

# Forging the nation? The failure of third world nationalism

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Dave Stockton continues a series on Marxism and the National Question with a survey of the development and fragmentation of national consciousness under the impact of colonialism.

The eruption of national struggles across the globe in the last years of the twentieth century has generated a new interest in nation formation and the national question in general. Most writers have drawn freely, and without acknowledgement, on the exceptionally rich Marxist theoretical work on the subject. At the same time many claim that Marxism's fatal flaw is its failure to understand the strength or lasting power of national consciousness.

John Swarzmantel, for example, writes that: "the Marxist and the socialist tradition has taken too external an attitude to nationalism, and has failed to understand why it has been and remains such a powerful force"<sup>1</sup>.

John Breuilly, in a recent work, has chimed in:

"As is usual, good Marxist history represents the most impressive attempts to provide satisfactory accounts of major modern historical developments, but there appears to be something about nationalism which eludes understanding from within a Marxist framework."<sup>2</sup>

Anthony D Smith agrees: "Marxist historicism turned away from ethnic and national problems"<sup>3</sup>.

All of this is plain nonsense, depending for its credibility on the power of caricature. These critics lazily target an economic determinist, class reductionist pseudo-Marxism that has nothing to do with the method of Marx, Lenin or Trotsky, and relies for its effect on the canon of ultra-left Stalinist writings on the question.<sup>4</sup>

We have tried to show in previous articles<sup>5</sup> the stupidity of this charge. Since Marxism recognises in nationalism the central political ideology of the bourgeois epoch it can hardly be said to underestimate it. What this charge really amounts to is that Marxism refuses to recognise the national identity as primordial, or the nation state as "the end of history".

Marxism insists that, like the capitalist mode of production, the nation state has not always existed and that one day it will cease to exist. Moreover Marxism, "that is, genuine revolutionary Marxism and not its reformist or centrist counterfeit" refuses to compromise with any variety of nationalism.

This draws down the wrath of the paid hacks of the bourgeoisie, imperialist or semi-colonial. It also attracts the hatred of the "Third World" ideologues who believe they can strengthen Marxism with a strong admixture of "anti-imperialist" nationalism.

The latter trend is particularly likely to hurl at revolutionary Marxism the charge of 'Eurocentrism'. Misusing Lenin's theory of imperialism they have created a neo-populism which designates the anti-imperialism of the oppressed, semi-colonial nations as an undifferentiatedly 'progressive' camp, and suppresses all recognition of the class struggle in the imperialist countries. The nationalism of petit bourgeois guerrilla movements, bourgeois nationalist parties and military-bonapartist regimes, has been recommended as a necessary corrective to crude, economistic, Eurocentric Marxism.<sup>6</sup>

In reality no revolutionary Marxist tried to apply a pattern drawn mechanically from the west European states any more than Marxists try to analyse the world economy solely on the basis of the structure of West European or North American capitalism.

The theories of uneven and combined development, of imperialism, of permanent revolution, rest upon a recognition that capitalism establishes economic, state and political models which cannot be ignored by those who later follow along the road to capitalist development. They are compelled to adopt these models but precisely not in the conditions which applied when capitalism emerged out of European feudalism.

The twentieth century has seen the near universalisation of the nation-state principle. But this has not led to the creation of stable nation-states on the West European model.<sup>7</sup>

Whilst the globe has been covered by 'nation states' the chronic instability of many of these new nations, their vulnerability to fragmenting sub-national claims by their own constituent regions, or their rivalry for territory with other nations, gives good grounds for asserting that a long and stable epoch of nation states is as unlikely as the supposed eternity of capitalism. The demand to be allowed to form a nation state has been used both to fight against the inequality and oppression that are typical of the imperialist epoch and it has been used to lay claim to privileges and to exploit and oppress others.

Marxists refuse to accept as a historical fact the 'primordial' division of humanity into nations. We refuse also any absolute recognition of each and every would-be nation's claim to statehood along with every state's claim to maintain its national unity. Marxists make a concrete, historical materialist, analysis of the origins and development of the various nations and national struggles.

Most nations claim a continuous life much longer than the bourgeois epoch. Indeed, the word 'nation' was used before this epoch. Generally, it meant simply the subjects of a particular ruler regardless of their language or culture. Often it referred to the upper classes alone and not to the peasant masses.

But the pre-capitalist concept of nationhood was not regarded as the normal or essential basis for the state. The primary communal identities of pre-capitalist human beings were not national, either in Europe or in the world at large.

But with the onset of the bourgeois epoch certain old ethnic identities were re-baptised as national communities that were supposed to have existed for centuries or millennia. Others, in contrast, were marginalised or forcibly suppressed by the successful 'national' identities.

Every newly born nationalism has to find both a historic purpose or a past for itself. Nations which arise on territory long inhabited by the same ethnic-linguistic community inherit pre-capitalist cultures and ideologies. These may be feudal, dynastic, religious or tribal.

Settler nations likewise do not simply replicate the national ideology of the 'mother country'. Often they have to combine the cultural inheritance of the settler nation with a 'manifest destiny' to 'civilise' and create a new world free from the vices and sufferings of the old.

All of these 'histories' are unscientific. They have a myth-making purpose which selects and suppresses evidence.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes these national histories are entirely mythical. Where they have to justify national existence by the displacement or destruction of the previous inhabitants—as the Zionists do in Palestine—they approach outright racism.

For a modern national consciousness to be established by the bourgeoisie, these 'ethnic' origins—real, mythological or a mixture of the two—play an essential role.

A nation has to have a historic dimension—the 'community of fate'—common to the classic definitions of the nation. This can relate to the actual history of the ancestors of the current population, the cultural achievements of previous inhabitants, the history of the colonisers of a given territory, the religious community and culture of its people. All of these pre-capitalist elements play an important ideological role in the formation of national consciousness. But it is not the role ascribed to it by nationalists.

For nationalist ideologues the pre-capitalist history of the nation is the history of the formation of a national character. This national character is for them, the essential 'subject' of history, the prime mover of human social development.

The national myth-makers treat this eternal collective subject as an independent driving force. They do so in order to displace and obscure the real class motive forces which led to the formation of the nation.

Modern Jewish nationalism, for example, (including Zionism) has to transform the religious history of the Jewish merchant/artisan centred communities into the history of a 3,000 year old nation.

Religious ideology has played an important part in the nationalism of oppressed nations like the Poles and the Irish. It remains an important resource for nation-creators or nation-dividers as in the Indian sub-continent. Likewise, tribal-confederation identities (Africa) can serve as a starting point for nation creating.

It can generally be stated, however, that the more 'undigested' these pre-capitalist elements are in an actual or aspirant 'national consciousness', the more problematic will be the formation of a stable national state. Any religious element will strengthen clerical influence and morality alienating religious minorities or the more modern classes. All preservation of pre-capitalist institutions and customs, with the excuse that they are an essential part of the national character, gives points of support to reactionary anti-capitalist as well as anti-working class forces.

Few national identities are single, uniform or exclusive across the whole range of religious, cultural, linguistic experience. In times of crisis old regional ethnic loyalties, absorbed or suppressed during the formation of a nation, can rise to claim 'national' status and challenge and break up the ruling nation's unity.

### **Europe exports the national idea**

Britain (England), Holland, the United States of America and France played a key role in developing the first nation states, which became a model for others to follow. In turn, Germany and Italy developed the model of national unification (1848-1871) and Italy and the Latin American states that of national liberation.

In this sense nation-building did indeed originate in the Americas and Europe as a result of the capitalist world market and mode of production. Its example spread with this mode of production and exchange, with the need of other states to compete militarily as well as economically with the more developed and expansionist powers. In the half century between 1775 and 1825 the ideals of the bourgeois revolutions inspired revolt against modern colonial as well as traditional feudal and Asiatic empires.

To understand the pattern of nation-state formation we must also understand the pattern of European colonial expansion and its interaction with the societies it 'discovered' from the 1490's onwards. Here climate and geography as well as socio-economic determinants were of vital importance. The fertile temperate and sub-tropical zones became the sites of mass settlement by Europeans with the displacement and near genocide of the indigenous population wherever their own social development was not such as to enable them to put up an effective resistance. The result was the creation of new nations of white settler colonists; Canada and the USA, Australia and New Zealand, Chile and Argentina, Algeria and Anglo-Boer South Africa.

Some of these projects failed (Algeria) or today maintain a precarious or artificial existence (Israel, South Africa), usually because it proved impossible to wipe out or completely displace the original inhabitants. When the settlers became restricted to a largely, petit-bourgeois, labour aristocratic, or rich farmer strata, the broad masses of the population went on to lead an anti-colonial, anti-settler nationalist revolt.

In countries which, prior to colonisation, had a long experience of state formation ('Asiatic' mode of production), or at least well developed tribal confederation, it proved difficult to establish pure colonial settler nations.

In some of these areas, Meso-America<sup>9</sup> and the northern and central Andes, the majority indigenous population was only nominally part of the new nations formed between 1811 and 1825. In reality they were often excluded from the 'political nation' by criollo (colonials of European extraction) and later mestizo (mixed 'race') elites well into the twentieth century. A partial exception were the societies where a plantation economy and mining were based on forced immigration by African slaves or by indentured Asian labour. Here, nations developed with a high degree of racial stratification, forming more complex hierarchies between the white settlers, mixed race population, indigenous peoples and African slaves.

The new states formed in the new world between the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth were all in this sense 'creole' states. They were created by the ruling stratum of the native born settlers who spoke the same language as the colonial power. But the distinct class interests of the settlers came into conflict with the 'mother country'.

Probably the original cause of the estrangement of large strata of the colonial elites was the fiscal crisis of the European colonial powers—Britain, France, and Spain—caused by enormous war expenditure as well as, for France and Spain, the death agony of late feudalism. This crisis required a tightening up of colonial administration, a re-subordination of its commerce to that of the mother country. The American War of Independence (1775-83) was provoked by the taxation demands of George III. Washington, Jefferson and Adams established a new nation state on a federal basis with the most democratic constitution seen hitherto.

Another important spur to local independence movements was fear of further revolts of oppressed and exploited masses and/or the indigenous inhabitants. The French revolution had encouraged a mass slave revolt in Haiti in 1791 which led, by 1804, to the recognition of the second independent state in the Americas.

The Napoleonic destruction of the Bourbon monarchy in Spain eventually unleashed a prolonged struggle (1810-25) for the independence in the Spanish colonies in Central and South America and Mexico. The leaders of these wars of independence were inspired by the examples of the English, (North) American and French revolutions, by Enlightenment theory and freemasonry.

But by no means all of the settler independence struggle leaders were members of the 'liberal

bourgeoisie? as such. Many were plantation slave-owners such as Washington, Jefferson and Simon Bolivar. These classes in both North and South America provided the leading stratum of the independence movements from England and from Spain. The really plebeian movements such as those of Hidalgo and Morelos in Mexico were unsuccessful.<sup>10</sup>

The major figures like Simon Bolivar and José de San Martín operated on a semi-continental scale. They had hopes of creating larger, much larger, states than in fact emerged (Bolivar's Gran Colombia, the United Provinces of Rio de la Plata, Iturbide's Mexican Empire) or of creating confederations of states and even a League of Spanish American Countries (the Panama Congress of 1826).

These pan-continental objectives did not materialise or proved abortive due to the incapacity of the creole land owning and merchant capitalist ruling classes to break the economic and political mould of the colonial divisions. Benedict Anderson has shown how these obstinate colonial borders helped determine the shape of the new nations of Latin America. The same was to be true for the later attempts at nation-building in Africa after the Europeans withdrew.<sup>11</sup>

The colonial administrations in each of these countries were obliged to relate economically to Spain and had few economic links with each other. The creole elites were formed on the basis of these provincial administrations. These functionaries and writers, travelling often between the colony and the mother country, were the main actors in the creation of a national consciousness.

In contrast, a strong modern bourgeoisie was slow to make its appearance due to the semi-feudal, chattel slavery, or mercantile capital basis of the ruling classes. At the other end of the social scale the white creole elites tended to look down on and exclude from power the mestizo, while the original indigenist people were cruelly exploited and ignored, hardly seeming to be part of the nation either in their own consciousness or that of their rulers.

Colonialism then played a crucial role in the development of capitalism and thus of the nation. The experience of colonisation or attempted colonisation was the crucible in which many nations were formed. Their birth set a precedent for the struggles against colonialism. A similar process took place later in the Indian sub-continent and Africa.

### **India: a national or multi-national state?**

In contrast to the American and African continents Asia was the site of powerful and ancient states, still economically and militarily powerful when the European merchants arrived in force in the sixteenth century. There was no question of the Europeans conquering states such as the Ottoman, the Persian, the Mogul, the Chinese or the Japanese empires at the height of their power. Only in the eighteenth century did these 'Asiatic despotisms' begin to show signs of decay in contrast to the rapidly advancing capitalist powers.

The British began massive expansion in India on the wreckage of the Mogul empire after defeating the French.<sup>12</sup> But it was only after the suppression of the Indian Mutiny in 1858 that the wholesale 'modernisation' of India began. Britain now had direct control of three fifths of India, leaving two fifths under the control of client rulers. The building of a huge railway network, aimed at pumping India's surplus product abroad nevertheless had the effect of tying it together as a political and economic entity.

It also led to the creation of a small modern bourgeoisie. The European-style education system produced an Anglicised state bureaucracy—the Indian Civil service—and a growing intelligentsia. Many of these intellectuals, teachers, doctors and lawyers came up against the brick wall of discrimination by the British authorities. Educated in 19th century European ideals and conceptions they responded to British racism

and arrogance by taking up the most comprehensive, progressive, ideological weapon with which to fight the colonialists?namely, modern nationalism.

This enabled them to make a bourgeois-democratic claim that it was difficult for the imperialists themselves to deny in principle. After all, the British had already granted home rule or dominion status to 'white' colonies like Canada and Australia. How could they deny it indefinitely for India?

In 1895 a mass movement against oppression, the Indian National Congress was born. It was to become a model for national movements throughout Asia and Africa. At first it was led by moderate leaders such as Naoroji, Bannerjee and Gokhale who sought to persuade the British to reform their rule. But close behind them was a militant wing that resorted to either mass actions, boycotts and demonstrations or to individual terrorism. The first Congress leader that outlined a policy of active resistance, B.J.Tilak, was a modern nationalist inspired by Garibaldi and Mazzini.

Increasingly, the Congress was driven by British intransigence to mobilise mass campaigns to achieve its aims especially after the rise of M.K.Gandhi to a leading role during and after the first world war. Gandhi published his central ideas in a book, *Young India* published in 1908 while in South Africa. His central argument was that English civilisation, embracing at its core industrial development, had to be rejected as alien to India. He argued that India was one nation and that non-violent actions alone should be used to force England to quit India.

The Amritsar massacre of 1919 drew a line of blood between the British and all the mass forces seeking change in India. But it also confirmed in Gandhi the need to apply a policy of non-violent resistance, satyagraha. Whilst insisting on strict non-violence, Gandhi's campaigns were based on mass non-co-operation and a boycott of British goods. They inevitably aroused the masses to self activity which went further than Gandhi intended. The British usually responded with bloody repression.

The masses began to break through the restraint of satyagraha and also to fight for land reform, aimed first at the British plantation capitalists and then at the feudal landowners. This was particularly so after the Russian revolution (1917) and the appearance of a small but influential Communist Party in India with roots in the trade unions. These mass struggles terrified the Congress leaders and their bourgeois base which had no desire to unleash a peasant war or to completely rupture their links with either the princes or the British.

The great campaigns of 1920-24, 1929-31, 1942 (Quit India) all followed the same pattern. Mass actions were called off as they gained momentum and the leaders entered into negotiations with the British. The response of the imperialists to Congress agitation was a policy of divide and rule which had important repercussions for the future national fate of the Indian sub-continent. The Minto-Morley reforms of 1909 were aimed at co-opting the Indian bourgeoisie and the professional middle class into British rule via an elective legislative council. They were based on dividing India's electorate along religious-communal lines, primarily Hindu-Muslim. They had the long term effect of preventing the coalescence of a truly all-Indian bourgeoisie and national movement, of splitting the Congress and creating the Muslim League.

Further British 'reforms' in 1919 and 1935 created governments and authorities dominated by the old princely rulers and reactionary religious-communal parties and movements. Though the British strategy failed in the end to preserve their rule in India they did manage to split the mainly Muslim north-west provinces and East Bengal away from the new state, thus creating Pakistan on a religious-communal basis.

This tended to give Indian nationalism, despite its declarations of secularism, a strongly Hindu cultural bias. Other religious cultural communities in India have tended to create regionalist and communalist

parties wherever and whenever the class movements of the workers and the landless peasants were weak.

Gandhi, followed by the Nehru 'dynasty' leadership of the Congress, enabled the Hindu dominated Indian bourgeoisie to assume power and to preserve a nearly continuous bourgeois democratic rule after 1947. This was possible partly by playing a balancing act internationally between the Stalinist bloc and the West; by adopting a highly state capitalist industrialisation programme on the basis of significant soviet aid; by conducting a land reform from above which strengthened a peasant proprietor class and by continuing the British policy of divide and rule.

The Indian bourgeoisie was thus torn between needing a national ideology to weld together its state and justify its rule on the one side, and on the other, the need to play off regional elites and weaken the unity of the proletariat. In the task of creating a national consciousness it faced enormous problems. Not the least of these was to create a national culture. In a country of 197 languages<sup>13</sup>, belonging to four separate language groups, this was difficult to do without alienating major parts of the nation. As a result, despite adopting Hindi as the state language English has remained the main lingua franca.

For over three decades Congress was able, at a national level, to maintain a near one-party state. But in the 1970s and 1980s cracks began to appear in the fabric of the nation. Economic unevenness between regions of the country became more manifest. The state capitalist dominated economy sank further into stagnation. Moreover, the CP-led working class movement failed to break free of the bourgeois Congress and this led to the massive growth of nationalist, regionalist and religious-communalist movements of resistance to Delhi. In turn the government resorted to declaring ever more 'states of emergency'.

The 'green revolution' which turned the Sikh farmers into a wealthy and ambitious stratum in Punjab, promoted calls for autonomy, and even independence for the Sikh dominated parts of the province. Government resistance to these claims first strengthened the moderate nationalist movement, the Akali Dal. Indira Gandhi, to undermine it, promoted Sikh 'extremists' around Bhindranwale to undermine the Akali Dal provincial government. The result was that the demand for an autonomous and separate 'Khalistan' grew enormously.

This movement was in itself triply reactionary: it framed its 'national' (Khalistan) claim in religious-communalist terms which would destroy the secular basis of the state; it made territorial claims that would lead to the oppression or expulsion of millions of Hindu and Muslim Punjabis; and its formation would promote the Balkanisation of the Indian state to the benefit of imperialism.

Nevertheless, systematic oppression by the central government, including the denial of the Sikh majority areas to express their wishes democratically has the potential to crystallise the Sikh population into an oppressed nationality which could formulate a claim to autonomy and separate statehood in a relatively progressive form, that is, not as a claim for privileges or the 'right' to oppress others.

This pattern of divide and rule, leading on via repression to the formation of nationalist movements out of religious and communalist roots is an increasing phenomenon.

Other movements have been based on economic backwardness of regions, discrimination and the settlement of ethno-linguistically different territories by immigrants from the Hindi and Bengali speaking zones. The change of economic policy which began under Rajiv Gandhi and his successors 'towards an open door, neo-liberal policy' will increase the growing unevenness of the sub-continent and thus the resort by local and regional elites to use 'nationalist' and separatist slogans. The consequent resort to increasingly bonapartist measures by the Federal regime will give a further twist to this vicious circle.

Only the proletariat of the Indian sub-continent can develop a consistent nationality policy as part of the programme of proletarian revolution. This must include the goal of a voluntary Socialist Federation of the whole Indian sub-continent. Only the widest scope for developing the productive forces on a planned basis can overcome the backwardness and misery in which imperialism has locked India for nearly two centuries. Its constitution must provide for the unconditional right to secede, if any oppressed nationality democratically expresses the wish to do so.

The boundaries of its constituent states or provinces must be drawn according to the wishes of its peoples, assuring all minorities full and equal rights. Only the proletariat, leading the urban and rural poor, can solve the national question of the Indian sub-continent on the solid foundation of class unity. This class unity can only be achieved on the basis of consistent internationalism, entailing a resolute struggle against all national privileges and all national oppression.

### **Africa: colonisation to independence**

Sub-Saharan Africa has experienced, and been transformed by, three distinct periods of contact with capitalism.

First, the mercantilist epoch, dominated by merchant capital, brought the large scale slave trade. Then the epoch of free trade began the wholesale seizure of the coastal regions of the continent and the systematic exploration of the interior. Lastly, the imperialist epoch has seen the colonisation of the entire continent and then its de-colonisation after 1945.

During all these three epochs the continent has seen Africa's human and natural resources plundered on a massive scale. It has been estimated that 150 to 200 million Africans were 'exported', largely to the plantations of the new world or perished in Africa as a result of the slave trade.

To this untold exploitation and suffering must be added the sucking out of Africa of vast wealth in the form of various industrial raw materials, together with precious metals and gems. This forced 'contribution' to the development of capitalism in Europe and North America led to Africa's near exclusion from capitalist development itself, except in South Africa and in those regions with some extractive industry and cash crop agriculture.

The speed of and thoroughness of the European conquest in the nineteenth century was due in large measure to the economic and military disparity between the European powers and Africa. Some important states had developed before the European onslaught: Benin and Asante in the west, Great Zimbabwe in the south-east and Ethiopia in north-east Africa. Cities like Mali, Timbuktu and Kano had highly developed artisan production and a metal-working culture.<sup>14</sup>

Powerful monarchies existed in both in west and east Africa long before the Europeans arrived. In addition some tribal confederations were evolving states. But by the time the Europeans arrived in force they had not transcended varieties of the Asiatic mode of production and feudalism. Their relative isolation from intercontinental trade left them economically and militarily vulnerable to plunder and conquest. The massive distorting effect of the slave trade turned these states and tribal confederations against one another and tied their rulers to the European traders.

The success of England's South African settler colony after the discovery there of diamonds and gold, led the way to the 'scramble for Africa' from 1885 to 1896.<sup>15</sup> The entire sub-Saharan continent was colonised apart from Ethiopia whose Negus succeeded in warding off Italy. The Europeans' new colonies rarely, if ever, coincided either with the boundaries of previous kingdoms or the territory of tribal

confederations; they possessed little or no linguistic or ethnic homogeneity.

Rather, they reflected agreements struck between the European powers. They were just so many straight lines drawn on a map in Berlin in 1885 and at subsequent conferences. Yet after 1945 these were to be the boundaries of the new nations of Africa. The colonial divisions drawn up in this way were only the beginning of the process of establishing the colonies. The traditional societies of Africa put up a heroic resistance to the white invaders. Momentary successes such as that of the Zulus over the British at Isandhlwana or the Mahdi at Khartoum were followed by larger and overwhelming defeats.

When the colonies were established the best land was stolen for European plantations or farms, using African labour. In the southern part of the continent huge investment in mines rapidly created a proletariat, both of 'poor white' immigrants and of black workers uprooted from the land. The latter grew steadily as a proportion of the workforce throughout the century whilst the white workers became a highly privileged labour aristocracy clinging fiercely to their racial privileges. Wherever, as in South Africa, the white settler population formed a sizeable minority white racism became enshrined in a horrific legal framework.

But in the long run such a system, dependant on super-exploiting a huge and growing black proletariat, could not survive. Prosperity in the imperialist centres after 1945 slowed the flood of white immigrants to a trickle. There was no chance of replacing the black population with a real white proletariat. No matter how much repression Apartheid unleashed it was steadily forced to create its own gravedigger in the factories and mines.

South Africa, alone amongst the semi-colonial countries in the post-war era, evolved into a minor imperialism due to the enormous wealth that came to its rulers from gold production and the harsh super-exploitation of the black workers. Capitalist development in the other states of Africa remained weak and stunted. In most colonies only the European companies provided members of the big bourgeoisie. The large scale capitalist farmers were likewise Europeans except in parts of West Africa. There was a 'native' merchant and commercial bourgeoisie and in some regions a layer of rich peasants. But until long after independence there was virtually no equivalent to the small industrial and large comprador bourgeoisie<sup>16</sup> of India or China.

The first modern classes of Africa were the agrarian and mining proletariat, transport workers (dockers and railway workers) and the educated middle classes created by the imperialists to play a subordinate role in administering the colonies. Colonial and missionary schools and colleges turned out relatively large numbers of teachers, preachers, lawyers and administrators, especially since the number of white civil servants was even lower than in the Asian colonies. Likewise, the colonial armies needed a black NCO and a junior officer caste.

In colonial schools and military academies these social classes were forced to absorb the idea of the European nation as the motor force of history. Naturally enough, they began to work towards a nationalism of their own. They fashioned an ideology that provided a basis for both the modernisation of their homelands and for mobilising a movement to win independence from the colonialists. The Italian colonisation of Ethiopia in the 1930s awakened the intellectuals of the whole continent who had taken pride in the one independent black state that had hitherto thwarted colonialism.

Despite the many struggles after the first world war by the young workers' movements of the continent there was no serious political challenge by the working class to petit and bourgeois nationalism. The early Comintern made little headway in the continent outside of South Africa.<sup>17</sup> These two factors, the extreme fragility of the African bourgeoisie and the political weakness of 'communism' opened the way for a petit bourgeois nationalism, with a non-class 'socialistic' gloss.

The existence of the colonial states, with their economies oriented to the imperialist metropolis, with their elites speaking the colonial languages, with the influence of liberalism and reformist socialism from the 'mother' countries, meant that no real pan-African movement ever developed on the continent. Despite the fact that these states' borders cut across ethno-linguistic groups, despite the fact that each had some sort of poisoned legacy of imperialist divide and rule, the new regimes did little or nothing to overcome this legacy.

They were completely unable to bring about any large scale industrialisation which would weld the different 'tribal groups' into a modern proletariat. The political movements, often converted into one party rule, rapidly ceased to be parties in any meaningful sense but rather instruments of patronage and clientelism.<sup>18</sup> The independence leaders adopted a grotesque personality cult and assumed bonapartist powers, maintained and extended by a succession of military rulers in the later 1960's and 1970's.

A model was the Gold Coast where Kwame Nkrumah was not only the leader of a reformist mass independence movement but an ideologue of pan-Africanism. In 1957 the British transferred the colonial state machinery to him confident that he would safeguard British interests. Despite his later verbally radical critiques of neo-colonialism, especially after his ousting in a coup in 1966, while in power he had kept the ex-colony tied to the 'mother country'.

In short he remained a thoroughly bourgeois nationalist and a servant of imperialism. Other even more verbally radical leaders were active throughout the continent: the self proclaimed Marxist Sekou Touré, Léopold Senghor, Julius Nyerere. But their 'Marxism' or their 'African socialism' was of a completely petit-bourgeois, utopian sort. Those who achieved power merely used it as a cover for remaining fairly obedient tools of the British, French and US multinational companies that continued to exploit Africa.

The imperialists' attitude to colonies where the workers or the peasants took up direct action to struggle against their tormentors was altogether different to the cosy relations they maintained with Nkrumah before they handed power to him.

Kenya had been a colony where militant fightbacks were common because here the white settlers were still expropriating the best farm land. Jomo Kenyatta was active from the 1920s in the Kikuyu Central Association and led struggles against land robbery in the 1930s. But after the war, in 1952, the so-called Mau Mau peasant rebellion led by Dedan Kimathi demanded independence under the slogans 'land and freedom'.

The Land and Freedom Army was some 30,000 strong. The British responded with the harshest repression. Thousands were killed and 80,000 Kikuyu placed in concentration camps.<sup>19</sup> The war ended in 1956 with a British victory. But the defeat of the French and British over Suez in the same year, and the bloody Algerian Independence War finally convinced leaders like de Gaulle and Macmillan that a retreat from the continent was necessary if they were not to provoke even more radical movements.

Their foresight was confirmed negatively by those powers like Portugal who would not, or could not, pursue this policy. This change was also partly due to US pressure, which wanted an open door for its companies in Africa as elsewhere, partly due to economic weakness (and in the case of France, military weakness too) of the colonial powers. But the change to a policy of creating semi-colonies, politically independent but economically tied, was possible because of the fact that the leaders were bourgeois nationalists and would prove reliable agents for imperialism.

The years following De Gaulle and Macmillan's tours through Africa in 1960 saw the granting of independence to all but the white self-governing settler colonies. In contrast, the necessity of a long anti-

colonial struggle in the Portuguese colonies of Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau produced revolutionary nationalist movements and leaders such as Agostino Neto and Amilcar Cabral.

In the 1970s and 1980s Marxist-Leninist movements or military regimes, disguising themselves in Stalinist clothing, triumphed in Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea. To some extent this was also the case in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) where Robert Mugabe took on a Marxist-Leninist coloration. This led to a series of left bonapartist regimes. But the decline and fall of their Soviet backers after 1987 and the subsequent retreat of their Cuban advisers doomed these regimes. Either they unceremoniously shed their Marxist disguise or they were overthrown. At the other end of the spectrum, pro-imperialist bonapartist Emperor Bokassa, Houphouet Boigny, Mobutu, or Banda in Malawi were little more than pliant tools of the former colonialists.

## **The Arab Nation?**

The history of the Arabs in the Middle East shows that possession of a common language and culture is a necessary but not self-sufficient condition for building a nation, or sustaining a modern nationalist ideology. While over 100 million people speak Arabic these same people have been divided by religion, nationality and indeed racial origin. The unified Arab state under the Caliphate from the seventh century did not spawn an Arab nation state. Hence, its collapse and fragmentation from the tenth century and the further Balkanisation of the region in the nineteenth century did not signify a breaking-up of this nation. 20

The original Arabs were from the Gulf peninsula, a people welded together for the first time into a state out of disparate tribes and clans by the merchant nomads under Mohammed in the seventh century. The subsequent conquest of the Levant and Spain spread the Arabic language along the trade routes. The conquered peoples in the Caliphate were not forcibly converted to Islam, though many did, and many of the peoples were Arabised.

Scarcely three centuries of rule passed before the state fragmented as the mercantile basis of the state weakened. The fragmentation of the state and its rule by non-Arabs at no stage provoked an Arab national uprising. The decline of the Ottoman empire and the encroachment on the Middle East by the new European capitalist powers tended to divide up the countries of the Arab world between them into colonies or spheres of influence. There was no unified Arab response.

The experience of this rule and the development of capitalism within each of the Arab states created distinct national bourgeois and urban petit-bourgeois classes and a beginning of modern nationalisms within each of these countries. Egypt was the most dynamic example and the Wafd Party the clearest example of a modern constitutionalist nationalism. Following the 1914-18 war the British and French divided up the region between them and the feudal Bedouin chiefs failed completely to unify the people of the region into a movement for an Arab state; they were all bought off and became tools of imperialism.

After the carve up of the region each of the states was integrated into the world market separately thus further weakening the ties between each of them. In response to these developments Arab nationalism grew in the inter-war years as an anti-imperialist response of the modern petit-bourgeoisie to shared experiences of exploitation and oppression<sup>21</sup>. Syrian nationalism was particularly strong in the 1920s. But pan-Arab nationalism was a minority ideology and movement until the creation of the Zionist state of Israel in 1948. The humiliation suffered by the surrounding Arab states in the 1948/49 war launched Arab nationalism.

Nasser's Egypt was to be the torchbearer of the hopes of this movement in the 1950s and 1960s. His successful nationalisation of the Suez Canal and the defeat of the French and British intervention in 1956

catapulted Nasserism to the forefront of the aspirations of millions in an Arab Revolution that would sweep through all the surrounding countries dominated by imperialism.

Nasserism's high point was the creation of the United Arab Republic (1958) with Syria. But clashes of interest between the national bourgeoisies of each half of the Union led to a breakdown by 1961. Similar differences with Iraq prevented the further spread of the Union.

Nasser's radical anti-imperialist measures against imperialism had already alienated Egypt from the conservative pro-imperialist Arab monarchies of the Gulf. Lingering defence pacts in the face of the Zionist threat kept Arab co-operation, if not unity, alive. But the Six Day war with Israel in 1967 resulted in a total crushing defeat for the Arab states and the cause of Arab nationalism suffered a grave blow.

The pan-Arabism under Nasser, and the episodic particular nationalisms of Ba'athism in Syria and Iraq (Husseini), and Palestinian nationalism have all proven themselves bankrupt. They have all been bourgeois nationalisms incapable of consistent and revolutionary resistance, incapable and fearful of mobilising the masses across the whole region against imperialism and its local Arab agents. The danger now, given the weakness of the secular left in the Arab world, is that the Islamic fundamentalist forces—with all their intolerance of the needs of the socially oppressed and reactionary attitudes to the democracy of the masses—will grow on the basis of disillusionment with Arab nationalism.

### **A federative future**

The lessons of nation building and nationalism in the countries which are now semi-colonies—whether they have long enjoyed this status (Latin America) or whether they have relatively recently emerged from colonial control (India, Africa and the Middle East)—is fundamentally the same.

Movements for national independence whether of a 'national' bourgeois or bonapartist type, whether petty-bourgeois or Stalinist have all proved incapable of achieving real independence against world capitalism in the twentieth century.

Whether they encompass a small or large economic area they remain immensely vulnerable economically. For all the ferocity with which national identity has been asserted it is constantly challenged by sub-national ethnic identities taken up by rival elites. Repression meted out in the name of the nationhood of the post-colonial states only inflames this and hastens the disintegration of the state.

The first generation of anti-imperialist fighters, those who were still distant from the levers of power, developed the utopian vision of continent-wide unity. Utopian that is, upon the basis of private property and the rule of capitalism and its agents.

For in reality whenever these nationalists came to power they were first and foremost concerned to hold on to it within the borders set by colonial development.

The sadly misnamed Organisation of African Unity proclaimed the inviolability of borders. In so doing it renounced the elementary democratic right in the whole sphere of national life; namely, the right to self determination of peoples, including the right to secede.

The vociferous anti-imperialism of the bourgeois anti-imperialists was never anti-capitalist. Petit bourgeois anti-imperialism was only episodically anti-capitalist. The possibility of private or state capitalist development always produced a capitulation by these leaders which left the workers and the peasants robbed of the benefits of formal independence and statehood.

In the late imperialist epoch autarkic economic development is impossible. Some states are loosely grouped together into 'common markets?', as in NAFTA, but in such a way as to increase their subordination to imperialism.

A trans-national unity is necessary to break the grip of imperialism. This is possible only on the basis of the democratic recognition of the right of nationalities to secede and the creation of regional, continental and finally a world federation. Only such federations will negate the tendency to subdivision and weakness at an economic level and abolish privileges at a political level.

Here it has to be recognised that no exploiting class can lead such a struggle. It requires the leadership of a class 'which has no country?' and which consequently can recognise national rights whilst constructing a fundamentally international order.

The only such class is the working class and the only solution to the bloody carnage of imperialist and nationalist wars is a Socialist Federation of all humanity. This is not a utopia but a burning necessity in the decades ahead, as events from Rwanda to Bosnia, from Timor to Chechnya prove.

### **End Notes**

1. John Swarzmantel, *Socialism and the idea of the Nation* London 1991
2. John Breuilly *Nationalism and the State* Manchester 1993. p415.
3. Anthony D. Smith *The Ethnic Origin of Nations* Oxford 1986 p182.
4. More generously, the error of modern academics may be in part related to the absence of translations of much of the Marxist material (written in German and Russian) in the first twenty years of this century.
5. Trotskyist International no12 'Marxism and the National Question' and Trotskyist International no 13-14 'The Bolsheviks and the National Question?.'
6. For a sophisticated version of this approach see James M Blaut *The National Question- Decolonising the Theory of Nationalism* London, 1987
7. Of course this stable system in Europe has generated a constant series of first national and then two imperialist wars. More recently a new series of national wars in the former degenerate workers states has taught Europe that its own system of nation states was created and maintained at a high cost in human suffering.
8. see Anthony D Smith *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (1987)
9. Meso-America comprises the area of old Mayan civilisation, today spreading from southern Mexico through Guatemala and Belize to northern Honduras.
10. See E. Williamson, *The Penguin History of Latin America*, Harmondsworth, 1992; D Bushnell and N Macaulay, *The Emergence of Latin America in the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford, 1988.
11. B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London, 1983, Chapter 4
12. see *A History of India* by Herman Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund London 1990
13. According to the official census
- 14 Roland Oliver *The African Experience*. London 1991
- 15 Thomas Pakenham *The Scramble for Africa 1876-1912* London 1991
- 16 The comprador bourgeoisie refers to a bourgeois class which is the agent of the foreign, imperialist capitalist class.
- 17 Even here the early Communist Party was overwhelmingly white and made unpardonable concessions to the racism of the white workers, for example when it supported the 1922 white miners' strike against opening up skilled work to black miners.
- 18 Daniel Fogel *Africa in Struggle* San Francisco 1986
- 19 op cit Chapter 5

20. Bernard Lewis *The Arabs in History* London 1970. An opposite view is to be found in the writings of Samir Amin. Amin believes that the trade links of the Caliphate and the spread of the language of the Koran created the framework for an Arab nation. A more recent expression of this approach is Fawzy Mansour *The Arab World* London 1992. He sees Arab history from the Prophet onwards as a series of failed attempts to create a united Arab nation.

21. Georges Corm *The Fragmentation of the Middle East* London 1988

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