

NATIONALISM, ETHNIC CONFLICT, AND CLASS STRUGGLE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF MAINSTREAM AND MARXIST THEORIES OF NATIONALISM AND NATIONAL MOVEMENTS

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Introduction

The resurgence of nationalism and ethnonationalist conflict in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and its associated Eastern European states in their transition from a form of socialism to a market-oriented direction led by bourgeois forces allied with world capitalism during the decade of the 1990s, has prompted a new round of discussion and debate on the origins and development of nationalism and the nation-state that has implications for contemporary nationalism and nationalist movements in the world today.

This discussion and debate has been framed within the context of classical and contemporary social theory addressing the nature and role of the state and nation, as well as class and ethnicity, in an attempt to understand the relationship between these phenomena as part of an analysis of the development and transformation of society and social relations in the late twentieth century.

This paper provides a critical analysis of classical and contemporary mainstream and Marxist theories of the nation, nationalism, and ethnic conflict. After an examination of select classical bourgeois statements on the nature of the nation and nationalism, I provide a critique of contemporary bourgeois and neo-Marxist formulations and adopt a class analysis approach informed by historical materialism to explain the class nature and dynamics of nationalism and ethnonational conflict.

Mainstream Theories of the Nation and Nationalism

Conventional social theories on the nature and sources of nationalism and ethnic conflict cover a time span encompassing classical to contemporary statements that provide a conservative perspective to the analysis of ethnonational phenomena that have taken center stage in the late twentieth century.

This section of the paper provides an overview of the statements of some of the most influential bourgeois theorists associated with classical and contemporary theories of nationalism and ethnic conflict that came to dominate the mainstream literature in the late nineteenth and throughout the twentieth centuries.

While I provide here an outline of several strands of bourgeois theorizing on the nation and nationalism, no attempt is made to undertake a comprehensive and exhaustive survey of all mainstream bourgeois theories of nationalism and ethnic conflict.

Classical Mainstream Statements

The central figures that have occupied a prominent place in the literature on classical bourgeois theories of the nation and nationalism have been Ernest Renan and Max Weber. There are, of course, other influential theorists who have made a lasting contribution to the development of mainstream, conventional theories of nationalism and national/ethnic identity, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Herder, Johann Fichte, and Giuseppe Mazzini, among others. However, Renan's and Weber's classical statements on these phenomena stand out as prime examples of bourgeois theories that have informed, in one way or another, all other subsequent mainstream formulations of the nation, nationalism, and ethno-nationalist conflict in the twentieth century.

In his classic statement "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?", originally delivered as a lecture at the Sorbonne in 1882, Ernest Renan provides the following definition of the nation:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Only two things, actually, constitute this soul, this spiritual principle. One is in the past, the other is in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of remembrances; the other is the actual consent, the desire to live together, the will to continue to value the heritage which all hold in common. . . . To have common glories in the past, a common will in the present; to have accomplished great things together, to wish to do so again, that is the essential condition for being a nation.¹

"A nation," Renan continues, "is a grand solidarity constituted by the sentiment of sacrifices which one has made and those that one is disposed to make again."² Thus, according to Renan's view,

A great aggregation of men, with a healthy spirit and warmth of heart, creates a moral conscience which is called a nation. When this moral conscience proves its strength by sacrifices that demand abdication of the individual for the benefit of the community, it is legitimate, and it has a right to exist.³

This subjective, idealist view of the nation is consistent with Renan's conclusion, where he states:

Through their varied, frequently opposing, abilities, nations serve the common cause of civilization; each holds one note in the concert of humanity, which, in the long run, is the highest ideal to which we can aspire.⁴

Defining the nation in these terms, Renan highlights one aspect of the fundamental features of mainstream, bourgeois theories of the nation and nationalism: a subjective, idealist conception of the nation that is largely a product of the mind, an abstraction that emerges from the collective imagination. Another, equally important, aspect of bourgeois theorizing on this question is the overemphasis on ethnic and cultural phenomena to explain the origins and development of the nation and nationalism, historically and today. In this view, culture and ethnicity, divorced from class forces in society, take on a life of their own and form the basis of social relations and social movements and their ideologies, including nationalism.

Max Weber's classic statement on this question fits in to both of these ideological frames of thought. A subjective, idealist conception of the nation that incorporates an ethno-cultural definition of nationalism and national identity is how Weber developed his approach to this question in the classic context. In a key passage in one of his major works, Weber writes:

If the concept of "nation" can in any way be defined unambiguously, it certainly cannot be stated in terms of empirical qualities common to those who count as members of the nation. In the sense of those using the term at a given time, the concept undoubtedly means, above all, that one may exact from certain groups of men a specific sentiment of solidarity in the face of other groups. Thus, the concept belongs in the sphere of values.⁵

In this sense, "a nation is a community of sentiment," writes Weber: "And one must be clearly aware of the fact that sentiments of solidarity, very heterogeneous in both their nature and their origin, are comprised within national sentiments."⁶ Moreover:

the idea of the "nation" is apt to include the notions of common descent and of an essential, though frequently indefinite, homogeneity. The nation has these notions in common with the sentiment of solidarity of ethnic communities, which is also nourished from various sources.⁷

Weber goes on to point out that the "sentiment of solidarity" that goes with the "idea of the nation" is well integrated into a cultural frame of reference facilitated by a collective "mission" that solidifies a community and gives it its sociocultural, as well as national, identity:

The earliest and most energetic manifestations of the idea [of the nation], in some form, even though it may have been veiled, have contained the legend of a providential "mission." Those to whom the representatives of the idea zealously turned were expected to shoulder this mission. Another element of the early idea was the notion that this mission was facilitated solely through the very cultivation of the peculiarity of the group set off as a nation. Therewith, in so far as its self-justification is sought in the value of its content, this mission can consistently be thought of only as a specific "culture" mission. The significance of the "nation" is usually anchored in the superiority, or at least the irreplaceability, of the culture values that are to be preserved and developed only through the cultivation of the peculiarity of the group.⁸

Weber's conventional, idealist views on the nation and national identity in such cultural, value-centered terms, complements well the arguments of other classical mainstream theorists, such as Renan, who have provided the foundations for subsequent bourgeois theories of the nation and nationalism developed by their contemporaries.

Among later bourgeois theorists who have followed this path, one may include Hans Kohn, Carlton Hayes, and Louis Snyder.

In his book *The Idea of Nationalism*, Hans Kohn writes: "Nationalism is first and foremost a state of mind, an act of consciousness."⁹ Kohn goes on to state:

Nationalism is an idea, an *idée-force*, which fills man's brain and heart with new thoughts and new sentiments, and drives him to translate his consciousness into deeds of organized action.¹⁰

"Nationalism," writes Kohn, "recognizes the nation-state as the ideal form of political organization."¹¹ Hence, in this sense, "Nationalism demands the nation-state; the creation of the nation-state strengthens nationalism."¹² Elsewhere, in *Nationalism: Its Meaning and History*, Kohn writes: "Nationalism is a state of mind, in which the supreme loyalty of the individual is felt to be due the nation-state."¹³

The relationship between nationality and the nation-state is an aspect of the phenomenon of nationalism that Carlton Hayes also emphasized in his writings on nationalism. For Hayes, the term “nationalism” is used in the first instance “to denote an actual historical process, the process of establishing nationalities as political units, of building out of tribes and empires the modern institution of the national state.”¹⁴ On the other hand, nationalism, according to Hayes, can also be described as “a contemporary popular belief, the belief that one’s own nationality or national state has such intrinsic worth and excellence as to require one to be loyal to it above every other thing and particularly to bestow upon it what amounts to supreme religious worship.”¹⁵ Thus, in this latter sense, nationalism is described by Hayes as a phenomenon that has metaphysical properties. Viewing nationalism as a belief (as a religion), Hayes in his book *Nationalism: A Religion* goes on to characterize the phenomenon in broad moralistic terms—as a force for “good” or as a force for “evil”, i.e., “as a blessing or as a curse,” as he puts it.¹⁶

Louis Snyder, another mainstream theorist in the tradition of Kohn and Hayes, provides a similar view on the nature and meaning of modern nationalism.¹⁷ Attempting to define nationalism at the broadest and most general level, Snyder writes: “the term nationalism admits of no simple definition. It is a complex phenomenon, often vague and mysterious in character.”¹⁸ Speaking of “its most perplexing feature,” he says: nationalism “may differ in its forms” as it is “used in so many different senses” and “has many faces,” such that “the effort continue as scholars seek to unravel the mysteries of an elusive historical phenomenon.”¹⁹

Having mystified the phenomenon beyond any concrete social meaning, Snyder defines nationalism as a “state of mind” as Kohn had done, as “nationalism” for Snyder “is a condition of mind, feeling, or sentiment.”²⁰ “Nationalism is a powerful emotion,” he writes, “a form of consciousness by which the individual proclaims his supreme loyalty to the nation.”²¹

This broad, psychological and metaphysical focus on the purported “mysterious” and “elusive” nature of nationalism by these earlier mainstream theorists has given way to a variety of more recent contemporary bourgeois theories that are more sophisticated in their reasoning through the adoption of a socio-cultural perspective that incorporates questions related to ethnicity and ethno-national issues. Although these later theorists have, as those before them, remained silent on class and the class nature of nationalism and ethnonational conflict, they have

nonetheless provided divergent perspectives that require our attention at least briefly.

Contemporary Mainstream Views

Among the most prominent of contemporary mainstream bourgeois theorists of nationalism one could cite Elie Kedourie, Ernest Gellner, Walker Connor, Karl Deutsch, John Breuilly, and Anthony D. Smith.²² We shall focus here on the views of three of these theorists—Kedourie, Gellner, and Connor—as representing a sampling of dominant mainstream views on this question in recent years.

Elie Kedourie, one of the most prominent, if not the most prominent, of more recent contemporary mainstream theorists of nationalism, provides a critique of various theories of the nation and nationalism that base their legitimacy on one or another aspect of social and historical existence. “In nationalist doctrine,” he writes, “language, race, culture, and sometimes even religion, constitute different aspects of the same primordial entity, the nation.”²³ While “it is misplaced ingenuity,” Kedourie continues, “to try and classify nationalisms according to the particular aspect which they choose to emphasize,” the premises on which such theory is based make its claims all the more evident:

What is beyond doubt is that the doctrine divides humanity into separate and distinct nations, claims that such nations must constitute sovereign states, and asserts that the members of a nation reach freedom and fulfillment by cultivating the peculiar identity of their own nation and by sinking their own persons in the greater whole of the nation.²⁴

To Kedourie, such view that characterizes the nation and the division of the world by nation-states as natural, i.e., as part of the natural order of things, is unfounded and is therefore a fallacy.

Rejecting various materialist approaches to the problem, Kedourie opts for an idealist definition of the nation and nationalism based on Ernest Renan’s classic statement on the individual will. Referring to Renan’s view of the nation, Kedourie approvingly writes: “having examined the different criteria which are used to distinguish nations, and having found them wanting, [Renan] concluded that the will of the individual must ultimately indicate whether a nation exists or not.”²⁵ Kedourie goes on to argue that the individual, “in pursuit of self-determination, wills himself as the member of a nation.”²⁶ In agreement with Renan’s own description of the nation as “a daily plebiscite,” Kedourie points out that “the metaphor is felicitous, if only because it indicates

so well that nationalism is ultimately based on will." Thus, Kedourie continues: "National self-determination is, in the final analysis, a determination of the will; and nationalism is, in the first place, a method of teaching the right determination of the will."²⁷

Such a subjectivist argument, divorced from the social basis that gives rise to the phenomenon of nationalism in the form of a collective national will, is a product of an idealist formulation and lacks a basis in material reality. Failure to identify the social and class forces that are the decisive agents of nationalist ideology and nationalist movements, leads Kedourie to a blind alley and an intellectual eclecticism that contributes very little to our understanding of this important social phenomenon.

Ernest Gellner, another prominent mainstream bourgeois theorist of nationalism, provides a different set of answers to this question. For Gellner, the primary unifying factor that nationalism utilizes to rally the masses behind the nationalist banner is culture. Culture, in Gellner's view, plays a decisive role in defining national identity, and the particular use to which culture is put by the nationalist forces determines the impact of nationalism on society: "nationalism, which sometimes takes pre-existing cultures and turns them into nations, sometimes invents them, and often obliterates pre-existing cultures."²⁸

In a fashion similar to that of Kedourie's idealist, subjectivist argument, Gellner argues that "It is nationalism which engenders nations, and not the other way round."²⁹ "Admittedly," he concedes, "nationalism uses the pre-existing, historically inherited proliferation of cultures or cultural wealth, though it uses them very selectively, and it most often transforms them radically."³⁰ But, Gellner points out:

The great, but valid, paradox is this: nations can be defined only in terms of the age of nationalism, rather than, as you might expect, the other way round. It is not the case that the "age of nationalism" is a mere summation of the awakening and political self-assertion of this, that, or the other nation. Rather, when general social conditions make for standardized, homogeneous, centrally sustained high cultures, pervading entire populations and not just elite minorities, a situation arises in which well-defined educationally sanctioned and unified cultures constitute very nearly the only kind of unit with which men willingly and often ardently identify. The cultures now seem to be the natural repositories of political legitimacy.³¹

Elsewhere, in his book, *Encounters with Nationalism*, Gellner writes: "Modern nationalism, which is a passionate identification with large, anonymous communities of shared culture and cultural imagery, creates its units out of pre-existing differences of various kinds."³² And that,

"It is this new importance of a shared culture," Gellner asserts, "which makes men into nationalists." "In the past," he concludes, "social structure not culture held society together; but that has now changed. *That* is the secret of nationalism: the new role of culture in industrial and industrialized society."³³

Notwithstanding some basic philosophical differences, Gellner's emphasis on culture as the source of nationalism and ethnonational identity (i.e., his emphasis on the primacy of superstructural phenomena), nevertheless places him in the same ideological camp as Kedourie. Thus, while Kedourie sees nationalism as an idea and speaks of the individual will and that Gellner bases his argument on cultural factors, both their theories are constructed in the superstructural sphere, i.e., in the realm of ideas, values, beliefs, tradition, culture, etc.—not in the sphere of fundamental social-structural conditions, let alone class and class relations.

Walker Connor is another contemporary mainstream bourgeois theorist who has had a major impact on dominant mainstream theories of the nation and nationalism. Viewing the nation in similarly psychological terms as associated with belief systems, Connor provides the following observation:

Defining and conceptualizing the nation is . . . difficult because the essence of a nation is intangible. This essence is a psychological bond that joins a people and differentiates it, in the subconscious conviction of its members, from all other people in a most vital way. The nature of that bond and its well-spring remain shadowy and elusive, and the consequent difficulty of defining the nation is usually acknowledged by those who attempt this task.³⁴

Connor goes on to emphasize that "when analyzing sociopolitical situations, what ultimately matters is not *what is* but *what people believe is*. And a subconscious belief in the group's separate origin and evolution is an important ingredient of national psychology."³⁵ Thus, referring to "a mass psychological vibration predicated upon an intuitive sense of consanguinity," Connor places national identity and nationalism in the sphere of beliefs and feelings and writes: "It is the intuitive conviction which can give to nations a psychological dimension."³⁶

Aside from the similarly idealist philosophical and theoretical orientations of these contemporary mainstream bourgeois theorists, the thread that runs through their ideologically-tainted conservative arguments is their open and undisguised anti-communism. It is, in essence, their uniform politically-charged ideological attack on Marxism that unites these

bourgeois apologists to develop their respective anti-Marxist (bourgeois) theories to counter the claims of the Marxist classics. That this is the case with bourgeois theories of nationalism in general, and with the two of the more prominent contemporary bourgeois theorists like Kedourie and Gellner in particular, is made clear by their own pronouncements in no uncertain terms.

Elie Kedourie, for example, in the July 1984 dated "Afterword" to the fourth, expanded edition of his book *Nationalism*, published posthumously in 1993, writes:

Marxism has also purported to offer an explanation of nationalism which makes it into an epiphenomenon which appears at a particular stage of economic development, when the bourgeoisie and its capitalist mode of production are in the ascendant. Nationalism is an expression of bourgeois interests. Here too, what nationalist ideology asserts or denies becomes of no interest, since it is a product of false consciousness, which must fade away as capitalism inevitably succumbs to its crisis. The bourgeoisie will then be dispossessed and swept away by the victorious proletariat, and with it all the superstructure of the bourgeois state, bourgeois culture, bourgeois ideology, etc. This is a manifest absurdity.³⁷

Ernest Gellner goes a step further in attacking Marxism in a politically-motivated, ideological polemic designed to discredit an intellectual orientation of long standing. In *Encounters with Nationalism*, published in 1994, Gellner writes:

The Marxist mistakes in social metaphysics and in sociology converge on what of course is the single most crucial and disastrous error in the system. The supposition that the communist social order will require no political organization but will in some unexplained way be self-adjusting. . . . The sad consequence is that societies living "under the banner of Marxism" are simply deprived of any idiom in which even to discuss their political predicament. . . . As for the political form of communist society, they cannot really discuss it at all.³⁸

Later in his book, Gellner continues:

It is indeed true that Marxism is formally the official doctrine and state religion over extensive parts of the globe. However, at present neither rulers nor subjects in these states have much faith in it, or take it very seriously. It is exceedingly hard to find Marxists in Marxist societies, though it is still possible to find some in non-Marxist ones.³⁹

Finally, Gellner cannot resist to take pleasure in the recent transformations that are taking place in the former Soviet Union and East

European socialist states, when he writes with a contemptuous sarcasm that makes a mockery of the pursuit of scientific knowledge and scholarship: "Marxism," he says, "had taught that civil society was a kind of moral fraud, but 70 years of secular messianism has engendered a passionate thirst for just this fraud":

Marxism had seen the liberal state as a kind of executive committee of the bourgeoisie; now a committee is striving, not too convincingly, to create a bourgeoisie which it could serve, and hopes that it is not too blatant a lumpenbourgeoisie. We can only watch these efforts with trepidation, and wish them well. The best one can say is that a dogmatic pessimism is unjustified.⁴⁰

There are, of course, other more sophisticated and sociologically-oriented bourgeois theorists who focus on ethnic groups and ethnonationalist movements as central to the nationalist project placed in historical context, such as that developed by Anthony D. Smith, Charles Tilly, and Anthony Giddens. Still, in one form or another, these "liberal" attempts to explain the origin, nature, and development of nations and nationalism, as well as ethnicity and ethno-national conflict, are predicated on a variety of anti-Marxist contemporary mainstream perspectives that have become quite fashionable in bourgeois circles in recent years, as in the case of Giddens's neo-Weberian critique of Marxism in his book *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, where he attacks Marxists, and Marxism in general, for failing to provide the "right" answers.⁴¹

Contrary to what Giddens asserts when he says, on page 1 of his book, "My intention is not to produce a critique of historical materialism written in hostile mien, declaring Marxism to be redundant or exhausted," he goes on in the same breath a few sentences later to unleash an all out attack against Marxism in an attempt to accomplish precisely the opposite of what he claims: "there is much in Marx that is mistaken, ambiguous or inconsistent," he writes, "and in many respects Marx's writings exemplify features of nineteenth-century thought which are plainly defective. . . ." ⁴²

"Let me try to put the facts of the matter as bluntly as possible," Giddens continues:

If by "historical materialism" we mean the conception that the history of human societies can be understood in terms of the progressive augmentation of the forces of production, then it is based on false premises, and the time has come finally to abandon it. If historical materialism means

that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles," it is so patently erroneous that it is difficult to see why so many have felt obliged to take it seriously. If, finally, historical materialism means that Marx's scheme of the evolution of societies (from tribal society, Ancient society, feudalism, to capitalism; and thence to socialism, together with the 'stagnant' offshoot of the "Asiatic Mode of Production" in the East) provides a defensible basis for analysing world history, then it is also to be rejected.⁴³

"First of all," Giddens admits, "much of this book is an attack upon the idea of 'mode of production' as a useful analytical concept."⁴⁴ "Anyone who rejects Marx's evolutionary scheme, and a good deal of the substantive content of his materialist conception of history besides—as I do—" Giddens continues, "must pursue the implications right through."⁴⁵ Thus, "Marx's more general pronouncements upon human history, especially in those most famous of all passages, in the "Preface" to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, have to be treated with great caution and, in some major respects, simply discarded."⁴⁶ Finally, "Marx's comments on non-Capitalist societies," Giddens writes, "are relatively scrappy and often unoriginal. Some of them, in my view, are just as erroneous as are certain of his more general statements. It is not their unsatisfactory character but rather the tenacity with which many Marxists have sought to cling to whatever gems they claim to find there which is astonishing."⁴⁷

Following his sweeping attack on Marx, Giddens offers the following proposal: "in diverging from Marx I want to propose the elements of an alternative interpretation of history."⁴⁸ He writes:

A fundamental component of my arguments is the supposition that the articulation of time-space relations in social systems has to be examined in conjunction with the generation of *power*. A preoccupation with power forms a leading thread of this book. I maintain that power was never satisfactorily theorized by Marx, and that this failure is at origin of some of the chief limitations of his scheme of historical analysis.⁴⁹

This is a claim that is totally unfounded, as power and power relations constitute the cornerstone of Marx's analysis of society and social relations.

As to Giddens' critique of Marxist views on nationalism, he offers the same worn-out anti-communist fallacies: "Even the most orthodox of Marxists," he writes, "are today prepared to concede that there is little to be found in Marx's writings relevant to the interpretation of the rise of nationalism."⁵⁰ Elsewhere, in the second volume of his book, Giddens continues:

It is manifestly the case that Marx paid little attention to the nature and impact of nationalism, and the comments he does make are mostly neither instructive nor profound. Subsequent Marxists have been very much concerned with "the national question," but it cannot be pretended that the literature thereby generated has done a great deal to illuminate the nature or origins of nationalism. None of the various Marxist interpretations which seek to treat nationalism as some kind of masked expression of the interests of the dominant class has much plausibility either.⁵¹

In all the cases discussed above, including both earlier and more recent mainstream efforts, to search for alternative non-Marxist theories of nations, nationalism, and ethno-national conflict, the underlying, driving-force of bourgeois theorizing on these questions has been a rejection of Marxist theory in favor of its bourgeois counterparts which, in essence, reveals the anti-communist nature of bourgeois "scholarship" that is presented as the only acceptable and viable alternative supposedly superseding Marxism.

In the next section of the paper, I sweep aside such diversionary, eclectic bourgeois attempts at sowing confusion on this important subject, and provide the outlines of a Marxist alternative that is firmly based on a class analysis of national phenomena that reveals the class nature of nationalism and ethnic conflict to expose the class forces involved in promoting and perpetuating class-driven national interests that have fostered, and continue to foster, ethnonational conflict in order to derail or postpone class struggle and social revolution.

Toward a Marxist Theory of Nationalism

In this section of the paper I attempt to develop an alternative Marxist theory of nationalism based on the principles of historical materialism. Going beyond the surface phenomena of national, religious, and ethnic conflicts that mainstream social scientists have studied as determinants of social relations, I provide here a class analysis of the nature and dynamics of conflicts along national, religious, and ethnic lines and attempt to develop an alternative theory that explains the root causes of such phenomena in class terms.

The Critique from within: Critics of Marxism

As I have pointed out in the previous section of this paper, it has been quite popular with mainstream bourgeois theorists and commentators to criticize Marxism for failing to come to terms with nationalism and

the national question, and for underestimating its potent force in effecting change. Bourgeois critics, in their zeal to undermine and discredit Marxism as a viable theory of society and social relations, have attempted time and again to undermine the legitimacy of Marxist social scientific inquiry as part of a sustained attack on Marxism throughout the Cold War years. A major ingredient of this anti-communist assault on Marxist theory during this period has been a concerted effort to refute the primacy of class—the central concept that informs the Marxist analysis of society and social relations.

This bourgeois, conservative criticism of Marxism, which has a long history stretching back more than a century, is not surprising, nor unexpected, as it conforms to long-held views that have always been hostile to Marxism. What is disturbing and troublesome, however, is that this same kind of criticism of Marxism is also leveled by some self-styled “Marxists” who have contributed to the anti-communist intellectual crusade aimed at discrediting Marxism for its “failure” to address the complex issues surrounding nationalism and the national question, coupled with charges of class reductionism. Here one can include Tom Nairn, Benedict Anderson, Ernesto Laclau, Ephraim Nimni, and Horace B. Davis, among others. What is common to all these critics from within Marxism (and here is where their positions coincide with that of their conservative bourgeois counterparts) is their subjective, idealist conception of nationalism informed by an ethno-cultural analysis devoid of class.

Tom Nairn, in his book *The Break Up of Britain*, for example, claims that: “The theory of nationalism represents Marxism’s great historical failure.”⁵² Adding to the list of “failures,” where he cites “Marxism’s shortcomings over imperialism, the state, the falling rate of profit and the immiseration of the masses are certainly old battlefields,” Nairn writes: “Yet none of these is as important, as fundamental, as the problem of nationalism, either in theory or in political practice.”⁵³ To correct this situation, he offers the following insight: nationalism is an autonomous, ideological force that is based on an idea; it is an irrational response to general frustration.

Taking this critique a step further, Benedict Anderson, in his book *Imagined Communities*, asserts: “nationalism has proved an uncomfortable *anomaly* for Marxist theory and, precisely for that reason, has been largely elided, rather than confronted.”⁵⁴ And what is his great discovery that Marxists have failed to confront? The discovery that the nation is an imagined cultural community and nationalism is a product of the collective imagination that is as real as religion and cosmology!

Ernesto Laclau, in a recent commentary on Marxism and the national question that echoes Nairn's and Anderson's critique, boldly states: "blindness to the national factor has been recurrent in the history of Marxism right from the beginning. These limitations are to be found even in the highest moments of Marxist theorization on the national question."⁵⁵ Yet, Laclau is unable to offer a vision other than old, worn-out bourgeois rationalizations on the irrationality of nationalism that is as ideologically blind as he alleges Marxist theorizing to be. Saturated with idealist conceptions emerging from abstract reasoning, nationalism to Laclau is no more real than those who believe it to be.

Ephraim Nimni, who credits Laclau's work as having had a "profound influence" on his intellectual development, goes even further in his recent book *Marxism and Nationalism* in attacking Marxists for their "insensitivity" toward the "uniqueness of nationalist ideologies", and says "the national question did not disappear because Marxists wished it to do so."⁵⁶ Stemming from this criticism is Nimni's attack on Marxism for its alleged "economic reductionism"—by which he means various aspects of superstructural phenomena are reflections of the economic base as "all meaningful changes within the social arena take place in the sphere of economic (class) relations" and that "economic relations of production are the unique source of causality."⁵⁷ Associated with this position is his indictment of Marxism for its "class reductionism":

A class reductionist approach represents an important shift of emphasis within the same conceptual framework. Social classes are considered the only possible historical subjects so that ideologies and other superstructural phenomena (such as nationalism and the national arena in general) "belong" to the paradigmatic area of influence of class position. . . . Political and other activities may advance or delay (according to the circumstances) the outcome of the relations between classes (class struggle).⁵⁸

Much to his surprise, however, as to his bourgeois ideological counterparts, "The class reductionist paradigm," writes Nimni, "has proven to be more resilient; it continues to inform influential contemporary Marxist discussion of the national question."⁵⁹

Earlier, in an effort to reformulate Marxist theory to account for certain political/ideological phenomena such as nationalism, Otto Bauer had conceptualized the nation and nationalism as an idea that is an autonomous force independent of class and class struggle—a position that was strongly criticized and rejected by Lenin and other classical Marxists.

More recently, Horace B. Davis attempted to develop a similar theory that gave equal weight to class and nation as forces that are func-

tional in separate spheres of social consciousness in a parallel fashion.⁶⁰ Despite Davis's otherwise fine historical analysis of the issues surrounding the origins and development of nationalism, his attempt to revise Marxist theory to accommodate the nationalist problematic by assigning to it an autonomous status has led him in a similarly idealist direction that has undermined the development of a class-based materialist analysis of nationalism and the national question.

This theoretical error stemming from the logic of such analysis is repeated by another respected scholar of Marxism of long-standing, Eric Hobsbawm, who treats nationalism in similarly idealist terms.⁶¹ Hobsbawm's view that nationalism is an irrational, invented ideology that is based on an imaginary allegiance to the nation independent of any direct link to class and social processes, places him, like Davis, in the company of critics such as Nairn, Anderson, Laclau, and Nimni who have criticized classical Marxism for its "class reductionism."

Notwithstanding these criticisms, the present study, as I have attempted to articulate in the pages of this article, makes a further contribution to a class-based Marxist theory of nationalism, the national question and national movements—one that is firmly rooted in *class* and *class struggle* as the motive force of social change and social transformation.

The Class Nature of Nationalism and National Movements

Contrary to the distorted critique of classical Marxism by some self-styled "Marxists" who have turned to bourgeois, idealist modes of thought for answers, we argue here that nationalism and national movements are phenomena that cannot be studied in isolation without taking into account the social and class structure of the society in which they arise. National and ethnic divisions (as well as nationalist ideology, as an extension of such divisions) are manifestations of class conflicts and class struggles that are at base a reflection of social relations of production.⁶²

"National relations," writes G. Glezerman, "cannot be understood outside of and independently of class relations":

This being the case, a class approach is one of the most important features inherent in the methodology of the Marxist analysis of social phenomena, including nations, national interests and national movements.⁶³

"The division of society, or a nation, into classes," Glezerman continues, "and the division of humanity into nations, nationalities, etc., have different historic roots. Yet relations between nations and classes cannot be viewed in isolation from each other."⁶⁴

Nations like classes are connected with a definite set of conditions of the material life of society. The material elements characteristic of a nation are common territory and, what is most important, a community of economic life which unites all parts of the nation into a single whole. A nation is also characterized by the specific features of its spiritual life, certain national traits, a single language and national consciousness.⁶⁵

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels devoted much time and effort to the study of the nature and dynamics of nationalism and the national question. Their analyses of the Irish national question, the anti-colonial revolts in India, and national uprisings elsewhere in Asia and the Middle East, as well as in other parts of the world, show the scope and depth of their understanding of the nature and role of national movements and struggles for national self-determination that they viewed to be part of the worldwide proletarian struggle against capitalism.⁶⁶

Subsequently, V.I. Lenin, through his perceptive political analysis in linking the national and colonial questions to the worldwide expansion of imperialism, Marxist discourse on the national question and the right of nations to self-determination, took on its political significance as an aspect of the class struggle to facilitate the fight for socialism and social emancipation.⁶⁷

Lenin's theses on the national and the colonial question were closely connected to his analysis of modern imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism. And this linkage, which laid bare the imperialist domination and oppression of colonized peoples and nations, led to the consequent response that set the stage for the struggle for national liberation.⁶⁸

J.V. Stalin, following this tradition established by the Marxist classics, addressed the national question most directly by focusing on the concept of *nation* as the centerpiece of his study and analysis of nationalism and national self-determination. In "Marxism and the National Question," Stalin summed up the characteristic features of a nation this way:

A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.⁶⁹

Placing it in historical context, Stalin situated the concept of nation within the framework of the evolution of capitalism and the capitalist state. With the expansion of capitalism on a world scale, and with the impact of capitalist imperialism on the colonies and neo-colonial territories that capitalism came to dominate throughout the world, Marxist theory subsequently incorporated during the period of the Third

International a broader definition of the rise of nations and national movements that corresponded to developments in the latest stage of capitalist development—the age of modern imperialism. Thus, a broader reconceptualization of the national question and national self-determination that would include nations colonized and oppressed by imperialism, provided the basis of a modified Marxist theory of nationalism that became the classic statement of the Marxist position on this question during the twentieth century.

In this context, “The very processes of the formation of nations, the development of the national liberation movement, and the rise of national states,” writes Glezerman, “cannot be correctly understood without taking into consideration the class or classes which determine the social content of these processes and are their motive force.”⁷⁰ Thus, “Nations as well as classes come into existence on the basis of the objective process of social development.”⁷¹

Marxist theory points out that the specific nature of class relations, which are based on relations of production, come to inform the nature and content of political struggles; such struggles, when they occur at the *inter*-national level, take the form of *national* struggles. Thus, while exploitative relations between two contending classes within a national territory take the form of an internal class struggle, a similar relationship at the international level manifests itself in the form of a national struggle. This struggle, which is the national expression of an international class struggle, is led by a particular class and is often based on an alliance of several classes unified for a common goal—national liberation and self-determination.⁷²

The nature of the process for self-determination, which is characteristic of Third World anti-imperialist national liberation struggles, is quite different in the advanced-capitalist imperial centers of Europe and North America. In these regions, the struggles waged by national minorities against the central state tend to be demands for limited autonomy, self-rule, or similar such status within the boundaries of the larger federal structure—demands that fall short of full national independence and statehood. This has been the case, for example, in Quebec and the Basque Country, as well as Puerto Rico and Northern Ireland.⁷³

In yet other instances, when the national question is raised within the context of a socialist state, we find an entirely different dynamic at work. In some cases, such as in China, nationalities policy may be framed within the context of national integration, which at the same time recognizes cultural diversity and allows regional autonomy to various ethnic and nationality groups. In other cases, such as the former

Soviet Union, some national groups may come to play a disproportionately dominant role, where the center fails to deal with deep-seated national antagonisms inherited from an earlier period, which in time may give rise to the disintegration of the central state along national lines. However, while long-suppressed national aspirations under an otherwise seemingly cooperative federated state may engender nationalism and ethnic conflict, such as in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, it is important to stress again that here too a closer examination of these conflicts reveal the class nature of national struggles often fueled by long-standing ethnic and religious divisions.⁷⁴

Nationalism, National Movements, and Class Struggle

A few key substantive questions that lie at the heart of nationalism must be briefly raised to sort out the class nature of national movements and struggles for national self-determination. Thus, while all national movements possess characteristics that are historically specific, the central question that must be raised as theoretically applicable to all such struggles for national liberation is the necessity of a *class analysis approach* to the study of nationalism.

Nationalism, writes Albert Szymanski in his book *Class Structure*, "is the ideology that members of a nation, people, ethnic group, or 'racial' minority have more in common with each other than the various constituent classes of the group have with other people in similar class positions."⁷⁵ Moreover,

"nationalism" dictates that because of their postulated overriding common interest, all classes within the ethnic group, people, or "racial" minority should work together economically and politically to advance their collective interests *against* other "nations," "races," ethnic groups, or peoples (even against those who are in the *same* classes). Nationalism is the advocacy of ethnic or "national" solidarity and action over class consciousness and action. It is, thus, the opposite of class consciousness that argues solidarity should occur and political alliances be formed primarily along *class* lines (even against the relatively privileged groups within one's subordinate ethnic group). Nationalism and class consciousness are, thus, alternative strategies of political action for gaining improvement in one's life.⁷⁶

"In fact," adds Szymanski, "nationalism is a product of class forces. Although different kinds of nationalism differ qualitatively in their effects, *all* serve some classes within a given racial or ethnic group as opposed to others."⁷⁷

The adoption of a class analysis approach to the study of nationalism, therefore, would entail an analysis of the class base of a particular national movement, the balance of class forces within it, and the class forces leading the movement. On this basis, one could determine the nature and future course of development of a national movement and whether a given movement is progressive or reactionary. Once the *class character* of a liberation movement and its leadership is thus determined, a political differentiation of various types of national movements can be ascertained, which in turn would provide us with clues to the social-political character of the movement in question.⁷⁸

An understanding of the class nature of a given national movement may also inform us of the nature of the class forces that movement is struggling *against*, hence the nature and forms of the class struggle. The class content of the anti-imperialist liberation struggle, then, transforms the national struggle into a *class* struggle which is fought out at the national and international levels.

This struggle, which appears in the form of a national struggle, is, in essence, a *struggle for state power*.⁷⁹ "If national struggle . . . is class struggle, [i.e.] . . . one very important form of the struggle for state power," writes James Blaut, then a number of questions arise which are central to an understanding of nationalism and a national movement: "which classes make use of it, in which historical epochs, and for which purposes?"⁸⁰ Thus, through such an analysis, one can expect a relationship between the class character of a national movement, its political goals, and the nature and direction of the postindependence state following a successful national struggle.

In national struggles led by the petty bourgeoisie, for example, the class position of this segment of Third World societies often lead to an anti-imperialist liberation struggle in which the petty-bourgeois forces play a dominant role. In such situations, writes Szymanski,

Both sectors of the petty bourgeoisie tend to become nationalist because of their feelings of social humiliation and lack of fundamental control over their lives—a situation they can easily attribute to foreign domination. This class becomes disillusioned with the authoritarian rule of the transnational-local capitalist coalition. Its tendency is to increasingly support various nationalist opposition movements often in alliance with the working class and peasantry—movements to which they attempt to provide leadership.⁸¹

Since the class nature of the leadership of a movement is decisive in effecting the outcome of a particular struggle to take state power, the

important question once again becomes the class nature of the social forces that wage the struggle for national liberation and lead the rest of society in a particular political direction.

Nationalism, Class Struggle, and Social Transformation

National movements that are struggling for self-determination are also engaged in struggles against dominant class forces that are in control of the prevailing social system. As a result, national struggles often turn into class struggles where a subordinate, oppressed class comes to express its interests through a revolutionary movement aimed at taking state power. Such a movement is often led by a single class or an alliance of class forces whose interests are opposed to those who control the state. Thus, as I have pointed out elsewhere:

Class forces mobilized by the petty bourgeoisie and other intermediate sectors of society . . . have seized power by rallying people around a *nationalist* ideology directed against imperialism and its internal reactionary allies, the landlords and compradors. . . . [R]evolutions led by worker-peasant coalitions against imperialism and local reaction have resulted in the establishment of *socialist* states.⁸²

Hence, a national movement led by the national or petty bourgeoisie, i.e., bourgeois nationalism, can, when successful, set the stage for the building of a national *capitalist* state; an anti-imperialist national movement that is led by the working class in alliance with the peasantry, on the other hand, can, upon waging a successful national liberation struggle, begin building a popular *socialist* state.⁸³

In other instances, actions by a coalition of class forces that mobilizes a variety of social classes through cross-class alliances aimed at capturing state power may, due to the absence of a clearly articulated class position, result in the transformation of society in an "ambiguous" direction, such that in the absence of a clear and resolute action against existing social, political, and economic institutions of society, the new order may soon lose its dynamism and become incorporated into the structures of the global political economy dominated by the imperialist states.

Given the dominant role of imperialism today, it is important to recognize the force brought to bear by the imperialist states in shaping the nature and direction of such movements that have an immense impact on the balance of class forces at the global level. Such intervention by an external force becomes a crucial determinant of the class

struggle when it is articulated through various internal class forces that are allied to it. An alliance of dominant classes at the global level is thus aimed at blocking the struggles of national movements in an effort to forestall the development of the class struggle that would transform the state and society and bring to power forces whose interests are contrary to and clash with those in control of the prevailing social order.

Today, the globalization of capital has intensified the imperialist domination of the world, a process that is developing in a much more accelerated pace than in earlier periods of imperialist rule. The distinct feature of this most recent period of transnational expansion, however, is the contradictory nature of the national movements that imperialism has variously suppressed and supported. Thus, while in earlier periods of superpower rivalry with the Soviet Union various Third World national liberation movements confronted the brute force of the imperialist states (especially of U.S. imperialism) that gave rise to a massive anti-imperialist movement across the globe, the transformations in the former Soviet Union and the Eastern European socialist states during the course of the past decade have changed the dynamics of the global political economy, forcing revolutionary nationalist movements into a defensive position while providing bourgeois nationalist forces a newly found alliance with imperialism as in the former socialist states of Eastern Europe, in particular the former Yugoslavia, where a variety of bourgeois nationalist regimes have come to serve as new outposts of global capitalism that allows limited autonomy for local capitalist development within the context of a global political economy controlled by the imperialist states.

The contradictory nature of imperialist intervention, to suppress some nationalist movements and support yet others, highlights the politics of imperialist intervention that the globalization of capital has fostered at century's end—a situation that calls for a careful analysis of the class forces involved in contemporary nationalist movements variously opposed to or allied with U.S. imperialism (e.g., Cuba vs. Croatia) that carries serious social and political consequences. Thus, the critical factor that distinguishes the nature and dynamics of contemporary forms of nationalism and national movements, then, is the *class character* of these movements and their *class leadership*, and the manner in which they are linked with or are opposed to imperialism. It is within this context of social-political developments in the struggle against the existing state and social-economic structures of society that we begin to delineate the nature and dynamics of ongoing class struggles and social transformations embarked by the various national movements.

The Class Nature of Nationalism and National Movements: The Case of the Palestinian National Movement

The diverse settings in which struggles for autonomy, self-determination, and national liberation take place necessitate a careful analysis of the relationship between class, state, and nation—a relationship that is central to our understanding of the nature and dynamics of nationalism, class struggle, and social transformation. It is thus within the framework of an understanding of the relationship between these phenomena that we discover the class essence of nationalism and national movements as manifested in different spatial, temporal, and political contexts.

In this section of the paper I take up a brief analysis of the Palestinian national movement as a prominent case of nationalism and a national movement to explore its internal organizational structure in class terms. In so doing, I attempt to highlight the various tendencies within the Palestinian movement in the context of an anti-imperialist national liberation struggle that contains a multitude of class forces attempting to control and dominate the structure and direction of this movement.

The Palestinian national movement emerged in the early twentieth century following the collapse of the Ottoman state during the First World War. Although unrest in the Province of Palestine directed against both the despotic Ottoman state and Zionist encroachments into the region had begun earlier in the previous century, it became further intensified during the British military occupation of Palestine following the First World War. This was further fueled by the creation of the State of Israel by the Western powers in the aftermath of the victory over Nazi Germany at the conclusion of the Second World War.

The initial nationalist response to British occupation emerged from the discontent of the Palestinian masses against the structure of governance under colonial rule. This, coupled with the rise in Zionist armed provocations against the Palestinians during British rule, led to the strengthening of the Palestinian national movement.⁸⁴

During the 1950s and 1960s, Palestinian nationalism took expression through the actions of several liberation organizations that operated in the diaspora. These included the Arab Nationalist Movement (ANM), founded by George Habash in the early 1950s, and El Fatah, founded by Yasser Arafat in the late 1950s. Later, in the mid-1960s, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) emerged as an umbrella organization that brought together various political tendencies in the diaspora and defined the nature of the liberation struggle during the sixties.⁸⁵

The emergence of the PLO and the continued presence of Fatah gave rise to the development of the National Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which engaged in military operations against Israel beginning in the mid-1960s. Armed operations by Palestinian commandos belonging to a number of other organizations were carried out against Israel throughout the 1960s.⁸⁶ Among these, the best known was El Fatah. However, in the late 1960s another important organization, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), was founded. The PFLP, and later its breakaway group Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PDFLP), became a direct rival of El Fatah, competing for support among the Palestinian masses. The sharp political focus of PFLP and PDFLP, with their Marxist-Leninist ideological orientation, served to differentiate them from other organizations within the Palestinian resistance. Within a short time, they came to play a prominent role within the mass movement.⁸⁷

On a broader level, the PLO, by the early 1970s, had come to represent most of the Palestinian organizations active in the national movement. This was also a period of growth of the Palestinian movement and a period that witnessed increased discussion and debate among the various movement organizations on the future course of the resistance.

During the 1970s and 1980s it became clear that the Palestinian national movement did not represent a single unified front or tendency, but that three rival factions within the movement came to represent three distinct class forces with a stake in the building of a future Palestinian state. These included: a populist/nationalist faction led by Arafat with support from the bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie; a left-wing Marxist faction supported by the working class and the peasantry; and a right-wing Islamic fundamentalist faction supported by the landlords and the clergy. In the protracted internal political struggle between these rival forces over the course of the past two to three decades, the bourgeois nationalist forces prevailed, isolating and finally defeating both the Marxist challenge from the left and the fundamentalist challenge from the right, thus dominating the politics of the national movement up to its present bourgeois context in talks regarding national political autonomy and the eventual establishment of a bourgeois-led Palestinian national state. The internal factional struggles within the PLO and the mobilization of class forces within the larger Palestinian society that fueled these struggles are thus the manifestation of the broader class configuration of the social formations embroiled in the Arab-Israeli conflict at the heart of which lies the Palestinian national

question—one that continues to occupy a central place in the politics of class and state in the Middle East.

Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that nationalism and national movements are a product of class relations and class struggles at both national and international levels. Countering classical and contemporary idealist formulations of the nation and nationalism as an “idea” or “an imagined community,” I have argued that an analysis of the *class nature* of nationalism and national movements provides us with a better understanding of the nature, form, and content of nationalism, as well as the nature and dynamics of the society that a given movement is struggling to build. In developing an alternative analysis of the relationship between class, state, and nation, I have attempted to show that nationalism and national movements are a product of the interests of a particular class or classes (i.e., the national and petty bourgeoisies) who are the direct beneficiaries of this ideology which represents the position of these classes so as to further advance their narrow, nationally-based interests. I have shown this to be the case in my brief account of the internal dynamics of the Palestinian national movement as an example of a national movement that has not been immune to the logic of class relations and class struggles in the larger society. Stressing the importance of class analysis in examining the nature of nationalism and national movements, I have argued that we would be better able to comprehend these powerful and persistent phenomena if we adopt a class perspective that is grounded in the principles of historical materialism.⁸⁸

Notes

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12. Ibid., p. 19.

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24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., p. 75.
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27. Ibid., p. 76.
28. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, p. 49.
29. Ibid., p. 55.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Gellner, *Encounters With Nationalism*, p. 178.
33. Ibid., p. 63.
34. Connor, "A Nation is a Nation, is a State, is an Ethnic Group is a . . .", p. 379.
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36. Ibid., p. 381.
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38. Gellner, *Encounters with Nationalism*, pp. 6–7.
39. Ibid., p. 64.
40. Ibid., p. 179.
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62. See Albert Szymanski, *Class Structure: A Critical Perspective* (New York: Praeger, 1983), pp. 5–7, 76–84.
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70. Glezerman, *Classes and Nations*, p. 21.
71. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
72. James Blaut, *The National Question: Decolonizing the Theory of Nationalism* (London: Zed Books, 1987), pp. 176–95 argues that national liberation struggles against imperialism are, in essence, class struggles that take place at the international level.
73. See Berch Berberoglu (ed.), *The National Question: Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Self-Determination in the 20th Century* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995) for a series of case studies on the national question in the advanced capitalist countries.
74. *Ibid.*, pp. 227–314.
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76. *Ibid.* (emphases in the original).
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79. *Ibid.* See also, Blaut, *The National Question*, pp. 23, 46, 123.
80. *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 46.
81. Albert J. Szymanski, *The Logic of Imperialism* (New York: Praeger, 1981), p. 426.
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