), pp. 264–5, omitting languages (or as Dutt claimed ‘very minor dialects’) spoken by less than 50,000 people. Six were spoken by more than 200,000. The argument does not depend on the validity of the data.

fraternity and friendship of which philosophers and revolutionaries have dreamed. Not all of us will be as quick as Nairn to write off this 'grand universalizing tradition' (which as he says goes back far beyond Marx) as a mere aberration of Eurocentrism, a 'metropolitan fantasy' (p. 336–7)—fortunately his theory of nationalism is too unconvincing to tempt us to do so.¹² However, we have had enough time since 1914 to get used to an international socialism—as movements or states—which falls short of the old dreams and hopes. The real danger for Marxists is the temptation to welcome nationalism as ideology and programme rather than realistically to accept it as a fact, a condition of their struggle as socialists. (We do not, after all, welcome the fact that capitalism has proved considerably more resistant and economically viable than Marx or Lenin expected, even though we are obliged to accept it.) Quite apart from implying the abandonment of the values of the Enlightenment, of reason and science, such a conversion also implies a withdrawal from a realistic analysis of the world situation, Marxist or otherwise. That is why books like Nairn's ought to be criticized, in spite of, perhaps because of, the author's talent and frequent insights. Karl Kraus's phrase about psychoanalysis (whether it was right or wrong about Freud) also applies to them: they are at least a symptom of the sickness of which they purport to be the cure.

On 'The Break-up of Britain'

It is not my object here to discuss Nairn's book in detail. This consists essentially of two sets of arguments: a specific case for 'the break-up of Britain' and a general case for the inadequacy of Marxism on the grounds—the author will perhaps pardon a little polemical oversimplification—that it does not recognize that the splitting of big states into smaller states is a sort of historical law. The former contains interesting, acute, sometimes remarkable, observations about English and Irish, though not so much about Scottish and Welsh history, but suffers from a tendency to anti-English invective. The latter suffers from the usual disadvantages of special pleading disguised as grand theory. As an interpretation of Marxism it is debatable. As a theory of nationalism, in spite of neo-Marxist terminology ('uneven development', references to Anderson and Wallerstein), it is not much different from others now current among academics (cf. pp. 96–105, and chapter 9).¹³

¹² For one thing, the argument that it derives essentially from the reaction of 'peripheral' élites against metropolitan capitalist progress and penetration neglects its historic origin and role in the core countries of capitalist development, which provided the conceptual model for the nationalism of the rest: England, France, the USA, Germany. In fact, Nairn's argument can be easily turned round, and the modern world of nation-states, territorial 'relatively mono-cultural, homogeneous, unilinguistic entities that have become the UNO standard pattern' (p. 317), can be presented as essentially a—one hopes temporary—product of Eurocentric fashion. This would, of course, be no better as political rhetoric than Nairn's version.

¹³ Except, possibly, in the doubtful contention that nineteenth century nationalism was essentially a reaction against 'indubitably archaic state forms' such as the old multi-national or rather multi-communal empires (pp. 86–7, 317–8). It was this evidently and necessarily, but it does not follow that archaic state forms 'were doomed to *disintegrate* into nation-states on the western model . . . by the nature of capitalism'. [emphasis added]. As argued above, they were at least as likely, indeed in the core areas of capitalist development *more* likely, to sink 'particularism' in large and more unified nation-states such as the UK, France, Germany and Italy.

It is more tempting to discuss Nairn's lengthy, impassioned and often brilliant enquiry into the 'crisis of England', for it really is important to trace back to the peculiarities and compromises of the English revolution, the triumph of British bourgeois society, in some respects unusually complete, in others unusually incomplete. Moreover, Nairn breaks genuinely new Marxist ground here, particularly in linking British capitalism's inadaptability to the conditions of the second half of this century to the cultural-political and state structures which are the result of these peculiarities of 'bourgeois revolution'. One must pay tribute in passing to Nairn's contribution. However, his arguments are double-edged. A century ago they could have been used to explain the triumphs and successes of British capitalism, just as analogous ones can today be used to explain the unusual success of German and Japanese capitalism, and not inconceivably the economic success of German socialism. Moreover, in one way or another such considerations apply to any bourgeois country, not excluding, in Nairn's own formulation, to eighteenth and nineteenth century Scotland. (Would it not be as true there as in England to say that 'the [Scottish] patrician class and state provided the necessary conditions for industrialization'?—p. 30). This is so because by Nairn's own argument 'uneven development' excludes the reality of a 'standard' version of a 100 per cent 'pure' bourgeois society. In any case, since no 'developed country' has so far produced a socialist revolution, some variant of the argument from history can be used to explain its non-occurrence anywhere. Conversely, since a growing number of the old 'nation-states' show tendencies to fission, the British analysis that it is due to economic shipwreck is unconvincing as an explanation of the more general phenomenon.

Nairn's book is by no means the only attempt to fudge the differences between Marxists and nationalism. What makes such books as his so melancholy a symptom of our times is precisely that he is *neither* the sort of nationalist who today sports a Marxist badge as before the war he might have looked to the ultra-right, *nor* the sort of Marxist who, in the crunch, discovers that he/she is a Jew or Arab *rather than* a Marxist. His strength has always been to see the auto-mystifications of those who talk of 'demystification', the intellectual cotton-wool behind political phrases masquerading as political analysis, the refusal to recognize realities because they are disagreeable. Where neither his nor most of the world's emotions are strongly committed, as on Ulster (about which, as he rightly observes, few people outside Northern Ireland really *care*), this lends his analysis an admirable muscular ruthlessness. Even his Scottish nationalism—not the same thing as his Scottishness—seems not so much a basis and objective of his politics as a last retreat.

For anybody can be a realist when prospects look good. The difficulty begins when, as today, analysis suggests to realistic observers like Nairn conclusions of deep pessimism. In spite of his disclaimer, his attitude is strongly marked by Walter Benjamin's image, which he quotes, of 'progress' as the pile of debris which we, advancing backwards into the future, see accumulating in the storms of history; by the fear that perhaps the future will not be as we wish, or even as we would find tolerable (pp. 359–60, 362). The various mechanisms on which Marxists, more or less loosely basing themselves on Marx's analysis, have relied for the

replacement of capitalism by socialism are not working: neither in the developed countries, nor in most of the 'third world'—itself a concept whose looseness is now obvious. As for the actual socialist states, their internal problems and the uncertainties of their own future are not to be denied. Moreover, even for those of us who refuse to diminish their extraordinary historic achievements, they are in their present form difficult to accept as models of a desirable socialist future. Capitalist society is at present in global crisis, but few can believe that its probable, or even in the short term its possible, outcome in any country will be socialism. On what then, other than blind will or an act of faith in historical inevitability, are we to base our hopes? But Marxists have never been blind voluntarists, nor have they ever based themselves on historical inevitability or philosophical generalization in the abstract. They have always sought to identify specific social and political forces, specific conjunctures and situations, which would dig capitalism's grave.

The Temptations of Separatism

Here lies the temptation of separatist nationalism, an unquestionably active, growing and powerful socio-political force, capable, on its own limited ground, of imposing terms not only on the workers, but also on the bourgeoisie and on capitalist states. Moreover, it visibly grows with the crisis of both. Nairn rightly stresses that Scots and Welsh national separatism as serious forces arise out of the crisis of British capitalism; he sees it as 'escape from the final stages of a shipwreck' (p. 90). It is equally and more concretely true, though he does not say so, that they acquired such mass support as they have, especially among workers, as a direct result of the failure of the British Labour Party in the sixties. So long as the Scots and Welsh put their hopes in whatever was the all-national party of 'progress and the people'—first Liberalism, later Labour—the mass basis for separatist nationalism was (unlike Ireland) negligible; and conversely, as in some other developed bourgeois states—notably the USA—the 'people's party' could acquire added strength (and capacity to serve its supporters) by broadening into an alliance of workers, intellectuals, national, racial and religious minorities, and disadvantaged regions.¹⁴ There is no reason to suppose that the discovery by the Scottish middle class of the oil bonanza—which in any case post-dated the rise of a nationalist mass basis—would have made the mass of Scots workers automatically more inclined to follow the SNP, or indeed that the argument that a flourishing and dynamic Scottish economy is stifled by the connection with backward England would have sounded more convincing in Strathclyde than it does anyway outside Scots nationalist circles.

Cannot this undoubted and formidable force, inseparable from capitalist

¹⁴ In an essay written in 1965, I argued this for the United Kingdom, but asked: 'Whether, with the erosion of the traditional labour movement, nationalist slogans may in future have a greater appeal to the Scottish or Welsh working class, is a question to which only the future can give an answer.' By the time the essay was in proof (1968), it was already possible to say: 'Since 1966 disillusion with a Labour government has turned both Scottish and Welsh nationalism into an electoral force for the first time in history.' (*Mouvements nationaux d'indépendances et classes populaires aux XIX et XX siècles*, Paris 1971, vol I, p. 42.) Nairn quotes the essay, but not the argument.

(or perhaps any) ‘development’, constantly generated by it, growing and becoming more universal with its inequalities, tensions and contradictions (pp. 334–40), be in some way the gravedigger of capitalism? Can it not, with all its admitted ambiguity (‘The Modern Janus’) be seen as not only inevitable but also desirable—e.g. as helping to restore ‘the real values of smaller, more recognizable communities’ (p. 253)? Must not, as for Sherlock Holmes, the elimination of all other hypotheses produce the true solution, however implausible? It can perhaps only produce ‘a detour on the way to revolution’ (p. 90), but where the main road has been blocked or destroyed, have we any other option? The temptation to discover that it can or must is great, but so also is the danger that the detour will become the journey. If separatist nationalism (in the form of the ‘break-up of Britain’ or in any other country) turns out *not* to be ‘a progressive action—a step forward not only for their own peoples, but for England and the wider state-order as well’ (p. 89), ‘then neo-nationalism needs no further justification at all’ (p. 90). ‘Who, in that case, can deny (the Scots, Welsh, etc.) effective self-determination, not as a moral piety, but as an urgently necessary, practical step?’ (p. 91). We have insensibly got to the point where creating another nation-state becomes its own purpose, and the left-wing argument becomes indistinguishable from that of all the Ruritania of the past whose spokesmen were anxious to assure us all, and doubtless to believe, that what was good for Ruritania was good for the world, but if it was not, they would go ahead nevertheless.

Nationalism and Socialism in Britain

Yet whatever the general theoretical or historical argument, the crucial questions must be whether the ‘break-up of Britain’ or other large nation-states will help socialism, and indeed whether it is as inevitable as Nairn states or implies. But these are not questions of general theory but of concrete reality and probability. To the uncommitted eye, the positive socialist effects of a break-up of the United Kingdom, however inevitable, are not at present visible. It may be true that ‘forces capable of unhinging the state finally appear . . . as harbingers of a new time’ (p. 89), if, with Nairn, we regard the prior destruction of the old state as a necessary precondition of, or even ‘the principal factor making for a political revolution of some sort’ (ibid.). It is a matter of pure faith to suppose that this will help the left. To Nairn’s rhetorical question ‘why should this not be true in the British case also?’ (p. 90), the only answer is: ‘Please give reasons why it should.’ Even if we leave aside as too ‘electoralist’ the probability that the Labour Party in a rump-England would be an almost permanent minority party, by far the most likely effect of a secession of Scotland and Wales would be an enormous reinforcement of English nationalism, i.e. under present circumstances of a xenophobic, vicious and—one must use the term in spite of its devaluation by the mindless ultra-left—a semi-fascist radical right. It is easy to make fun of the fact that English nationalism has not been quite like so many others (‘The English Enigma’, pp. 291–305) and to foresee that, after enough of a beating, it ‘will become a nation like all the rest’ (!). Nairn, whose generation has been lucky enough not to live through the time when Germany went through such a process, may well regret such politicians’ bromides as: ‘In time the rest of us will learn to live with the result,

which will have some compensations as well as its bitterness and ultra-nationalist follies.' (p. 301). It is easier to anatomize the eccentric Enoch Powell who did *not* become the leader of English nationalism than the first English Nationalist movement 'like all the rest' which has actually achieved a degree of mass support, not least among workers. Is it really possible to discuss the future of English nationalism in 1977 without, so far as I can recall, a single reference to the National Front or movements of its kind?

Unless one is a Welshman or a Scot, the prospect that the break-up of the United Kingdom is more likely than not to precipitate forty-six out of its fifty-four millions into reaction (the million and a half in Ulster may be left aside as *sui generis*) is not offset by the possible advance of socialism among the remaining eight. But, in fact, there is no very convincing reason to expect such an advance. The best that can be said about independent Wales is that it will probably not be all that much different politically from the present Wales. It will quite evidently be *less* close to socialist revolution than in the great days of the South Wales Miners' Federation; but it is perhaps not impossible that, faced with some real competition from a Plaid Cymru fortunately also imbued with the basic political traditions of the country, which are those of the historic left, Labour will try to recover some of its ancient spirit. The triumph of the SNP, a classical petty-bourgeois nationalist party of the provincial right suddenly precipitated into government, can only be achieved on the ruins of the Labour Party, from which—alas—the Communist Party, whose record as a champion of the *people* of Scotland is much the best, is far from likely to benefit much. Anyone who thinks the SNP would readily let itself be transformed into something like a socialist party is whistling in the dark. It might or might not break up. Labour might or might not recover. What the Scots Tories and liberals might or might not do is anyone's guess. The safest prophecy is that Scottish politics would be complex and unpredictable, and might be rather savage if the hope of universal prosperity as the Kuwait of the North, or as an industrial economy whose problems will miraculously disappear with independence (unlike those of, say, the English North-East), proves unreal. What is pretty certain is that it will be nothing like another Norway.

Is Separation Inevitable?

By any short-term calculation, the break-up of the United Kingdom is, therefore, a prospect to which the left may have to resign itself, but which calls for no enthusiasm and some foreboding. This is not an argument in favour of maintaining the unity of this or any other state on principle. But are such break-ups of multi-national or other large states inevitable? It is obviously to the interest of separatists to argue that nothing can stop their cause, but experience does not suggest that they are. Let us leave aside the counter-tendencies which have, in the past fifty years, made e.g. the federations of Brazil, Mexico and the USA probably more unitary or centrally controlled than before. Let us omit them—so far—successful examples of postwar devolution as opposed to breakup in West Germany and Italy. Nairn, who acknowledges them, suggests that it may be too late for others, but that is a matter of argument. In fact, the great bulk of the new states since 1945 have not arisen by the division of existing states, but

by the formal separation of already separate dependent territories, within pre-established frontiers, from their metropolises.¹⁵ There are examples of successful secessions—notably that of Bangla Desh from Pakistan—but perhaps rather more of failed ones (Biafra, Katanga, Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, etc.) Concretely, the question is one of power, including military power; of the determination of governments; of help or opposition by foreign states; of the international situation in general—and no *a priori* generalizations about it are possible. Concretely, the argument that state independence for Scotland and Wales is ‘inevitable’ assumes that, if the local pressure for it were to prove overwhelming, England would behave like Sweden towards Norway in 1905 or Denmark towards Iceland after 1944—which may be a reasonable assumption, but has nothing to do with historical inevitability.

But is the pressure for separation overwhelming? Does neo-nationalism imply the aim of state independence? Is the present—and undeniable—reaction against centralized bureaucracy felt as such by the individual, and against entities (not only states) on a scale beyond human relations, necessarily ‘nationalist’ in origin or character? Once again, it is to the interest of nationalists to argue that it is—at least insofar as states are concerned, these being the only entities they normally consider. But to accept this assumption is to beg questions not only of analysis but also of policy in a manner which Marxists cannot do. It is to accept nationalism at its own valuation, or rather at that of the ideologists and politicians who claim to be its spokesmen; to recognize not problems and facts, but manifestoes. It is to recognize the problems of declining industrial areas (or even to deny them) when they are formulated in ‘national’ terms (Walloon nationalism for the Belgian ones, Scots nationalism for Strathclyde), but not when they are not (North-east England); to see the crisis of rural life when the influx of second-homers or commuters is ‘foreign’, as in North Wales, but not when it is ‘native’, as in Suffolk. It is to recognize as ‘nations’ those who shout and not those who do not; to risk identifying the problems of the Jews as a people (most of whom, including 10 per cent of the population of Israel, continue to live in the diaspora, and are likely to go on doing so) with the problems of the state which includes one fifth of them. It is to forget—as Nairn does—the distinction between unquestionable ‘nations’ and movements with undoubted political weight, such as Scotland, Wales, the Catalans, Basques and Flemings, and what—at present anyway—are little more than doubtful and fuzzy ideological constructs like ‘Occitania’.¹⁶

¹⁵ I omit 1. cases of constitutional fiction, in which overseas territories were officially classed as metropolitan provinces (France, Portugal); and 2. divisions of states as a result of power conflicts (Germany, Korea, China/Taiwan, temporarily Vietnam).

¹⁶ ‘Occitanism’ is the attempt to argue the ‘nationhood’ of an area of uncertain size, covering, in extreme versions, most or all of southern France, united by the fact of speaking or having spoken dialects and languages—doubtfully classifiable as one—which did not become the basis of modern standard French (roughly analogous to the ‘Low German’ of the northern plains which did not become the standard German language). ‘Except for the truly pan-Occitanian world of the troubadours, there has never been historically a unified Occitanian consciousness. The consciousness has always been on the level of Auvergne, Languedoc, Limousin, Guyenne, etc’ (E. Le Roy Ladurie, ‘Occitania in Historical Perspective’, *Review I*, 1, 1977, p. 23). There is no good reason to suppose that its common characteristics outweigh its internal heterogeneity; no evidence that it has ever considered

Even if we do not choose to query the existence of nationalism or (more unwisely) the claims of this or that political party or ideological group to give us its only true version, the number of questions this assumption begs is immense. What actually changed in the aspirations of Welsh-speaking Welshmen in Merioneth and Caernarfon when they finally decided to elect a Plaid Cymru MP instead of a Liberal or Labour one? Certainly not that they suddenly acquired a nationalism which they previously lacked. (Conversely, why did more than half the Ladinsh speakers in South Tyrol vote to emigrate into Hitler Germany in the plebiscite of 1939? Hardly because they considered themselves ethnic Germans or German nationalists.) Were the Catholic Irish somehow less nationalist when they overwhelmingly supported Parnell and his successors who did not demand anything like independence, than when they later voted for Sinn Fein which did? Are the Welsh less nationalist than the Scots, because Plaid Cymru is electorally weaker than the SNP? An uncommitted observer might conclude the opposite, both from history and from inspection. Would even the Plaid prove to be less nationalist than the SNP if, as is not improbable, it proved to be less rigidly committed to breaking all state links with England? Is it enough to state the obvious, namely that the strong pro-Catalan and pro-Basque votes in those parts of Spain are evidence of nationalist predominance, without investigating how far they are votes for secession, for some other form of autonomous association, and if so which?

Nations and Historical Change

But there is, for Marxists and others, a broader set of questions which such nationalist assumptions beg. It is or ought to be obvious that the specific character of regions or groups does not point invariably in one direction, both for reasons of political calculation and because they themselves do not remain historically unchanged. Nairn admits the first consideration, when he insists that the specific interests of Protestant Ulstermen led them, logically enough, to insist on union with Britain, and that even today 'independence is seen here as a Biblical last strait . . . the awesome threat at the end of the line' (p. 241).¹⁷ Political independence is one option out of several. Tyrol has in the course of the twentieth century attempted to maintain its rather strong 'identity' and special interests by ultra-loyalty to the multi-national Habsburg empire, by seeking various degrees of autonomy in Austria, by integration into a pan-German Reich, and once, though only for a moment, by playing with the idea of a separate Tyrolean republic.

The second consideration is equally relevant. Economically, the trend to transform and integrate regional interests in larger unities is undeniable.

itself a 'nation' or indeed envisaged independence as 'Occitania' before the present Occitanist movement—which, up to now, plainly lacks anything like the regional mass support of the Basques and Catalans (who, incidentally, overlap the territory claimed by some Occitanists).

¹⁷ He is wrong to see this as 'absurd' and self-government as 'the boringly normal answer to nationality conflicts: a now standard product of centuries of world history' (ibid.). In the unfortunately usual situations like Ulster, where the neat territorial separation of communities is impossible, 'self-government' in itself is irrelevant to nationality conflicts. Partition either fails, or succeeds only by the mass expulsion or forcible subjugation of whoever happens to be the weaker group or minority.

In the USA 'where the pull of the old southern sectionalism was to remain apart from the rest of the country, the South's sectional interests today are impelling it to move into the national mainstream'.¹⁸ It may be, for reasons discussed earlier, that it is today fairly practicable to combine integration with small-state independence, so long as the operations of the multi-nationals are not made impossibly inconvenient. Nevertheless, the point is not whether, if need be, Frisia could be independent of the Netherlands and West Germany or Salzburg once again from Austria, but whether 'centuries of world history' are in fact leading in this direction and in no other.

I do not make these points to question the reality and force of nationalism today, or even to query Nairn's empirical observation that, once a nationalist movement has entered the politics of a country as a mass force, it is likely to stay there permanently in one form or another. Nor do they imply any attitude in principle towards big or small, unitary or any variety of federal states, separatism in general or in any particular case, in Britain or elsewhere. What they do imply is that Marxists ought not to swallow the story that the process of 'socio-political fragmentation' (p. 356) or the development of nationalism into 'a kind of world norm' (p. 343), even if we were to accept it without further analysis (which we should not), allows us to make any prediction of moment about the future of any particular state, region, people, linguistic or other group or nationalist organization; and still less that history has been working exclusively up to the particular set of political arrangements advocated by, say, the SNP. It implies recognizing the character of nationalism as a dependent as well as an independent variable in historical change. In short, it implies making a Marxist analysis of the phenomenon in general, whether or not we decide to cheer or to oppose it in any particular version or instance. That this implies a continued re-thinking and development of the Marxist *analysis* is self-evident. Not only because—in spite of a much larger and more valuable body of past work than critics are prepared to recognize—Marxist views on 'the national question' are not satisfactory; but above all because the very development of world history changes the context, the nature and the implications of 'nations' and 'nationalism'. However, I cannot see that Nairn has made a useful or convincing contribution to this.

Marxists and Nationalism Today

Meanwhile, the practical *attitude* of Marxists to the concrete political problems raised by 'the national question' hardly requires serious modification. They will, no doubt, continue to be as conscious of nationality and nationalism as they have been for most of the twentieth century: they can hardly not be. Subject only to the built-in fuzziness and changeability of the concept, they will continue to favour the fullest development for any nation, its right of self-determination including secession; which, as always, will not mean that they will regard secession as desirable in every case. They will no doubt continue, in most cases, both to be profoundly attached to their own nations, and to champion these: their record in the European resistance movements of the Hitler

¹⁸ S. Lubell, *The Future of American Politics*, New York 1956, p. 135.

period speaks for itself. However, unlike nationalists, they will also continue to recognize—generally before others—the multi-nationality behind the façade of states, large or small. Their very non-nationalism and their refusal to identify ‘the nation’, its ‘interests’, ‘destiny’, etc. with this or that nationalist programme at any given moment will continue to make them effective champions of nations, racial groups, etc. *other than their own* (as English communists have consistently been of Scots and Welsh nationhood), whether or not they actually demand state separation. Marxists will, therefore, continue to be not merely enemies of ‘great-nation chauvinism’, but also of ‘little-nation chauvinism’, which is not a negligible force in a world largely composed of little nations. They will not always get it right, though one may guess that they are more likely to get it wrong when they find themselves swallowing some nationalist assumption whole, as so many Marxists have done for so long in the matter of Ulster. They will, alas, sometimes—especially when in government—fail to live up to their own principles. When they do, one hopes that some of them will have the courage to say so, as Lenin did when, in his ‘Testament’, he criticized the ‘chauvinist’ behaviour of Stalin, Dzerzhinsky and Ordzhonikidze.

Nobody has given good reasons why this attitude, which is essentially shared (in spite of Nairn’s combats with the ghost of Luxemburg) by most Marxists, should not provide adequate guidance in principle to the political problems Marxists are likely to encounter in this field. Including the ‘break-up of the United Kingdom’, which, in the form of Scottish and Welsh secession, most of them would today not regard as a desirable solution, unlike the secession of an independent Ulster, which many of them might welcome. Which does not mean that they would not accept it as a fact or even in other circumstances, welcome it. This attitude provides no guarantee of success, but neither does Nairn’s. The difference between the two is that one deludes itself less than the other. Insofar as Nairn remains within the established, and historically or politically far from unrealistic, range of Marxist debate on the attitude to nationalism, his assessments are arguable, though some of us may think them mistaken. Insofar as he tries to change the terms of that debate, the main drift of his arguments seems to be not to make Marxism ‘for the first time an authentic world theory’ (p. 360), or ‘to separate out the durable—the “scientific” . . . from the ideology in our *Weltanschauung*’ (p. 363), but to change the ideology and undermine the ‘science’.

It puts Marxism at the mercy of nationalism. In this, unfortunately, Nairn is not alone nowadays, particularly in countries in which national issues dominate political debate. As Maxime Rodinson has put it, writing about the Arab Middle East: ‘On the one hand, pure nationalism utilized justifications of a Marxist kind and recruited apologists formed by Marxism . . . On the other international leftism . . . vigorously denounced the pure nationalist régimes. . . But it did not give any less priority to the national struggle. The sophisticated device for justifying this consisted in the thesis that “the masses” were the ones to show unqualified loyalty to the nationalist cause in its most extremist form. . . Social revolution was therefore seen in what was in the final analysis a nationalist perspective.’

Thereby it runs the risk of subordination to nationalism.¹⁹ One does not have to be a Luxemburgist to recognize the dangers of a Marxism which loses itself in nationalism. Lenin was not talking about the Flemings or the Bretons, but about what he saw as the clearest case of 'progressive' and 'revolutionary' anti-imperialist nationalism, when he warned Zinoviev and his colleagues who wanted to preach 'holy war' at the Baku Congress of 1920. 'Do not paint nationalism red', he said.²⁰ The warning still stands.

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¹⁹ *Marxisme et monde musulman*, Paris 1972, pp. 564–5.

²⁰ M. N. Roy, *Memoirs*, Bombay 1964, p. 395.