Introduction

Perhaps without being much noticed yet, a fundamental transformation in the history of Marxism and Marxist movements is upon us. Its most visible signs are the recent wars between Vietnam, Cambodia and China. These wars are of world-historical importance because they are the first to occur between regimes whose independence and revolutionary credentials are undeniable, and because none of the belligerents has made more than the most perfunctory attempts to justify the bloodshed in terms of a recognizable Marxist theoretical perspective. While it was still just possible to interpret the Sino-Soviet border clashes of 1969, and the Soviet military interventions in Germany (1953), Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968), and Afghanistan (1980) in terms of— according to taste— 'social imperialism,' 'defending socialism,' etc., no one, I imagine, seriously believes that such vocabularies have much bearing on what has occurred in Indochina.

If the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia in December 1978 and January 1979 represented the first large-scale conventional war waged by one revolutionary Marxist regime against another,¹ China’s assault on Vietnam in February rapidly confirmed

¹ This formulation is chosen simply to emphasize the scale and the style of the fighting, not to assign blame. To avoid possible misunderstanding, it should be said that the December 1978 invasion grew out of armed clashes between partisans of the
two revolutionary movements going back possibly as far as 1971. After April 1977, border raids, initiated by the Cambodians, but quickly followed by the Vietnamese, grew in size and scope, culminating in the major Vietnamese incursion of December 1977. None of these raids, however, aimed at overthrowing enemy regimes or occupying large territories, nor were the numbers of troops involved comparable to those deployed in December 1978. The controversy over the causes of the war is most thoughtfully pursued in: Stephen P. Heder, ‘The Kampuchean-Vietnamese Conflict,’ in David W. P. Elliott, ed., The Third Indochina Conflict, pp. 21–67; Anthony Barnett, ‘Inter-Communist Conflicts and Vietnam,’ Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars, 11: 4 (October–December 1979), pp. 2–9; and Laura Summers, ‘In Matters of War and Socialism Anthony Barnett would Shame and Honour Kampuchea Too Much,’ ibid., pp. 10–18.

2. Anyone who has doubts about the UK’s claims to such parity with the USSR should ask himself what nationality its name denotes: Great Brito-Irish?


5. See his ‘The Modern Janus’, New Left Review, 94 (November–December 1975), p. 3. This essay is included unchanged in The Break-up of Britain as chapter 9 (pp. 329–63).
must, of course, first of all settle matters with its own bourgeoisie?’

How else to account for the use, for over a century, of the concept ‘national bourgeoisie’ without any serious attempt to justify theoretically the relevance of the adjective? Why is this segmentation of the bourgeoisie – a world-class insofar as it is defined in terms of the relations of production – theoretically significant?

The aim of this book is to offer some tentative suggestions for a more satisfactory interpretation of the ‘anomaly’ of nationalism. My sense is that on this topic both Marxist and liberal theory have become etiolated in a late Ptolemaic effort to ‘save the phenomena’, and that a reorientation of perspective in, as it were, a Copernican spirit is urgently required. My point of departure is that nationality, or, as one might prefer to put it in view of that word’s multiple significations, nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind. To understand them properly we need to consider carefully how they have come into historical being, in what ways their meanings have changed over time, and why, today, they command such profound emotional legitimacy. I will be trying to argue that the creation of these artefacts towards the end of the eighteenth century was the spontaneous distillation of a complex ‘crossing’ of discrete historical forces; but that, once created, they became ‘modular’, capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations. I will also attempt to show why these particular cultural artefacts have aroused such deep attachments.


7. As Aira Kemiläinen notes, the twin ‘founding fathers’ of academic scholarship on nationalism, Hans Kohn and Carleton Hayes, argued persuasively for this dating. Their conclusions have, I think, not been seriously disputed except by nationalist ideologues in particular countries. Kemiläinen also observes that the word ‘nationalism’ did not come into wide general use until the end of the nineteenth century. It did not occur, for example, in many standard nineteenth century lexicons. If Adam Smith conjured with the wealth of ‘nations’, he meant by the term no more than ‘societies’ or ‘states.’ Aira Kemiläinen, Nationalism, pp. 10, 33, and 48–49.

8. The Break-up of Britain, p. 359.
IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community — and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.

It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. Renan referred to this imagining in his suavely back-handed way when he wrote that 'Or l'essence d'une nation est que tous les individus aient beaucoup de choses en commun, et aussi que tous aient oublié bien des choses.' With a certain ferocity Gellner makes a comparable point when he rules that 'Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist.' The drawback to this formulation, however, is that Gellner is so anxious to show that nationalism masquerades under false pretences that he assimilates 'invention' to 'fabrication' and 'falsity', rather than to 'imagining' and 'creation'. In this way he implies that 'true' communities exist which can be advantageously juxtaposed to nations. In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. Javanese villagers have always known that they are connected to people they have never seen, but these ties were once imagined particularistically — as indefinitely stretchable nets of kinship and clientship. Until quite recently, the Javanese language had no word meaning the abstraction 'society.' We may today think of the French aristocracy of the ancien régime as a class; but surely it was imagined this way only very late. To the question 'Who is the Comte de X?' the normal answer would have been, not 'a member of the aristocracy,' but 'the lord of X,' 'the uncle of the Baronne de Y,' or 'a client of the Duc de Z.'

The nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coextensive with mankind. The most messianic nationalists do not dream of a day when all the members of the human race will join their nation in the way that it was possible, in certain epochs, for, say, Christians to dream of a wholly Christian planet.

It is imagined as sovereign because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm. Coming to maturity at a stage of human history when even the most devout adherents of any universal religion were inescapably confronted with the living pluralism of such religions, and the allomorphism between each faith's ontological claims and territorial stretch, nations dream of being free, and, if under God, directly so. The gage and emblem of this freedom is the sovereign state.

Finally, it is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings.

These deaths bring us abruptly face to face with the central problem posed by nationalism: what makes the shrunken imaginings of recent history (scarcely more than two centuries) generate such colossal sacrifices? I believe that the beginnings of an answer lie in the cultural roots of nationalism.

9. Cf. Seton-Watson, Nations and States, p. 5: 'All that I can find to say is that a nation exists when a significant number of people in a community consider themselves to form a nation, or behave as if they formed one. We may translate 'consider themselves' as 'imagine themselves.'

10. Ernest Renan, 'Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?' in Œuvres Complètes, 1, p. 892. He adds: 'tout citoyen français doit avoir oublié la Saint-Barthélemy, les massacres du Midi au Xixe siècle. Il n'y a pas en France dix familles qui puissent fournir la preuve d'une origine franque.'


12. Hobibawm, for example, 'fixes' it by saying that in 1789 it numbered about 400,000 in a population of 23,000,000. (See his The Age of Revolution, p. 78). But would this statistical picture of the noblesse have been imaginable under the ancien régime?