

## WHY NATIONALISM?

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The burning problems of our times – such as the growing gap between the South and the North, the need for general disarmament, the world capitalist crisis, the threat of ecological catastrophe – are obviously of an international character. They can hardly be solved on a local, regional or national scale. However, at the same time as the world economy is becoming more and more unified by multinational capitalism, a spectacular tide of nationalism is rising, in Europe and on a world scale, submerging everything on its way.

While some national movements are emancipatory and progressive, nationalism is very often a 'false solution' to the economic, social, political and ecological challenges of our times. Why then has it become so popular in so many countries and areas of the world?

There is no easy explanation for this upsurge, but it could be helpful to compare it with the parallel revival of religious feelings. The crisis of both existing models of (instrumental) rationality – capitalist accumulation and bureaucratic productivism – favours the development of non-rational (sometimes irrational) reactions such as religion and nationalism. Of course, both phenomena can also take progressive forms – as in national liberation movements, or in liberation theology – but the regressive tendencies (nationalist **and/or** religious intolerance) are quite formidable.

In many countries of the world religion tends to merge with nationalism, infusing it with greater power of attraction and an aura of 'sacredness': this is the case with Catholicism in Poland and Croatia (as well as, in a different context, Ireland), of Christian orthodoxy in Serbia and Russia, of conservative evangelism in the USA, of **certain** forms of Jewish orthodoxy in Israel, of Islam in Libya and Iran. In other cases, religion and nationalism are competing rivals or even forces in open conflict, as it is the case with Islamic fundamentalism and Arab nationalism in North Africa and the Middle East.

In any case, nationalism has **its own** roots and does not depend necessarily on religion in order to expand. How to explain its present rise? One could perhaps consider the nationalist wave as a sort of reaction to the growing internationalisation of the economy and (to a certain extent) of

culture, a struggle against the threat of homogenisation. It could also be understood as a compensatory movement, trying to counterbalance the decline of economic independence by reinforcing (sometimes to monstrous proportions) the ethical, political and cultural moments of the national identity.

A similar (but different) hypothesis had been suggested by Theodor Adorno in a conference in 1966 (on 'Education after Auschwitz'): if nationalism is so aggressive 'it is because in the era of international communication and supra-national blocs, it cannot really believe in itself, and has no choice but to become outrageously excessive, if it wants to persuade both itself and others of its substantive character.' Of course, the argument applies to a much greater degree to the situation in Europe in the 90s than in the 60s.

However, this and other general interpretations, although useful, cannot quite explain the extraordinary diversity of the phenomenon, which takes very different forms in different parts of the world. One has therefore to examine the *specific nature of nationalism in each of its multiple contexts*, in order to be able to understand its moving forces.

Let us begin with *the region* where this new nationalist tide is particularly visible: Eastern Europe and the ex-USSR. An intelligent observer of Eastern European politics has remarkably well summarized the events in this part of the world:

**The last remnants of solidarity between the nonemancipated nationalities in the 'belt of mixed populations' evaporated with the disappearance of a central despotic bureaucracy which had also served to gather together and divert from each other the diffuse hatreds and conflicting national claims. Now everybody was against everybody else, and most of all against their closest neighbours – the Slovaks against the Czechs, the Croats against the Serbs, the Ukrainians against the Poles.**

The most astonishing thing in this analysis is that it was *not* written a few weeks ago: it is a passage from the well known book of Hanna Arendt on the origins of totalitarianism, published in . . . 1951, which describes 'the atmosphere of disintegration' in Eastern Europe during the 20's, i.e. after the liquidation of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the Tsarist Empire – the two 'despotic bureaucracies' referred to in the above quotation.'

Incidentally, a similar assessment can be found also in Rosa Luxemburg's notes on War and Nationalism from 1918: 'Nationalism is at the moment a trump. From all sides nations and semi-nations appear and claim their right to form a State. (. . .) At the nationalist Brocken it is now the time of the Walpurgis night!'

In other words: we have been drawn, in a large part of Europe, *seventy years back* . . .

■ Let there be no **misunderstanding**: there is nothing regressive – on the contrary – when (today, as in 1920) multinational empires, which had become true 'prisons of peoples', crumble and the oppressed nations recover their liberty. To that extent, there is undeniably a *democratic*

*moment* in the national revival which took place since 1989 in Eastern Europe and the USSR. Socialists and democrats cannot but rejoice when the Soviet tanks leave East Germany, Poland and Hungary, and the troops of the KGB quit the Baltic countries, leaving these people to decide for themselves their future, and freely choose unity, separation or federation.

Unfortunately, not everything is so pleasant in this picture: the best and the worst are inseparably mixed in these national movements. The best: the democratic awakening of spoliated nations, the rediscovery of their language and culture, the aspiration for freedom and popular sovereignty. The worst: the awakening of chauvinistic nationalisms, of expansionisms, of intolerances, of xenophobias; the awakening of old national quarrels, hatred against the 'hereditary enemy'; the growth of authoritarian tendencies, leading to the oppression of one's own national minorities; and finally, the upsurge of fascist, semi-fascist and racist forms of nationalism, in Russia ('Pamiat'), in Rumania, in Slovakia, in Croatia (neo-ustachi), in Serbia (neo-chetniks), in the former DDR (neo-nazis), and elsewhere as well. The eternal scapegoats of the past – Jews and Gypsies – are again being selected as responsible for all the evils of society . . .

Paradoxically, this negative and sinister aspect, this 'return of the suppressed', this resurrection of the ancient national vendettas appears nowhere in a more brutal and absurd form than in Yugoslavia – the only one of the so-called 'socialist' countries which had been able to escape from the control of Moscow and to establish a relatively egalitarian federation between its component nations. Anti-fascist solidarity between the various nationalities, rooted in the Communist partisan fight of **World-War II**, has now left the stage, to be replaced by a savage *bella omnia contra omnes*.

Of course, one can explain this paradox by several and complex economic, cultural, political, religious and historical causes – without forgetting the heavy responsibility of the Serbian Stalino-nationalist regime of Milosevic, who opened, by his policy of oppression against Kosovo's Albanians, the Pandora box of nationalisms in the country.' Nevertheless, there remains an irreducible kernel of pure irrationality in this explosion of hatred against the 'other' – whose most dreadful expression is the policy of 'ethnic cleansing' implemented by Serbian nationalist forces in **Bosnia-Hercegovina**.

It is impossible to predict, for the moment, if the 'Yugoslav paradigm' is going to be followed by others, and if the present conflicts between Slovaks and Czechs, Hungarians and Rumanians, Moldavians and Russians, Azeris and Armenians, Georgians and Ossetians, Russians and Ukrainians, etc, etc, will or will not take the form of a general confrontation; and if the dissolution of the ex-USSR **will or will not** lead to national wars (with nuclear arms?) that would make the present conflict in Yugoslavia look like a small incident. Anything can happen, and unfortunately the worst is a distinct possibility.

The reasons for this nationalist explosion, which is shaking practically the whole former 'socialist bloc', are, among others, the following:

1) The rebellion against decades of **national** discrimination and 'Great Russian' hegemonism. This is the most obvious motive behind national **movements**, both in the ex-USSR and in its former 'satellites'. There is no doubt that the annexation of the Baltic states during the Second World War, or the invasion of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, left a very deep imprint in the national consciousness of these countries. Once the **iron** lid of Soviet occupation was lifted, it is understandable that a vast nationalist upsurge would take place.

But this does not apply to Yugoslavia, an independent state which had liberated itself from Soviet hegemony since 1948 . . .

2) According to the Czech historian Miroslav Hroch, 'where an old regime disintegrates, where old social relations have become **unstable**, amid the rise of general insecurity, belonging to a common language and culture may become the only certainty in society . . .'.<sup>5</sup>

This helps to understand the parallel between present events and those of the **20s**, after the disintegration of the traditional Empires in Central and Eastern Europe.

3) The collapse of the socialist ideas, values and images (including the idea of 'proletarian internationalism'), as well as of working class culture, discredited by so many years of bureaucratic manipulation, and identified by very broad masses as the official doctrine of the 'ancien regime'. Politics, like nature, hates a vacuum. No other rival political ideology had such a powerful tradition and such ancient roots in popular culture as nationalism – often combined, as we saw, with religion. Liberal individualism of the Western kind, while attractive to the intelligentsia and the rising new class of business men, had little appeal to the broad mass of the population.

4) The desire of relatively advanced nations, regions or republics to cut loose from poorer and relatively backward areas, in order to keep their own resources for themselves, and to join, as quickly as possible, the Western European Market. This applies particularly to Slovenia and Croatia, to the Baltic republics, and in general to the Western parts of the ex-USSR (in relation to the Asiatic ones). A similar phenomena, by the way, can also be found in Northern Italy (the rise of the so-called Lombard Leagues).

To these main explanations, one has to add the manipulation of nationalist feelings by neo-stalinist or neo-liberal elites trying to keep (or to win back) their power: Azerbaijan, Russia, Serbia and Croatia are good examples of this process.

Of what help, in so chaotic a **situation**, confronted with such a confused maelstrom of territorial conflicts, historical claims, chauvinist exclusions and liberating uprisings, can the analytic and political instruments of Marxism be?

Marxism has the great advantage of a *critical/rational*, as well as *humanist/universal*, standpoint. But it will remain disarmed in confronting present developments, if it is not able to get rid of certain myths and illusions which belong to its own tradition.

Among the myths, there is one which is particularly obnoxious: the idea of a 'scientific' and 'objective' definition of the nation. Thanks to Stalin, this dogma wrought havoc in the four continents, transforming theory into a true Procrustian bed, imposed by decree of the Political Bureau (charged with verifying if this or that nation lived up or not to the 'objective' criteria).

Happily, most Marxists dealing today with the national question have understood quite well that the nations cannot be defined in purely objective terms (territory, language, economic unit, etc) – even if these are far from being irrelevant – but that they are *imagined communities* (Benedict Anderson), *cultural creations* (Eric Hobsbawm). Already in **1939** Trotsky insisted, in a discussion with C.L.R. James about the Black question in America, that 'on this **matter** an abstract criterion is not decisive, but the historical consciousness, the feelings and impulses of a group are more **important**'.<sup>6</sup>

As far as illusions are concerned, there is one which can be found in Marx himself and which haunts the reflections of the best Marxists from Rosa Luxemburg until our own day: the imminent decline of nationalism and of the nation-state, made anachronistic by the internationalisation of the economy.

An attenuated version of this hypothesis can still be found in **1988**, on the eve of the most formidable nationalist wave in Europe since World War II. In his book, otherwise excellent, on nations and nationalism since **1780**, Eric Hobsbawm risked the following diagnosis: 'while nobody can possibly deny the growing and sometimes dramatic, impact of nationalist, or ethnic politics, there is one major aspect in which the phenomenon today is functionally different from the 'nationalism' and the 'nations' of nineteenth- and earlier twentieth-century history. It is no longer a major vector of historical development'. In his opinion, 'the declining historical significance of nationalism is today concealed . . . by the visible spread of **ethnic/linguistic agitation**'. In other words: 'in spite of its evident prominence, nationalism is historically less important. It is no longer, as it were, a global political programme, as it may be said to have been in the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries. It is at most a complicating factor, or a catalyst for other developments'.

One would like to subscribe to this optimistic view of things (from the standpoint of internationalist socialism), but one can hardly avoid the impression that the great historian is taking his desires for reality. One does not need to sympathize with nationalist ideologies in order to take into account their growing influence in Europe. It is difficult to predict what is

going to happen during the next century, but now, and in the coming years, it is impossible to consider the role of nationalism in Europe (and elsewhere) as a minor or secondary factor.

Hobsbawm is more to the point when he shows the inadequacy of nationalist 'solutions', particularly in Eastern Europe. Unlike the nationalists, Marxists are convinced that national independence – although necessary, in many cases – is far from sufficient to solve the basic economic, social, ecological or political problems confronting the population. Particularly if we consider the new kind of economic (and therefore also political) dependence of the recently emancipated nations towards Western finance.

Western European liberals often consider this Eastern nationalist explosion – and its xenophobic manifestations – as the product of 'under-development', of primitive semi-agrarian societies, of populations having lived too long under 'Communism' and lacking democratic experience. Some even pretend that nationalism is only a plot of ex-communists (as in Serbia, Bulgaria or Azerbaijan) to keep power. Western Europe is presented as a harmonious world, well beyond such irrational passions: reconciled, the nations of this democratic and modern part of the continent are quickly moving towards their integration in a united European Community.

This idyllic image does not quite correspond to reality. It is an illusion, if not a mystification, to claim that Western Europe is now 'beyond nationalism', or that it has, as Ernest Gellner recently wrote, achieved 'Stage Five' in the history of European nationalism, a 'relatively benign condition' where 'economic and cultural convergence jointly diminish ethnic hostilities'."

National conflicts, nationalist feelings, and nationalist movements exist also in Western Europe, and are growing. They belong basically to two very different species:

1) the – usually progressive – movements for the rights of the national minorities **and/or oppressed nations**: the Basque and Irish are only the visible (and explosive) top of an iceberg, which includes Catalans and Galicians, Scots and Welsh, Corsicans and Greek-Cypriots – and several others.

2) **xenophobic and racist nationalism**, directed not so much against the old 'enemy from outside' (other European nations) but against the 'enemy from inside': the immigrant workers of Arab, African, Turkish, Kurd or Eastern European origin (as well as, often, the Jewish or Gypsy minorities). The political expression of this development is the surprising rise of nationalist parties and **movements** of semi-fascist, fascist or even nazi character (in France, Austria, Belgium, Germany, etc) – representing already 7 million voters in the European Community! – as well as the murderous aggressions of skinheads and other racist bands. In Germany

alone in 1991, there have been more than 1,200 aggressions by racist thugs against foreign immigrants (compared to 270 in 1990).<sup>9</sup>

It is true that racism is not identical to nationalism. But as Adorno already emphasized at the above mentioned conference in 1966, 'the **awakening** of nationalism is the most favourable climate' for the upsurge of racism and intolerance." In its most radical and extreme forms, nationalism often turns into racism, by trying to ground national **supremacy** on pseudo-biological criteria.

The main targets of Western European xenophobic nationalism were until recently the immigrants from the South (particularly Africa and Asia); the **next** victims will be – or are already, mainly in Germany – the unfortunate immigrants from Eastern Europe, expelled from their countries by national conflicts or by the economic catastrophe resulting from the brutal introduction of a market economy. After the Arab, the African or the Turk, it is now the turn of the Pole, the Romanian or the Albanian to become the scapegoat for Western **racist/nationalists**.

Mainstream Western European parties refuse to endorse racism, but they share a sort of 'Western nationalism' which leads to the exclusion of immigrant workers from democratic rights (eg. to vote and to be elected) and to the closure, as tightly as possible, of the EEC borders to **non**-Western immigrants. Could it be that one day the European Community will rebuild the Berlin Wall a little further to the East, and re-establish the barriers of electrified barbed wire of the old 'Iron Curtain', this time on the Western side of the border?

As a matter of fact, the presence of the immigrants is only a pretext: they constitute no more than 2% of the European Community's population; moreover, they were already there 15 or 20 years ago, without provoking the same reactions. Why precisely now has this xenophobic wave taken place? The economic crisis, unemployment and the degradation of living conditions in the popular neighbourhoods are certainly among the main factors.

But there is something deeper taking place in the political culture of some popular layers: as in Eastern Europe, but in a different way, the decline of socialist and class values, so long identified with the USSR and the Communist Parties, make room for **national/racism**. From this standpoint, the rise of nationalist values has, in both parts of Europe, common roots. To this one has to add, in the West, the disappointment with the social-democratic management of the crisis, increasingly **undistinguishable** (with the exception of a few details) from the neo-liberal one. The failure of social-democratic governments (or coalitions including such parties) to confront the growing **social** inequalities, their adoption of the conventional (bourgeois) economic wisdom, and their involvement in various affairs of corruption (eg. in France and Italy) have paved the way for all sorts of xenophobic 'populist' movements. Thanks to the weakening

of the socialist culture, capitalism appears more and more as a 'natural' system, as the only possible horizon, as the necessary form of production and exchange; as a consequence, economic and social problems like unemployment, poverty or urban insecurity are no longer attributed by significant sections of the population to the disfunctions of capitalism, but to the presence of immigrants and other 'foreigners'.

Progressive and reactionary forms of nationalism can also be found in the so-called Third World (a term which has lost any meaning, since there is no more any 'Second World'), i.e. in the dependent periphery of the imperialist world system.

Several important emancipatory and progressive movements of national liberation can be found today in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. But it should be emphasised that most of these movements – like those in Kurdistan, Eritrea, South Africa, Palestine, Timor, Sudan – are not directly opposed to Western imperialism as such but rather to local forms of national oppression. With the exception of the wave of popular protest in the Arab world against the Gulf War, anti-colonial and anti-imperialist nationalism seems to have lost much of its influence, to the profit of basically reactionary **and/or** xenophobic movements like Islamic Fundamentalism, ethnic-linguistic and religious Communalism (India, Sri-Lanka) and Tribalism.

Contradictory forms of nationalism co-exist also in Latin-America." The classic example of reactionary nationalism is the 'patriotic' ideology of military regimes – as in Argentina, Brazil or Chile in the 70's and 80's – usually directed against the ghost of 'international communism' and its Latin-American 'subversive agents'. In the name of the 'Doctrine of National Security', every social protest, every leftist movement is denounced as being 'of foreign inspiration', or based on 'exotic doctrines alien to our national tradition'. This conservative brand of cold-war nationalism makes an extensive usage of national symbols (the banner, the national anthem) and patriotic rhetoric, but it accepts without hesitation US hegemony ('the American leadership of the Free World'). It may refer to geo-politics in order to claim a sub-imperialist role of regional hegemony – like the Brazilian military during the 70s – but this ambition leads very seldom to an open conflict with rival Western powers, as in the Argentinian war with Britain around the **Malvinas/Falkland** islands.

Middle-class populist nationalism, which had its peak during the 40s and the 50s (Peronism in Argentina, the Peruvian APRA, 'getulismo' in Brazil, etc) is in decline and has come to terms with foreign capital. The most obvious example is the present Peronist government in Argentina (President **Menem**), which has systematically broken all the links with the nationalist tradition of the movement and has followed very strictly the instructions of the IMF. In some cases, like Mexico, the crisis of the governmental populist movement (the PRI, Institutional Revolutionary

Party) leads to a split, and the formation of a new party. The Mexican PRD (Revolutionary Democratic Party), led by Cuauhtemoc Cardenas – the son of former president Lazaro Cardenas, who expropriated the US oil companies in Mexico during the 30s – aims at a renewal of the nationalist and anti-imperialist tradition of the Mexican Revolution.

Revolutions in Latin America always had simultaneously a *social* and a *national* content. This applies not only to the Mexican Revolution of 1910-11 or the Bolivian Revolution of 1953, but also to the more radical (i.e. aiming at a socialist transformation) revolutions in Cuba (1959-61) and Nicaragua (1979). Fidel Castro and his followers were inspired by the struggle and the ideas of Jose **Marti**, the Jacobin, nationalist and anti-imperialist leader of the insurrection against Spanish colonialism; and the fighters of the FSLN (Frente Sandinista de **Liberacion Nacional**) in Nicaragua considered themselves as heirs to Augusto Sandino's war of national liberation against the US marines (1927-32). The struggle for national independence and sovereignty, in confrontation with aggressive US imperial policies, was a decisive component of the Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutionary movements and of their popular support.

Today, the fight against foreign debt and the IMF policies has been the main focus of progressive national feelings and anti-imperialist **mobilisations** in Latin America, taking the form of rallies, strikes, protests and even mass riots. Thanks to the heavy requirements of the (strictly impossible) debt repayment, the IMF and the World Bank exert such a kind of direct control (without precedent since the end of Spanish colonisation in the 19th century!) over the economic and social policies of these countries that their independence is often reduced to a fiction. The 'advisors' and 'experts' of the international financial institutions dictate to Latin American governments their rate of inflation, their budgetary cuts in education and health, their wages policy and their tax structure. The popular struggle against such outrageous forms of dependency, and against the repayment of the foreign debt, is not only a 'nationalist', but also an *anti-systemic* (to use Immanuel Wallerstein's useful concept) movement, by its opposition to the logic of world capitalist finance. It has also a 'class' component, by its conflict with the local rulers – eager to comply with the policies of the IMF and of the foreign banks.

It is not surprising that in some countries, like Brazil, Bolivia or Peru, it is the labour movements, the unions and the leftist parties that lead the fight against the repayment of the foreign debt: national and social liberation are intimately linked in the consciousness of the most active sections of the movement. Lula, the leader of the Brazilian **Partido dos Trabalhadores** (Workers' Party) – 47% of the votes at the presidential elections of 1989 – called for an immediate suspension of the payment and the establishment of a public inquiry on the debt, in order to find out what happened to the money borrowed (mainly by the military regime which

ruled the country from **1964** to **1985**). He also called for a common initiative of the indebted countries, since none of them is strong enough to confront the creditors alone.

How far can a single country – even a powerful one like Brazil or Mexico – refuse the dictatorship of the World Bank and break the yoke of imperialist domination? Can Latin-American unity, under popular leadership, constitute an alternative to the US plans of economic integration? How to achieve national and social liberation in an underdeveloped country without the economic or military support of an industrial power like the USSR? How important are the contradictions between Europe, Japan and the USA and could they be exploited by liberated peripheric countries?

This and similar questions – which cannot be easily answered – are being debated among progressive, socialist and anti-imperialist forces, in Latin-America and elsewhere in the ex-Third World. They show that national liberation is still a key issue at the periphery of the system, but also that purely nationalist solutions are of limited value: the need for an internationalist strategy is perhaps better perceived now than in the past.

The example of Cuba seems to show that an independent country can, at least during a limited amount of time, survive in confrontation with a US blockade, a boycott by the world financial institutions and no support from the ex-USSR. But in the longer run, the future of Cuba will depend on developments in the other parts of Latin America.

During recent years, the various socialist, nationalist and anti-imperialist forces in Latin America – including, among others, the Brazilian PT, the Nicaraguan FSLN, the Salvadorean FMLN (Farabundo **Marti** Front of National Liberation), the Mexican PRD and the Cuban Communist Party – feeling the need of an international (or at least regional) coordination, have associated themselves in a united front, called the Forum of Sao **Paulo**, which meets yearly and discusses common perspectives. At the first conference of the Forum, in **1990**, a document was adopted, which presented the broad outlines of a common strategy for national liberation in Latin America. First of all, it rejected the proposition of 'American Integration' proposed by US President Bush, denouncing it as an attempt to 'completely open our national economies to the disloyal and unequal competition of the imperialist economic apparatus, submitting entirely to its hegemony and destroying our productive structures, by integrating them into a zone of free exchange led and organized by the US economic interests'. The document opposes to this proposition of integration under imperialist domination, 'a new concept of continental unity and integration', based on the sovereignty and self-determination of Latin America, the recovery of its historical and cultural identity and the internationalist solidarity of its peoples. 'This presupposes the defence of the Latin-American patrimony, an end to the flight and exportation of

capitals, a common and united policy towards the scourge of an unpayable foreign debt, and the adoption of economic policies in benefit of the majorities, able to combat the situation of misery in which millions of Latin-Americans live'."

Next to anti-imperialist nationalism, a different sort of emancipatory nationalism has been developing in Latin America during the last years: the movement of the indigenous nations for their rights. The debate around the Fifth Centennial of Columbus's arrival in the Americas, and the Nobel Prize attributed to Rigoberta Menchu have given a greater visibility to this indigenous struggle for the defence of their communities, their land and their national culture against the oppression of the ruling oligarchies (usually of Spanish descent).

These Indian movements, associations or political parties (like the Tupac Katari Movement in Bolivia) – which usually are **not** limited to one ethnic group (Quechuas, Aymaras, Mayas) but unite all the Indian communities in each country – develop a thorough criticism of Western civilisation and its values (private **property**, individualism, commodity production), in the name of the pre-capitalist (and pre-Columbian) indigenous traditions, and their communitarian culture. Their struggle has at the same time, a national, social and ecological character.

While some organisations have a stronger ethnic component, and call for the restoration of the old Indian nations and empires, most of those movements fight for the recognition of the national and cultural rights of the indigenous peoples, in coalition with other oppressed groups and classes. One example of this is the continental-wide movement against the official celebrations of the Fifth Centennial, called 'Five Hundred Years of Indian, Black and Popular Resistance', which had as one of its main aims the solidarity with the struggles of the indigenous peoples. Of course, there are very great differences between the indigenous nations of countries like Guatemala, Peru and Bolivia, where they constitute the majority of the population, and the small surviving tribes of the Amazonian area. While in the first case the national struggle is intimately linked to the social one, and to the agrarian question (the struggle for land), in the second one it is rather a matter of protection against the ethnocidal logic of 'civilisation'.

The resistance of trade-unionists, ecologists and Indian tribes against the destructive development of agro-business may lead to common action, as happened recently in the Brazilian Amazon area, with the constitution of a Confederation of the Rain-forest Peoples, by initiative of the well known trade-union and ecological leader Chico Mendes (recently killed by land-owners).

Finally, there is a third form of progressive nationalism in Latin America (and the US as well): Black nationalism, which is particularly important in the Caribbean countries. Its historical roots can be found in the slave

rebellions, and in particular in the Haitian Revolution of 1791, led by Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Black Jacobins. In a country like Brazil, where the majority of the population is black or coloured, there have also been slave revolts (like the Quilombo dos Palmares, a community of rebel slaves during the eighteenth century). In our days, the main form of Brazilian Black cultural resistance is religious, through the development of Umbanda, a syncretic cult composed of African and Christian elements.

What should be the attitude of Marxists in relation to national conflicts? Marxism is opposed to the nationalist ideology, but it does not ignore the importance and legitimacy of democratic national rights.

This is why, during conflicts between Western imperial powers and dependent countries of Asia, Africa or Latin-America, Marxists usually defend the rights of the peripheric nations, and struggle against all forms of imperial aggression (whatever their 'democratic' or 'juridical' cover) – but this does *not* mean that they should give any kind of support to reactionary military, religious or nationalist dictators of the Third World, like Gen. Videla, Ayatollah Khomeini, Saddam Hussein or General Noriega . . .

As an internationalist world-view, Marxism – to be distinguished from its multiple national-bureaucratic counterfeits – has the advantage of a universalist and critical position, in contrast to the passions and intoxications of nationalist mythology. On the condition, however, that this universalism does not remain abstract, grounded on the simple negation of national particularity, but becomes a true 'concrete universal' (Hegel), able to incorporate, under the form of a dialectical *Aufhebung*, all the richness of the particular.

Thanks to the concept of *imperialism*, Marxism is able to avoid the pitfalls of the Eurocentric (or 'Western') false universalism, which pretends to impose on all countries in the world (and particularly those on the periphery), under the cover of 'civilisation', the domination of the modern bourgeois/industrial way of life: private property, market economy, unlimited economic expansion, productivism, utilitarianism, possessive individualism and instrumental rationality.

This does not mean that socialists ignore the universal value of certain achievements of European culture since 1789, such as democracy and human rights. It means only that they refuse the false dilemma between a pretence 'Western' universalism and the narrow-minded worship of cultural differences.

For **Marxism**, the most important universal value is the liberation of human beings from all forms of oppression, domination, alienation and degradation. This is an utopian universality, in opposition to the *ideological* universalities which apologetically present the Western status quo as being the accomplished human universal culture, the end of history, the realisation of the absolute spirit. Only a *critical* universality of this kind, looking towards an emancipated future, is able to overcome short-sighted nationalisms, narrow culturalisms, ethnocentrism.

Starting from this premise, how should Marxists react to the present European national conflicts (or to Third-World communal strife)?

First of all, Marxism proposes a capital distinction between the *nationalism of the oppressors* and of the *oppressed*. Without adhering to any nationalist ideology, Marxist socialism supports unreservedly the national movement of the dominated and rejects without hesitation the 'Great Power chauvinism' of the ruling nation. This distinction is more than ever justified and it operates like a precious compass to find one's bearings in the present tempest. But its use is made difficult by a well known characteristic of modern nationalisms: each oppressed nation, as soon as liberated (or even before), considers as its most urgent task to exercise an analogous oppression over its own national minorities. Frequently, during the present inter-ethnic conflicts, each side persecutes the minority belonging to the rival nation, while manipulating its own nationals on the other side of the border (Yugoslavia is a good example in point).

We need therefore a universal criterion in order to disentangle the web of the opposed and mutually exclusive claims. This criterion can only be that – common to socialists and democrats – of the right of self-determination (until **separation**) of each nation, that is, of each community which considers itself as such. Indifferent to the myths of blood and soil, and not recognising any purely religious or historical claims over a given territory, this criterion has the immense advantage of referring itself only to the *universal principles of democracy and popular sovereignty*, and of taking into consideration only the concrete demographic realities of any inhabited space.

This principle does not prevent socialists from defending the option which seems to them the most desirable or the most progressive at a given historical moment: state separation (independence), federation, confederation. The essential point is that the concerned nations and nationalities should freely decide their own future.

This rule – incorporated by Lenin into the Marxist vocabulary – is more than ever necessary. But, again, its application to the present national conflicts – particularly in Eastern Europe and the ex-USSR – is not always easy. In many cases the interpenetration of the nationalities is such, that any attempt to cut borders into this mosaic is fraught with perils. The dream of national homogeneity inside the state, which haunts almost all nationalisms, is a most dangerous perspective. As Eric Hobsbawm observes, in a sober historical reminder: "The logical implication of trying to create a continent neatly divided into coherent territorial states each inhabited by a separate ethnically and linguistically homogeneous population, was the mass expulsion and extermination of minorities. Such was and is the murderous *reductio ad absurdum* of nationalism in its territorial version, although this was not fully demonstrated until the 1940s."

Let us return to our initial paradox: at this strange nationalist end of the century, the most urgent problems have, more than ever, an international

character. The search for a way out of the economic crisis of the ex-'socialist bloc', the question of the Third World's debt, and imminent ecological disaster – to mention only these three major examples – require planetary solutions. Those of Capital are well known and perfectly organised on a world-scale: they have inevitably, in whatever place they have been implemented, the same double result: make the rich even richer, and the poor even poorer.

What alternatives exist to the totalitarian grip of 'really existing' world capitalism? The old pseudo-internationalism of the Stalinist Comintern, of the followers of various 'Socialist Fatherlands', is dead and buried. A new internationalist alternative of the oppressed and exploited is badly needed.

It is from the fusion between the international socialist, democratic and anti-imperialist tradition of the labour movement (still much alive among revolutionaries of various tendencies, radical trade-unionists, left-socialists, etc) and the new universalist culture of social movements like ecology, feminism, anti-racism, and Third-world-solidarity that the internationalism of tomorrow will rise. This tendency may be a minority now, but it is nevertheless the seed of a different future and the ultimate guarantee against barbarism.

#### NOTES

1. T. Adorno, *Modèles critiques*, Paris, Payot, 1984, p. 106.
2. H. Arendt. *The Burden of our time*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1951, p. 267.
3. R. Luxemburg, 'Fragment über Krieg, nationale Frage und Revolution', *Die Russische Revolution*, Frankfurt, Europäische Verlagsanstalt. 1963, p. 82.
4. See on this the remarkable essay by Catherine Samary, *The fragmentation of Yugoslavia*. Amsterdam, Notebooks for Study and Research, no. 19/20. 1992.
5. Quoted by Eric Hobsbawm in 'The Perils of the New Nationalism'. *The Nation*. 4 November 1991. p. 556.
6. L. Trotsky, *On Black Nationalism and Self-Determination*, New York. Pathfinder Press, 1978, p. 28.
7. E. Hobsbawm, *Nation and Nationalism since 1780. Programme. Myth. Reality*, Cambridge University Press. 1990. pp. 163, 170. 181.
8. E. Gellner, 'Nationalism and Politics in Eastern Europe', *New Left Review*, No. 189, October 1991, p. 131.
9. *Bild am Sonntag*, January 26. 1992.
10. T. Adorno, *op. cit.*, p. 106.
11. I am referring more extensively to Latin America because I am more familiar with this area of the Third World.
12. *Inprecor*, no. 6. July 1990. p. 6.
13. Hobsbawm, *Op. cit.*, p. 133.