Guest editorial

Nationalism, regionalism, and the state

Rather than dissolving in the acid bath of modernity as conventional academic wisdom had predicted, both ethnic nationalism and regionalism remain unresolved problems on the political agenda of most advanced multinational states. It is therefore not surprising to find that floods of ink have recently been spent on trying to explain just why industrialisation and concomitant modernising processes have not led to the erosion of regionally based ethnic and other identifications and commitments and to their replacement by alternative socioeconomically aligned loyalties throughout such advanced but politically and culturally variegated societies as Western Europe, Canada, and the Soviet Union. In their search for the reasons why such a phenomenon as nationalism remains central to the human condition of many societies, writers have treated it as a form of politics (Breuilly, 1982; Rokkan and Urwin, 1983), as an expression of national consciousness (Doob, 1964; Mayo, 1974), as part of a historically specific sociological process (Amin, 1980; Hechter, 1975), as a territorially embedded phenomenon (Knight, 1983; Williams and Smith, 1983), or simply as a product of modernisation (Connor, 1973; Deutsch, 1969). Yet besides often failing to stray far from the conventional terrain of one discipline, the study of nationalism has also laboured under the handicap of stock explanatory social and political theories which, like their predecessors, still assume it to be a form of behaviour transitional to the modern epoch. In this regard, the main ideological traditions of liberalism and Marxism have much to answer, for both run counter to recognising the significance of nationalism. Liberalism has classically insisted that the great forces of trade and industry would bind regions, nations, and states together; just as the state would become an obsolete and less than efficient economic base, so small-scale relationships based on constructing new and smaller territorial enclaves were counter to a world moving towards greater cosmopolitan unity. Marxism, in turn, has been equally quick to earmark ethnic and regionally based loyalties as phenomena living on borrowed time. As Nairn (1975, page 3) has noted, “The theory of nationalism represents Marxism’s great historical failure”. This assumption that ethnoterritorial communities would end up as nothing more than ‘ethnographic monuments’ is thus a product of a deep-seated lack of sympathy with nationalism and of analysing society exclusively in terms of territorially constituted class-based interests and solidarities. This has led not only to a miscalculation of the scale of the nationalities problem in advanced capitalist societies but also to a failure by Western Marxism to analyse and to explain the persistence of ethnic nationalism in the USSR.

From the outset, it is important to distinguish between ethnic nationalism and other types, for, although all nationalisms are based essentially on a political principle, which holds that the territorial and the national units should be allowed to coexist in an autonomously congruent relationship, they differ in the objective conditions which determine their opportunities to achieve or maintain this aim. On this basis, we can distinguish between a number of minority nationalisms, including irredentist (borderland peoples who strive for secession and unity with conationals in a neighbouring state), anticolonialist (in which nationalist demands are based primarily on an ethnically heterogeneous people’s common opposition to, and rejection of, colonial rule), and ethnic. For many postwar Third World anticolonial movements, administrative territories carved out by the imperial power, along with united
opposition to a socially and physically distant metropolitan power, provided the only framework of reference. Unlike these movements, ethnic nationalist movements can draw upon shared experiences, culture, and often language to legitimise their demands for territorial autonomy or even outright separatism [for a fuller discussion of typologies of nationalism, see Smith (1971) and Symmons-Symonolewicz (1970)]. By drawing upon Wilsonian-based democratic theories of national self-determination for nations, ethnic nationalist leaders in East and West alike can claim that their nation has a natural right to constitute a nation-state, as if human beings were, first and foremost, members of a nation. However, none of these minority nationalisms escape from a measure of nationalism of majorities, which often takes the form of a state nationalism, and which on behalf of the nation’s myths and iconographies can legitimise state actions in both the international and the domestic arena by appealing to ‘national unity’, ‘the national good’, and ‘the nation’s interest’. When the regions who do not share this urge for national belongingness and state unity feel that such statements are little more than meaningless rhetoric which have little or no substance to their daily life experiences—for instance, calls to sacrifice a regional policy for the benefit of the collective good—then state nationalism can often feed into and strengthen the appeal of autonomist and separatist demands within that ethnoterritory. This does not mean that any explanation of ethnic nationalism can be reduced to antistatism or that ethnic nationalism is simply a product of the political actions and behaviour of the state, but as Breuilly (1982) stresses, without understanding the nature of the state, its historical development, and its relationship with society, we will be unable to grasp fully those processes which give rise to ethnoterritorial demands.

Whatever structural preconditions or triggering mechanisms facilitate the politicisation of ethnoterritorial communities, ethnic nationalism entails irony and paradox, for as Rothschild (1981, pages 3–4) explains,

“It [the politicisation of ethnicity] stresses, ideologizes, reifies, modifies, and sometimes virtually re-creates the putatively distinctive and unique cultural heritages of the ethnic groups that it mobilises—precisely at the historical moment when these groups are being thoroughly penetrated by the universal culture of science and technology. Politicisation of ethnicity is thus a dialectical process that preserves ethnic groups by emphasising their singularity and yet also engineers and lubricates their modernisation by transforming them into political conflict groups for the modern political arena, where they must deploy cosmopolitan modern skills and resources. These two aspects of the dialectical process facilitate and reinforce each other, controverting the conventional assumption that secular modernisation and ethnic identification covary inversely”.

Yet with all its contradictions, ethnic mobilisation does not take place in a world where the spread of technological change, scientific progress, and economic development is even. The spatial logic of capitalism and of state-managed Soviet-type economies generates discontinuous and disruptive patterns or waves, conferring advantages on some regions and peoples while relegating many peripherally based communities to a marginal and subordinate status. That this uneven diffusion often coexists with ethnoterritorial boundaries has been seized upon by the uneven development school as one explanation of why nationalism remains an unspent force. Although subsuming several perspectives, this line of reasoning locates nationalism within a materialist framework. Thus whereas Nairn (1977) and Chesneaux (1978) trace both Third and First World minority nationalisms directly to the operation of the global capitalist economy, Hechter (1975) is more specific and case-orientated in likening the recent revival of regional separatist movements in Western Europe to classical core–periphery colonialism. Here minority nations are seen as being conditioned by the historical development of a culturally backward and economically exploited internal colony,
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in which such peoples as the Welsh, Bretons, and Québécois have been relegated to the bottom of the socioeconomic structure, and the state ‘core’ territory, by accumulating capital from, and inhibiting its flow into, these regions, develops a more advanced and diversified economic base (see also McRoberts, 1979; Reece, 1979). These core–periphery differences become institutionalised into a coextensive cultural division of labour, thus inhibiting the upward mobility of the dependent community. Because cultural distinctiveness provides a symbol of oppression, ultimately it becomes a focus for territorial mobilisation. Yet, although there is no doubt that such peoples have seized upon substantive ethnocultural issues to demonstrate the ubiquitous failure of postwar states to develop a meaningful regional policy or to ensure distributive justice and access to an evenly competitive statewide labour market, the internal colonialism thesis fails to come to grips with the nature of the recent nationalist revival. If class-based divisions and loyalties are so important, why should a revival occur in the mid-nineteen sixties and not in the nineteen thirties, when core–periphery dualities and class divisions were as marked? Moreover, it does not explain why ethnic nationalism can propel relatively prosperous (for example, Spanish Basques, Croats, Latvians, Scots) and relatively poor peoples (Québécois, Bretons, Welsh, Slovaks) alike into political action. To subsume territorially based ethnic conflict along class lines, as Ragain (1980) does in relation to competition between ethnic groups for the same rewards and resources, is to ignore the social variations and complex relationships within as well as between ethnic communities. Finally, such perspectives tend to underestimate the emotional and cultural appeal of nationalism and its capacity to serve human needs better than do instrumental groups and satisfactions.

It is this last perspective in particular which forms the nexus of an alternative approach. Here cultural markers—based on language, religion, ethnic background, kinship patterns, and the like—are considered as providing the automatic reference point for ethnoterritorial communities seeking security, survival, and regeneration under conditions of socioeconomic and political pressure to conform to statewide universalising processes, whether measured in terms of mass education, public language use, or the state’s attempt to carve out common political symbols and identities. Mayo (1974), for instance, claims that ethnic nationalism is part of a society’s response to a broad social malaise associated with increasing mobility, namely the loss of community, in which ‘natural social groups’ are threatened by an erosive culturally standardising state. The logical consequence of this defence of cultural particularity, it is contended, is support for territorial autonomy. Given the increasingly centralised and bureaucratic nature of states like Britain, France, and the Soviet Union, in which decisions are made in remote and culturally alien capital cities, it would seem quite permissible to suggest that reaction along ethnoterritorial lines should occur. This line of reasoning is, however, too ready to assume that in peripheral regions, cultural differences provide the most compelling basis upon which such political communities might be defined. Although there is no doubt that an ethnic nation can provide ontological security and solace for the individual in what may appear as an increasingly unstructured world, it is quite a different matter to argue that member loyalty is naturally contingent upon such primordial traits of anthropological culture as language, ethnicity, religion, and kinship patterns. Possession of such attributes does not necessarily ‘neutralise’ other group loyalties and affiliations either within or between regions. We certainly cannot assume that Clydeside dock-workers will always funnel their grievances against English or multinational capital into an ethnoterritorial rather than some other socioideological political party or that because of common language and shared ethnic background the Donetsk miner is bound to feel greater solidarity with the Ukrainian middle class than with miners in
the Kuzbass or Karaganda region. What is important is to understand why such cultural markers can take on both material and symbolic relevance to individuals and why, today, they command such profound emotional legitimacy.

This leads us on to a third approach, that of focusing on the role of the ethnic leadership in spearheading nationalism. According to Smith (1981), recent West European separatist movements in Wales, Scotland, the Basque lands, and Brittany constitute an offshoot of a far wider ethnic revival of the last two centuries, in which two social developments in particular were critical: first, the expansion of scientific bureaucracies and, second, the view that nationalism is a particular version of evolutionary historicism. The new kind of state bureaucracy which was developing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was one which was not only more centralised and more interventionist, but also one which sought to become more ‘scientific’; it was this new bureaucracy which helped create a demand for a new rationalist type of education, and which in turn gave rise to a lay stratum of intelligentsia. In the process, it also undermined the close traditional bonds between church and state. This new scientific bureaucracy championed a whole wave of a potentially dissident strata, for supply soon outstripped demand in modern states where age-old antagonisms and prejudices were resurrected under conditions of competition in the new urban labour market; where ethnic discrimination by central authority merely highlighted previously unimportant cultural differences; and where, to complete the process of state building and to manage effectively the state territory, the dominant culture was expanded, whether in education, public language use, or whatever. Policies of Frenchification, Anglicisation, and Russification towards the regions are testimony to this. It was, however, in the works of historicist educators, and in their interpretations of the origins and laws of growth of their particular ethnoterritorial community, that this disillusioned class of diploma-holders found the solution to their problems. It was to history that they turned for self-understanding and anchorage in an ‘irrational’ and ‘unordered’ world, in which the newly discovered ‘nation’ could provide them with a new historical vision, giving meaning and coherence to their particular position and that of their community and its future path. An ethnic community could provide a definite social and political space in which to construct a separate stratification system and power centre, within which career aspirations would be satisfied, and where dignity and status commensurate with their educational achievements would be guaranteed.

Such a sociocultural background to contemporary nationalisms does not of course pinpoint the time- and place-specific ‘triggering mechanisms’ which give rise to the politicisation of national identities, and some might question the way in which the origins of the recent revival are too closely interwoven, if not causally related, to the expansion and character of the state. However, the important point is that it focuses on the crucial role of the ethnic middle class in the development, manufacture, and mass mobilisation of ethnoterritorial communities. The willingness and ability of this stratum to propagandise on behalf of the nation and to convince the countryside and other urban social groupings, under conditions of socioeconomic and political change, of the nationalist alternative is clearly central to any understanding of such a phenomenon. Such developments can also be seen in conjunction with the earlier work of Deutsch (1969), who saw the process of social mobilisation as crucial to the politicisation of ethnic consciousness. In this work he concludes that, wherever social mobilisation outstripped the assimilation process into the dominant state culture, then ethnic differences became problematic. It is this model in particular which has found currency among Western studies of the nationalities question in the Soviet Union, where democratisation and political participation have also failed to match the social
mobilisation of the State’s non-Russian minorities (for example, see Rakowska-Harmstone, 1980). However, as Agnew (1981) reminds us, we should not assume that where material interests are compatible with cultural differences based on language, culture, or ethnicity that this necessarily leads to the politicisation of national identities, for “people act politically by pursuing ‘symbolic’ and ‘material’ interests, which may or may not be compatible, defined by them in reference to their situational contexts” (page 279). Just as the economic reductionism characteristic of the internal colonialism thesis leads to the assumption that differential development causes the politicisation of national identities, so we must be careful about inferring that blocked social mobility necessarily leads to a heightening of ethnic consciousness among the middle classes.

What seems more pertinent to understanding why ethnoterritorial communities should seek to redefine their relationship with the state is to focus on the complex social and political matrix of symbolic and material conditions which various substrata find themselves in at any one time and place. To draw simply upon the conceptual storehouse of classical political economy, in which the politicisation of ethnic boundaries are viewed “as little more than a ripple across the surface of the class structure” (Parkin, 1979, page 36), is to ignore those ethnic divisions which almost invariably cut across class cleavages, as well as to further the impoverishment of class analysis. Similarly, to see ethnic boundaries as a more fundamental source of stratification than that of class or as an alternative to statewide identity (for instance, West European ethnic nations have a long and probably just as meaningful historic association with a wider social and territorial state system) is to inflate the scale and intensity of nationalism. For example, Rothschild (1981) notes that many modern societies have created for incumbents positions that functionally de-ethnicise them—professional roles, market roles, working-class organisations, technical competence roles, and the like—in which the ethnoterritorial community may no longer be seen as relevant to the functions that they perform within their work place. It is only when the unequal social and economic distribution of goods occurs which is not based on their partial role performances, or when their community is disproportionately and systematically relegated and restricted to the bottom echelons of the socioeconomic and political structure, that the hitherto dormant ethnic consciousness may resurface and crystallise in support of a nationalist movement. The formation of such movements could also be considered in terms of Parkin’s (1979) social closure thesis. Here, exclusionary social closure is an attempt by one group to secure for itself a privileged position at the expense of some other group through a process of subordination; this in turn leads to usurpatory action by the excluded group as they attempt to use power in an upward direction to win a greater share of resources. Thus the role of an exclusionary class of liberal bourgeoisie and their ability to mobilise political sentiment against purely collectivist state forms of exclusion is one such avenue of enquiry; another may concern the ending of discrimination by the state against ethnic blue- and white-collar workers by incorporating them into civil society, and the workers’ reaction to usurpatory struggle by their counterparts in the core territory to the state withdrawal of, say, their erstwhile monopoly of the working-class labour and housing market.

The extent to which ethnic nationalism poses a threat to the political stability of present-day multinational states in the advanced world should not be overestimated. Can it really be argued that it is simply an expression of the crisis of developed capitalist society as Chesneaux (1978) would have it, striking at the very heart and stability of the world order, or does it constitute ‘a time bomb’ as Keenan (1976) argues with reference to the Soviet Union? Certainly one of the most striking features of recent ethnic nationalist movements has been their failure to secure outright
separatism, sovereignty-association, or in some societies like Britain, even greater territorial autonomy. Neither should one underestimate the ability of the state to cloud separatist or regional demands or the ability of changing economic, social, and political conditions to weaken the nationalist cause. Yet it is clear that many of the various solutions tried by states to blunt the politicising edge of ethnoterritorial conflict—be it through consociationalism, federalism, or some form of territorial decentralisation—have at minimum resulted in the quarantining of ethnoterritorial demands and more usually have exacerbated tensions.

In this issue, Kofman considers the new programme of decentralisation adopted by the Mitterand government in an attempt to appease the demands of ethnoterritorial and regional aspirations. She examines the extent to which central and regional views of decentralisation conflict, particularly in relation to Corsica, the only region to be granted a statut particulier. By focusing primarily on linguistic politics and language planning, in a comparative study of Wales and Québec, where language is central to the nationalist platform, Williams considers the background to and nature of such demands, the recent changes in language planning in the public sector, and the extent to which such reforms are likely to satisfy the politically mobilised sectors of the ethnoterritorial community. In my paper on the nationalities question in the Soviet Union, I set out to challenge the widely held Western viewpoint that ethnic nationalism is necessarily a threat to the Soviet State. Unlike in Canada, Britain, or France, here we are dealing not with politically organised nationalist movements which might pose a direct challenge to state authority and power, but rather with nationality groupings whose only formal outlet for demand-making is through the federal structure. By arguing that the politicisation of national identities cannot be assumed to be automatic or even, either within or between ethnoterritorial boundaries, I explore ways in which the state controls their politicisation and the problems faced by a nationally-sympathetic cultural intelligentsia in mobilising support on the basis of such cleavages. In the final paper, Bennett explores the nature of nonethnic-based regional movements in Britain. While it is evident that, to varying degrees, ethnic and nonethnic regions seek to question state control and power through various forms of political action and organisations, the most successful in mobilising support have been those whose appeal is nationalistic. Although such ethnoterritories have to be considered separately from regions like the English North, Westphalia, Nord Pas-de-Calais, and Alberta, as demonstrated in this paper the conditions under which nonethnic-based regional movements develop are not that dissimilar. They also form part of a counterculture, their aims emphasise participation, autonomy, and local power, and their political rhetoric and assertiveness are based on a deep-seated distrust of an increasingly remote and interventionist bureaucratic state. By comparing such regionalisms with nationalist movements we will be in a better position to understand why regional dissent takes the form that it does and how it has greater mass appeal and mobilising potential among some regions than among others.

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