THE PROBLEM OF NATIONALISM - PART TWO

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 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 accompli. 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 a 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