THE PROBLEM OF NATIONALISM – PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

In order to challenge the economic and political supremacy of the capitalist class it is essential that the proletariat acts internationally in order to overthrow the existing system. However, this prospect has not occurred because generally the working class considers its interests to be expressed by the role of the nation state. This affiliation has led to support for national wars, and can be expressed in terms of xenophobic dislike of people from other countries. Hence, Marxism has often been in a minority position when it has called for the development of international solidarity within the working class. This situation of dominant nationalism has its origins in the refusal of the Second International to oppose the First World War in terms of the position of national defence. The result was the promotion of national chauvinism within the working class that has never been overcome since that time. Part of the working class did identify with the Soviet Union after the October revolution, but this was not on the basis of support for world revolution but instead was connected to the principal of defence of the socialist motherland. In the cold war period the working class was divided between support for the USA or the Soviet Union. The demise of the USSR meant identification with the nation state was effectively unanimous, and the concept of global solidarity was reduced to the cosmopolitan identification with the role of the European Union. (1)

The BREXIT vote has indicated the depth of popularity of nationalism and right-wing populism, and internationalism seems to be reduced to an issue of compassion concerning the problems of other countries. The importance of internationalism as an integral aspect of a strategy to overthrow capitalism has been increasingly superfluous, and Hillel Ticktin could describe the working class as lacking in a sense of international consciousness: “The socialist alternative is real, putting the human being first, planning for a humane future, but then the working class is not yet a class. To be a class it has to be international and internationalist, conscious of it history and its task. Instead, demoralised, parts of the class have turned to immediate xenophobia, nationalism and anti-immigrant attitudes.”(2) This situation is also the logical outcome in which the Labour Party has never upheld internationalism as an alternative to what is considered the national interest, and the Conservatives have always upheld an imperialist and national identity. In contrast, the influence of Marxism has been strictly limited and the EU referendum mobilised a united cross-class alliance in favour of the importance of the nation as opposed to a trans-national institution. This situation is the result of demoralisation within the working class, combined with the durability of nationalism, which has led to the popularity of the nation and opposition to any form of internationalism. However, the result of this situation in the UK, and other countries, is to subordinate the working class to the national capitalist class and therefore oppose the possibility of united and international struggle against capitalism. Consequently, if nationalism remains a dominant ideology, the result will be to undermine the struggle for socialism. The task of this article is to address the issue of how to promote both internationalism and the task of proletarian revolution.

THE HISTORY OF THE NATION

It is important to recognise that the nation is not recent invention, or an imagined community. (3) Instead the nation has often had a primordial existence, which means that it has an ancient history. For example, the beginnings of the British nation possibly go back to the times of Alfred the Great and the struggles of the Anglo-Saxons against the Vikings. This sense of nation was intensified with the oppression of the Norman Conquest. However, in feudal times the local village was often the most important economic and political unit, and the dominant ideology was based on the role of the Catholic Church which provided a sense of internationalism. It was Henry 8th who embarked on building a centralised state in terms of the principles of absolute monarchy, and it was Elizabeth 1st who created an effective nation in terms of the national ideology of the Church of England and the sense of national loyalty in terms of resistance to the threat of Spanish invasion. This concept of nation was given a democratic twist in terms of the struggles of Parliament against absolute monarchy in the 17th century. However, the most popular concept of nation was provided by the French revolution and the Napoleonic wars in Europe. In 1851 Louis Napoleon utilised patriotic themes in order to undermine the possibility of proletarian revolution. But the Paris Commune of 1871 united the themes of nation, socialism and internationalism in opposition to the bourgeois government that was collaborating with Prussia in order to undermine the Commune. This was possibly the first occasion in which the working class was able to unite the principles of nationalism and internationalism against the forces of reaction which preferred to accept the domination of Prussia in order to undermine the revolutionary government.

Lenin's work on national self-determination differentiated between the reactionary nationalism of the imperialist powers from the possible progressive nationalism of the struggle for self-determination of the nations dominated by imperialism. (4) It was understood to be the task of the working class of the imperialist countries to support the struggle of the nations striving for political independence. This approach was essentially self-explanatory in a period of colonial empires. However, since the effective political liberation of many oppressed nations what is meant by the concept of self-determination has become more complicated. For example, is Scotland an oppressed nation? The development of globalisation, or the effective unification of the world economy in terms of integrated production and trade, has also raised questions about whether nations and nationalism has become an antiquated ideology. (5) But the nation state has continued to be an important basis of the internationalisation of economic activity, and the political reaction to globalisation has included the increasing influence of nationalism. For example people oppose the free movement of labour which has been promoted by globalisation. The logical political position would be to conclude that globalisation indicates the possibility of a world economy based on socialist principles of international planning and the organisation of production. But this standpoint is not adopted because people prefer the nostalgic view that the nation should become 'great' and determine its own future. Hence we have an economic situation which is increasingly amenable to transformation into a socialist world economy and yet political views are retrogressive and nationalistic.

The creation of the Second International meant the possibility to unite the working class against the threat of inter-imperialist war. But when war occurred in 1914 the Second International capitulated to the interests of their respective national bourgeoisie. We will never know if principled anti-war resistance could have led to effective international working class opposition to the development of national rivalry. The October revolution of 1917 led to increased opposition to the war. But the new Soviet state increasingly confronted the difficulty of national isolation, and under Stalin it responded with the perspective of socialism in one country. Hence the ideology of proletarian internationalism became diluted with Soviet patriotism. This also meant the strategy of world revolution became undermined and was transformed into Soviet defencism. By the time of the Cold war most workers supported the USA because of its role in upholding the boom of the world economy, and this standpoint led to increasing support for the national bourgeois states who were allies of America. The onset of neo-liberalism and globalisation was connected to the intensely contradictory and nationalist ideology of Thatcher and Reagan. Reactionary ideology was utilised in order to justify the process of the undermining of the material interests of the working class. In this period a new working class was created without internationalist traditions because of its intensified subordination to capital. The conception of internationalism became associated with ecological issues, animal rights, and other pressure groups campaigning. Hence it seemed that the only expression of working class community and solidarity was defined by a nostalgic conception of nation. This development led to increased opposition to the EU, and the various Marxist groups were unable to tackle and oppose this development of populist nationalism. Indeed some Marxist groups accommodated themselves to the anti EU sentiment and so were unable to uphold a convincing conception of a Socialist United States of Europe.

THE DURABILITY OF NATIONALISM

The ideology of nationalism is connected to the importance of the nation state. In the UK this is connected to the role of the monarchy and Parliament, and also by the nostalgia for the period of Empire. Furthermore, the concept of an island nation is based on the sense of national exclusiveness and so the process of assimilation of people from other countries has often been considered to be problematical. Only after a prolonged period of time are people of different nations recognised as being British because of adoption of similar cultural practices. This popular nationalism is not necessarily connected to a sense of loyalty of workers to their employers, but it could be argued that a sense of affinity with the existing nation state results in indirect support for the capitalist system within the UK. Michael Billig has argued that what he defines as banal nationalism, or everyday practical activity, promotes a sense of loyalty between citizens and their nation state. (6) Hence it seems that the very existence of people is defined by their connection and relationship to what is a national context. In contrast, the sense of internationalism is reduced to the transitory role of tourism and so does not extend to a sense of solidarity with other human beings, except in times of catastrophes. This sense of solidarity is an expression of compassion and has little to do with a sense of an international class that is able to transform reality. (7)

The problem is that with the demise of the Second International the understanding that the working class could be a progressive international actor has also declined. The capitulation of the Second International to national chauvinism was a tremendous defeat, and represented the effective end of an international proletarian consciousness, although this did revive with the struggle against fascism in the 1930's. Instead of international opposition to world war one, national chauvinism has become part of the identity of many nations, like the UK. Indeed important wars are also an expression of what it means to be part of a given nation state. The lesson of war seems to be the necessity to sacrifice oneself for the country, and this recognition is far more popular than any notion of opposing wars in the name of humanitarian causes. In contrast, the celebration of the struggles of the working class has been reduced to a few small annual meetings, and increasingly these events are remembered only by a few activists. In contrast, national events are the subject of media programmes and articles, and it seems eccentric to voice opposition to the role of the nation in war. Only the opposition to the Iraq war has become popular in recent times. However, this anti-war dissent was considered to be exceptional, and the majority of wars are events to be celebrated.

The nation is also defined by support for the national team in football, rugby, cricket and other sports. Rivalries with nations like Australia is part of the popular consciousness, and victories are cause for national celebration. In contrast, the obscure internationalism of Marxism seems to represent boring and unrewarding political activism. Indeed, the Left wing forces are defined as being anti-patriotic and people who dislike the achievements of the nation. Only, on rare occasions, as in relation to the Iraq war did the left wing view become popular, and this situation was transitory and changeable. The left wing call for the democratic republic has little support because the monarchy is considered to be a symbol of the nation. Indeed it could be argued that Marxism is primarily not influential because of its supposed anti-patriotic stance. However, Marxism does not deny the achievements of national culture such as works of art, music and books. But what is against is the transformation of the role of the nation into an ideology that ultimately supports the status quo and therefore defends the capitalist system. In this context it supports the development of an international consciousness in order to undermine existing national ideology and therefore uphold the perspective of world revolution. The crucial issue is how to make this internationalist stance popular within the working class that presently identifies strongly with the nation state? This task will not be resolved by an activist stance that concentrates on struggles and avoids the wider questions. This process of evasion cannot develop effective support for an internationalist strategy based on aiming to overcome the domination of global capital. Hence we must strive to undermine bourgeois nationalism within the working class.

An important problem with the Marxist approach to nationalism is that it assumes that the economic interests of the working class will represent opposition to the influence of nationalism. Hence it is presumed that the development of trade union struggle will express a sense of solidarity that rivals that of nationalism. However, the very limitation of the role of the trade unions in the period of the offensive of capital against labour has only generated the increased importance and significance of the rival ideological influence of nationalism. In other words nationalism provides an alternative sense of community that seems to compensate for the limitations and failures of the class struggle. The more that the working class becomes low paid and subject to long hours of work and deteriorating conditions, the result is to try and overcome these weaknesses in terms of the generation of a sense of national identity. Hence the working class of the UK that has been weakened by many years of the neo-liberal offensive seeks to overcome this development by voting in favour of BREXIT and opposition to the EU. It also has to be accepted that the trade union associations of the working class cannot provide an alternative and superior sense of identity which could rival that of nationhood.

However it is necessary to qualify the above comments and suggest that the sense of nationalism has often been contested in the history of the major capitalist nations. For example, many people in 2003 opposed the war in Iraq carried out by the UK and USA. This situation indicated that an anti-imperialist consciousness, and its relationship to criticism of nationalism, is possible. But it is also necessary to suggest that a consistent sense of proletarian internationalism has not occurred, and the ideology of trade unionism does not oppose accommodation to the perspective of the national interest. Furthermore, the left wing of the Labour party, for electoral considerations, upholds a conception of socialism in a single country. It does not accept that socialism is only possible in international terms, and therefore is not opposed to what it might vaguely define as George Orwellian Little Englander socialism. Only the small currents of Marxism attempt to reject the role of nationalism as an ideology, and instead attempt to promote the connection of internationalism to the class struggle.

But we should not be pessimistic. The ideology of nationalism is very shallow, and is based on the most ignorant understanding of the history of the UK. What results from this ignorance is a deferential attitude towards traditional institutions like the monarchy. The most vivid expression of nationalism is pride in sporting achievements, and associated cultural manifestations, such as popular musical groups. But this vague type of nationalism is still capable of providing a sense of national identity that undermines the importance of class solidarity. The shallow nature of nationalism may result in an 'imagined community', but it still represents the most powerful representation of bourgeois ideology. But it is important to recognise that in order to promote nationalism, the Conservative Party has had to undermine their commitment to the interests of capital. The BREXIT vote has led to the Tories rejecting the importance of the single market of the EU, and instead their heightened sense of the importance of nationalism has led them to contemplate an isolationist UK. Hence the historic relationship of nationalism and capitalism has recently been undermined, and this means that nationalism could assume extreme populist and reactionary forms. The only progressive alternative to this development is to strive to promote mass support for an internationalism that is based on the interests of socialism. The difficulty of developing the popularity of this standpoint is that it seems to represent an approach that is in opposition to the very national traditions and ideas that express the character of the UK. What is being called for is an ideological revolution at the level of popular common sense. This type of ideological transformation only rarely occurs in the history of nations, such as at the time of wars, when capitalist enters into international crisis. Consequently, it seems optimistic to believe that such a process of ideological change could change in less exceptional conditions?

The only answer to this issue under the conditions of the present is to, firstly, build support for a party based on the strategy of international socialism, and secondly to build mass support for an offensive for the transformation of capitalism. These two aspects are interconnected because the creation of the party is integrally linked to the development of mass opposition to the system. What is vital in this process of development is increasingly recognition that the ability to end the domination of capital within the UK is connected to the aim of bringing about the creation of an international socialist system. Furthermore, the point being made is that the present influence of nationalism is because of the low level of development of class consciousness and the connected lack of success in the class struggle. It is the limitations of the leadership of the trade unions which promotes the alienating influence of nationalism, which is an ideology of compensation for the inability to transform society. It is important to recognise that Marxists are opposed to the role of nationalism as a political perspective of opposition to the class struggle and socialism. We are not opposed to the progressive development of national culture, which takes the form of literature, music, and other means of the expression of human talent. Hence Marxists primarily reject nationalism as an ideology that is based on a false sense of community and solidarity in opposition to the genuine understanding of the solidarity of the class struggle. Only class conflict can provide the working class with a principled sense of understanding of its interests, and so express a progressive recognition of how it can bring about the emancipation of society. Indeed, it is the very connection between internationalism and emancipation from the domination of capital which means that the ruling class acts to develop the influence of nationalism within the working class. However, this process is not without its contradictions because it is possible for the global interests of capital to become counter-posed to the exclusive message of nationalism. Such a contradiction is deeply reactionary because it poses the possibility for capital to become politically represented by the most backward forms of populism, as with the election of Donald Trump as the president of the USA.

It would seem that the task of developing internationalism within the working class is effectively impossible because of the depth of the influence of nationalism. Indeed it would appear that nationalism is part of human nature, whilst socialism is a recent and less durable political creed. This point would seem to have some validity, but the very inability of bourgeois politicians to promote an alternative to austerity and crisis can create questioning of the system. What is crucial is that a genuine Marxist party emerge that can provide answers to any situation that develops. The problem has been that the lack of such a party means that the 'common sense' of working class people becomes defined in reactionary terms despite increasing unrest because of poor working conditions and the crisis of public services like the NHS. The standpoint of the trade unions does little to challenge this situation because of their generally defensive posture and inability to promote militant struggles against austerity. In other words the enfeebled situation of the working class only encourages the supposedly compensating ideology of nationalism. The unity of the nation seems to be a more modest and realisable possibility than the complex development of the solidarity of the class. This understanding seems to have been confirmed with the success of the BREXIT vote, and the eagerness of the Conservative government to implement a 'hard' version of BREXIT.

In these political conditions the very importance of working class seems to have evaporated and instead all the people within society are united by a national agenda. Yet despite this situation material reality continues to intrude, and this is expressed by popular concern with the situation within the NHS. The fact that resources are inadequate for the NHS is not overcome by this sense of national unity. The question of the quality of services continues to undermine the sense of a united nation. In this context the Labour Party senses that it could re-develop its popularity on the issue of the NHS, and the Tories are put onto the defensive. The Conservatives can only maintain their popularity by emphasising their support for a hard BREXIT. However genuine opposition to the system still requires the development of the unity of internationalism and socialism. This task is difficult, but it is the only principled basis to develop an intransigent and militant aspect to class struggle. In this constructive manner reactionary nationalism can be overcome.

WOODS AND GRANT ON THE NATIONAL QUESTION

Woods and Grant appreciate that the national question is still important in the era of globalisation. They comment that: “Far from peacefully receding into the background as an antiquated phase of human development, as hopeless reformists imagine, it has acquired a particularly vicious and poisonous form that threatens to drag whole nations into barbarism. The solution of this problem is a vital component for the triumph of socialism on a world scale.”(9) This comment has truth in terms of expressing some of the terrible consequences of nationalism, but it does not explain its durable influence. The point is that despite the regressive limitations of nationalism it seems to be the most valid and important strategy for liberation of humanity from the problems of poverty, imperialism and the other limitations of society. In contrast, the influence of Marxism seems to have ended with the demise of the USSR. Instead of discussing this point, the authors still seem content to suggest that nationalism has become antiquated in a world economy dominated by monopoly capital. Hence they apparently are suggesting that nationalism is superfluous in the context of economic development based on the international expansion of the productive forces. However, this is not their actual viewpoint. Instead they are maintaining the view that the importance of nationalism occurs in a situation in which it should have become antiquated in historical and economic terms: “Yet precisely at this moment in time, when the world market has become the dominant force on the planet, national antagonisms have everywhere acquired a ferocious character and the national question far from being abolished everywhere has assumed a particularly intense and poisonous character.”(9)

Their emphasis is on Lenin's view that the development of the world economy indicates that the nation state and nationalism is generally historically regressive. The contradiction between the international development of the productive forces and the nation state has led to wars and revolutions. But this standpoint is one-sided because they do not explain that despite the antiquated character of nationalism it is maintained and promoted by the popular ideology of the subordinated classes within society. According to their logic it is baffling why nationalism is still influential despite its anachronistic economic and political character. The answer to this question is that nationalism is often the ideology of the exploited and oppressed, and its popularity has proved to be more enduring than Marxism and Stalinism. Nationalism is connected to the role of religious ideology and is still the expression of opposition to the major powers. Woods and Grant do recognise the importance of the connection of nationalism with discontent, but they fail to provide reasons for this situation. Instead they present nationalism as an irrational and antiquated force. This view may explain aspects of nationalism, but they do not relate the enduring character of nationalism to the failure of the apparent internationalism of Marxism and Stalinism.

They provide a modernist view of the rise of nations, and connect them to the development of capitalism, as in relation to the French revolution. This standpoint ignores the importance of evidence of the primordial view which locates the history of nations before capitalism. Indeed it is this ancient history of nations which could explain the enduring character of nationalism, and why it is a long-standing ideology. This criticism does not mean to suggest that the major era for the formation of nations is not related to the development of world capitalism. But the influence of nationalism is also connected to myths about blood and soil, and stories of ancient heroes. These become projected onto the modern history of nations, and form part of the ideological pre-conditions for the emergence of contemporary nations. Woods and Grant dismiss this aspect because they are concerned to connect the formation of nations with the French revolution, American wars of independence, and the 1848 revolution. This period is important, but it does not uphold the exclusive relationship of nations with capitalism. Indeed it could also be argued that the absolute monarchies of a declining Feudal system were just as important in the process of the formation of nations in Western Europe. However, Woods and Grant do make the valid point that the formation of nations during the early period of capitalism was generally progressive and led to the formation of modern states that overcame previous feudal limitations. It is also necessary to emphasise that the creation of a world economy and the international working class meant the nation was quickly antiquated in historical terms. The reactionary character of nationalism was indicated with the development of the First World War when the issues were posed in terms of the promotion of the international unity of the working class or national chauvinist support for a specific imperialist power. The latter situation developed because of the opportunist collapse of the Second International and the generation of popular nationalism. In other words the choice was between upholding internationalism and accepting the most reactionary forms of nationalism. Only a small group of Marxists upheld the principled standpoint of internationalism and argued in favour of world revolution. In contrast, the majority of the Second International divided in terms of adherence to the standpoint of national defence. It would require the horrors of the First World War, and the development of the Russian revolution, in order to create popular opposition to the war. However, the reactionary role of popular nationalism had been established, and it was shown that the so-called socialist parties were also susceptible to the claims of the interests of the nation state rather than socialism.

These issues were only emerging at the time of Marx and Engels. Woods and Grant outline the support of Marx for Polish independence because of its progressive role in opposing the interests of Russian Tsarism. But in controversial terms they also oppose the national movement of the Czech people: “Marx understood that, whereas a victory for the Poles would represent a blow against Russian Tsarism which would have revolutionary implications, the national movement of the South Slavs was used by Tsarism as a tool of its expansionist policy in the Balkans. As so often occurs in history, the struggles of the small nations were used as small change for the manoeuvres by a reactionary big power. Whoever fails to grasp this side of the national question falls into a reactionary trap.”(10) The problem with this standpoint is that it imposes a possibly restrictive condition on the significance of the national question. Is it possible to differentiate between so-called progressive and reactionary nations? Would it not be more constructive and principled to strive to achieve the most progressive leadership of the small nation that is vulnerable to the influence of a greater and more powerful nation? The point is that it is possible for more powerful nations to manipulate smaller nations in their interest, and this includes Poland, which could become the puppet of Austria or Prussia. Hence the only alternative to these reactionary developments was to advocate the leadership of the workers and peasants in the national struggle, and this strategy was related to opposition to the manoeuvres of the national bourgeoisie. Or alternatively the workers should try to ensure that the most radical sections of the national bourgeoisie become the leadership of the national struggle, as occurred in Italy of the 1860's. The major problem was the possibility of national struggles led by the reactionary landowners, who would attempt to reconcile their ambitions with those of the more powerful imperialist power. This understanding is both more principled and flexible than Marx and Engels rigid characterisation of progressive and reactionary nations. Effectively they were to reject this characterisation after 1848, and instead consider the national question as part of the bourgeois revolution.

However, as Woods and Grant outline the issue of the national question was secondary in importance to that of the proletarian revolution. Consequently Marx and Engels no longer supported the national and defensive war of Prussia when the Paris Commune was established. The authors make the principled point that: “The national question for Marx was always subordinate to the class struggle (the “labour question”). (11) However, it is also possible to recognise that the national question can become an integral aspect of the struggle for world socialism. For example, the Dublin uprising in Ireland in 1916 indicated that opposition to imperialism was possible, and that this development could be continued and strengthened by the transformation of this struggle into an act of proletarian revolution. The point is that it was possible to connect the struggles of oppressed nations against imperialism with the aim of proletarian revolution. This understanding was what motivated James Connolly's participation in the 1916 uprising. Woods and Grant accurately express the view that Marx connected the progressive nature of the national struggle in Ireland with the possibility to resolve the land question and the related advancement of the interests of the workers and peasants. However the attempt to project Marx's view onto the events of the last hundred years results in a dogmatic rejection of the role of the national struggle, and instead they argue it could only be successful in a socialist form. In actuality, the Irish struggle was crucially undermined by the divisions of the early 1920's, and the weakness of the labour movement which no longer had the leadership of Connolly. Partition led to the creation of reactionary states in the South and North. The re-emergence of the national struggle in the 1960's occurred in the most unfavourable conditions, and effectively took the form of civil war between Catholics and Protestants. The task of developing unity between these contending groups was very difficult, and ultimately an unstable political settlement has resulted. This means the promotion of working class unity is still the major task of the possibility to reconcile the national question with the aim of socialism. However, this does not mean that we should dogmatically reject the importance of the grievances of the most oppressed sections of the reactionary partitioned North of Ireland. Woods and Grant criticise the politics and actions of all sides of the conflict, but they have no suggestions as to how working class unity could have been advanced. In actuality, despite limitations, the politics of petty bourgeois nationalism has made gains, even if it cannot develop a successful strategy to unite the aims of socialism and nationalism.

Woods and Grant connect the inability of the Second International to oppose the inter-imperialist war with its inability to understand the national question. This view may have an element of truth, but the primary cause of the process of degeneration was the failure to recognise that the central task was to promote the mobilisation of the working class in favour of international revolution as the alternative to the development of war. It was the regression of the International into a reformist organisation which meant it was unable to recognise that the task was to advocate the overthrow of the bourgeois state in terms of the generation of mass mobilisation against the war. Instead the promotion of the so-called national interest was considered to be primary, and was utilised in order to reject the principled role of a genuine international organisation of the working class. This situation represented the fact of a genuine connection between the interests of imperialism and nationalism which meant that the only alternative for Marxists was to strive to realise the possibility of international revolution. This type of chauvinist nationalism, which was connected to the interests of the major capitalist powers, had no progressive content in terms of the interests of the working class. However, the problem was that this reactionary form of nationalism had led to enthusiastic support for the war aims of the various imperialist powers within the working class. Marxism had to recognise that one of its central objectives was to undermine this popular reactionary nationalism and instead promote the alternative of socialist internationalism. If this task was not successfully realised the possibility of proletarian revolution would be made more difficult, if not impossible. Consequently, Lenin recognised that in relation to the aims of international proletarian revolution popular bourgeois nationalism had become reactionary. The only progressive type of nationalism was one that was genuinely connected to the interests of oppressed peoples, and so meant self-determination free from imperialist control.

Woods and Grant make the principled point that this latter task should not be at the expense of trying to develop the international unity of the working class. However, important the aim of self-determination may be, it is still an integral aspect of the struggle for world revolution. Thus the revolutionary party should be composed of the people of many nations, and should have centralised tasks that transcend the importance of national boundaries. However, it was not always possible to uphold these principles when the October revolution occurred and Russia became the dominant nation. In this situation it was tempting to impose 'socialism' onto other nations, and so undermine the principle of self-determination. In this context, the standpoint of 'Greater Russian Chauvinism' became the alternative to principled proletarian internationalism. But this problem was the genuine result of the aspiration to expand the influence of socialism, and so indicated the tensions between internationalism and nationalism.

Lenin's starting point is to suggest that in many circumstances the standpoint of the working class and nationalism is opposed: “The slogan of working class democracy is not “national culture” but the international culture of democracy and the world-wide working class movement.”(12) Hence the working class should be united into a single international organisation, which contrasts with the bourgeois adherence to the role of nations. However, the working class is not indifferent to the obtaining of political rights within nations, and is for the principle of equality between nations. Hence the role of the nation for the principled working class movement is that it becomes the particular context to strive to advance the aim of socialism, but even this task is secondary to the internationalist aspiration to unite the working class in a manner that transcends national boundaries. This implies the importance of the national is an aspect of the international struggle for socialism. However, it is also possible to suggest that the role of the national and international can be counter-posed: “The conclusion to be drawn from this? It is that all the liberal-bourgeois nationalism sows the greatest corruption among the workers and does immense harm to the cause of freedom and the proletarian class struggle.”(13) Hence in order to be principled it is only possible to accept the aspects of national culture which promote the international approach of the working class: “In advancing the slogan of “the international culture of democracy and of the world working class movement” we take from each national culture only its democratic and socialist elements; we take from only and absolutely in opposition to the bourgeois culture and the bourgeois nationalism of each nation.”(14) Consequently the character of national culture is not necessarily reactionary, but it should not become the basis to oppose the international unity of the working class. Hence the primary aim of socialism is to oppose bourgeois nationalism and its justification of division between nations. The ideological role of nationalism is to defend the class interests of the bourgeoisie, and so can only be principally opposed with the internationalism of the working class. This means: “Bourgeois nationalism and proletarian internationalism – these are the two irreconcilably hostile slogans that correspond to the two great class camps throughout the capitalist world, and express the two policies (nay, the two world outlooks) in the national question)”(15)

Woods and Grant agree with this point, but they do not outline what it means in precise detail. Lenin is emphasising that the bourgeoisie will utilise an appeal to the claims of national culture in order to undermine the sense of independence of the proletariat from the bourgeoisie. The standpoint of national culture is utilised in order to deny the demarcation of the classes within society. This reactionary approach is an ideological method for making appeals for national unity, and so expresses the perspective of the unification of the nation in the most reactionary manner. The only consistent and principled standpoint that can be adopted by the working class is to reject any expression of national unity with the bourgeoisie and instead uphold its independent approach. This means in concrete terms the determination to wage struggle against the so-called national aims of the bourgeoisie. No concession must be made to the appeal to a conception of national culture, which in actuality disguises the narrow class interests of the bourgeoisie. Hence the working class of different nationalities, which may have some different aims, such as the self-determination of the Ukraine, must still uphold their unity and ability to organise together. This means the principle of self-determination is secondary when compared to the aim of uniting the working class and developing its ability to act to oppose capitalism. Promoting the opposition of the working class to the bourgeois state is primary, and other aims like national self-determination are secondary: “All advocacy of the segregation of the workers of one nation from those of another, all attacks upon Marxist assimilation, of attempts where the proletariat is concerned to counter-pose one national culture as a whole to another allegedly integral national culture, and so forth is bourgeois nationalism., against which it is essential to wage a ruthless struggle.”(16) Hence Lenin is suggesting that it is not possible to accommodate the interests of national culture, which has a bourgeois content, and instead it is necessary to reject its character in the name of internationalism. There can be no compromise on this issue because accommodation to the role of bourgeois national culture means the acceptance of reactionary class interests and opposition to genuine internationalism.

Lenin has outlined one of the most emphatic conceptions of the relationship of internationalism to the interests of the working class. Only in limited and specific instances can nationalism be connected to the standpoint of the proletariat, and this instance is defined as being compatible with the approach of internationalism such as the demand for self-determination. Hence the unfavourable contrast of nationalism with internationalism means that the latter is what is in accordance with the general interests of the proletariat. There is no suggestion that a capitalist nation can have progressive aims that could supersede those of the proletarian internationalism. Hence the assumption is that in a situation of war, the obligation of the proletariat is to oppose it and to strive to bring about the downfall of the capitalist nation via the discrediting of bourgeois nationalism. This means that the working class should not support nationalism as an ideology because in these terms it can only uphold the interests of capitalism and the bourgeoisie. Instead the only political standpoint, or ideology that is compatible with the interests of the working class, is that of internationalism, which means the development of world revolution and the demise of capitalism. This standpoint means that even when national self-determination is progressive, the working class should not defend nationalism, and instead this aim of national emancipation is upheld because in some sense it advances the cause of world revolution. In this sense, Woods and Grant are right to comment: “There is no doubt whatever about this. Bourgeois nationalism and proletarian internationalism are two utterly incompatible policies, reflecting the incompatible world outlook of two hostile classes. It is useless to twist and turn and try to disguise this obvious truth. Lenin stood for proletarian internationalism and against nationalism in whatever for it masqueraded under. The fact that he opposed all forms of national oppression, and showed sympathy for oppressed peoples should not be used to disguise this indisputable fact. Lenin was the enemy of nationalism.”(17)

However, the problem with this comment is that it is outlined in general terms and not made specific. The point is that the most reactionary expression of bourgeois nationalism was the support for imperialist war. This meant the highest aspect of proletarian internationalism is opposition to imperialist war, and support for the alternative of an end to war by the advance of the prospects of socialist revolution. Woods and Grant are reticent to explain the logic of Lenin's opposition to nationalism because they have a history of adapting to the pro-nationalism of the working class on the question of imperialist war, such as the Falklands war of 1982. Hence their views concerning Lenin and nationalism lack strategic clarity and historical relevance. They do not recognise that Lenin understood the necessity to oppose the popular support within the working class for the inter-imperialist war of 1914. This type of nationalism was its most reactionary expression, and was the most problematical because it led to the rejection of class interest in favour of the aims of the imperialist nation. The standpoint of international proletarian revolution was counter-posed to the objectives of the national aggression of the participants in the inter-imperialist war. This is why the adoption of support for imperialist war within the working class was completely against its class interests, and meant the workers acted to undermine their ability to be able to carry out their genuine historical objectives of world revolution. Support by the workers for nationalism during the inter-imperialist conflict meant they adopted the position of counter-revolution and became part of the forces of reaction.

This is why Lenin opposed any suggestion of alliances with Social Democratic parties who had supported the war. He argued: “Today unity with the opportunists actually means subordinating the working class to their “own” national bourgeoisie, and an alliance with the latter for the purpose of oppressing other nations and of fighting for dominant nation privileges; it means splitting the revolutionary proletariat of all countries.”(18) The point he is making is that in a situation of inter-imperialist war the only basis for opposing accommodation to reactionary nationalism is realised when the working class align themselves with the most principled Marxist opponents of the conflict. Only revolutionary Marxism can provide consistent opposition to acceptance of the reactionary aims of imperialism, and this is why the camp of proletarian internationalism is connected with this small political grouping. Lenin elaborates his point in the following terms: “Opportunism and social chauvinism have the same politico-ideological content – class collaboration instead of the class struggle, renunciation of revolutionary methods of struggle, helping one's own government in its own embarrassed situation instead of taking advantage of these embarrassments so as to advance revolution. If we take Europe as a whole....we will find that it is opportunist trend that has become the bulwark of social chauvinism, whereas from the camp of the revolutionaries more or less consistent protests against it are heard from almost all sides.”(19) The opportunists have gone over to the side of counter-revolution because they emphasise the supposed national interest to the detriment of the tasks of world revolution. In this manner they attract support from within the working class for the aims of the capitalist nation and against the standpoint of international class struggle. Hence the approach of national defence is the most reactionary and abject form of class collaboration. The approach of proletarian internationalism and nationalism has a different class content, and opposing objectives.

However, what makes Lenin's position dogmatic and one-sided is that he underestimates the influence of popular nationalism within the working class in relation to the role of the Social Democratic parties. The spontaneous support for the war within the working class creates the basis for the parties of the Second International to accommodate to the war effort. In the initial period of the war there is genuine mass support, and the result is that the socialist parties utilise this situation in order to justify their own opportunist standpoint. Lenin has no answer to this outburst of popular nationalism, and instead he one-sidedly blames the opportunism of the Second International for the situation. In actuality the role of the Second International, combined with the majority of the working class, has interacted in order to create a situation in which the support for the war has become overwhelming. Lenin is defending proletarian internationalism in a manner in which he is opposed to the spontaneous nationalism of the working class. His position is isolated until the outbreak of the February revolution in Russia, which results in mass anti-war sentiment and support for the positions of the Bolsheviks. But the historic vindication of his position is that the alternatives were posed starkly as being between support for imperialist war or adherence to world revolution. The political content of nationalism was shown to be abject acceptance of the war objectives of militarism and imperialism. Opposition to the war meant the revival of proletarian internationalism and the development of the struggle for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism.

In other words principled opposition to imperialist war meant the forces of revolutionary Marxism accepted that they would initially be in an isolated minority. They implicitly recognised that nationalism would be more popular than the alternative of world revolution. But the overall perspective was that the opportunist limitations of the parties of the Second International would be increasingly realised by the working class as being against their class interests: “The European war of 1914-1915 is doubtlessly beginning to do some good by revealing to the advanced class of the civilised countries what a foul and festering abscess has developed within its parties, and what an unbearable stench comes from that same source.”(20) This comment was still based on wishful thinking because Lenin underestimated the ability of popular nationalism to continue to support the war despite the many increasing casualties. Lenin's belief in the perspective of world revolution meant he did not recognise the depth of support for popular nationalism. Instead he considered that it would not be long before the horrors of the war would result in mass revulsion and rejection of the policies of the parties of the Second International. His perspective was partially vindicated with the outbreak of the revolution in Russia, but it also has to be accepted that the inter-imperialist war continued with popular mass support. However, what is not in doubt is that only genuine proletarian internationalism represented principled opposition to the imperialist war and its nationalist justification. In this context only people like Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky did not betray the historic interests of the working class by capitulating to nationalism. Instead they continued to uphold the political independence of the proletariat by calling for opposition to the imperialist war.

Woods and Grant outline Lenin's view of the right of national self-determination in the following principled terms: “For Lenin, the right of self-determination did not mean that workers were “duty bound to vote for separation”, but exclusively to oppose all forms of national oppression and to oppose the forcible retention of any nation within the boundaries of another state – that is to let the people freely decide on the matter. This is an elementary democratic right, which the Bolsheviks defended. But even then, the right was not considered as something absolute, but was always subordinated to the interests of the class struggle and the world revolution.”(22) This point can be connected to the situation of the First World War. The demand for Serbian independence was critically evaluated because it provided an impetus for the development of the First World War. In contrast, the revolt in Ireland in 1916 can be supported because it led to opposition to British imperialism and the First World War. In other words the issue was to what extent did the national struggle provide a momentum for the development of world proletarian revolution. This is why Lenin is explicit that the proletariat does not support the aspiration for self-determination in unconditional terms, or because the bourgeoisie has made the plea for support for this demand. Instead the proletariat should evaluate the demand for self-determination in the following terms: “While recognising equality and equal rights to a national state, it values above all and places foremost the alliance of the proletariat of all nations, and assesses any national demand, any national separation, from the angle of the workers class struggle.”(22)

This means the greater the level of internationalist consciousness within the working class, the more it is able to assess the demand for self-determination in an objective and reflective manner. It is able to evaluate this demand from the viewpoint of the democratic and international aspirations of the working class, and as a result does not accommodate to the nationalise dynamics of the aims of the bourgeoisie. In this context the high level of class consciousness of the working class means that the demand for self-determination is not reduced to the interests of the bourgeoisie. Instead it can become part of the programme for world revolution. Hence the aspiration for self-determination does not mean conciliation of the national bourgeoisie or a relaxation of the class struggle. Quite the contrary: “The bourgeoisie is most of all interested in the “feasibility” of a given demand – hence the invariable policy of coming to terms with bourgeoisie of other nations, to the detriment of the proletariat. For the proletariat, however, the important thing is to strengthen its class against the bourgeoisie and to educate the masses in the spirit of consistent democracy and socialism.”(23) This is why Rosa Luxemburg is wrong to equate the demand for self-determination with accommodation of the interests of the national bourgeoisie. The independent role of the working class means that is possible to promote a Poland that is not based on discrimination, and is instead influenced by the interests of the aims of socialism. This means the activity of the working class will influence the character of the realisation of self-determination in the most progressive manner.

However Woods and Grant do not emphasise the relationship of the working class to the struggle or self-determination. Instead they claim that Lenin subordinated the Polish aspiration for independence in 1916 to the superior claims of the Russian and German proletarian revolution. However, what Lenin actually argued was that it was not tactically astute to advocate Polish self-determination in a situation of inter-imperialist war: “To be in favour of an all European war merely for the sake of resorting Poland is to be a nationalist of the worst sort, and to place the interests of a small number of Poles above those of the hundreds of millions of people who suffer from war.”(24) The point is that this situation of inter-imperialist war is not the most favourable for the promotion of Polish self-determination. It is necessary to wait for a more favourable time, such as the development of a Russian or German revolution. Hence Polish independence is not subordinate to proletarian revolution in the manner claimed by Woods and Grant. Instead this struggle should not be advanced in conditions of world war, but it could be promoted by a Russian revolution. The point being made is that it is not possible to isolate current national struggles from the generation of world socialist revolution. The very interests of the Polish national struggle require the creation of proletarian revolution in other countries. This is the dialectic of struggle not understood by Woods and Grant, who subordinate the national struggle to proletarian revolution in a dogmatic manner.

Lenin was making the point that even in the situation of the inter-imperialist war it was still possible to advance the aim of national self-determination. The point is that the emphasis of this demand changes in relation to the given political situation. Hence he does not categorically deny the relationship of the national struggle to the prospect of proletarian revolution even in the situation of the development of international conflict. Thus he argues: “Hence the concrete change in the application of the same socialist principles: formerly the main thing was to fight “against tsarism” (and against certain small-nation movements that it was using for undemocratic ends) and for the greater revolutionary peoples of the West; the main thing today is to stand against the united, aligned front of the imperialist powers, the imperialist bourgeoisie and the social-imperialists and for the utilisation of all national movements against imperialism for the purpose of the socialist revolution. The more purely proletarian the struggle against the general imperialist front now is, the more vital obviously, is the internationalist principle: “No nation can be free if it oppresses other nations”” (25) In other words it is possible that the very character of inter-imperialist war as an expression of national domination and expansion could mean that the scope of the progressive character of the aspiration for national self-determination can be widened. However the question as to when a given oppressed nation should strive to realise its freedom should be decided by the development of the world war. In this context the struggle in Ireland 1916 is progressive and should be supported by Marxists because it is based on intransigent opposition to British imperialism, but does not necessarily advance the contrasting aims of Germany. Consequently, it is possible to envisage that the given national struggle is not a pawn of the interests of the great powers, but on the other hand the interests of the small nation are not given absolute priority. Instead 'it means the democratic interests of one country must be subordinated to the democratic interests of several and all countries.'(26)

Thus the question of the freedom of any given nation in the situation of the inter-imperialist war means that it is not evaluated in terms of the limitations of the exclusive bourgeois character of how self-determination is often conceived, but instead it becomes part of an international and socialist striving for the proletarian revolution: “It is not a paradox but a fact that the today the Polish proletariat as such can help the cause of socialism and freedom, including the freedom of Poland, only by joint struggle with the proletariat of neighbouring countries, against the narrow Polish nationalists.”(27) Thus the national struggle acquires international and proletarian characteristics in the context of the inter-imperialist war. But it would be a mistake to suggest that national liberation is not possible in the era of imperialism. This standpoint is the mistake of the Polish Social Democrats. Instead it is more appropriate to connect the national struggle with the requirements of world socialist revolution. In this manner any pro-bourgeois and exclusivist aspects can be overcome. Thus the Irish rebellion is progressive because it becomes part of the development of world socialist revolution. This means the Polish struggle has to overcome any subordination to German imperialism and instead become an integral aspect of the proletarian struggle against capitalism. In this manner the Polish struggle is not narrowly anti-Russian and is instead internationalist and democratic. Therefore the Poles should not raise as a priority the demand for national self-determination which could be utilised against both Germany and Russia, but instead they should subordinate the demand for national separation to the cause of international socialism. Therefore: “The situation is indeed, bewildering, but there is a way out in which all participants would remain internationalists: the Russian and German Social Democrats by demanding for Poland unconditional “freedom to secede”; the Polish Social Democrats by working for the unity of the proletarian struggle in both small and big countries without putting forward the slogan of Polish independence for the given epoch or the given period.”(28)

This comment indicates that at certain moments, and because of the obligations of the class struggle, the Marxists of the oppressed nation should not raise the demand for self-determination. However, this does not mean that Marxists of other countries should drop this demand, and indeed it will become appropriate for Poland itself in different circumstances. Lenin is making the point that the issue of self-determination has to be sensitively related to particular circumstances. This means the demand cannot be raised in a manner which could unintentionally advance the cause of reactionary interests. But this temporary expediency does not mean that the goal of national self-determination should be rejected as being inherently reactionary or unrealistic in the era of imperialism. Instead the demand should be raised sensitively and in a manner which is compatible with the interests of world socialist revolution. Primarily, it would be a mistake to counter-pose the supposedly reactionary role of the national struggle with that of the socialism. Instead the Irish rebellion has indicated the potential for the national struggle to acquire socialist characteristics: “It is the misfortune of the Irish that they rose prematurely, before the European revolt of the proletariat had had time to mature. Capitalism is not so harmoniously built that the various sources of rebellion can immediately merge of their own accord, without reverses and defeats.”(29) Hence under the given circumstances the development of the national struggle it could become the prelude to the generation of world proletarian revolution. This implies that it is a serious strategic mistake for Marxists to reject the importance of the national struggle as being reactionary and even impossible in the era of imperialism. Instead, in relation to the particular situation, the national struggle could be a manifestation of the emergence of proletarian revolution. Thus it would be a mistake to label the national struggle as being reactionary when compared to the prospect of socialist revolution. Instead it is entirely possible that the two forms of struggle could merge into one tremendous rebellion against imperialist domination.

|Indeed Lenin argued that opposition to the national struggle could become an accommodation to imperialism under given circumstances: “What for Rosa Luxemburg, the Polish Social Democrat, had been merely an incorrect theoretical generalisation of the specific conditions of the movement in Poland, became objective opportunist support for Great Russian imperialism when actually applied to more extensive circumstances, to conditions obtaining in a big state instead of a small one, when applied on an international scale instead of a the narrow Polish scale.”(30) The point being made is that if the Polish national struggle is considered as being nothing more than a reactionary accommodation to the interests of imperialism, this means that the actual progressive and anti-imperialist character of the Polish aspiration for self-determination is denied. Indeed, the ultimate result of this sectarian position is to deny the relationship of Polish national aspirations to the struggle for world socialism. The development of the class struggle in Poland will inevitably become connected to the demand for self-determination. Thus it would be dogmatic to consider the situation in Poland as being nothing more than subordinate to the class struggle in Russia. Furthermore, it is the duty of Russian Social Democrats to strive to realise the self-determination of all nations oppressed by Russia. To deny this possibility in the name of the class struggle is a serious mistake and is to repeat the mistakes of the followers of Proudhon who could only conceive of the reactionary character of the national question.

Hence Lenin is saying more than the view that the national struggle is secondary when compared to the aspiration for world socialism. Instead he is suggesting that the national struggle can promote the development of the international class struggle, and that it is a serious mistake to deny the progressive nature of the national struggle in the name of the world revolution. It is not just the proletarian revolution which can overcome the global domination of imperialism. Instead the national struggle can not only undermine imperialism, it can also result in the promotion of the development of the class struggle. Hence Luxemburg is making a serious mistake when she seems to deny the progressive character of the national struggle in the era of imperialism. Indeed, this view results in the pessimistic conclusion that the national struggle is antiquated and reactionary. The unintended result of this standpoint is to accommodate to the very domination of the imperialist power. This is not what Luxemburg intends, but it is the logical outcome of a narrow and economistic viewpoint. Woods and Grant accommodate to this position with their rigid and dogmatic view that the national struggle is secondary to that of socialist revolution. In contrast, Lenin outlines how the national and socialist struggle can merge in complex forms.

Woods and Grant outline how Lenin did not consider that the proletariat should meekly accept the leadership of the bourgeoisie in the national struggle and instead should evaluate the merits of the national struggle from the viewpoint of the aim of socialism. (31) However, we can elaborate this point and emphasise Lenin's perspective that what is important is the class consciousness of the proletariat. In this sense it is not sensible for the proletariat to follow the bourgeoisie in relation to the realisation of self-determination, but instead uphold its own independent approach such as the generation of the maximum level of democracy in the relationship between nations. This means the demand for self-determination is secondary when compared to the advance of the aims of democracy and socialism: “The bourgeoisie always places its national demands in the forefront, and does so in categorical fashion. With the proletariat, however, these demands are subordinated to the interests of the class struggle. Theoretically, you cannot say in advance whether the bourgeois democratic revolution will end in a given nation seceding from another nation, or in its equality with the latter; in either case the important thing is to ensure the development of its class. For the bourgeoisie it is important to hamper this development by pushing the aims of its 'own' nation before those of the proletariat. That is why the proletariat confines itself, so to speak to the negative demand for recognition of the right of self-determination, without giving guarantees to any nation, and without undertaking to give anything at the expense of another nation.”(32)

The point Lenin is making is that the class struggle does not end with the development of the national struggle. The bourgeoisie and proletariat have different ways in which they comprehend the national question and the bourgeoisie attempts to utilise this situation in order to establish advantages over the proletariat. Hence the working class has to maintain its own independent interests, and it has to reject any bourgeois criticism of the attempt to establish the highest levels of democratic equality as the basis of the realisation of the demand of self-determination: “The whole task of the proletarians in the national question is “unpractical” from the standpoint of the national bourgeoisie of every nation, because the proletarians, opposed as they are to nationalism of every kind, demand “abstract” equality, they demand as a matter of principle that there should be no privileges, however slight.”(33) However, the high level of principles that the proletariat imposes in terms of the conditions for its participation in the national struggles does not mean that as Rosa Luxemburg claims that national self-determination is impossible from the proletarian standpoint. Instead it is necessary to reject the bourgeois conception of what is practical in the national struggle and instead imposes a proletarian approach and standpoint: “While recognising equality and equal rights to a national state, it values above all and places foremost the alliance of proletarians of all nations, and assesses any national demand, any national separation, from the angle of the workers class struggle. This call for practicality is in fact merely a call for uncritical acceptance of bourgeois aspirations.”(34)

Thus it would be a pessimistic mistake to suggest that only the interests of the bourgeoisie can define the character of the national struggle. Instead it is possible for the working class to establish its independent understanding of the principled character of the aspiration for national self-determination. But this means that the aims of oppressed nations are connected to the aspirations to encourage the international unity of the working class. Hence it is a mistake to suggest that by supporting the right of secession this results in accommodation to bourgeois nationalism. This standpoint is the mistake made by Rosa Luxemburg. Instead the working class should establish principled criteria by which it is correct to support the bourgeois claim for self-determination: “Insofar as the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nation fights the oppressor, we are always in every case, and more strongly than anyone else, in favour, for we are the staunchest and the most consistent enemies of oppression. But insofar as the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nation stand for its own bourgeois nationalism, we stand against.”(35) The point is that the aspiration for self-determination of oppressed nations within an imperialist empire has a progressive content. But in order to ensure that the demand for self-determination is realised in the most principled manner, the proletariat has to establish its influence within the national struggle. Thus: “The interests of the working class and of its struggle against capitalism demand complete solidarity and the closest unity of the workers of all nations; they demand resistance to the nationalist policy of the bourgeoisie of every nationality. Hence Social Democrats would be deviating from proletarian policy and subordinating the workers to the policy of the bourgeoisie if they were to repudiate the right of nations to self-determination.....or if they were to support all the national demands of bourgeoisie of oppressed nations.”(36)

In other words the primary character of the politics of the working class consists of international unity. But within that context it is possible, practicable and principled to strive for the right of self-determination. However this aspect should not result in accommodation to the exclusive character of bourgeois nationalism. Hence Lenin is emphatic that the only principled basis to uphold the right of nations to secession is the standpoint of proletarian internationalism: “Successful struggles against exploitation requires that the proletariat be free of nationalism, and be absolutely neutral in the, so to speak, in the fight for supremacy that is going on among the bourgeoisie of the various nations. If the proletariat of any one nation gives the slightest support to the privileges of its “own” national bourgeoisie, that will inevitably rouse distrust among the proletariat of another nation, it will weaken the international class solidarity of the workers and divide them, to the delight of the bourgeoisie.”(37) Luxemburg denies the ability to unite support for the national struggle and the aims of international proletarian revolution. Instead accommodation to bourgeois nationalism will result, and so weaken the strength of the class struggle. Lenin argues in opposite terms. Principled support for oppressed nations, which is not counter-posed to the international unity of the working class, can develop opposition to various forms of bourgeois nationalism. The actual alternative is to accommodate to the standpoint of the great imperialist powers at the expense of the interests of the small oppressed nations. Hence national self-determination can be a principled demand because it is not opposed to the interests of developing the international unity of the working class.

Woods and Grant argue that the right of self-determination is a legitimate demand in relation to specific circumstances. Only when the national struggle promotes opposition to imperialism and advances the cause of socialism should it be supported.(38) But what is neglected by them in this view is Lenin's understanding that in the era of imperialism and imperialist war, the possibility of connecting the national struggle with that of socialism is advanced: “We say: In order that we may have the strength to accomplish the socialist revolution and overthrow the bourgeoisie, the workers must unite more closely and this close union is promoted by the struggle or self-determination, i.e., against annexations.”(39) This does not mean that the working class should accommodate to the aims and ideology of the national bourgeoisie, but rather that the national struggle can become an integral aspect of world socialist revolution. Hence, it is a mistake of Rosa Luxemburg to counter-pose the supposed reactionary character of the national struggle in contrast to the progressive character of the proletarian revolution.

Lenin possibly summed up his standpoint in his document: 'The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination'. (40) He outlines how the world economy is based on the domination of imperialism and the oppression of nations. It is accepted that the right of nations to self-determination is not a socialist demand, but it is integral to the possibility to realise socialism in a similar manner to the progressive role of striving for democracy: “It would be a radical mistake to think that the struggle for democracy was capable of diverting the proletariat from the socialist revolution or of hiding, overshadowing it. On the contrary, as there can be no victorious socialism that does not practice full democracy, so the proletariat cannot prepare for it victory over the bourgeoisie without an all-round, consistent and revolutionary struggle for democracy.”(41) The assumption is that the continuation of national oppression under imperialism makes the struggle for socialism more difficult. Hence national self-determination, whilst not being an explicit demand for socialism, is also often a crucial aspect of the ability to realise the undermining of the economic and political power of capitalism. In that manner it is part of the programme for the realisation of socialism. Hence it is a mistake to counter-pose the national struggle, which is defined as being exclusively bourgeois, to the role of the class struggle. Whilst the national struggle may not be directly part of the aims of socialism it can still have a vital role in advancing the cause of the overthrow of imperialism and capitalism. Consequently, the formal Marxist view that struggles for self-determination are unrealistic under capitalism represents a serious strategic mistake. Instead: “Increased national oppression under imperialism does not mean that Social Democracy should reject what the bourgeoisie call the “utopian” struggle for the freedom of nations to secede, but on the contrary, it should make greater use of the conflicts that arise in this sphere, too, as grounds for mass action and for revolutionary attacks on the bourgeoisie.”(42)

Hence \Lenin has effectively gone from a position of subordinating the national struggle to that of socialism into a more emphatic view that the former can become an integral aspect of the latter. Thus it might be considered that the very potential of the struggle for world proletarian revolution is enhanced if it is connected to the role of the struggle for self-determination. Indeed it would seem that he considers that the possibility of socialism is strengthened by the realisation of the demand for national secession: “In the same way as mankind can arrive at the abolition classes only through a transition period of the dictatorship of the oppressed class, it can arrive at the inevitable integration of nations only through a transition period of the complete emancipation of all oppressed nations, i.e., their freedom to secede.”(43) In other words if imperialism and global capitalism is weakened by the connection of the struggle for self-determination with that of socialism, this must mean that the aim of the equality of nations is an integral aspect of the process of transition to the success of the aim of establishing workers states with the intention to develop communism. This means that an integral aspect of the class struggle involves the proletariat of the oppressor imperialist nation demanding the right of self-determination for the colonies and all small nations; whilst the working class of the oppressed nation should aspire to realise political unity with the workers of the oppressor nation. In this manner international solidarity can be generated, and so provide an impetus to the struggle against imperialism and capitalism.

Lenin is still aware that democratic demands, including that of self-determination, can be utilised by the bourgeoisie in order to undermine the class consciousness of the working class. But this potential aspect does not undermine the overall contribution that the national struggle can have in regards to the development of world revolution. This is why the followers of Proudhon were wrong to reject the importance of the national question in the name of socialist revolution. Instead it is the task of the international working class to connect national issues to the aim of world revolution. In this context the most difficult and complex task is to unite the working class of the oppressor and oppressed nations around common objectives and tasks. The primary aim is still to oppose the bourgeoisie and aim to overthrow capitalism, but it is also necessary to recognise the crucial aspect of self-determination in this revolutionary process. Hence the Polish Social Democrats are wrong to contend the following: “The introduction into the International of the viewpoint of certain small nations, especially that of the Polish Social Democrats, who have been led by their struggle against the Polish bourgeoisie, which deceives the people with its nationalist slogans, to the incorrect denial of self-determination, would be a theoretical mistake, a substitution of Proudhonism for Marxism implying in practice involuntary support for the most dangerous chauvinism and oppression of the Great Power nations.”(44)

This perspective outlined by Lenin established the connection between the national struggle and that of the international proletarian revolution. This approach was enhanced by the October revolution which meant the national question was an important aspect of consolidation of the Soviet state. Woods and Grant outline how the sensitive approach of Lenin was undermined by the Greater Russian chauvinism of Stalin, who eventually upheld the reactionary nationalist theory of socialism in one country. Lenin defined his standpoint in his 'Draft Theses on the National and Colonial Question' which was presented at the second congress of the Comintern.(45) He outlines how the interests of the working people are based on the right of self-determination as opposed to the interests of imperialism and its exploitation of oppressed peoples. There is an inherent unity between the struggle of the working class in the major imperialist powers and the toilers in the oppressed nations. He now outlines in explicit terms that the leadership of the struggle in the oppressed nations should be with the workers and peasants, and the vanguard role of the national bourgeoisie is explicitly rejected: Hence the international struggle should consist of: “The form of this alliance should be determined by the degree of development of the communist movements of the proletariat of each country, or of the bourgeois democratic liberation movement of the workers and peasants in backward countries or among backward nationalities.”(46)

In other words the only genuine national struggle, or one that is likely to succeed, is that which is based on the role of the workers and peasants, and which has an important influence of the role of the communist party. This perspective makes the possibility of the unity of the workers and peasants of the oppressor and oppressed nations easier, and so will not be undermined by the opportunist role of the national bourgeoisie of the oppressed nations. Furthermore: 'It is also necessary to....explain that only the Soviet system is capable of ensuring genuine national equality of nations, by uniting....the proletariat and then the whole mass of the population in the struggle against the bourgeoisie'(47)

Thus the perspective of Lenin has changed from a specific and conditional support for national self-determination, when it upholds the interests of the proletariat, to recognition that this struggle is a vital and integral aspect of the world socialist revolution. The assumption is that the national struggle, and its mass base in the role of the workers and peasants, will become the prelude to the socialist transformation of society. There should be no conciliation of the forces of bourgeois democracy, which may also be involved in the national struggle, and instead: “Under present-day international conditions there is no salvation for dependent and weak nations except in a union of Soviet republics.”(48) This emphasis on the possibility of the struggle against national oppression becoming the dynamic of the development of the class struggle of the proletariat and peasantry is similar to Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution: “The perspective of the permanent revolution may be summed up in these words: The complete victory of the democratic revolution in Russia is inconceivable otherwise than in the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat basing itself on the peasantry. The dictatorship of the proletariat, which will inescapably place on the order of the day not only democratic but also socialist tasks, will at the same time provide a mighty impulse to the international socialist revolution.”(49)

Lenin does not deny the possibility that national emancipation can occur under the leadership of the national bourgeoisie, but what he now considers to be more likely is that the important role of the workers and peasants can bring about success in this most progressive task. They can enhance the possibility to connect the success of the national struggle with the dynamics of proletarian revolution. In these terms the national struggle can acquire its most developed historical importance and can become the prelude to international socialist revolution. The national struggle would be not only directed against imperialist domination, but it would also be opposed to the very interests of capitalism. The connection between imperialism and capitalism would indicate that national emancipation was related to the struggle for socialism, and so there would be a tendency to replace the leadership of the national bourgeoisie in the national struggle with the class alternative of the proletariat. These are the strategic lessons that Lenin made in 1920. The Comintern under Stalin emphasised the progressive role of the national bourgeoisie in China. This meant they subordinated the interests of the proletariat and the peasantry to those of the national bourgeoisie. The result was defeat for the most progressive forces in the Chinese revolution.

After a repressive period of Stalinism, Trotsky advocated an independent Soviet Ukraine. He considered that the national repression of the Ukraine under Stalin was increasing support for a Ukraine without connections to the Soviet Union. As an alternative to this nationalist influence he argued for a separate proletarian Ukraine. He asks the important question: “Let us grant that the separation of the Ukraine does actually weaken the USSR. What to do then with the principle of the self-determination of nations?.....In other words if they are a nation, it is a second class one inasmuch as the fate of the Ukraine must be determined by the interests of Russia, i.e., the Great Russian majority.”(50) The point he is trying to make is that the realisation of an independent Ukraine would not encourage the forces of reaction and instead would provide for the revival of the revolutionary movement: “The Ukrainian revolutionary movement aimed against the Bonapartist bureaucracy is the direct ally of the international revolutionary proletariat.”(51) In other words the reactionary and repressive character of the Stalinist regime meant that it would be progressive and emancipatory if the working class of oppressed nations like the Ukraine could establish a democratic, revolutionary and national social formation. It could be argued that the principle of national self-determination would only encourage the influence of reactionary and separatist forces. Trotsky replies to this type of viewpoint: “The right of national self-determination is, of course, a democratic and not a socialist principle. But genuinely democratic principles are supported and realized in our era only by the revolutionary proletariat; it is for this very reason that they interlace with socialist tasks. The resolute struggle of the Bolshevik party for the right of self-determination of oppressed nationalities in Russia facilitated in the extreme the conquest of power by the proletariat.”(52)

Trotsky suggests that the Ukrainian people have reawakened the demand for national independence because of the repression of Stalinism. However, it would appear that national separation would be a reactionary development because it could be the beginning of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. But in actuality this demand is progressive because it is directed against the interests of the Stalinist bureaucracy: “The barb of the slogan of an independent Ukraine is aimed directly against the Moscow bureaucracy and enables the proletarian vanguard to rally the peasant masses. On the other hand, the same slogan opens up for the proletarian party the opportunity of playing a leading role in the national Ukrainian movement in Poland, Rumania and Hungary. Both of these political processes will drive the revolutionary movement forward and increase the specific weight of the proletarian vanguard.”(53) The slogan of an independent Soviet Ukraine can unite the people behind the goal of self-determination and socialism. This standpoint is not identical to that of bourgeois Ukrainian nationalists who desire the creation of a capitalist state. Instead the perspective of a Soviet Ukraine unites the relationship of national separation with the possibility of the rejuvenation of the proletarian character of this state. Just as imperialism can only be overthrown by the proletariat, so also Stalinist imperialism can only be overcome by the independent actions of the working class.

Woods and Grant suggest that the slogan of an independent Soviet Ukraine is exceptional and refers to the special circumstances of the prospect of world war and the potential sympathy for German imperialism within the Ukraine. But the above analysis of Trotsky's views indicates that his standpoint represents a strategic vision of how to replace the extremely centralist USSR with a democratic collection of independent proletarian states. The point is that a centralised USSR has become the justification of state repression and Bonapartist dictatorship. In contrast, the national break-up of the USSR could advance the prospect of the advance of proletarian democracy and genuine socialism. Woods and Grant accept that the demand for the national independence of the Ukraine is acceptable under the given circumstances of the centralism of the Soviet state, but they are reluctant to extend its implications for the USSR in general. But the logic of Trotsky's standpoint is that the formation of various independent states would become the basis of the creation of a new and genuine socialist society. It would not be principled to accept the self-determination of the Ukraine and yet reject it for the other republics within the Stalinist dominated USSR. Indeed it can be argued that Great Russian domination within the old USSR was sufficient reason to advocate the genuine democratic and national separation of the various republics. This could be the vital formal basis for the democratic renewal of a truly socialist society.

Woods and Grant outline a description of the contemporary world in which inter-imperialist rivalry and the inability to resolve the national question in the Third World is considered to be outstanding. They describe the inability of organisations like the Palestinian Liberation Organisation to bring about national emancipation and suggest that a socialist revolution in Israel combined with similar events in the Arab world will bring about the only resolution of the situation, which is the combination of the role of the national and social. The complexity of the national situation has led some left-wing groups to support the forces of separatism, as in relation to the break-up of the former Yugoslavia. In relation to Ireland it was necessary to strive for working class unity and to recognise that the guerrilla struggle could not be successful: “Now we are entitled to say: the solution of the tasks left over from Ireland's bourgeois democratic revolution – by which we mean Irish reunification – can only be solved by the proletariat coming to power in both Ireland and Britain.”(51)

The situation is more complex than that outlined by Woods and Grant. Firstly, the national question has become antiquated and often anachronistic when compared to the economic achievements of globalisation. In some sense the very development of capitalism has provided the basis to resolve the national question. But the popular nationalism generated by the mythology of nations and oppressed peoples has meant that the national question remains an outstanding aspect of international politics. The answer to this issue is not to imply that it is inherently necessary to connect the national question with socialism. This is the primary basis to resolve the complexities of the outstanding issues of national oppression, but we have to develop a programme that will genuinely resolve the national issue. In relation to the complexities of Northern Ireland only the resolution of the situation of civil and political discrimination can bring about unity between two opposing groups that have been defined by different national identities. The Catholics and Protestants have basically been in a situation of civil war, and as Marxists we attempt to connect the struggle against oppression with that of socialism. The problem has been that the situation in Northern Ireland has been perceived as being about realising unity with a capitalist Southern Republic. Unity with this state is not appealing for the Protestants whilst the Catholics can only make a romantic and cultural appeal for the aim of unification. Hence in order to overcome this impasse, the programme of revolutionary socialism can uphold the aim of the simultaneous transformation of both the character of Northern and Southern Ireland. This is why the role of a revolutionary party is essential if mistrust between rival communities is to be overcome. The project of the realisation of a bourgeois united Ireland has made some progress, but this perspective cannot be realised because a capitalist and catholic South is not appealing to the Northern Protestants. However, popular anti-capitalist struggles in the South indicate the possibilities to develop a united socialist Ireland.

In relation to the disintegration of Yugoslavia, Woods and Grant do not refer to the role of Serbian separatists, and instead blame the nationalist forces of the smaller nations. However, they are perceptive to raise Trotsky's demand for a democratic federation of the Balkans. This could unite the many nations of the former Yugoslavia in terms of the reconciliation of the often competing aims of autonomy and centralism. But the problem is that this perspective is presented by Woods and Grant in terms of criticism of the separatism of the smaller nations within former Yugoslavia combined with apparent silence about the reactionary role of Serbia in relation to the disintegration of what had been a united nation state. We have to recognise that Serbia played the most important reactionary role, and it utilised nationalism in order to promote the process of the restoration of capitalism. In this context the nationalism of the other nations was generally a response to this situation. However, this does not mean that nationalism was a progressive response to the disintegration of Yugoslavia. This development could only establish antagonism between rival peoples, even if we have to support the right of self-determination in these circumstances. Only the development of a democratic federation that combines the aspirations of nations with the dynamics of centralism, which means the formation of a socialist state, is a progressive development under these circumstances. But this process also means the development of a revolutionary party that can oppose the popular nationalism of the competing national groups.

Woods and Grant conclude, and comment: “Despite all the evidence, the apologists of capitalism do not want to acknowledge what is increasingly evident to all thinking people: that the nation state itself now plays the same retrograde role that was played by the old feudal particularism, local barriers and toll roads of the past. The further development of human culture and civilisation will only be possible through the total destruction of these archaic barriers and their replacement by the planned and harmonious development of the productive forces on a world scale. Not outmoded nationalism, but socialist internationalism is the only hope for the human race.”(55) This comment is generally true, but it is necessary to be aware that the national question requires careful study and answers, and it is also vital to be aware of the influence of popular nationalism. The point is that whilst the nation state may be anachronistic in economic terms, the nation state is upheld because of the strength of the national myths and illusions that sustain it. For example, the BREXIT vote was considered to be a national protest against the international character of the EU. Such a display of unity across political loyalties would not be possible on any other issue. However, Woods and Grant seem to have little awareness of the importance of popular nationalism. They consider the national issue primarily in terms of the standpoint of Lenin and the importance of various political events. This approach is inadequate because it is popular nationalism that is the major ideological standpoint that undermines the development of support for the aim of international socialism.

However Dave Stockton of Red flag has analysed this issue of popular nationalism. His starting point is principled. He contends: “National identity is by its very nature defined against other national identities, and embodies the potential for conflict between them, however peaceful and good natured relations may be at any given moment.”(56) The problem is that whilst this approach may seem to be formally true, the complex issue is to provide an alternative that seems to be more worthwhile and inspirational. At the moment most people do consider their understanding of their relationship to social reality in terms of the role of nation. This was previously defined in terms of the relationship of nation to empire, and is now recognised in terms of aspiration for the isolated independence of the UK. This standpoint is irrational because it goes against the economic requirements of a close relationship of the UK to the world economy. However people do not recognise the importance of this economic necessity and instead glorify in the prospect of the isolation of the nation state. Hence a dogmatic conception of national identity is against the character and relations of a globalised world economy. This isolationist standpoint takes the form of opposition to the role of migrants, such as those from the EU, within the UK economy. The international character of capital and labour is rejected by the populism of popular nationalism.

Stockton suggests that the basis to develop an alternative is that of working class consciousness and active solidarity. The problem with this view is that the trade unions seem to be very ineffective and unable to oppose the development of a low wage economy. They also have proved ineffectual in terms of the defence of public services. In contrast, the approach of popular nationalism seems to provide alienated sense of empowerment; the view that the nation can act in a dynamic manner if it is united and has a common sense of purpose. This approach was present during the BREXIT vote, and seems to be confirmed by the adaptation to popular nationalism by the Tory government. Consequently, the only basis to provide an alternative to the various illusions of popular nationalism is to develop and promote class struggle in an effective manner. This would confirm the view that if the working class acts in a collective manner it can achieve aims and goals that are more principled and worthwhile than the illusions of nationalism. The point is that nationalism is effectively an ideology; it can only uphold capitalism and can do nothing to overcome the subordinated position of the working class within society. In contrast, the methods of class struggle can challenge the domination of capital and so begin to provide an alternative to the situation of the subordination of labour within the relations of production. However, it has been the very limitations of trade unionism which has led to the generation of contrasting illusions in the importance of nationalism.

The problem with Stockton's analysis is that he only recognises the importance of the nationalism of the ruling class, which is propagated within the working class. This aspect is true, but this one-sidedness means that he does not recognise the importance of the more dynamic role of popular nationalism. The point is that the parties of capital, like the Tories, utilise economic arguments in order to justify austerity. They maintain that it is in the economic interests of the system to have a low wage economy, and to carry out cuts in public expenditure. Working people accept these arguments as being those of common sense, but they do not provide inspiring arguments for the system. In that context it is necessary to develop popular nationalism in order to provide the dynamic basis for acceptance of the system by the people.

Stocking is right to suggest that the ultimate logical result of nationalism is support for the war of the various imperialist powers. However, what he does not outline is how to develop support for an alternative. Instead he implies that the end of the various wars results in opposition: “It is only in the aftermath of war that millions wake up to the facts, why the war was fought and how empty the promises were.”(57) This view has merit, but the problem is that anti-war discontent is not the same as the promotion of genuine internationalism. Opposition to war does not result in the development of an international view that generates the standpoint of socialism. Instead the ruling class is blamed for the carnage of war, and the actual capitalist system is not blamed for the situation. People do not associate the character of capitalism with the promotion of war. Instead economics and politics are considered to be alternatives. The former is defined in terms of the role of the world economy, whilst the latter is understood to result in national rivalries. Stockton does not seem to recognise the limitations of his anti-war standpoint, and seems reluctant to suggest that the alternative is international socialism. Instead he is content to contend that patriotism results in national chauvinism. This is true, but the question of how to develop an alternative is still not addressed. Instead in a vague manner he refers to the importance of international solidarity. This comment relates to the question of practical actions against wars and so on, but it still does not address the importance of popular nationalism as an ideology. In relation to this question the question of how we empower the working class is crucial. If this task is successful, the influence of popular nationalism will seem to be less attractive. Popular nationalism is an attractive ideology when the working class is on the defensive and the role of class consciousness is very low.

This dire situation has not been overcome by the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party. Instead the reactionary forces of UKIP seem to be more relevant for working people because of their advocacy of popular nationalism. This situation is connected to the fact that people have little comprehension of the alternative of the socialist viewpoint. Most people do not know what socialism is, or why it could be an alternative to capitalism. Instead the reactionary alternative to capitalism becomes the views of extreme nationalism. The appeal to a mythical past is contrasted to the internationalism of the world economy. Trump has recently developed a programme based on the apparent glories of the American past when contrasted with the uncertainties of contemporary globalisation. The fact that popular nationalism is impractical is not mentioned by these populists. However, the only principled alternative to popular nationalism is the standpoint of internationalism and socialism. The development of support for this approach requires the advance of the class struggle. If this occurs people will begin to be truly and effectively empowered. Hence the arguments in favour of popular nationalism will begin to seem less convincing. In other words only when the working class becomes a truly collective class movement and begins to aspire for socialism will nationalism become to be considered as mythical and considered to be merely an ideology of the ruling class.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Lawrence Wilde: Global Solidarity Edinburgh University Press 2013

(2)Hillel Ticktin: The Ruling Class Turns? In Weekly Worker issue 1134, December 8th 2016 p7

(3)Benedict Anderson: Imagined Communities, London Verso, 1984

(4)Lenin: The Junius Pamphlet, Collected Works volume 22, Progress Publishers Moscow p305-319

(5)Editors: Daphne Halikiopoulou and Sofia Vasilopoulou Nationalism and Globalisation Routledge Abingdon 2011

(6)Michael Billig: Banal Nationalism, Sage London 1995

(7)Wilde op cit p122-126

(8)Alan Woods and Ted Grant: Marxism and the National Question, [www.marxist.com/](http://www.marxist.com/) - national question p1

(9) ibid p2

(10) ibid p10

(11) ibid p12

(12)V.I. Lenin: Critical Remarks on the National Question, Collected Works, Progress Publishers 1972 Volume 20 p22

(13) ibid p23

(14) ibid p24

(15) ibid p26

(16) ibid p33

(17)Woods op cit p27

(18)Lenin: Socialism and War, Collected works volume 21 p311

(19) ibid p310

(20) Lenin, The Collapse of the Second International CW Volume 21 p208

(21)Woods op cit p31-32

(22)Lenin, The Right of Nations to Self-Determination CW 20 p411

(23) ibid p410

(24)Lenin, The Discussion of the Nations summed up, CW vol 22 p350

(25) ibid p342-343

(26) ibid p345

(27) ibid p351

(28) ibid p351

(29) ibid p358

(30) ibid p359

(31)Woods and Grant op cit p34-35

(32)Lenin: The Right of Nations to Self Determination CW20 p410

(33) ibid p411

(34) ibid p411

(35) ibid p411-412

(36) ibid p424

(37) ibid p424-425

(38)Woods op cit p36

(39)Lenin CW 22 p336

(40Lenin: The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self Determination CW22 p143-156

(41) ibid p144

(42) ibid p146

(43) ibid p147

(44) ibid p156

(45)Lenin Draft Theses on the National and Colonial Question, in Woods and Grant p70-73

(46) ibid p71

(47) ibid p71

(48) ibid p73

(49)Leon Trotsky: Three Conceptions of the Russian Revolution in Selected Writings 1939-1940, Pathfinder Press 1973 p72

(50)Trotsky: Democratic Feudalists and Independence of Ukraine ibid p74-75

(51) ibid p75

(52)Trotsky: Independence of Ukraine and Sectarian Muddleheads ibid p45

(53) ibid p49

(54)Woods op cit p60

(55) ibid p69

(56)Dave Stockton: A Progress Patriotism? In Red Flag Issue 9 January 2017 p5

(57) ibid p5

NATIONALISM PART TWO BY PHIL SHARPE

Tom Nairn in his book 'Faces of Nationalism' contends that the importance of nationalism is denied by Marxists like Lenin. (1) Lenin does not recognise the progressive and democratic character of nationalism for expressing the political destiny of peoples, and instead he seems to suggest that nationalism has a reactionary logic when compared to the alternative of internationalism. Nairn implies that the very goals of internationalism, like socialism, are advanced in terms of the development of national struggles. In a sense Lenin does not necessarily deny this point. It is possible to consider that the struggle for national self-determination can advance the striving for socialism in terms of the realisation of democracy and political independence from the major imperialist powers. However, this prospect does not mean that the class interests of the working class and the bourgeoisie are reconciled. The point is that even temporary agreement between the bourgeoisie and the working class concerning the national struggle does not mean that their class interests are reconciled. Instead Lenin makes the point that: “Working class democracy contraposes to the nationalist wrangling of the various bourgeois parties over the questions of language etc., the demand for the unconditional unity and complete amalgamation of workers of all nationalities in all working class organisations – trade union, co-operative, consumer, educational and all other – in contradistinction to any kind of bourgeois nationalism. Only this type of unity and amalgamation can uphold democracy and defend the interests of the workers against capital -which is already international and is becoming more so – and promote the development of mankind towards a new way of life that is alien to all privileges and all exploitation.”(2)

Hence Lenin is not denying the importance of the national question in relation to the struggle for socialism, but he is denying that this recognition should result in the accommodation of the proletariat to the nationalist ideology of the bourgeoisie. Instead the working class should promote an internationalist standpoint, such as the unity of workers beyond national boundaries, and it should uphold a strategy and vision that is based on the importance of transforming global capital into world socialism. In this manner, the importance of the national struggle should not undermine the class independence and integrity of the working class. It should not accommodate national chauvinism, which means subordinating itself to the aims of imperialism or bourgeois nationalism in any forms. In other words Lenin is not rejecting the importance of the national question, but he is denying that this significance should result in accepting the leadership of the bourgeoisie in the struggle for independence. Instead it is vital that the aim of national liberation should not result in the sacrifice of the proletarian ideology of internationalism and the goal of socialism. Consequently, there is an antagonistic relationship between the ideology of nationalism and internationalism. The former perspective is consistent with the standpoint of the national bourgeoisie in either the oppressed nations or the imperialist powers. Whilst the latter approach indicates that the proletariat is not subordinate to the ideology and class viewpoint of the bourgeoisie.

In contrast, Nairn considers this view is restrictive and sectarian because it denies the role of the 'nation'. But it is unrealistic to define the significance of the nation without reference to the importance of the relations between classes. This is why Lenin comments and contends that: “The elements of democratic and socialist culture are present, if only in rudimentary form, in every national culture, since in every nation there are toiling and exploited masses, whose condition of life inevitably give rise to the ideology of democracy and socialism. But every nation also possesses a bourgeois culture (and most nations a reactionary and clerical culture as well) in the form, not merely of “elements” but of the dominant culture.”(3) Thus at the ideological level we have the tension between the emerging socialist culture and the nationalist culture of the bourgeoisie. Hence if the working class is to adopt a nationalist standpoint it would be expressing a form of ideology that is in the interests of the bourgeoisie and against its own interests. The only ideology that is in the interests of the working class is that of internationalism and socialism. But this political conclusion does not mean that under certain circumstances it is not progressive for the working class to support national aspirations, such as secession from the imperialist power.

This understanding means that whilst it is politically principled to develop a united front between the national bourgeoisie and the working class in favour of national demands, what is not permissible is the undermining of the political independence of the proletariat in order to accommodate to the capitalist class. Instead the working class should always be aware that its advocacy of the national struggle is more democratic and principled than that of the capitalist class. In relation to the bourgeois nationalism of the imperialist powers it is necessary to conclude that this nationalism is always repressive and based on the aim to exploit other nations, and this is why the proletariat should not support it. It is not in the interests of the working class to defend great power national chauvinism. Thus the only principled standpoint for the proletariat in relation to the national question is to uphold its distinctive class interests: “In advancing the slogan of the “the international culture of democracy and of the world working class movement” we take from each national culture only its democratic and socialist elements; we take them only and absolutely in opposition to the bourgeois culture and the bourgeois nationalism of each nation.”(4)

Hence Lenin does not deny progressive aspects to a national culture, but they are only compatible with the aims of democracy and socialism. In contrast, the dominant and general aspects of the national culture are likely to be in the interests of the national bourgeoisie. Thus the capitalists are not likely to defend what is progressive about a nation; instead it is more inclined to uphold what is reactionary and expansionist. This is why the national ideologies and culture of the bourgeoisie and proletariat are likely to be opposed if the working class continues to defend its own class interest. However it could accommodate to the bourgeois understanding of nationalism if it rejects its own independent class standpoint. The result of this situation is that the working class could promote bourgeois nationalism. Such an outcome would not be in its class interests: “Aggressive bourgeois nationalism, which drugs the minds of the workers, stultifies them and disunites them in order that the bourgeoisie may lead them by the halter – such is the fundamental fact of the times.”(5) This comment indicates that Lenin is aware of the problem caused by the influence of bourgeois nationalism within the working class. This type of reactionary influence undermines the development of the international unity of the working class and instead results in mass support for the aims of the national bourgeoisie in their conflicts with other nations. The result of the influence of national chauvinism is that the international working class does not acquire the political independence that will enable it to engage in common struggle against the forces of the bourgeois nation and global capital.

It could be argued that this emphasis on internationalism is over-ambitious and unrealistic. The workers will always support nation as against the apparently more abstract claims of international solidarity. However, whatever the level of difficulty concerning developing genuine proletarian internationalism we know that without its generation it will be far more difficult to promote the aim of revolution and socialism. Thus to suggest that international solidarity is not possible is to imply that the goal of the overthrow of capitalism is impossible. However, this understanding does not mean that we should underestimate the difficulties involved in overcoming the influence of nationalism within the working class. Indeed, it is necessary to accept that nationalism has had a durable influence within the proletariat. Consequently, we presently have no ready-made answer to this problem, and it will require a tremendous advance in class consciousness in order that the influence of internationalism will replace that of nationalism. But our starting point must be not to capitulate to nationalism, or bestow upon it progressive credentials. Instead we must recognise that bourgeois nationalism is reactionary and so must be opposed. This opposition has to be connected to a strategy of international revolution. Lenin outlines this point in the following manner: “Marxism cannot be reconciled with nationalism, be it even of the “most just”, “purest”, most refined and civilised brand. In place of all forms of nationalism Marxism advances internationalism, the amalgamation of all nations in a higher unity, a unity that is growing before our eyes with every mile of railway line that is built, with every international trust, and every workers association that is formed (an association that is international in its economic activities as well as its ideas and aims.”(6)

The assumption is that the principled stance of Marxism will not make it popular within the working class who may be influenced by the standpoint of national prestige and the interests of the imperialist state. This means it will be very important to develop the most effective arguments that can be utilised in order to outline how bourgeois nationalism is against the international interests of the working class. In this context it will be crucial to develop an effective international organisation that can indicate how the class struggle is crucial for the promotion of the interests of the working class. Therefore the task should be to indicate that genuine proletarian internationalism and bourgeois nationalism are not compatible. This task is possibly the most difficult one that has to be achieved if the proletarian independence from the ideological hegemony of the bourgeoisie is to be realised. However, such an ideological struggle cannot be shirked and avoided if the proletariat is to become a class that is capable of overcoming capitalism. In contrast, Nairn seems to have an avoidance strategy that amounts to accommodation to the progressive character of bourgeois nationalism. His standpoint seems to suggest that the aim of internationalism in political and socialist terms is unrealistic. It can only be realised in the economic sense of the development of global capital. We can contend in preliminary terms that Nairn's approach can only result in the glorification of national movements, and anything international is effectively dismissed. It is also assumed that the working class cannot overcome the influence of nationalism.

Marxism cannot be satisfied with this pessimistic standpoint. It maintains that the contradictions of capitalist society can result in the generation of an international class consciousness. However, this task will be difficult because we also know the importance of inertia which means that people resign themselves to what they are familiar. This means that people accept as part of the human condition the role of nation states and the exploitation of labour by capital. Furthermore, the partially democratic systems of the capitalist nations are accepted as being legitimate, and alternative and socialist forms of democracy are considered with suspicion. But these problems are not sufficient for us to consider that the aim of national liberation has replaced the goal of socialism. Instead we have to ask who will this process of national liberation most benefit and we should also recognise that the capitalist system always remains after national emancipation has been realised. In this context the progressive aspects of national emancipation is always limited. Unless this struggle has the explicit aim of socialism, and is able to realise this demand, what is likely to occur is that the national struggle will result in the consolidation of capitalism. Therefore in relation to the role of ideology it is necessary to suggest that it is not possible to reconcile socialism with nationalism. Instead nationalism is most consistently considered to be a form of support for capitalism. This means that socialism cannot compromise on its international aims and aspirations. Hence the theory of 'socialism in one country' was ultimately a rejection of the international aims of proletarian revolution. This approach was a dilution of the aims of principled socialism.

In other words the standpoint of internationalism may seem to be unrealistic and difficult to realise, but there is no alternative if the domination of global capital is to be replaced by a principled alternative. Furthermore, we can suggest that capitalism has developed the productive forces to a level whereby socialism is a realistic historical alternative. The global material conditions have been created in order to make socialism possible. Thus to argue that socialism is impossible is basically an argument in favour of capitalism and a rejection of alternatives. What actually makes the task of socialism difficult is one of ideology and class consciousness. This aspect is connected to the role of nationalism. But it would be dogmatic to imply that this perspective is unassailable. Instead we have to develop more creative and effective arguments as to why nationalism should be replaced with internationalism. The point is that we do not have any historical guarantees as to why out standpoint should be successful. We cannot have the confidence that 'history is on our side'. Consequently we have to develop the arguments and reasons as to why socialism should succeed capitalism.

Nairn introduces his standpoint with a discussion of the importance of the development of the global economy. But he concludes that this situation has not resulted in the political evolution of similar dynamics: “No one in his senses is going to deny the increasing interdependence of the global economy, the economic rationale of larger productive units and markets, the growth of state intervention, the role of the multinationals.....But no automatic, 'logical' rendition of these factors into political and historical internationalisation has in fact occurred. Hence it is grotesque to employ them so automatically as a foundation for the ethical or political posture of internationalism.”(7) However it is no mystery why this impressive material basis of capitalism has not become some higher form of internationalism. The answer is expressed by the difficulty involved in promoting the only historical alternative which is that of socialism. The point is that because of a combination of reasons the potential for socialism, which is represented by the international development of the productive forces, has not been realised. This does not mean that socialism is impossible, merely that it is proving very complex and protracted to realise its development. However, it is necessary to also make the point that nationalism in whatever guise does not represent an alternative to socialism, and instead it can only generate the further fragmentation of nations into smaller units. It is true that the democratic issue of national self-determination has not necessarily been resolved, but it would be progressive to connect this task with that of realising socialism.

The point is capitalism has created the objective, material and international conditions for socialism, but only conscious action will realise this aim. For various reasons the people of the world are not eager to accomplish this task of promoting socialism, and instead generally prefer the continuation of capitalism. As long as this situation continues socialism will not be realised. This situation does not mean that socialism is unrealistic, as Nairn seems to imply. Instead it indicates that people still consider capitalism to be the most practical system, and one that will bring them improvements. The belief in the merits of capitalism, and the related support for the role of nation, will have to be overcome if the cause of socialism is to advance. Nairn contend that capitalism has generated an ideology of nationalism and internationalism. The assumption is that this combined ideology is unassailable and so cannot be superseded. Hence what is being effectively argued is that the standpoint of socialism cannot overcome this present hegemonic ideology. However, what is also argued is that as an ideology internationalism – in both its bourgeois and socialist forms – is less dynamic and immediate than nationalism. It is nationalism which has the durable and popular character. Internationalism refers to economic and political institutions, but nationalism refers to the generation of a national consciousness, and so has direct significance. This view may have some truth, but it does not explain whether nationalism is progressive or reactionary. The apparent assumption of Nairn is that nationalism is progressive because of its enduring relationship to the people. If this is his view it is generally illusory in relation to the nationalism of the major imperialist powers, and has only a limited progressive content in connection to the struggle for national self-determination.

Primarily the pro nationalist views of Nairn cannot establish a plausible conception of what would be a better world. By its very definition the very emphasis on nationality implies the dynamics of national conflicts and rivalries and so suggests the fragmentation of the coherence of the world. The only thing that can provide coherence to the international situation is firstly, the global development of capitalism, and secondly, the promise of socialism. In contrast, the role of nationalism can only result in historical regression and the end of the process of social advance which has been brought about by the international development of the productive forces. The fact that nationalism is popular does not make it progressive. Indeed this criticism seems to apply to the standpoint of Nairn. But it is the central weakness of Nairn that whilst he can outline why national conflicts develop, he can never suggest why they could be historically progressive. In this sense he has not provided an alternative to either bourgeois internationalism or socialism. He accepts that nationalism results in a standpoint of independent development in the present era, but he cannot establish how this would be progressive when compared to the alternatives.

To Nairn the importance of the national transcends the role of the international, and it is necessary to accept this situation. This implies that the national is what is practical, specific and easily accessible: “Internationalist philosophy asserts that between (inter) national or ethno state realities there lies a common higher ground, and our most sacred duty is to struggle on it. But this terrain is obviously difficult to access.”(8) This comment represents truth but this does not establish that the international is what should be aspired to, or realised because it is more progressive than the national. The domination of the national implies that the conflict of nationalities cannot be overcome, whilst internationalism implies the development of a global economy or the solidarity of the working class. The former aspect is already part of the contemporary reality of economic activity, and the latter is a possibility. We strive to realise socialism because it expresses the highest level of solidarity that is possible, and so would overcome the limitations posed by national rivalries. The continued influence of nationalism can only result in the generation of conflicts and this is not the utopian reality that should be promoted. Instead we attempt to develop what is possible within the global economy which is the creation of world socialism. Hence this aim is not unreal, but is instead an integral aspect of what has developed. The global economy is the pre-condition for socialism. In contrast the only alternative to this possibility is the continuation of national rivalries within the process of the development of the world economy. The serious limitation of this situation is that the actuality of the global economy does not overcome the problem of national conflicts. Only the advance to socialism will ensure that this issue is progressively resolved in terms of the promotion of human solidarity and cooperation.

Nairn argues that the standpoint of internationalism is not a firm ideology in the context of the regular development of national and ethnic rivalry. This point is valid but it does not mean that we should repudiate internationalism as being unrealistic or an over-ambitious project. Instead we should endeavour to make the very principle of internationalism the answer to the generation of national rivalry. Nairn contends that it is illusory for Marxist internationalists to reduce the national struggle to one of self-determination, or a form of the class struggle. It is true that this approach may be rigid and one-dimensional because it does not necessarily explain the great variety of national conflicts. However, what Marxists have tried to consider concerns what is progressive or reactionary about the national dimension. Lenin explains that the class struggle continues even if there is some level of unity between the proletariat and the national bourgeoisie about the national issue. He explains: “The bourgeoisie which naturally assumes the leadership at the start of every national movement, says that support for all national aspirations is practical. However, the proletariat's policy in the national question (as in all others) supports the bourgeoisie only in a certain direction, but it never coincides with the bourgeoisie's policy. The working class supports the bourgeoisie only in order to secure national peace (which the bourgeoisie cannot bring about completely and which can only be achieved with complete democracy), in order to secure equal rights and to create the best conditions for the class struggle. Therefore it is opposition to the practicality of the bourgeoisie that the proletarians advance their principles in the national question; they always give the bourgeoisie only conditional support.”(9)

Thus the criteria that Lenin provides in order to define a given national struggle as progressive depends on the level of the influence of the proletariat. This ensures that the aspiration for self-determination has internationalist impulses, and it means that the struggle is likely to also promote the cause of democracy. In contrast, if the influence of the working class is limited and based on acceptance of the leadership of the bourgeoisie, the result will be that the understanding of what is practical and acceptable will be defined by the role of reactionary forces. This will mean that national exclusiveness will be primary, the principle of democracy will not be advanced, and the possibility that self-determination will be related to discrimination of minorities. Hence Lenin does not suggest that the goal of national self-determination is illusory, or inherently reactionary. But what he does insist on is that in order for this aim to be realised in the most progressive manner it should express the role of the working class. This standpoint means that Lenin is not suggesting that the national and international are two distinct and counter-posed objectives, but on the contrary they are related and the realisation of the former could create the political conditions for advance towards the latter. Thus the greater the influence of the working class in relation to the national struggle, can mean that the process of advance to international socialism is enhanced and strengthened. If, however, the working class has a marginal role in the national struggle, the result will be that the formation of the nation state will have a hegemonic and exclusive character. The aim of international socialism will not be advanced in these circumstances.

Consequently Nairn's pessimism about the possibility for the aim of the international to transcend that of the national is an indication that he is sceptical about the proletariat acquiring a socialist and internationalist consciousness. Instead he is implying that the working class shares the national project of the bourgeoisie. This may be true on many occasions, but the result will be as Lenin implies, which is that the influence of the working class over society has not been promoted. Instead the very character of the nation is created in the image of the strength of the bourgeoisie. In contrast to this class understanding of the development of the national struggle, Nairn implies that the proponents of internationalism are being optimistic when they conceive this standpoint is generated by national struggles. However, Lenin never suggested that the development of the relationship between internationalism and nationalism would not be complex and difficult. The major point that he is making is that the importance of the national struggle should not become the reason to undermine the importance of the political independence of the working class from the interests of the bourgeoisie. He comments: “Theoretically you cannot say in advance whether the bourgeois democratic revolution will end up in a given nation seceding from another nation, or in its equality with the latter; in either case, the important thing for the proletariat is to ensure the development of its class. For the bourgeoisie it is important to hamper this development by pushing the aims of its “own” nation before those of the proletariat.”(10)

Hence in order to uphold its class interests, the working class should not promote the interests of its nation at the expense of another, and instead should uphold the principle of democratic equality between nations. This principled standpoint is part of the recognition that the working class and the bourgeoisie have distinct aims in the process of realising national emancipation. These antagonistic views are expressed by the working class advancing internationalism and the principle of the equality of nations, whilst the bourgeoisie upholds national separation and the domination of one nation by another. So according to Lenin, the national bourgeoisie and proletariat have distinct and counter-posed interests in relation to the national struggle. If the working class was to accept the bourgeois conception of self-determination this would imply that it had accommodated to opposing class interests in the name of nationality. In contrast, Nairn implies that the very unity of these two classes can bring about the progress of the national cause. This implied suggestion is an illusion. What actually results in the situation where the working class accepts the leadership of the bourgeoisie in the national struggle is the undermining of its own political independence and repudiation of the programme of socialism. This point was recently confirmed when popular nationalist sentiment led to victory for the BREXIT forces in the UK referendum on EU membership. Sections of the working class deliberately put the interests of nation before those of class. Indeed it was difficult to conceive what represented class interest given the weakness of internationalist ideology. The standpoint of Nairn, which fuses nationalism and internationalism, would have difficulty in providing a principled alternative to UK isolationism in this context. In contrast, Lenin would have insisted that the standpoint of internationalism was primary, and that the nationalism of an imperialist power could not be progressive. This approach represents a more principled and intransigent basis by which to compare the relationship of nationalism and internationalism.

This standpoint does not mean that it will be straightforward prospect to implement the aims of internationalism. Lenin is not denying that the influence of bourgeois nationalism could mean that it becomes difficult to realise the approach of the political independence of the working class. However these difficulties do not amount to a situation in which the politics of internationalism become unrealistic. Instead the Marxist party has to struggle to promote the international unity of the working class and this means opposing any tendency for the national struggle to become reduced to the dominant interests of the bourgeoisie. In contrast, Nairn would imply that national unity represents a political condition that cannot be challenged. The role of the nation is the essence of politics. Hence, Marxism is utopian to consider that it can oppose this situation. The problem with this view is how do we define and demarcate between progressive and reactionary politics if the nation is effectively a uniform and static unit? Nairn would seem to imply that the role of a monolithic national politics cannot be contested. But this standpoint actually means that he accept the domination of the bourgeoisie over the nation. In contrast, Lenin is implying that the leadership of the nation by the capitalist class can be challenged and instead the working class can become the dominant social force. However, for this possibility to happen it is necessary to promote an internationalist world view. This is admittedly a difficult task. But without the development of internationalism socialism is not possible.

Nairn considers that internationalism can be a creed of impotence: “At its worst, far distant from its best, internationalism may be little better than face saving abdication. It can be aimed at conserving the sanctified bones of a revolutionary creed, rather than keeping the strength to do anything. Indeed, it may easily turn into a way of avoiding doing anything – a permanent defence of the ossuary against nationalist vandals, therefore, blind to the element of delinquency in all actual revolutions.”(11) But this description of the weakness of internationalism refers to situations in which its influence within the working class is minimal. This is not an inherent situation, but instead refers to when the support for this ideology within the working class is minimal. Nevertheless this very adverse situation indicates the power of internationalism, because if this standpoint had mass support it would be able to motivate serious struggle for world socialism. Hence internationalism is not inherently weak. On the contrary, the connection between internationalism and class solidarity means that the possibility to promote the aim of socialism is immensely advanced. In contrast, adherence to nationalism is a false ideology within the working class because adherence to its world view can only promote subordination to the national bourgeoisie. Nairn cannot recognise this point because to him nationalism is an inherent and unalterable aspect of the human condition. This means that from his perspective internationalism is not a political strategy and is instead a sense of compassion and solidarity with the people of other nations. Admittedly it has this aspect, but this does not describe its importance. Instead its central and indispensable significance is that it is an integral aspect of the perspective of world revolution.

Nairn denies this point because to him the brief period of proletarian internationalism was overcome by the advent of the First World War, which was followed by the nationalist trajectory of Stalinism. He describes the importance of these events: “The tide of revolution did not merely retreat; it was overtaken by fantastic nationalist parodies, counter-revolutions with mass support. At a certain level of consciousness, therefore 1914 was continued until 1945. And its long term effects have not disappeared – obviously – up to the present.”(12) There is an aspect of truth in this comment because the level of proletarian internationalist consciousness has never been replicated since that earlier time. The nationalist degeneration of the Second International, and the development of popular nationalism, represented a tremendous setback in the struggle for world socialism. But contrary to Nairn's assumptions, this does not mean that internationalism is antiquated. Instead we have to consider how it can be re-invented in order to make it relevant for the contemporary working class. The point is without success in this task, the promotion of socialism will be very difficult. Hence the importance of internationalism is that it retains its strategic relevance for the process of facilitating the prospects for socialism. History itself has taught us that the national road to socialism is not successful. Only the international development of the class struggle can advance the cause of the overthrow of what is global capitalism.

Nairn would describe this perspective as an expression of romanticism which denies the development of nationalism within the proletariat. However, this approach would only express these illusions if it denied the durable role of nationalist ideology within the working class. Instead we have to admit that popular nationalism has been more influential than either reformism or Marxism within the working class. This situation has led to working class support for ruling class politicians and the projects of the national bourgeoisie. Such a development does not mean that the generation of internationalism is unrealistic or impossible. Nor should it mean that we become supporters of a false internationalism which relegates the possibility of socialism to the Third World. Instead Marxists have to strive to convince people that the problems of capitalism can only be resolved by the promotion of world revolution. This is not a sentimental notion based on the theory of the past, or the traditions of great leaders, but is instead an expression of the fact that capitalism is a global system which can only be overcome in similar terms by the promotion of an international revolution.

It could be argued that it is the very global character of capitalism which only reinforces the popular character of nationalism within the working class. For example, the free movement of labour, or mass migration, generates support for reactionary populism and national chauvinism. This is true, but it would be an easy answer to accommodate to this popular nationalism. Instead we have to develop convincing arguments that try to provide plausible reasons why migration is not responsible for the declining situation of the 'native' working class. The reason for low wages is not migration but is instead because of the exploitative power of capital combined with the ineffectiveness of the trade unions. The situation of depression since 2008 has led to low profits which has created the tendency to impose low wages and to intensify the exploitation of labour. The BREXIT vote will only intensify these tendencies as the UK will no longer be part of the single market of the EU. Instead of the class collaboration logic of nationalism we have to promote the politics of the class struggle and develop an offensive for socialism. If this development occurs, it will become the basis for international opposition to capital. In this context, Nairn's description of national unity will seem to be antiquated. But at present, his approach seems to be more realistic because of the very fact that the influence of nationalism undermines the development of class consciousness and militancy and instead results in the subservience of labour to the interests of capital.

Nairn argues that an important consequence of Lenin's understanding of the national question was that he defined it in conditional terms, and refused to support struggles which could be interpreted as being reactionary: “Hence the general principle is that all nationalist struggles and movements are bad; however specific and pragmatically identifiable circumstances may make them good – although only for a time and in a highly qualified fashion. These circumstances have normally to do with sufficiently gross forms of imperialist oppression. An adequate quota of suffering serves to legitimate a national struggle. As long as that goes on it impedes the 'normal' development of the subjugated society along lines of class awareness and healthy internationalism.”(13) In other words the major problem with Lenin's conception of national self-determinism is that it is made conditional and limited because of the apparent imposition of the rival claims of internationalism and the class struggle. Lenin would not deny that this interpretation of his view is essentially accurate. But he would also suggest that he is not undermining the integrity of the national struggle by insisting that it is connected to the apparently contrasting claims of internationalism. Instead he would maintain that his perspective is based on the understanding that the proletariat should not accommodate to the ideology of the capitalists in the national struggle. Instead they should assert their political independence which means upholding internationalism. Nairn seems oblivious to the fact that if the proletariat merely supported nationalism it would be accommodating to the interests of the national bourgeoisie. Indeed he seems to suggest that there is some mystical conception of nationalism which can unite the capitalists and workers. Lenin is realistic to recognise the importance of class differences. This means so called national unity means the subordination of the working class to the national bourgeoisie.

Lenin actually argued against Rosa Luxemburg concerning working class involvement in the national struggle, he maintained that it was not unprincipled, or an accommodation to the interests of the bourgeoisie. However, he also made the point that the participation of the working class in the national struggle should not undermine the following principles: “And at the same time, it is their task, in the interests of a successful struggle against all and every kind of nationalism among all nations, to preserve the unity of the proletarian struggle and proletarian organisations, amalgamating these organisations into a close knit international association, despite bourgeois strivings for national exclusiveness.”(14) In other words the national struggle should not reconcile the proletariat to the class interest of the bourgeoisie, and instead it strives to promote its own aims and forms of organisation. Thus the workers should oppose the nationalist ideology of the bourgeoisie, and instead utilise the national struggle in order to advance the cause of socialism. To Nairn this perspective is unrealistic. His assumption is that the working class will always defer to the nationalist ideology of the bourgeoisie in a servile manner. Lenin does not share this scepticism about the independent role of the working class. He believes that it is possible with a principled strategy and tactics for the working class to uphold its distinct internationalist programme. The point is that even if this development is rare in history, and generally the working class has accepted the national leadership of the bourgeoisie, Lenin has still outlined the most principled course of action. Only Lenin's approach would uphold the political independence of the working class in the national struggle. In contrast, the logic of Nairn's approach is to justify the capitulation of the working class to the national bourgeoisie.

Consequently, Lenin's approach is both principled and flexible. On the one hand he upholds the distinct class interests of the workers in the national struggle, and on the other hand he recognises that the aim of national self-determination can be an integral aspect of the perspective of socialism. In contrast, Nairn has no coherent historical aims, and instead suggests in a dogmatic manner that the national struggle has an inherent progressive logic. He outlines no strategy, and seems to have rejected the aim of socialism. Therefore Nairn has apparently adapted to bourgeois nationalism, and can only recognise the actuality of the global economy combined with the role of the bourgeois nation states. This conservatism must be rejected, and instead Lenin is principled to consider nationalism within the context of the struggle for socialism. However, he is not reticent to reject the national struggle if it contradicts in any sense the interests and imperatives of socialism. Nairn can only consider that this standpoint is inflexible and restrictive because he has rejected the possibility of socialism and instead reduces history to the complexity of the national struggle. This is effectively another way in which to describe the hegemony of the bourgeoisie within history. Instead of an emphasis on the economic superiority of capitalism, he defines this dominance in terms of the eternal character of the bourgeois nation state. It is the role of the political which describes the character of the end of history. In other words the proletariat is powerless to overcome the influence of bourgeois nationalism, and Lenin was naïve to consider that this possibility could occur. Instead we have to accept the superiority of the bourgeoisie within the nation, and this means that internationalism is effectively considered to be unrealistic and ineffectual. This standpoint represents a type of essentialism, or the view that the nation is the essence of history. From this historical viewpoint, Lenin's alternative can only be considered to be both rigid and dogmatic. Nairn might object, and suggest his explicit aim is not to praise the national bourgeoisie. But by praising the nation in such an uncritical manner means that he does outline a possibly unintended praise for the eternal historical role of the national bourgeoisie. This view is connected to the implicit assumption that the working class cannot acquire a leading role in the nation. In these terms he rejects the standpoint of Lenin, who is still considered to have an unrealistic internationalist approach. This means that the nationalist dynamic of history is considered to be unchallengeable. Socialism is condemned because it dares to continue to outline its premises in terms which are connected to internationalism.

Another important argument of Nairn is that the dynamics of internationalism take the form of the role of the national. Hence the creation of the British Empire promoted the formation of the world economy, and the French revolution spread its message of political liberty and democracy by means of national expansion and invasion. Furthermore, the message of world revolution was reduced to the Soviet Union upholding the nationalist ideology of socialism in one country. (15) These developments do not mean that it is impossible to differentiate between the national and the international. The first examples mentioned by Nairn were bound to happen because the internal character of the capitalist world economy was connected to the dynamism of the role of particular nation states. The UK was the major economic power, and so was likely to become the most dynamic force of the world economy. In relation to France what occurred was that revolutionary France was being opposed by many other countries, and so in the name of defence it exported its principles by military means. However, in terms of the October revolution, Stalin's nationalist trajectory was a betrayal of the internationalist principles of the original Soviet regime. The regime of Lenin considered that international revolution was vital both for the aims of the class struggle and also as the basis to develop socialism. This standpoint became diluted to mean that the USSR was the centre of world revolution, and so the purpose of international opposition to capitalism was reduced to what benefited the interests of the USSR. This approach ultimately meant that proletarian revolution could be opposed in the name of the interests of the USSR.

Nairn seems to suggest that this degeneration was predictable, and was an expression of the national interests of the Soviet Union. But this outcome was not predictable, and instead was the outcome of the defeat of the internationalist tendency led by Trotsky. Nairn disregards these developments and instead argues that: “There is the same crypto-imperialist streak in the proletarian internationalist ideology as there was in the liberal and free trade dogmas that lent themselves so well to the Anglo-Saxon empire.”(16) This point is not elaborated or proved in any satisfactory detail. Instead it is outlined as an unfinished statement. However, the assumption is that regardless of the original international pretensions of the proletarian revolution, it will eventually resort to nationalist reasoning. This is why the revolution in the USSR began to uphold the interests of a national state, and so reconciled the role of the world revolution with these interests. Furthermore, the very aim of internationalism becomes reduced to the justification of political expansion and the domination of other nations. Formally, this standpoint is correct, but what is omitted are the consequences of the political domination of Stalinism. The revolution underwent a process of degeneration and the generation of repression and personal dictatorship. Under these circumstances the international aim of world revolution was diluted and reduced to what was in the interests of the Great Russian state. However, it would be dogmatic to claim that this situation was supposedly an authentic representation of the development of a workers state. Thus the original internationalism of the Soviet state was not a means of disguising national aspirations, and instead was meant to inspire the genuine promotion of the class struggle and the prospect of socialism.

Consequently the internationalism of the original Soviet state was not effectively identical to the imperialist dynamics of the British Empire. This latter relationship was based on the character of the world economy, which in the 19the century was dominated by the nation state of the UK. The UK was dominant because the nation state was the vital form by which the international promotion of the world economy was realised. Genuine socialism is different to that situation of unequal economic and political power. Instead it should be based on what Lenin has described as the genuine equality between nations and the promotion of democracy. The development of the international class struggle should not be at the expense of any nation and instead should advocate the right of self-determination. If this principle of nationality has in some sense been violated, this would mean that the very character of the proletarian revolution had become distorted. This is why Lenin comments to the effect that: “The experience of the joint struggle waged by the proletarians of various nations has demonstrated all too clearly that we must not formulate political issues from the All-Russia, not the “Cracow” point of view.”(17)

In other words, Lenin is suggesting that a principled understanding of the class struggle would mean that we would evaluate it from an internationalist standpoint and that we would attempt to overcome any national bias in this perspective. In contrast, Nairn implies that this standpoint is impossible; we cannot disengage the significance of the national when we are discussing international political issues like the class struggle. His view would imply that the character of the international is false and is instead effectively a justification for the role of the national. Nairn does not seem to realise that if his view was true it would imply that the forces of Marxism were upholding a false and unprincipled banner. The very aim of international revolution would be unrealistic and merely a disguise for the national dynamics of any attempt to promote the overthrow of capitalism. Lenin would argue that he is aware of the problem of the nationalist distortion of the class struggle, and this is why he is trying to develop principles that would overcome any tendency towards great power chauvinism or the nationalism of the small nation. But what he would reject is any suggestion that the very character of the international class struggle is flawed and distorted by nationalism. If this was true his very perspective would be contradictory and false. Instead it is a contention of Marxism that the international development of the productive forces is preparing the material basis for world socialism. In this context it is possible and feasible to try and promote the international class struggle in order to realise this aim.

Nairn rejects the very approach of Lenin. He comments: “The Lenin inspired orthodoxy put its historical emphasis in the wrong place. It argued that on the whole, in relation to the general notion of history...nationalist or secessionist trends were regrettable lapses. 'On the whole' they are not: the revolutionary movement ought always to have welcomed and encouraged them, even when not led by hallmarked socialists, rather than grumbling and belatedly opening the door to a disheartening succession of fait accomplit. A general prima facie attitude was needed; internationalism was and is the wrong one.”(18) This comment seems to be an almost eccentric description of Lenin's views on the national question, which he supported and advocated. However, what Nairn ultimately seems to disagree with Marxists is that they do not support nationalism uncritically and instead uphold internationalism as the basis to evaluate political activity. If Nairn's advice was followed seriously it would mean nothing more than the capitulation of Marxism to nationalist ideology. This would in practice mean tamely following the leadership of bourgeois nationalism. Instead Lenin's approach is still relevant, which is to be critical supporters of nationalism, and it is vital to defend the principle of the international unity of the working class. Hence, contrary to Nairn, Lenin is contending that it is vital not to accommodate to nationalist ideology. Nairn obviously considers that this is a dogmatic and inflexible standpoint.

Indeed he concludes that it is wrong to prioritise the role of class over nation. This perspective can only undermine the necessity to develop the political independence of the working class from nationalist ideology. The Marxist approach is both principled and relevant because the working class has undermined a defence of its class interests because of continual accommodation of nationalism. Nairn would seem to endorse this accommodation to the ideology of the bourgeoisie. In contrast, Lenin has outlined a still timely understanding that it is necessary for the working class to uphold internationalist aims and values even when supporting national struggles. Contrary to Nairn, his view is not Marxist dogma, but is based on recognition that if the approach of internationalism is diluted, or rejected, the result is the subordination of the working class to the bourgeoisie. This does not meant that Marxist support for the national struggle is strictly conditional, rather that it has to be reconciled with the internationalist principles of the class struggle. Nairn rejects this standpoint as dogma, but he seems unaware that his uncritical embrace of nationalism means effective support for the national bourgeoisie. He cannot describe a popular nationalism that has an inherent progressive and socialist logic. Instead internationalism is required in order to uphold the principle of the political independence of the working class.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Tom Nairn: Two Faces of Nationalism, Verso London 1997 p25-46

(2)Lenin: Critical Remarks on the National Question, CW Volume 20 p22

(3) ibid p24

(4) ibid p24

(5) ibid p25

(6) ibid p34

(7)Nairn op cit p27

(8) ibid p29

(9)Lenin: The Right of Nations to Self-Determination CW vol 20 p409

(10) ibid p410

(11)Nairn op cit p30-31

(12) ibid p33

(13) ibid p39

(14)Lenin op cit p454

(15)Nairn op cit p42-43

(16) ibid p43

(17)Lenin op cit p451

(18)Nairn op cit p45