

# In perspective: Tom Nairn

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The 1960s saw an upsurge of separatist nationalisms at the core of the capitalist system, with the movements in Catalonia, Eskudai, Occitania, Quebec, Scotland, Wallonia and Wales all making their first serious impact during that decade. Nationalist demands went on to play a role—although by no means the most important role—in the social upheavals which shook the capitalist system between 1968 and 1976. And although none of them succeeded in establishing new states, several—Catalonia, Quebec and, more recently, Scotland—gained a significant degree of formal autonomy within the state framework of the dominant nation.

These events inspired a number of important studies of nationalism, the majority of which appeared in two clusters. The first appeared between 1977 and 1982 and the second between 1989 and 1992, following a further and, in terms of establishing new states, more successful revival of nationalist aspiration in Eastern Europe. Whatever criticisms might be levelled at these works the best have nevertheless helped to advance our understanding of the phenomenon in important, if partial, ways.<sup>1</sup>

Only a minority of these studies approached the question from an avowedly Marxist perspective. One of them was by the Scottish writer Tom Nairn, who is regarded by many as the foremost modern theoretician of the subject. It is ironic, therefore, that his contribution emphasised the supposed inadequacy of the Marxist tradition as a tool for understanding nationalism, persuading many on the left that, in the famous opening sentence of one key essay, 'The theory of nationalism is Marxism's greatest historical failure'.<sup>2</sup> Most of the essays in which he put forward these arguments were collected in a book first published in 1977 called *The Break-Up of Britain*, but Nairn has recently returned to the subject in a further collection of essays called *Faces Of Nationalism*. On the evidence of this work he no longer considers himself to be any sort of Marxist. Indeed, it is questionable whether he can in any sense still be described as belonging to the left. Nairn is no longer merely a theorist of nationalism—Marxist or otherwise—but a nationalist theorist, advocating nationalism not only for his own nation, but as a universal political programme for the peoples of any potential nation states, in much the same way as revolutionary socialists argue for working class power. The extent to which Nairn has abandoned not only Marxism, but socialism itself, has been missed by both his critics and his supporters.<sup>3</sup> Such misunderstandings should not be allowed to continue. What Nairn advances is nothing less than a theoretical justification for the endless subdivision of the world into competing capitalist nation states.

With the collapse of Stalinism and reduction of social democracy to the most servile position it has ever held in relation to capital, there is a powerful tendency

for nationalism to become the vehicle for local opposition to the effects of the global crisis. This is certainly true in Scotland itself, where disillusion with the Blair government has already led to increased levels of support for the Scottish National Party. And while it has never been true that working class support for the SNP necessarily reflected an increased level of nationalism, the danger is that it might become true.<sup>4</sup> Avoidance of that possibility will depend, at least to some extent, on socialists successfully demonstrating to other workers that nationalism is not a solution to our problems but a manifestation of them. One aspect of that demonstration, although by no means the most important one, is to challenge the type of theory advanced by Nairn, where nationalism is presented not only as desirable, but natural and inevitable. The first part of this article therefore traces the development of Nairn's theory of nationalism; the second is a critique of his current position.

### **Part 1: Nairn's theory of nationalism--from history to human nature**

Nairn writes, 'I have never hidden the fact that my own dilemmas and oddities emanate from those of my country, Scotland'.<sup>5</sup> In fact for the first part of his writing career, between 1962 and 1968, Nairn showed no discernible interest in Scotland whatsoever, but devoted his attentions to constructing a thesis on English development with Perry Anderson, then editor of *New Left Review*. This Anderson-Nairn thesis owed far more to Nairn than to Anderson, at least in its original formulation.<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this article the most important aspect of the thesis, in relation to the direction subsequently taken by Nairn, concerns the supposedly archaic nature of the British state. It was only in this context that Scottish nationalism, and through it nationalism in general, became the focus of Nairn's work.

#### **The British state, the working class and the Labour Party**

Nairn acknowledges that the combined effects of the Civil War and the Glorious Revolution were to establish a fundamentally capitalist economy in England. He argues, however, that because these events occurred at such an early stage in capitalist development, the English bourgeoisie, unlike the French Jacobins a hundred years later, did not require a theoretical understanding of the revolution it had made. Consequently, the culture of the new ruling class was shaped by the more established and durable values of the landowning aristocracy who exercised hegemony over their immature junior partner, the bourgeoisie proper. Unlike other bourgeoisies which followed it to power, the English bourgeoisie did not become conservative after its economic power was assured, because it had always been conservative. This state, consolidated in England by 1688, and, by extension, in Scotland after the Union of 1707, was therefore pre-modern in structure: 'Although not, of course, an absolutist state, the Anglo-British state remains a product of the general transition from absolutism to modern constitutionalism: it led the way out of the former but never genuinely arrived at the latter'.<sup>7</sup> The pre-modern character

of the British state was preserved beyond the term of its natural life by the spoils of empire, which rendered any subsequent 'modernisation' unnecessary for the ruling class. Ultimately, however, when the British state was overtaken by modernising rivals and undermined by the retreat from empire, it entered an almost permanent condition of crisis which no government of either left or right has been able to resolve.

Superficially, this analysis bears some resemblance to that advanced by Trotsky in his writings on Britain.<sup>8</sup> But although Trotsky was perfectly aware of what Alex Callinicos calls the 'disadvantages of priority', he also situated this in the context of the world system and argued that the resultant crisis could be resolved by the working class.<sup>9</sup> Nairn, however, focuses almost exclusively on the national arena and does not accept the revolutionary potential of the English working class. Here too he regards the early formation of English capitalism as decisive. The English working class was formed in the classic period of bourgeois revolution (1789-1848), but because the English bourgeoisie had already achieved its victory, the former fought alone for political rights and social progress, unaided by the petty bourgeois insurgencies characteristic of the rest of Europe. Defeated, the working class was forced into a form of 'apartheid': the separateness of a class all too aware of what distinguished it culturally from other classes, but unable to identify the opposed interests which this also involved. Marxism, which might have clarified the situation, was available to the English working class only after it had already entered into its caste-like isolation within bourgeois society.

According to Nairn these characteristics were inherited by the political party which is usually thought to speak for English workers. Dominated by a bureaucratic gradualist right, besotted by the supposed wonders of the British constitution, and opposed only by a succession of moralistic but impotent 'lefts', the Labour Party was a useless instrument for achieving socialism. Yet his critique was not based on the premise that Labour had betrayed its supporters, but rather that it had all too faithfully reflected their lack of class consciousness.

It is not my intention to subject Nairn's analysis to detailed criticism here, since a massive literature exists which does precisely that.<sup>10</sup> The main theme, however, is clear: the British state is an archaic formation in deep crisis, but which nevertheless exercises such a hold over society that no force exists which can destroy or even restructure it.

### **Tartan waistcoats and the dreams of May**

In the beginning Scottish nationalism offered no prospects of playing a modernising role. Throughout the 1960s the Scottish National Party had been gathering electoral support almost unnoticed by political commentators of left or right. In 1961 their candidate polled a respectable 18.7 percent of the vote at a by-election in Glasgow Bridgeton. The following year SNP Chairman William Wolfe

came second to Labour candidate Tam Dayell in West Lothian with 23 percent of the vote--more than the Conservatives and Liberals combined. Finally, in November 1967, Winifred Ewing won a by-election in the previously safe Labour seat of Hamilton, beating Labour into second place by 18,397 votes to 16,598.<sup>11</sup> Nairn drew attention to the significance of these developments in an article for *New Left Review* which appeared in 1968, 'The Three Dreams of Scottish Nationalism', which was resolutely hostile to the nationalism of the SNP.

Nairn argues that the Scots have undergone three successive attempts to define their identity. The first of these was Calvinism. Nairn correctly argues that the 'rising bourgeoisie' did not initiate the Reformation of 1559. It was to remain inconsequential for another century and only achieved full dominance after 1746. Instead, the Church of Scotland acted both as a substitute for absent state power and as the unifying factor in a civil society. After the Union with England of 1707, the kirk was, along with the legal system, one of the institutions specifically preserved from the dissolution of the state. Consequently, it became the main vehicle through which a separate national identity was maintained.

The second attempt was not, as might be expected, the Enlightenment, in which Scotland attained greater eminence than any nation apart from France, but Romanticism. The leading figures in the Enlightenment were not concerned with Scottishness, but identified themselves with the British nation politically and were concerned with discovering universal laws of human development: 'While the Enlightenment was only an episode, Romanticism entered her soul'.<sup>12</sup> But the way in which it did so was markedly different from that of other European nations. Whereas, in Italy or Germany, Romanticism was part of the formation of national identity, in Scotland, particularly in the work of Sir Walter Scott, it acted as another substitute for it.

The third attempt was--or more precisely, is--the modern national consciousness of industrial Scotland, which Nairn sees as being positively schizophrenic. One element is the debased romanticism of a popular culture which then still revolved around tartan and bagpipes, whisky and haggis, the Loch Ness Monster and Greyfriars Bobby, Calvinism and a militarist celebration of the Scottish contribution to the British Empire. The other is the 'ethereal tartantry' of the intelligentsia, which begins as a rejection of such images of Scotland, but ultimately reproduces them at a more refined level.

Nairn notes that the SNP represents 'bourgeois nationalism', a political formation which socialists have seen as historically justified in only two situations--first, during the original bourgeois revolutions which completed the transition from feudalism to capitalism, and second as the means by which mainly non-European peoples have mobilised to liberate themselves from the imperialism of these original capitalist nation states. Scotland had long since accomplished the first and consequently has no requirement for the second.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Nairn argues that

there are two reasons why the national aspirations of the Scots must be supported. First, 'as a blow against the integrity of British imperialism' and secondly, 'because it represents some transfer of power to a smaller arena'.<sup>14</sup> The first is certainly a legitimate reason for not opposing Scottish separatism; the second is more problematic, suggesting that a government in Edinburgh might be politically, rather than merely geographically, closer to the people who elected it than one in London. However, instead of supporting the SNP, Nairn argues Scottish socialists must develop their own form of nationalism with which to oppose bourgeois nationalism: 'Is it really impossible that Scotland, which has dwelt so long and so hopelessly on the idea of a nation, should produce a liberated, and revolutionary nationalism worthy of the name and the times?'<sup>15</sup>

The events of May 1968 in France had an effect on Nairn. He wrote a collaborative contribution to the literature of May during a struggle in which he was personally involved: the occupation of Hornsey College of Art in London. In a revised version of 'The Three Dreams of Scottish Nationalism', included in the 1970 collection *Memoirs Of A Modern Scotland*, in which the counterposition of revolutionary socialism to Scottish nationalism is strengthened still further, Nairn notes that the 'tartan waistcoated bourgeoisie' had not remained unchallenged: 'I do not want to turn aside either from Scotland's native tradition of working class protest, John Maclean, Clydeside radicalism, or the communist tradition of the miners.' The problem was that these alternatives had never come close to dislodging their class enemies. Bourgeois nationalism, however, was a false solution to the problem, proposing as it did a false unity of interest between different classes. Nairn goes on to argue that the Scots have two choices, one of which leads into 'the prison of an archaic bourgeois nationality', and the other to a 'revolutionary' consummation which would destroy the prison and lead towards a 'real, meaningful future existence'. Nairn makes it clear that the latter possibility has been inspired by 1968:

*I for one am enough of a nationalist, and have enough faith in the students and young workers of Glasgow and Edinburgh, to believe that these forces are also present in them. I will not admit that the great dreams of May 1968 are foreign to us, that the great words on the Sorbonne walls would not be at home on the walls of Aberdeen or St Andrews, or that Linwood and Dundee could not be Flins and Nantes. Nor will I admit that, faced with a choice between the Mouvement du 22 mars and Mrs Ewing, we owe it to 'Scotland' to choose the latter.*

This counterposition of a specifically Scottish socialist alternative to the bourgeois nationalism of the SNP constituted Nairn's first concession to the latter. Why did 'the great dreams of May 1968' have to be considered in a purely Scottish context in the first place? Nevertheless, the overall tone of the piece is clearly aligned with the revolutionary movement of the time. This was not to last.

## European integration and British disintegration

In 1972, at a time when the class struggle in Britain was at the highest level since 1919, Nairn devoted an article, comprising the whole of *New Left Review* 75, to a critique of the dominant left positions on British entry to the Common Market, as the European Union was then known. His central argument was that although there had indeed been a major upturn in the industrial class struggle, it had failed to find new organisational forms. At the same time the Labour Party, the TUC, the Communist Party and the revolutionary left were all engaged in channelling the massive levels of worker discontent into the relatively safe question of opposition to British entry to the Common Market, tying the left to supporting British nationalism.<sup>16</sup>

Two aspects of this argument should be noted as foreshadowing his current position. The first is the assertion that when the British left counterpose socialist internationalism to the capitalist Common Market, they are 'really' using this as a cover for defending the integrity of the British imperialist state. The second is that Nairn now sees the only possibility of transforming the British state in any direction as coming from forces external to the state itself--in this case the supra-national institutions of Western European capital.

It was in this context that Nairn returned to the subject of Scottish nationalism, in the aftermath of the second important SNP by-election victory, at Govan during November 1973. The tone was now very different. The article in question, 'Scotland and Europe', which appeared in *New Left Review* early in 1974, is much more concerned with a historical analysis of Scottish distinctiveness than the nature of the SNP and, in this respect, it may be the best thing he has ever written. Nairn begins with the central problem: the absence of Scottish nationalism during the periods when other national movements dominated European politics. Why did it only take political form in the 1920s, at the very moment the modern European state system had taken shape? Only a detour through a general theory of nationalism gave Nairn the answer. He wrote that, 'Nationalism, unlike nationality or ethnic variety, cannot be considered a "natural" phenomenon.' Instead, it must be defined as 'mobilisation against the unpalatable truth of grossly uneven development'.<sup>17</sup> The modern capitalist world emerged from the combined pressures exerted by the British Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution. These forced all other states into copying their achievements in order to compete effectively with or be dominated by their more advanced rivals. But this could not be simply an acceptance of 'progress' as defined by the front runners, it also necessitated a rejection of progress in the terms on which they offered it. This process, which is more or less parallel with that of the bourgeois revolution, spread out from the unifications of Germany and Italy during the 1860s to contemporary national liberation movements in places as different as Ireland and Bangladesh.

Where did Scotland fit in to this dualist view of historical development? Uniquely, Nairn argued, through the Union of 1707, Scotland 'exploited' the achievements of the English bourgeois revolution, thus entering--indeed, helping to define--the advanced world of capitalism. Scottish capitalist development was fully attained before the age of nationalism began and so, although Scotland had all the ingredients necessary for a nationalist movement--a rising bourgeoisie, an intelligentsia, a popular tradition of hostility to England, a national church--no social class required such a movement.

The political implications of this analysis did not become clear until the following year, when an essay by Nairn called 'Old and New Scottish Nationalism' appeared in a collection called *The Red Paper On Scotland*, edited by the current Chancellor of the Exchequer in an earlier, more left wing incarnation. Nairn now argued that, like several other areas in Western Europe, Scotland was experiencing the rise of what he called neo-nationalism. In the Scottish case, the arrival of American based oil companies in the North Sea had provided a functional equivalent of the imperialist intrusions which had provoked 'modernising', 'developmental' nationalisms of which Scotland had previously no need. Here Nairn dismisses the earlier analysis of 'Three Dreams', which assumed that Scottish self-determination would come as a result of socialism, as based on 'two misjudgments': 'overestimate of socialist potential and underestimate of capitalism's ability to mutate further'. According to Nairn, 'the left had pinned too much faith on the rationality of working class based struggle (understood as a potentially international force), and far too little upon the non-rational strengths of nationalism.' In these circumstances socialists had little option but to accept the continued influence of nationalism: 'In my view it has become totally inadmissible to oppose such tendencies in the name of an abstract internationalism, a universal socialist or class struggle which exists only in aspiration'.<sup>18</sup>

These words were written in 1975, during which the revolutionary period which opened in 1968 was drawing to a close. Nairn seems to have seen Scottish nationalism as a substitute for the inability of the working class to destroy the British state: 'More than any other factor, more even than the miners' strikes of 1972 and 1974, it has exposed the senility of the old consensus and its two party system'.<sup>19</sup> These claims are quite astonishing. The British state has only been in actual crisis (as a result of its internal contradictions, rather than war) on three occasions this century: first between 1910 and 1914, then in 1919 and finally between 1969 and 1974. On each occasion Scottish nationalism trailed some way after the class and anti-imperialist struggles in Ireland in the list of factors causing this crisis.

In practice, Nairn treats the state in classically liberal fashion, as an autonomous body exercising a constricting power over society. His hatred of this state is undeniable, but it springs less from the fact that it exists to run society in the interest of the bourgeoisie, as from its inability to 'modernise'. From this

perspective events at the summit of politics which threaten the supposed sovereign power of the British state take on a special significance which workplace struggles do not immediately seem to possess.

In keeping with his instrumental view of nationalism, Nairn does not indulge in the glorification of Scottish history in the manner of more conventional Scottish nationalists. Indeed, if anything, he achieves the almost impossible task of both exaggerating the backwardness of pre-Union Scotland and the mindlessness of tartanry.<sup>20</sup> For this he was denounced by two self proclaimed nationalist 'philosophers', Craig Beveridge and Ronald Turnbull. These authors draw a distinction between those, like Nairn, whom they see as 'fighting for a socialist future' within which nationalism is simply a 'tactical possibility', and those, like themselves, who are fighting for 'a culture, a history, [and] a people as an integral part of a socialist *politique*'.<sup>21</sup> In the mid-1970s this distinction was certainly still relevant. Nairn maintained that Scottish nationalism should be supported because it offered the possibility of a alternative road to socialism to the hopelessly economic struggle waged by miners and the like. In 1977 he made explicit the perspective implied by privileging Scottish (and to a lesser extent, Welsh) nationalism over the class struggle:

*The fact is that neo-nationalism has become the gravedigger of the old state in Britain, and as such the principal factor making for a political revolution of some sort--in England as well as the small countries. Yet because this process assumes an unexpected form, many on the metropolitan left solemnly write it down as a betrayal of the revolution.*

*...The reason is that proletarian socialism is supposed to be the gravedigger, and no-one else will do. So they tell the nationalists to drop their shovels and put up with the pathetic limits of 'devolution': the revolution will solve their problems along with the others. Meanwhile they should wait until the time is ripe--ie the time for socialism--taking a firm grip on their petty bourgeois, backward looking impulses. The essential unity of the UK must be maintained till the working classes of all Britain are ready.<sup>22</sup>*

Nairn originally developed a general theory of nationalism in order to explain the particular Scottish variant. Now he moved back from the particular to the general, taking with him the pessimism about working class politics which characterised 'Old and New Scottish Nationalism'. In 'The Modern Janus', also written in 1975, he summarised his views as they had evolved over the previous seven years. First, it is important to note that Nairn does not pretend that all nationalisms--or indeed, any nationalisms--are wholly virtuous. While recognising that judgements have to be made about specific cases based on political criteria, Nairn maintained that this was not decisive. Ultimately, all nationalisms share the same contradictory nature:

*...nationalism can in this sense be pictured as like the old Roman god, Janus, who stood above gateways with one face looking forward and one*



*backwards. Thus does nationalism stand over the passage to modernity, for human society. As human kind is forced through its strait doorway, it must look desperately back into the past, to gather strength wherever it can be found for the ordeal of 'development'.*

Here is the familiar analysis of the spread of nationalism after 1789 as a necessary response on the part of modernising elites to the uneven development of capitalism. Now it is accompanied with a dismissal of the independent role of the oppressed: 'The new middle class intelligentsia of nationalism had to invite the masses into history; and the invitation had to be written in a language they understood.' Later in the same essay Nairn argues that nationalism is inescapable in the core and periphery of the system alike: 'There was never any chance of the new universal class which figured in the Marxist doctrine emerging as "proletarians" rather than as "Germans", "Cubans", "Irishmen" and so on.' This is because:

*Nationalism could only have worked, in this sense, because it actually did provide the masses with something real and important--something that class consciousness postulated in a narrowly intellectualist mode could never have furnished, a culture which however deplorable was larger, more accessible, and more relevant to mass realities than the rationalism of our Enlightenment inheritance. If this is so, then it cannot be true that nationalism is just false consciousness. It must have a functionality in modern development, perhaps one more important than that of class consciousness and formation within the individual nation states of this period.<sup>23</sup>*

Nairn attempted to put his theory into practice by joining the Scottish Labour Party, the organisation set up by Labour MPs Jim Sillars and Alex Neil in January 1976. In retrospect, the brief history of the SLP, whose membership never rose above 1,000, shows that there is little room in Scotland for a reformist party straddling the ground between the Labour Party and the SNP. For Nairn, the attempt by that organisation to combine socialism and nationalism in equal measures was its strength, as, 'We have to fight coherently on both fronts'.<sup>24</sup> But events in Scotland led Nairn to abandon the socialist front.

By 1978 the Labour government had been reduced to a minority in the House of Commons and was under extreme pressure both from socialists opposed to its attacks on trade unions and the welfare state, and a resurgent Conservative Party under Thatcher for not attacking trade unions and the welfare state hard enough. The minority Labour government was partly reliant on SNP votes at Westminster, and therefore needed simultaneously to undermine nationalist support while appearing to meet nationalist demands. The trick was to be performed by offering the Scots a largely powerless Assembly which, Labour ministers hoped, would nevertheless meet national aspirations sufficiently for Scottish independence to be seen off, at least for the duration of the immediate crisis. The scheme might have

worked, but it was sabotaged from inside the Labour Party itself. The Scotland Bill of July 1978 offered administrative devolution, providing the proposal was backed by a majority of the Scottish voters in a referendum. George Cunningham, a Scottish MP who sat for the London constituency of Islington, introduced an amendment to the Bill which required 40 percent of the Scottish electorate to support it in a referendum, rather than a simple majority of those voting. The subsequent campaign saw the Labour Party split down the middle, with one wing supporting the 'Labour Vote No' committee and the other the 'Labour Movement Yes' campaign.

Outside the Labour Party, the left in Scotland showed far greater unanimity in supporting devolution. The Communist Party of Great Britain had already adopted a policy of 'national self-determination' for Scotland in 1964. Among the orthodox Trotskyist organisations the International Marxist Group and supporters of *Militant* supported devolution. Only the SWP stood aside from this unusual display of left unanimity, standing on what might be called a position of 'malign abstentionism'.<sup>25</sup> However, the point is not that the SWP took a wrong position on the issue--the lesson was subsequently learned--but that, contrary to what Nairn has subsequently claimed, the majority of the left supported devolution.

In the end only 32.9 percent of the electorate voted 'Yes'. Indeed, only 63.8 percent turned out to vote at all. It is possible that the concerns of most Scots, certainly most Scottish workers, were elsewhere. The campaign had been conducted in the aftermath of the last great general wave of industrial struggle in Britain to date, the so-called Winter of Discontent, when the pressure from below against wage restraint finally forced the union leaderships to call action against the Labour government. Unlike the strikes between 1969 and 1975, however, these strikes were not imbued with feelings of optimism and hope but pessimism and despair. The election of a Tory government was felt by many to be inevitable months before the poll was announced. In the event, the SNP reaction to the inevitable repeal of the Scotland Act was to bring a motion of censure, supported by the Tories, which saw the government defeated, a general election called, and the election of the first Thatcher government.

As Andrew Marr has written, 'Part of the bitterness and disillusion with which the Scottish political and journalistic world greeted the result [of the referendum]...reflected the amazement of Scotland's suburban leftish-leaning establishment that their views were not shared more widely throughout the country'.<sup>26</sup> At the time Nairn reflected these feelings of 'bitterness' and 'disillusion', but did not, however, blame the Scottish people for their lack of enthusiasm for devolution. For Nairn the blame lay elsewhere, with the left.

In a new endnote to an essay called 'Internationalism: a Critique', written after the 1979 referendum, Nairn writes of the fiasco: 'In very adverse circumstances, a small majority had actually voted in favour of the Labour government's devolution

Act; and yet had been frustrated by a mixture of old imperialism and the "internationalism" analysed here'.<sup>27</sup> There is something in this. 'Old imperialism' is straightforward enough. Labour right wingers like George Cunningham and Tam Dayell were then, and are now, committed to defending the integrity of the British imperialist state against any form of constitutional reform, no matter how superficial, on the grounds that it will inevitably lead to separatism. What about 'internationalism'? The same case was essentially made by the Labour left, although with different emphases. As Eric Heffer wrote in his memoirs, 'I feared that devolution for Scotland and Wales would weaken Britain as a united economic unit and be detrimental to socialism as a whole'.<sup>28</sup> Nairn's error is to assume that every objection to Scottish nationalism must universally be based on 'Unionist' support for the British state.

Reviewing the arguments of *The Break-Up Of Britain* in October 1981 Nairn wrote of his attempt to steer a course between two 'primitive but vigorous opponents' both advancing equal and opposite errors: 'On one side a bourgeois nationalism denied region and class altogether; on the other a lumpen socialism denied nationality any progressive significance whatever (unless its frontier ran through the middle of the English Channel).' He nevertheless refuses to see that any of the critics who were alarmed at 'the spectacle of a Marxist sympathising with the notoriously bourgeois nationalism of the SNP' might have had a point, dismissing their objections as 'bilge, the product of reheated stereotypes and the sermonising impulse so important to a frustrated left.' For Nairn the 'majority' who did not awaken to national consciousness, which presumably includes most of the working class, were afflicted by 'a peculiarly Scottish torpor' comprised of 'respectable servility' and a 'Jekyllish conformism and a fear of reversion to being "natives"'.<sup>29</sup>

Nairn allowed that, just possibly, a combination of the revived Labour left, then mobilised around the Alternative Economic Strategy, and the more left wing nationalism he saw developing in Scotland, might point towards a socialist solution to the crisis of the British state.<sup>30</sup> Such hopes were quickly dashed. The Bennite left had already peaked by the time these cautious hopes were expressed in late 1981 and the left within the SNP, in the shape of the '79 Group, was expelled during the same year. Scottish nationalism, far from recovering from the disaster of 1979, retained a low level of support until the third Conservative electoral victory in 1987 brought a new dimension of support which extended far beyond the ranks of the SNP. Long before then, however, Nairn's fundamental pessimism reasserted itself. A dispute within the editorial board of *New Left Review* in 1982 resulted in a split, caused partly by personality differences, but also by the question of whether the decline of Stalinism, both as state power in the East and working class organisation in the West, could herald the revival of a genuine revolutionary movement. Anderson and the editor, Robin Blackburn, were at this stage still committed--albeit somewhat abstractly--to a perspective which saw such a development as being possible; Nairn sided with the faction which held that it was not, and after they lost the fight, he resigned in solidarity with them.<sup>31</sup>

The remainder of the decade was largely taken up with writing his book on the British monarchy, *The Enchanted Glass* (1988), whose central thesis concerning the ideological dominance of the Windsors has been so comprehensively refuted by events that further comment is unnecessary. It was at this point, however, that Nairn resumed his engagement with nationalism proper. The majority of the essays contained in *Faces Of Nationalism* were written after the Eastern European revolutions of 1989 and they cast their shadow over its contents. Here Nairn raises to new extremes all the positions which he had previously held in earlier writings. Three themes have now emerged full blown which until now had only been hinted at; the identification of Marxism with Stalinism, the introduction of 'human nature' as an explanatory framework for the existence of nationalism and the consequent rejection of internationalism even as a theoretical possibility.

### **Uncovering secret Stalinists**

The extent to which even nominally anti-Stalinist socialists like Nairn tended to identify the Stalinist states with socialism was only fully revealed after their collapse, when he performed the familiar exercise of rejecting Marxism along with the states which described themselves as Marxist.

This then allows him to equate fascism and 'communism': 'Attempts to realise these prophecies--and the struggle between them--have accounted for much of the past century. Fortunately they ran out of steam before annihilating the species. But does even the most fervent optimist think this could not have happened?'

Nairn pursues his attack on Marxism into the work of his one time inspiration, Antonio Gramsci. According to Nairn, Gramsci is not the advocate of civil society for which he is taken. On the contrary, Gramsci is alleged to have seen his purpose as being to destroy civil society:

*The circumstances of censored notebook composition compelled a detour through...pluralism, and the avoidance of an overtly anti-statist and anti-national rhetoric. But the point of it was to lay the foundations of the standard internationalist state of Third International times: **il moderno principe** or radically Leninist polity within which society would be reconfigured to suit the vision of a commanding elite.*

Nairn does note, in passing, that Gramsci was in fact opposed to the direction which Stalin took the USSR and the Communist International during the 1920s and 1930s, and that this was one of the reasons why socialists in the 1960s were attracted to his work. Nairn now reveals that they were mistaken: 'Behind any disenchantment with "crude" Russian hegemony lay a more powerful will towards, in Harding's words, "a transcendent tactic and sublime goal" in the sky of the new proletarian enlightenment'.<sup>32</sup> Gramsci is therefore said to have harboured a monolithic 'statist' agenda behind the superficially open concepts employed in his

prison notebooks--a position which echoes the earliest Cold War assessments of his work by American academics.<sup>33</sup>

### **Humans need nations**

It seems likely that the events of 1989-1991 simply gave Nairn an occasion, rather than a reason, for publicly abandoning Marxism and its associated political commitments. Accordingly, he no longer argues for nationalism as an alternative road to socialism. He now argues that it is the fate of humanity because it corresponds to the requirements of human nature. This is extreme, even by Nairn's previous standards. He rightly dismisses the notion, associated with currently fashionable cant about globalisation, that the nation-state has run its course. However, his alternative is based on the opposite and equally damaging error. Discussing the new wave of nationalisms which have arisen since 1989, he writes, 'If...people have not been able to help being like that (inventors of cultural contrasts, antagonistically differentiated, etc) then what is to prevent blood and accursed "human nature" coming into their own once again?' If true, these remarks would be the occasion for despair. But Nairn is neither despairing nor depressed, for such responses would be the result of misunderstandings. Nationalism, in this account, has been the downfall of empire, from the Dutch revolt against Spanish absolutism in the 16th century to the Eastern European revolt against Russian totalitarianism in the 20th. For this reason, it has to be welcomed, despite its continual splitting up of existing states: 'If the role of primordial human nature was greater than [Gellner's theory of modernisation] allows, however, then may it not be that what saved us [ie from Stalinism-ND] may also be condemning us to an indefinite futurity of differentiation?'<sup>34</sup>

Although he circles evasively around the issue, distancing himself from the 'dreadful simplicities of racism and ethnic nationalism', Nairn ultimately opts precisely for this oldest of reactionary creeds: 'Any new paradigm depends, in other words, on establishing a more plausible link between biology and kinship on the one hand, and the world of politics, nation states and resurgent nationality on the other'.<sup>35</sup> To this end, he expects the Human Genome Project, and other research into the 'life sciences' more generally, eventually to prove the link between biology and nationhood. The same point was made more simply in an article from 1992 not reproduced in this collection:

*...if diversity was never merely a 'given', in the meaningless accident sense, a different light must be thrown upon its persistence. If internal species-diversity through cultural means has always been 'human nature', presumably it will go on being so--in a way that has nothing to do with ideology of blood or race.*<sup>36</sup>

It should be noted that Nairn does not attempt to excuse what he calls 'blots, excrescences or failures' in the record of nationalism since 1989. He merely

considers that 'the bombardment of Dubrovnick or the political rape of Muslim women' are a price worth paying for the downfall of the USSR and the other oppressor states of the Stalinist bloc: 'Insistence that the small battalions are likely to be "on the whole" better than the large--particularly the multi-ethnic large--does not imply there can be no pathology of the ethnic, or no cases where nationalists are wrong'.<sup>37</sup>

In fact, Nairn does attempt to explain the genocidal aspects of nationalism. The problem, he claims, is not nationalism as such, but *ethnic* nationalism, particularly where it used to mobilise a peasant population whose way of life is under threat from 'modernisation'. On this basis, Nairn not only seeks to explain the Cambodian and Rwandan massacres, but the lack of violence in the history of Scottish and Welsh nationalism compared to that of rural Ireland.<sup>38</sup> In a more recent article in *New Left Review* he extends this analysis to include the rise of Nazi Germany, identifying the centrality of rural Bavaria and its capital, Munich, in inculcating Fascism. Indeed, in combination with a range of other factors Nairn treats the persistence of peasant life and its forced entry into modernity as the prime cause of what he calls 'nationalist disasters'. Munich was 'a town of peasant culture', Cambodia and Rwanda were 'virtually 100 percent peasant', Bosnia and Serbia were 'less touched by the process of halting industrialisation than many outside observers realised', and so on.<sup>39</sup>

In reality, these cases have little in common. The genocide in Rwanda took the form of an inter-peasant conflict about access to land, and was neither a rural revolt against the towns nor a national struggle in any recognisable sense. Cambodian Stalinism certainly embodied a ferocious anti-urban bias, but the victims of Khmer nationalism were not, in the main, killed because of their ethnicity, but because of their supposed opposition to the New Order: most of the bones now preserved in Tual Sleng extermination centre are of 'ethnic' Khmers. Indeed, the second greatest example of systematic internal violence in the 20th century (after Nazi Germany), Stalinist Russia between 1929 and 1956, can scarcely be said to have rested on peasant support, since at one level the industrialisation of the Soviet Union can be seen as a civil war waged by the bureaucracy *against* the peasantry. The reason why Irish nationalism has repeatedly been forced to resort to violence is not the consequence of peasant trauma at modernisation (in 1798!) but a response to the institutionalised violence of the British state and its Orange offshoot--and this is a violence which the Scots certainly have been responsible for exercising.

In short, the entire argument is an exercise in apologetics: tragically, these pre-modern peasants are susceptible to ethnic mobilisation which can lead to genocide; happily, we modern urbanites have attained a level of civic nationalism which allows us to engage in democratic state-building without relapses into tribal barbarism. But the distinction between 'civic' and 'ethnic' nationalism is extremely dubious. 'Ethnicity' is as much an invented condition as 'race' (or indeed, 'nation'); political conflicts *create* ethnic divisions, not the other way around, and there

is *no* nationalism which could not begin to adopt 'ethnic' distinctions in situations of social crisis. Given the way in which Scotland (and the Scottish national consciousness) has been implicated in the atrocities of the British Empire and the racism which accompanied them, can Nairn be so sure that these elements would not rise to the surface of Scottish Nationalism if economic conditions were bad enough? The legacy of Britishness is not escaped so easily.

This is why the question of German fascism is important to Nairn's argument: Nazi Germany, for Marxists, is an example of a modern, developed capitalist power succumbing to extreme right wing nationalism in its fascist form. If it can be shown to be the product of peasant backwardness, rather than modern capitalist society, however, then nationalism emerges without responsibility for the Second World War and the Holocaust. Now, as Zygmunt Bauman has pointed out, the anti-Semitism which formed the core of Nazi ideology was, as Nairn suggests, a form of resistance to modernity.<sup>40</sup> But this only explains the origins of anti-Semitic ideology, not how significant sections of the German nation, including its most 'modern' sections, could succumb to it. As Geoff Eley has written, against earlier attempts to blame Nazism on supposed German backwardness, the answer lies 'in the immediate circumstances in which the Nazis came to power--namely, the successive conjunctures of the First World War, the post-war crisis of the 1917-23, and the world economic crisis after 1929'.<sup>41</sup> Twenty years before the Nazis came to power, Germany as a whole had long since left 'rural backwardness' behind:

*In 1913, Germany was producing two-thirds of all European steel...double the British figure and not far short of the American one. She produced almost as much coal as Great Britain, and took many European markets from her.*

More importantly, the class structure changed as a result. In 1880 German society was one in which the majority of the population worked on the land and industry was confined to small workshops:

*In 1914, not much more than one third worked in agriculture (thirty five percent), almost two fifths in industry. But within industry there was a great change over from small firms employing a handful of workmen to middle sized and, most spectacularly of all, very large concentrated firms whose huge ugly factories dominated the Ruhr, Silesia, Saxony.*<sup>42</sup>

In short, Germany was not a society in transition to modernity but one which had arrived. Bauman's comments on the Holocaust are also appropriate to describe the frenzy of German nationalism which accompanied it: 'The Holocaust was born and executed in a modern rational society, at the high stage of our civilisation and at the peak of human cultural achievement, and for that reason it is a problem of that society, civilisation and culture.'<sup>43</sup>

Nairn seems to believe that, against the 'big battalions', small is always beautiful. 'Regrettably', he writes of Italian and German unification in the 19th century, 'both these great and exemplary unification projects ended in fascism'.<sup>44</sup> The corollary of this is his enthusiasm for 'micro-states', a category in which he numbers Andorra, Gibraltar, Hong Kong, Jersey, Liechtenstein, Malta, Monaco and San Marino.<sup>45</sup> Ulster, it is hinted, may also belong in this company. Is this the future of the international state system? There are at least three reasons why this is extremely unlikely.

First, the list itself is extremely heterogeneous. Hong Kong was the creation of British imperialism (as are those other non-European 'micro-states' which Nairn unaccountably omits--Kuwait and the other Gulf dictatorships); Singapore developed out of the retreat from empire; both economies are primarily geared to the export market which developed out of the post-war boom. The European examples are remnants of the tiny pre-capitalist principalities which once covered Europe, and which have established themselves as off-shore tax havens. The circumstances in which these quite different states came into being are unlikely to be repeated.

Secondly, these are not nations. The discussion of 'micro-states' is the one point in the book where Nairn blurs the difference between states and nations--with good reason, for the notion of a Monacoan nationalism is implausible to say the least. But so too, more importantly, is a Hong Kong nationalism. All of the forces which opposed the Chinese takeover, bourgeois and proletarian, did so on class, not nationalist grounds. The national identities which have developed in 'micro-states' tend to be those of the dominant power which guarantees their existence. In Ulster and Gibraltar (and the Falkland Islands) it is British nationalism which holds sway, not that of the territory itself.

Thirdly, there is no reason to suppose that the future direction of nationalism will only involve the disintegration of existing nation states. It is at least as likely that nationalism will find expression in policies of aggressive integration. In this respect the failed Iraqi attempt to absorb Kuwait and the successful Chinese attempt to absorb Hong Kong reveal the shape of things to come as much or more than the splitting of Czechoslovakia into its component parts.

What this section of the book does reveal, however, is another element which Nairn expects to form an eternal aspect of human existence. At one point he draws a revealing comparison between nationalism and the state, both of which are 'very unlikely to wither away'.<sup>46</sup> His acceptance of the continued existence of the state is of course a necessary concomitant to his argument concerning the inescapability of nationalism but Nairn's eternal state is a capitalist state. Nairn lets this slip during a discussion of the components of the Eastern European revolutions:

*There was a popular, democratic rebellion against one party autocracy and state terror. There was an economic revulsion against the anti-capitalist*



*command economies which for forty years had imposed forced-march development on the East. And thirdly there was the national mould into which these revolts were somehow inevitably flowing--the new salience of the ethnic, or (as in Bosnia) of the ethnic-religious in post-communist society.*<sup>47</sup>

Bourgeois democracies, capitalist economies, nation states--these are the components of our future, according to Nairn. He implies that anyone who objects to the disastrous imposition of multinational capitalism in Russia since 1991 is seeking a return to the genocidal certainties of the Cold War, as if these were the only alternatives facing humanity. In fact, the revolt against the market has already begun in Russia with a 'new development' in the class struggle: 'co-ordination of strike activity across international borders'. The Russian miners, for example, delayed taking strike action in 1996 until it could be co-ordinated with action by miners in the Ukraine.<sup>48</sup>

### **The impossibility of internationalism?**

For Nairn, nationalism is so rooted in our nature that attempts to displace it in the name of international working class solidarity are misguided. Thus, 'An authentic Internationale can only be based upon the liberation of human nature: which means (in the first instance) nationalities, the precondition for democracy and individual emancipation...'<sup>49</sup> As with his definition of the state, Nairn's own definition of internationalism is classically liberal: 'Internationalism, understood as a systematic outward-looking and inquiring attitude, an imaginative search into the meaning of other experiences, is the most valuable way of counteracting the disadvantages of this truth [that most people live in 'backyards']'.<sup>50</sup> Now, even if I accepted the notion that discrete national cultures exist (which I do not), the outcome desired by Nairn would still be serial nationalism, rather than internationalism. This conclusion in fact predates Nairn's final break with Marxism, and is argued most clearly in 'Internationalism: A Critique'.

He begins by distinguishing between 'internationality' and 'internationalism'. Internationality is the objective result of a capitalist world market in which the same social classes increasingly wear the same clothes, watch the same television programmes and consume the same food and drink, no matter where they are geographically situated. Economic and cultural integration has not, however, led to an identification of political interests between these people, even those which belong to the same social classes. Instead, they have tended to identify with their particular nation, which ultimately involves supporting the state which rules over it. With this much we can agree. The conclusion which Nairn draws, however, is that internationalism is therefore an ideology which, in both Marxist and liberal variants, sets out an essentially moral agenda for overcoming the dominance of nationalism: 'Internationalism poses a moral alternative to the way in which the

world has actually gone since the Franco-Prussian War, the end of the First International and, more emphatically, since 1914'.<sup>51</sup>

The reference to 1914 is significant. The collapse of the Second International was a defining moment for Nairn, but not because it demonstrated the betrayal of the international working class movement: 'There was neither betrayal nor regression in this sense'.<sup>52</sup> On the contrary, Nairn argues the socialist parties simply recognised the reality of working class nationalism. Working classes are, at the moment of their initial formation, spontaneously internationalist and anti-capitalist; but this lasts only as long as it takes for them to become integrated into the system, with their own trade unions, co-operatives and political parties--a stage which had been realised in Europe long before 1914.<sup>53</sup> Unable to accept the reality of the situation, however, Marxists retreated into an essentially religious adherence to the internationalist faith, which prevents them responding to the actual--and invariably national--crisis situations which do arise.

Ultimately, conforming to the doctrine of internationalism led socialists into one of two dead ends, whether they were Stalinists or anti-Stalinists: 'The former usurped internationalism into the service of the Soviet Great Russian state, ultimately in still more theocratic terms; the latter responded to this and the other betrayals of the revolution either with distance and pessimism (like some Western Marxists) or with even greater idealisation of the international ideal.' Internationalism for Nairn has therefore essentially been maintained by socialist intellectuals as compensation for the defeats which have dogged the movement since 1917: 'As all-the-samism it is a standing invitation to the notion that "I" (the subject of international revolution, not the unshaven native of Aberdeen or Neusiedle-an-See) am better engaged supporting the revolution where it happens to be at, rather than where I (unshaven native) happen to be located'.<sup>54</sup> But even this is no solution, for these distant revolutions have tended to be driven precisely by the nationalism which the subjects of international revolution oppose: 'To put it crudely--what orthodoxy required was a plausible way of supporting and not supporting national movements at the same time.' Lenin provided the theoretical solution to this conundrum: 'Hence the general principle that all nationalist struggles and movements are bad; however, special and pragmatically identifiable circumstances may make them good--though only for a time, and in a highly qualified fashion.' Thus socialists are free to support national movements until they come to power, then denounce them for refusing to conform to the internationalist ideal: 'Each new tragedy of Balkanisation serves to underlie the ever fresh principle that only the international class struggle can prevent this kind of thing--if only the revisionist and narrow nationalists can be stopped, next time.' The alternative to this, Nairn argues, would be the psychologically impossible one of admitting the inevitability of nationalism.

Marxists are therefore taxed with refusing to recognise the power of nationalism, with adhering to an illusionary theory of internationalism, and hypocritically supporting national movements (as 'exceptions') in the inevitable absence of that

internationalism. There is, however, one final indictment to be added to the charge sheet. As Alex Callinicos has written, 'It has become part of the common sense beliefs of large sectors of the Western intelligentsia that every universalism is a masked particularism'.<sup>55</sup> For Nairn, the universalism of internationalism disguises a particularism of big battalion nationalism, such as that displayed by socialists who opposed Scottish self-determination in favour of the British state, or, for that matter, those who opposed self-determination for Azerbaijan in favour of the old USSR.

## **Part 2: The reality of nationalism--capitalism and reformism**

I have given Nairn the benefit of an extended presentation of his position, delivered as far as possible in his own words. I now want to examine the relationship of nationalism respectively to modernity, capitalism, reformism and internationalism, before returning to engage with Nairn's current position on Scotland.

*i) Nationalism as an aspect of modernity.* According to Anthony Smith, there are three basic positions on the place of nations and nationalism in historical development. The first, appropriately enough, is primordialism: 'proponents of this view claim that nations and ethnic communities are the natural units of history and integral elements of human experience...[the] basic organising principles and bonds of human association throughout history.' The second is perennialism, whose advocates argue that 'units and sentiments found in the modern world are simply larger and more effective units and sentiments traceable in much earlier periods of human history'. The third and final position is modernism, where:

*...the nation is a purely modern phenomenon, a product of strictly modern developments like capitalism, bureaucracy and secular utilitarianism... Nations and nationalism, the argument continues, can be dated with some precision to the latter half of the 18th century...anything which appears to resemble it, either in antiquity or the Middle Ages must be understood as purely fortuitous or exceptional.*<sup>56</sup>

The modernist position (once held by Nairn) refuses all attempts to claim that nationalism is an inescapable part of the human condition. As the late Ernest Gellner wrote, the primordialist theory is the most commonly invoked of the three, but 'in one sense it is barely a theory, because it treats the principle as something inherent in human nature, or the very principles of social organisation, so obvious as not really to require explanation.' If anyone points out that for the most of human existence this aspect of our nature has been absent, nationalists have an answer:

*Nationalists are in fact aware of the evidence which makes some of us contest the universality of nationalist sentiments: they do know, often with*

*anger, that in many societies and many historical periods, nationalism is conspicuous by its absence. They know it, with great bitterness, especially when it relates to the recent past of their own nation. But they explain it in their own way, and their explanation is contained in what is probably the most commonly used word in the nationalist vocabulary: awakening.*<sup>57</sup>

Nairn is aware of Gellner's critique,<sup>58</sup> yet the notion of 'awakening' is the basis of his explanation for the revival of Scottish nationalism and indeed of all other nationalisms. The reader may have already noted his use of the term in passing-- 'As far as the "bourgeois" aspects of the 1970s national movement are concerned, I remain convinced that in our specific conditions only the middle strata could have brought about such an awakening'--but now we learn that 'the Treaty of Union came just in time to bury a nascent Scottish nationalism, but could only put it into a shallow grave.' And from this grave, 'The corpse may simply step out from temporary interment to claim his rights'.<sup>59</sup> In a sense this goes one better than Gellner: not only an awakening but a veritable second coming. We will examine the Lazarus of European nationalisms at the conclusion of this article. For the moment, however, let us stick with the question of modernity.

Those who accept that nationalism is a modern phenomenon tend to uphold one of two main theoretical approaches. On the one hand, followers of the German sociologist Max Weber argue that nations are a product of the process which they call modernisation, particularly during the phase involving industrialisation. On the other, Marxists argue that these terms ignore the fact that 'modernising' societies have been subject to a much more specific process: domination by the capitalist mode of production. It was the first of these approaches, embodied in the work of Ernest Gellner, which influenced Nairn in his original reflections on the national question, but Nairn avoided the issue by treating modernity and capitalism as equivalent.<sup>60</sup>

Since Nairn now treats nationalism as a permanent aspect of the human condition, he has consequently dissociated it from both modernisation and the capitalist mode of production (although, as we have seen, he is happy to use the notion of a transition from 'traditional' to 'modern' societies as an explanation for nationalisms of which he disapproves).

*ii) Nationalism and capitalism.* Once a nation state has been established, those who control the state apparatus always seek to consolidate the hold of 'national consciousness' among the people who inhabit the state territory. As Nigel Harris puts it, 'Once the boundary is beaten back and troops posted around the perimeter, the state undertakes to colonise all within, to drill all the inhabitants who find themselves trapped behind the fence with an invented common inheritance of loyalty, supposedly to a common culture or way of life, but in practice to a particular state.'<sup>61</sup> This certainly happens, although Nairn is largely silent on the issue, but the suggestion that nationalism exists purely as the result of

indoctrination is hardly the whole explanation. Why do workers support nationalist movements before states are established? Why do they accept it afterwards? One reason is clearly that bourgeois ideology is at its most convincing when it appears to confirm the inevitability of the world as it is organised under capitalism, which is one consisting of actual or potential nation states. There is, however, another reason. Nairn is correct to suggest that nationalism provides a framework of identity, a sense of 'belonging'; the question is whether it is the only form of consciousness which can play this role.

Benedict Anderson once suggested that the origins of national consciousness lay in the collapse of 'three fundamental cultural conceptions' during the rise of capitalism: the identification of 'a particular script-language' (such as Latin in Christendom) with access to religious truth; the belief that society was organised in a natural hierarchy, at the summit of which were 'monarchs who were persons apart from other human beings'; and a view of the indistinguishability of cosmology and history which rendered 'the origins of the world and of men essentially identical'. The interconnected decline of these three meant that human beings required 'a new way of linking fraternity, power and time meaningfully together'.<sup>62</sup> As Chris Harman has noted, this argument makes the connection of nationalism with capitalist development contingent rather than necessary, with the latter simply allowing expression to an 'existential yearning', providing an outlet for 'the satisfaction of innate psychological needs'.<sup>63</sup> It is, however, possible to reformulate the position held by Anderson in a way which relies not on a conception of the eternal human condition--which would be to surrender to the position held by Nairn--but on the human needs which are created by capitalism.<sup>64</sup>

As George Kerevan once wrote, ironically in Nairn's journal, *The Bulletin Of Scottish Politics*:

*If civil society separates itself from people's social-political designation (as opposed to their party-political designation); if individuals only face one another in the market connected in only one all-embracing unit of civil society--the nation... A mass social allegiance is born; an allegiance to something beyond the class antagonisms of civil society, beyond language, beyond ethnicity, beyond geography: nationalism. For the feudal peasant, whose unfreedom is not masked by the market, no such allegiance is possible.*

For workers under capitalism, however, such an allegiance is not only possible, it is--from the point of view of the capitalist class in individual nations--absolutely necessary; for without it, the danger is always that workers will identify not with the nation in which they happen to be situated, but with the class to which they are condemned to belong, regardless of the accident of geographical location. Consequently, as Kerevan points out, workers are confronted by 'two materially conditioned allegiances'. On the one hand, '*Nationalism*, reflecting the social

position of the individual caught in the allegiances imposed by civil society and its exterior state.' On the other, '*Proletarian internationalism*, reflecting the class position of the worker and the kernel of the socialist mode of production developing within capitalism.' The two are quite different in nature: 'The former is materially determined by the external appearance of bourgeois society, the latter by its essence'.<sup>65</sup>

*iii) Nationalism and reformism.* Nationalism should not therefore be seen as something which only 'happens' during separatist movements on the one hand, or during fascist and imperialist manifestations on the other. The capitalist system generates nationalism as a necessary, everyday condition of its existence. Consequently, it forms part of the reformist consciousness among the working class. Reformism, long before it becomes embodied in organisation, is produced by the tension between accepting the system as a unchanging feature of human life, and rejecting the way in which specific aspects of it actually impact on our lives. The task for revolutionaries is, as it were, to expand this 'rejectionist' side of reformist consciousness until it becomes total, proving through a combination of argument and activity that, for example, the inadequacy of our schools is neither accidental nor incidental, but a direct effect of how the system operates.

The difficulty is that reformist political organisations are constantly pulling in the opposite direction, reinforcing nationalism at the same time as they encourage workers to accept the system. This is for two reasons. The first is the well known tendency of reformist parties to appeal to the lowest levels of working class consciousness, rather than attempt to raise them; to pander to the worst forms of working class prejudice rather than attempt to challenge it. The second is that these reformists hope to take over national government office themselves--despite all the talk of globalisation, the assumption is still that the national state is the arena in which 'politics' is conducted. Nairn therefore completely underestimates (or rather, wilfully disregards) the extent to which the reformist and Stalinist left have been responsible for the continued dominance of nationalist consciousness among the working class under capitalism.<sup>66</sup> Rather than having no alternative but to reflect an overwhelming nationalist feeling among the working class, they consciously attempt to foster these feelings.<sup>67</sup> Within the trade unions this can occur in two ways, both of which can be illustrated from the experience of the labour movement in Scotland.

The first is the argument that particular industries or workplaces belong to 'the nation', rather than to capitalist firms or (more rarely these days) the capitalist state. The disastrous effects of this ideology became apparent during the Miners' Strike of 1984-1985.<sup>68</sup> One of the key objectives of the NUM was to stop steel production nationally. Unfortunately the leadership relied on their fellow officials in the steel unions delivering this rather than picketing out the steel workers. The latter had been badly defeated in the steel strike of 1980 and more than half the workforce

had been lost in the ensuing three years. The leadership of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation opposed shutting down steel production.

It was at this point that the Scottish nationalist argument kicked in. In Scotland, the NUM Area officials signed an agreement allowing enough coal to enter the strip mill at Ravenscraig in Motherwell to keep the furnaces operating. The reason given by Area President Mick McGahey was that the deal was 'in the interests of Scotland's industrial future'. In fact, not only did the amount of coal entering Ravenscraig not drop from its normal levels to that required on a care-and-maintenance basis, it increased. Picketing by the miners and their supporters was unable to close the plant in the absence of practical solidarity from other unions or the STUC. And so the 'Scottish national interest' helped play its part in the defeat of the NUM, the destruction of the British mining industry and the perpetuation of Tory rule for another 12 years.

Pursuit of the national interest also left a legacy of division within the Scottish working class which should not be underestimated. Joe Owens, a miner who worked at Polkemmet Colliery in East Lothian before the strike, gave vent to his feelings in an interview several years later:

*And when the miners asked the men at Ravenscraig not to accept imported coal, they just put two fingers up at them, which was another contributing factor to the closure of Polkemmet. Since that event, of course, Ravenscraig has been closed and they're looking for everybody's sympathy after turning down the miners' appeals. I've no sympathy for them, same as I've none for the Nottinghamshire miners [ie who formed the scab Union of Democratic Mineworkers during the strike]. I'm actually praying for pits to close in Nottingham so that I can laugh at them.<sup>69</sup>*

The second way in which nationalism is fostered by the reformist bureaucracy is in the advocacy of all-class, pan-Scottish alliance as the way to defend jobs. Despite the comments quoted above, delegates at the Scottish NUM conference in June 1990 voted to support the campaign to save Ravenscraig from closure, and union convener Tommy Brennan was even invited to speak at the annual Miners' Gala in Edinburgh. But this was simply the latest in a series of campaigns which had followed the same disastrous course over every threatened closure since the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders' work-in of 1971. The composition of these coalitions, invariably led by the Scottish TUC, was summarised by one friendly critic as consisting of 'trade unionists, clergymen, artists, politicians of various hue [ie they included Tories], thinkers, councillors, professionals, and the rest'.<sup>70</sup> They inevitably refused to consider industrial action and focused instead on 'mobilising Scottish public opinion' on the one hand (unnecessarily, since in most cases it was already in sympathy with the threatened workers) and attempting to 'persuade' the government to intervene (pointlessly, since it was usually in complete agreement with the employers). Of these campaigns, only the first at Upper Clyde

Shipbuilders achieved any kind of success, and that because it was accompanied by a militant occupation which took place in the context of the great upturn in British working class struggle of the early 1970s. The others--Singer at Clydebank, the Carron Iron Works, British Leyland at Bathgate, the Corpach paper mill, the Invergordon smelter, Linwood, Caterpillar, Ravenscraig--took place in a period of defeat and contributed to extending it by their failure. As Keith Aitken writes:

*Retrospection yields the dispiriting, and somehow surprising, realisation that almost none of the eighties issue coalitions achieved their primary objectives. They did not save Caterpillar or Ravenscraig. They did not change government policy on health, devolution or the economy.*<sup>71</sup>

It was not until the Timex workers in Dundee fought back in 1993 that this strategy was effectively challenged, and not until the victory of the Glacier RPB workers in Glasgow during 1996 that the cycle of disaster was broken, although there is no sign that the STUC have learned any lessons from the experience. And there can be little doubt that in an independent Scotland there will be increased reformist pressure on workers, both to identify with 'their' capitalism against that of other rival nations, and to unite with other social classes in Scotland to 'solve' the local manifestations of the global crisis. The point is that what Nairn identifies as the dominance of nationalism within the working class is to a large extent the dominance of reformism, of which nationalism is a necessary component. But if nationalism in this sense is part of reformist consciousness then it can be challenged in exactly the same way as reformism can in every other sphere of life. Indeed, one might say that workers remain attached to nationalist loyalties to the extent that they remain subject to reformist consciousness.

*iv) Nationalism and internationalism.* Internationalism is as much a component of revolutionary consciousness and politics as nationalism is of reformist consciousness and politics. It has two aspects. On the one hand, it involves workers in one nation giving solidarity to workers in other nations, even at a cost to themselves: for example, the support given to the Liverpool dockers from as far afield as the United States and Australia. Here the issue is the unity of working class interests against employers or the state, regardless of national boundaries. On the other hand, internationalism also involves workers in one nation giving solidarity to the national aspirations of the people of another nation, who will--by definition--include non-workers and are usually led by quite alien class forces: for example, the opposition mounted in both Britain and the US to the bombing of Iraq.

A small but illuminating example of both aspects--solidarity with both a working class and a nation--was once given, appropriately enough, in Nairn's native region of Fife. In 1974, a year after the military coup in Chile, the Chilean submarine *O'Brien* docked in Greenock in order that tailshafts could be repaired, protected and then sent back to South America as spares. When the tailshafts



arrived at the Royal Navy dockyard at Rosyth the TGWU shop stewards in the stores organisation refused to release them and wrote to the Ministry of Defence informing it 'that no future Chilean Navy work will be done in Rosyth dockyard until the fascist *junta* is removed and a freely, democratically elected government put in power and human rights restored in Chile'. The blacking went on for four years until the MOD eventually agreed that no work would be carried out or supplies provided to the *junta* by that dockyard. Rosyth was not traditionally a militant workplace; it had participated in the 'Hands Off Russia' agitation in 1919, but in that case the driving force had been a group of Portsmouth engineers temporarily based in Fife. In 1974 the catalyst for action was a group of left wing stewards who were active locally in the Labour Party, demonstrating that where internationalist arguments are consistently put, they can influence the actions of workers.<sup>72</sup>

Internationalism is not simply a moral imperative which workers can respond to or not, according to inclination, but a practical necessity given the nature of the capitalist order. The Fife shipyard workers referred to above may not have been immediately threatened by a military dictatorship, but they understood that the ease or difficulty with which the *junta* was able to go about its business in the world would have a bearing on whether other ruling classes were inclined to go down the road to repression. Furthermore, it is a necessity which the interconnectedness of the system--its 'internationality', to use Nairn's phrase--makes possible because it is not simply a question of the clothes people wear or the television programmes they watch, but a shared relationship to the reproduction of an international system. At a trade union level, the support shown by the Australian maritime union to the Liverpool dockers was at least partly a recognition that their own employers were planning a similar onslaught--which eventually came within weeks of the dispute coming to an end.<sup>73</sup> It is also true that the cultural aspects of 'internationality', notably the growth of a global media, have simply made people more aware of the similarity between their struggles and those happening in other parts of the world.

I want, however, to dwell briefly on the second aspect of internationalism, since it is one of the biggest sources of confusion, not least to Nairn, who persistently mistakes the effect of Stalinism (including the effect it has had on 'orthodox' Trotskyism) and the ideological rubbish left in its wake for the genuine Marxist position. It is important to state first of all that there is no metaphysical 'right of nations to self-determination' (the unfortunate title of Lenin's otherwise indispensable pamphlet notwithstanding). Nor, contrary to what Nairn asserts, has the Marxist position ever been to support 'exceptional' or 'good' nationalisms. Socialists never support nationalism but they do support specific *national demands* under certain conditions. What are these?

This question is often reduced to the attitude taken by Marxists to oppressed peoples struggling against imperialism and its local agents--understandably, since for more than the first half of this century this issue largely *was* 'the national

question'. The basis of socialist support for these nationalist movements was set out in the debates at the first four Congresses of the Communist International; the rise to full human dignity of peoples who had previously been regarded (and in some cases regarded themselves) as naturally inferior to their colonial masters, the weakening effect which national revolts had on the world system as a whole, the opportunity which they gave for socialists to break workers in the West from racism and support for imperialism and, consequently, to demonstrate to the colonial peoples that Western workers supported them rather than their 'own' capitalists or state. None of this meant supporting the politics of the national movements themselves. Not the least distorting effect of Stalinism was to convince the majority of the international left that these national movements were socialist in content (so that when the true nature of, say, the Vietnamese regime was exposed it contributed to disillusion with the very idea of socialism). Since the end of Stalinism this view has nevertheless remained alive, but in the form of arguing that in every situation there must be one national movement which is oppressed and deserves support.

For socialists, however, the question of support for particular national demands (not for particular nationalisms) is determined by their relationship to the struggle for socialism, regardless of whether the nation concerned is oppressed or not. Furthermore, it should openly be undertaken with the purpose of weakening the support of workers for that nationalism. In this context several questions have to be asked. Does support strengthen or weaken the capitalist or imperialist state? Does support strengthen or weaken the class consciousness and organisation of the working class? Does support strengthen or weaken the tolerance of people of different nations or 'races' for each other? These are not always easy questions to answer, particularly where (as in Scotland) no element of national oppression is involved. Nevertheless, to try and answer them seems preferable to conceding in advance both the legitimacy of every nationalism and our inability to make any value judgements between them.

### **Politics and the modern Lazarus**

The previous paragraph brought us back to Scotland, our starting point. Let us examine Nairn's current views on this subject, then conclude. First, we need to understand his assessment of contemporary Scottish nationalism. According to Nairn, the political nationalism which arose in the 1960s 'was not solely a wish for exit from the United Kingdom: it was, in effect, the desire to escape from "civil society" and resume business as a political society' in his native Scotland, where, we learn, 'a "civil" social order (with the sense of "decency", privacy, individual and group minority rights, *freedom of initiative and enterprise*, etc) depends in the long run upon an appropriately civil form of national identity'.<sup>74</sup> From this perspective, 'civil society' is merely 'a fall-back position for middle class internationalists' opposed to Scottish nationalism.<sup>75</sup> It should not be thought,

however, that Nairn is opposed to the middle class as such; on the contrary, they must be at the heart of the Scottish nationalist project.

In fact, at one level, Nairn is far more honest about the class basis of Scottish nationalism than the SNP could ever be: 'Though led in the name of a indeterminate "people", national liberation struggle can only be led by certain people with more determinate and vested interests in the process; nor could it conceivably be otherwise.' And who is this class in Scotland? According to Nairn, it is the one which 'runs Scotland--the institutional middle class', with which he identifies himself as a 'recalcitrant member': 'No collective presumption is intended here, for the important term is "runs": the Scottish institutional middle class has never ruled this country, it merely manages it'.<sup>76</sup> Actually, no middle class--institutional or not--has ever ruled any country, the bourgeoisie does that. For Nairn, however, failure to win the support of the former group was at the root of the SNP's inability to make an electoral breakthrough: 'In this sense, perhaps, the SNP version of national identity has never been half "bourgeois" enough--it was a twopenny solution aimed at a bit of everyone and no one in particular.' However, the Scottish middle class was now beginning to take its national identity seriously under 'the lash of Thatcherism'.<sup>77</sup>

Now, there is a sense in which this is absolutely correct. The original class basis for the SNP during the 1960s and 1970s was the old petty bourgeoisie, 'the small man, the frustrated Scottish businessman smelling profit in oil yet unable to cash in, only to spectate, and the lower middle class and professional elements watching their hard non- status and security disappear in the furnace of inflation'.<sup>78</sup> There is no doubt that elements of the new middle class are now dominant within the SNP, their presence symbolised by the leadership of former Bank of Scotland economist Alex Salmond. The important fact here, however, is that the working class has not been won over to political nationalism, a fact of which Nairn is no doubt aware, but which has no great significance for him precisely because he now regards working class politics as irrelevant. For revolutionaries, however, it is crucial. Yet the failure of Scottish nationalism in this respect is often unappreciated both inside and outside Scotland, largely as a result of misinterpreting two kinds of opinion poll.

The first are those which show a growing tendency for respondents to claim that they feel more Scottish than British (33 percent in June 1998 compared to 29 percent in September 1991).<sup>79</sup> Yet this indicates an increase in national consciousness, not nationalism as such, although the former is a necessary precondition of the latter. This consciousness has been shared, since the latter half of the 18th century, with a sense of Britishness, but assertion of the Scottish 'side' of this dual identity has no necessary political implications. As Joyce McMillan once noted, 'Scottish identity requires constant assertion, whereas British identity is something taken for granted by every institution with which [the Scots] have to

deal, and inclined to assert itself in the half conscious assumption that politics is something that happens at Westminster'.<sup>80</sup>

The point here is not that there is anything desirable about feeling British rather than Scottish or any other nationality but rather that, precisely because political and economic issues have tended to be resolved at a British level, that side of the national identity is where class unity is usually expressed. Britishness tends to be assumed at some level by all classes in Scotland (the same poll cited above shows that only 28 percent of Scots do not feel British to any degree). A genuine hardening of Scottish consciousness into a political nationalism, precisely because its goal would be to establish a new state, would necessarily be accompanied by an emphasis on the unity of all Scots against that of British workers.

The second set of polls show a growing tendency for Scots to say that they would vote for independence in a referendum about the constitutional future and vote for the SNP in the Scottish Parliament: the most recent shows 56 percent opting for the former and 40 percent for latter--the same percentage as those saying they would vote for Labour.<sup>81</sup> What these results both demonstrate is not some asocial upsurge of primeval nationalism, but a response to the actions of the Blair government. The SNP made few advances in working class areas at the general election of 1997. Despite posturing as the inheritor of Labour's social democratic past it gained only two Tory seats in predominantly rural areas. Yet after the hopes of 1 May 1997 were dashed, the SNP provides an electorally credible and seemingly left wing alternative for Scottish voters of a type which is not (and cannot be) available in England. The SNP is not a reformist party like Labour, but we are dealing here with perception, not reality.<sup>82</sup>

Two other points of interest arising from these polls deserve to be mentioned. First, that the numbers claiming to favour independence for Scotland exceed by 16 percent those claiming they would vote for the SNP, which suggests that independence as means of achieving certain political objectives and Scottish nationalism as a set of political beliefs are not necessarily seen as linked. Secondly, these are voting intentions for the Scottish Parliament, not Westminster, where the SNP has consistently failed to achieve levels of Labour support, which suggests that voting for the SNP might be seen as a luxury which can be indulged without the threat of doing too much damage.

The establishment of a Scottish Parliament was, after the election of a Labour government, the solution most commonly offered by reformists to problems of the working class in Scotland during the years of Tory rule. Given the nature of the current Labour government, it comes as no surprise that those who are anxious to take the path of least resistance have focused still more on what the parliament will deliver. Does Nairn share these illusions? Here we return full circle to the question of the British state. Nairn so loathes the aged beast that his reaction to the Labour victory on 1 May 1997 was very restrained.<sup>83</sup> Nairn correctly saw that Blair would

do nothing to disturb the existing set-up, unless forced to, but completely misunderstands what lay behind the vote for a parliament with 'tax varying' powers on 13 September 1997: 'The most important thing for a recalled Parliament to decide, I need hardly point out, is not raising or lowering income tax by a few percent. It will be whether to alter the conditions of UK affiliation'.<sup>84</sup>

Nairn now seems confident that this will happen. In a speech to the annual conference of the Centre of Research into Elections and Social Trends during November 1997 he foresaw that: 'Within the crumbling clam-shell of British sovereignty, serious home rule...will find it hard to avoid *de facto* sovereignty'.<sup>85</sup> There are two issues here.

First, what is sovereignty for, exactly? This obsession with sovereignty for its own sake (taking into account Nairn's concern to protect 'enterprise') is about the most right wing position available within the pan-nationalist camp.

Secondly, are the 'conditions of UK affiliation' the central issue for most Scots? The 1997 Scottish Election Survey found that 54 percent of respondents expected 'the economy' to be better after the establishment of a Scottish Parliament (13 percent by 'a lot', 41 percent by 'a little'), 38 percent expected unemployment to be better (6 percent and 32 percent), 62 percent expected education to be better (17 percent and 45 percent) and 60 percent expected the NHS to be better (16 percent and 44 percent).<sup>86</sup> These findings tend to suggest two conclusions. One is that the main reasons why people want a Scottish Parliament are immediate social issues, not abstractions about sovereignty. The other is that, even so, they do not expect it to make more than marginal improvements to the quality of their lives. Nairn, on the other hand, believes that a Scottish polity will somehow be innately beneficent. Writing of the anti Poll Tax campaign he notes that: 'Everyone there... knew perfectly well that no Scottish legislation would ever conceivably have imposed such a tax to begin with'.<sup>87</sup> As is well known, the powers enjoyed by the parliament will be extremely limited, although opportunities will exist for agitation and propaganda around issues like education where it does have some control. The voting system for the elections of May 1999 has been deliberately devised to prevent as far as possible any individuals or organisations from outside the established parties getting elected. Furthermore, it is likely to produce a coalition politics in which both Labour and the SNP will be able to claim that they are unable to carry out radical policies because of the need to placate their coalition partners, whoever they are. Finally, the process by which the Labour candidates has been selected has eliminated all but a few token left wingers in favour of faithful Blairites. On the whole, the prospects of the Scottish Parliament producing something as offensive as the Poll Tax are probably rather high.

Nairn is obviously aware of all this, but probably thinks that an increase in power for the parliament is inevitable, its very existence leading a heightened desire for more 'sovereignty'. But this in turn is predicated on the false belief that

'sovereignty' is a matter of importance to the majority of Scots. What most working class Scots want is the control over their lives and conditions that no bourgeois parliament in Westminster or Holyrood can give them--the control which bourgeois parliaments are in fact specifically designed to prevent working class people achieving. When it becomes apparent that the Scottish Parliament will not live up to even the minimum expectations invested in it, then a number of responses are possible. One might be the outcome desired by Nairn (and in a more directly electoral way by the SNP), where parliamentary failure is seen as stemming from the absence of Scottish sovereignty and leads to the demand for independent nationhood becoming irresistible. Another might be that failure condemns it to irrelevance, and instead of provoking high levels of public interest it becomes the object of the same sort of bemused contempt with which local authorities are currently viewed. Still another might be that its failures are seen, not as the result of a lack of independence, but because it is a reformist institution incapable of challenging capitalism in Scotland or anywhere else. The latter perception is, of course, correct and the one which revolutionaries will seek to make hegemonic among the working class. If we fail, it will be for political reasons, not because our audience was genetically predisposed to embrace nationalism.

One final point is worth considering. Nairn always tended to treat the British state as if it had a life of its own, apart from the class interests which it represents. His argument nevertheless assumed that 'the break-up of Britain' would represent a defeat for the British ruling class, and that it would oppose the departure of Scotland--indeed, this was one of the very reasons why the idea of Scottish independence had such a resonance on the left. It is by no means certain, however, that the British ruling class will necessarily remain committed to the preservation of the British state in its current form, if it can be demonstrated that other constitutional arrangements will equally serve their interests to the same extent. As early as 1990, *The Economist*, playing its usual role as outrider for the most extreme doctrines of free market ideology, suggested in a leader article that there might be advantages in Scotland achieving independence: 'Unable to rely on handouts from the British exchequer, Scotland's political classes would take unpopular closure decisions for themselves, or leave managers free to do so.' The editorial looked forward to 'the replacement of today's half angry, half embarrassed dependency status by a grown up political culture', capable of closing down plants like Ravenscraig without concession to 'industrial romanticism'.<sup>88</sup>

This was a lone voice at the time, but there are signs that the bourgeoisie themselves--and not just their ideologists--might now be prepared to contemplate full independence, not on free market doctrinal grounds, but as part of the search for stability. The *Financial Times* reported recently that 'what worries business is the prospect of endless uncertainty and altercation over Scotland's status, rather than the nature of the eventual settlement'.<sup>89</sup> The declining Scottish economy is unlikely to reproduce the relative success of Catalonian devolution. The prospect

of the national question becoming a permanent feature of Scottish politics, as it has become in Quebec, would therefore make independence attractive simply because it would decide the issue once and for all. This is a view which may gather strength once the parliament is established. At the moment, much more typical is Andrew Neil's talk of creating a 'new Unionism...within a much more devolved, even federalist, United Kingdom', but Neil--once accurately described by Nairn as an 'archetypal Scotch crawler'--will ultimately be less important in deciding the path of the British state than the capitalists he admires so much.<sup>90</sup> If Scottish independence does become something that the British capitalist class can live with, then one of the key arguments on the left for supporting it--that it is against the interests of the bourgeoisie--will have effectively dissolved. One of the tragedies of Nairn's trajectory towards the acceptance of 'enterprise' is that this is no longer even an issue for him.

### **'We are all German Jews'**

In one of the essays in *Faces Of Nationalism*, Nairn reviews *The Race Gallery*, by Marek Kohn, from which he extracts two morals. The first is that 'Human biological diversity needs to be explored not denied.' And the second is that 'diversity needs some new defences in order to survive'. The reader will have no difficulty in guessing what the nature of these new defences are likely to be. Nairn is thinking here in particular of the Roma population of East Central Europe, who have suffered renewed levels of racism since the fall of Stalinism. Needless to say, as far as Nairn is concerned there is no possibility that this can be resisted; the Roma must simply establish their own nationalism in opposition which will 'inevitably' be 'ethno-linguistic or "racial"'.<sup>91</sup>

The tragedy of Nairn's long retreat from Marxism is that for one brief moment he did recognise, in all its grandeur, the possibilities for socialist revolution, not as a myth, but as an actuality which provided the solution to racial and national oppression:

*When de Gaulle spoke with condescension of 'the new blood of France', to be 'given a voice' after May, he revealed only his own ignorance of a generation that had spewed out that 'France' along with the priests, professors and policemen, and adopted 'Nous sommes tous des Juifs-Allemands' as its motto, doing more for the cause of internationalism and European unity in one day than the governments and labour bureaucracies of Western Europe had achieved in twenty years.*<sup>92</sup>

'Nous sommes tous des Juifs-Allemands'--'We are all German Jews'--was the slogan of the French students and workers who demonstrated in May 1968 after attacks on Daniel Cohn-Bendit as a 'German Jew' in the bourgeois press had led to his attempted assassination. Nairn could once use the very same slogan against the paltry vision offered to Scotland by nationalism: 'To acquiesce in the SNP's version

of our future, in the year where a new generation cried "Nous sommes tous des Juifs-Allemands" before the Palais Bourbon and ground the nationalism of the past to dust at the Saarbrücken bridge, is merely an uninteresting form of suicide'.<sup>93</sup> It seems likely that when another new generation arises to proclaim themselves German Jews (or perhaps Punjabi Scots), Nairn will now be one of those pressing the hemlock into our hands. 'A false political theory bears within itself its own punishment', wrote Trotsky in 1933.<sup>94</sup> There is no need for the working class in Scotland or anywhere else to suffer that punishment, but one prerequisite for escaping it is precisely to see ourselves primarily as workers, and to reject all theories which would have us believe that the accidental fact of Scottish nationhood, or any other, is what will determine our fate.

## Notes

Many thanks to Alex Law.

1 Excluding *The Break-Up of Britain* itself, the major works in order of appearance are: H Seton-Watson, *Nations And States* (London, 1977); J Breuille, *Nationalism And The State* (Manchester, 1982 and 1993); E Gellner, *Nations And Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983); B Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London and New York, 1983 and 1991); A D Smith, *The Ethnic Origins Of Nations* (Oxford, 1986); E J Hobsbawm, *Nations And Nationalism Since 1780* (Cambridge, 1990); N Harris, *National Liberation* (London and New York, 1990); A D Smith, *National Identity* (Harmondsworth, 1991); L Greenfield, *Nationalism* (London, 1992); and E Gellner, *Nationalism* (London, 1997). The books by Anderson, Harris, Hobsbawm and the first by Gellner are reviewed in C Harman, 'The Return of the National Question', *International Socialism* 56, Autumn 1992, pp4, 41-49.

2 T Nairn, 'The Modern Janus', *New Left Review* 94, November-December 1975, p3; *The Break-Up of Britain*, p329.

3 For an example of the first, see [N Gentshev, 'Lambs to the Slaughter?'](#), *Socialist Review* 218, April 1998, pp29-30; for an example of the second, see I Bell 'Spirit of nationhood alive and kicking as the world goes global', *The Scotsman*, 9 February 1998.

4 The point was made long ago by James Kellas: 'The fortunes of the SNP have of course affected the intensity of national consciousness, but such consciousness is greater than the number of votes won by that party at elections. It is not necessarily concerned, as is the SNP with "national self determination", or with political devolution. It is rather an expression of Scottishness on the part of an amorphous group of interests and individuals, whose identity is caught up with that of Scotland.' J G Kellas, *The Scottish Political System* (Second Edition, Cambridge, 1975), p119.

5 T Nairn, 'The Question of Scotland', *Faces of Nationalism*, p189.

6 W Thompson, 'Tom Nairn and the Crisis of the British State', *Contemporary Record*, 6:2, Autumn 1992, p308. This interesting, if over-reverential, article is based in part on an interview with Nairn conducted on 17 December 1991 and is a useful source of information about his career. See also P Anderson, 'Foreword', *English Questions* (London and New York, 1992), p3.

7 T Nairn, 'The Twilight of the British State' *New Left Review* 101-102, February-April 1977, p49; *The Break-Up of Britain*, p75.

8 L D Trotsky, *The History Of The Russian Revolution* (London, 1977), p27; 'Where Is Britain Going?', *Collected Writings And Speeches On Britain* (3 Volumes, London,



1974), vol 2, pp14, 39-40.

9 A Callinicos, 'Exception or Symptom? The British Crisis and the World System', *New Left Review* 169, May-June 1988, p103.

10 The literature on the 'Nairn-Anderson thesis' is too vast to be listed here. Virtually the only contribution to the debate to treat Nairn as seriously as it did Anderson was the first, E P Thompson's 'The Peculiarities of the English' (1965). This great (and extremely funny) essay is best savoured in the complete version published in *The Poverty Of Theory And Other Essays* (London, 1978). A brief but pointed critique of the 'thesis' from the perspective of this journal can be found in A Callinicos, op cit. Various misconceptions about working class politics during the 19th century are corrected in C Bambery, 'Myth and Reality in British Working Class Struggle', in J Rees (ed), *Essays On Historical Materialism* (London, 1998), although Bambery takes Anderson rather than Nairn as the starting point for his discussion.

11 J Brand, *The National Movement In Scotland* (London, 1978), pp258-262.

12 T Nairn, 'The Three Dreams of Scottish Nationalism', *New Left Review* 49, May-June 1968, p7.

13 Ibid, p13.

14 Ibid, p16.

15 Ibid, p18.

16 T Nairn, 'The Left Against Europe?', *New Left Review* 75, September-October 1972, pp116-9.

17 T Nairn, 'Scotland and Europe', *New Left Review* 83, January-February 1974, pp63, 60; *The Break-Up of Britain*, pp99, 96.

18 T Nairn, 'Old and New Scottish Nationalism', in G Brown (ed), *The Red Paper On Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1975), pp47, 49; *The Break-Up of Britain*, p179. The majority of the quoted passages were not included in the later version of this essay.

19 Ibid: *The Red Paper On Scotland*, p24; *The Break-Up of Britain*, p130.

20 For an example of the first, see 'Scotland and Europe': 'After the dark, the unspeakable 17th century...it was 1688 which marked the real dawn in Scotland', *The Break-Up of Britain*, p109. For an example of the second, see 'Old and New Scottish Nationalism': '[Kailyard culture] is recognisably intertwined with that prodigious array of Kitsch symbols, slogans, ornaments, banners, war-cries, knick-knacks, music-hall heroes, icons, conventional sayings and sentiments (not a few of them "pithy") which have for so long resolutely defended the name of "Scotland" to the world. Annie Swan and [A J] Cronin provided no more than the relatively decent outer garb for the vast tartan monster. In their work the thing trots along doucely enough, on a lead. But it is something else to be with it (eg) in a London pub on International night, or in the crowd at the annual Military Tattoo in front of Edinburgh Castle. How intolerably vulgar! What unbearable, crass, mindless philistinism! One knows that Kitsch is a large constituent of mass popular culture in every land: but this is ridiculous!' *The Red Paper On Scotland*, p39; *The Break-Up of Britain*, p162. On second thoughts, given the success of Braveheart, and the recent announcement that 6 April is henceforth to be celebrated in the US as 'Tartan Day', perhaps Nairn does not exaggerate too grossly after all.

21 C Beveridge and R Turnbull, 'Scottish Nationalist, British Marxist: the Strange Case of Tom Nairn', *The Eclipse Of Scottish Culture* (Edinburgh, 1989), pp59, 60.

22 T Nairn, 'The Twilight of the British State', *New Left Review* 101-102, February-April 1977, pp59-60; *The Break-Up of Britain*, pp89-90.

23 T Nairn, 'The Modern Janus: *New Left Review* 94, pp12, 18, 22-23; *The Break-Up of Britain*, pp339-340, 348-349, 354.

- 24 T Nairn, 'The National Question', internal SLP document, cited in H Drucker, *Breakaway: the Scottish Labour Party* (Edinburgh, n.d. [1978]), p124.
- 25 Cartoons of Oor Wullie advancing slogans along the lines of 'Jings! It's not Devolution we need, it's Revolution!' soon followed in *Socialist Worker*. While no doubt formally correct, this was not perhaps the best way to engage the Scottish working class in discussion of the issue.
- 26 A Marr, *The Battle For Scotland* (Harmondsworth, 1992), p162.
- 27 T Nairn, *Faces of Nationalism*, p227.
- 28 E Heffer, *Never A Yes Man* (London and New York, 1991), p165. Heffer records how his views were received in parliament: 'In the Commons I made speeches drawing attention to what the Austro-Marxists and [Rosa] Luxemburg had argued... They cut little ice.' It is part of the tragedy of his political career that he ever imagined they would in this setting.
- 29 T Nairn, 'Postscript 1981: Into Political Emergency', *The Break-Up of Britain*, pp288, 397-398.
- 30 See *ibid*, pp402-404 and, more optimistically, an article called--inevitably--'The Crisis of the British State', *New Left Review* 130, November-December 1981, pp41-44. As Perry Anderson once pointed out, words, like currency, lose value through inflation. Thanks to Nairn, the word 'crisis', especially when conjoined to the phrase 'British state', is worth about as much as a Weimar deutschmark.
- 31 W Thompson, *op cit*, p320. Ironically, Anderson himself abandoned the classical Marxist perspective shortly afterwards. His own account dates this from the mid-1980s. See P Anderson, 'Foreword', *A Zone Of Engagement*(London and New York, 1992), pxii-xiii.
- 32 T Nairn, 'From Civil Society to Civic Nationalism', *Faces of Nationalism*, p82. The quote by Neil Harding is from 'Intellectuals, Socialism and Proletariat', in J Jennings and A Kemp-Walsh (eds), *Intellectuals And Politics*(London, 1997), p211.
- 33 See, for example, the remarks by H Stuart Hughes on the concept of 'hegemony': 'As happened so often in Gramsci's writings, a totalitarian thought was clothed in liberal guise.' *Consciousness And Society* (St Albans, 1974).
- 34 'Introduction: On Studying Nationalism', *op cit*, pp10-11.
- 35 *Ibid*, p13.
- 36 'Does Tomorrow Belong to the Bullets or the Bouquets?', *New Statesman And Society*, 19 June 1992, p31. The appropriate response to this irrationalism was given by a fellow Scottish nationalist, Pat Kane, who condemned the resort to 'biological or species-hereditary determinations': 'The only universally-binding terms which might help us through this international liberation-chaos are not our hominid instincts, but those "circumstances of Modernity" which Nairn foolishly attempts to go behind... Pursuing a progressive-nationalist game with the cards of biological science means that your opponent may defeat you, still playing poker--but with higher, more terrifying stakes, holding infinitely dirtier and dishonest hands. The packet of nationality and biology should be left unopened, in the drawer of the first half of this century.' 'Scotland by Starlight', *Tinsel Show* (Edinburgh, 1992), p198.
- 37 T Nairn, 'Demonising Nationality', *Faces of Nationalism*, p63.
- 38 T Nairn, 'The Curse of Rurality: Limits of Modernisation Theory', *Faces of Nationalism*, pp90-92, 101-102, 109-110.
- 39 T Nairn, 'Reflections of Nationalist Disasters', *New Left Review* 230, July/August 1998, p149.
- 40 Z Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (2nd edition, Oxford, 1991), pp46, 61.
- 41 G Eley, 'The British Model and the German Road: Rethinking the Course of

- German History Before 1914', in D Blackbourn and G Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History* (Oxford, 1984), p154.
- 42 N Stone, *Europe Transformed: 1878-1919* (Glasgow, 1983), p160.
- 43 Z Bauman, op cit, px.
- 44 T Nairn, 'The Curse of Rurality', op cit, p149.
- 45 T Nairn, 'Micro-States', *Faces of Nationalism*, pp143-149.
- 46 T Nairn, 'The Owl of Minerva', *Faces of Nationalism*, p52.
- 47 T Nairn, 'Demonising Nationality', op cit, pp57-58.
- 48 B Arnot and K Buketov, 'The Political Economy of Russian Labour: From Acquiescence to Action?', *Abertay Sociology Papers 1:2* (University of Abertay, 1998), pp7, 9.
- 49 T Nairn, 'The Question of Scale', *Faces of Nationalism*, p134.
- 50 T Nairn, 'Internationalism: a Critique', *Faces of Nationalism*, p32.
- 51 Ibid, p30.
- 52 Ibid, p35.
- 53 Even this apparent recognition that internationalism once sprung unforced from a pre-lapsarian proletariat is designed to emphasise the supposed extent of the subsequent fall. In fact, even in their formative years, most proletarians have had to overcome reformist consciousness, strategy and organisation--of which nationalism is inevitably a component. I have discussed this in the context of Scotland in two forthcoming books, *Discovering The Scottish Revolution: The Decline of Scottish Feudal Society and the Origins of the British Capitalist State, 1688-1746, Conclusion, and Highlanders Into Scots, Scots Into Britons: The Origins of National Consciousness in Scotland, 1746-1820*, ch 8 and Conclusion.
- 54 Ibid, pp32-33, 36.
- 55 A Callinicos, *Theories And Narratives* (Cambridge, 1995), p179.
- 56 A D Smith, *The Ethnic Origins Of Nations*, op cit, pp11-2, 8.
- 57 E Gellner, *Nationalism*, op cit, pp7-8.
- 58 T Nairn 'Introduction: On Studying Nationalism', *Faces of Nationalism*, p7. This is a good example of one of Nairn's most annoying habits: quoting an argument against one of his positions in a knowing kind of way--then carrying on without actually answering the point.
- 59 T Nairn, 'Union and Empire', *Faces of Nationalism*, p209.
- 60 In particular, E Gellner, 'Nationalism', *Thought And Change* (London, 1964). See the references in *The Break-Up of Britain*, pp96, 99, 133, 317, 338, 342 and 358. As we saw above, his attitude to the Gellner thesis has now undergone a significant alteration.
- 61 N Harris, *Of Bread And Guns* (Harmondsworth, 1982), p24.
- 62 B Anderson, op cit, p36.
- 63 C Harman, op cit, pp42, 43.
- 64 The problem for both Anderson and Nairn may have been their incomprehension at the conflicts between supposedly socialist--or at least 'post-capitalist'--states in Indochina from 1978 onwards. Compare B Anderson, op cit, ppxi, 1-2, and T Nairn, 'Postscript 1981: Into Political Emergency', op cit, p371.
- 65 G Kerevan, 'The Origins of Scottish Nationhood: Arguments Within Scottish Marxism', *The Bulletin Of Scottish Politics*, 1:2, Spring 1981, p118-119.
- 66 Occasionally the mask slipped even prior to 1989. When Khieu Samphan, one of the leaders of the Khmer Rouge, was interviewed in January 1981, his response was rather different: 'No more socialism. No more socialist revolution... Our ideal is the survival of Cambodia. As for Communism, we saw it as the way to lead Cambodia to

independence and survival--a means only, not the ideal. Now, through the flesh and blood of people, we have been given the experience to know that we cannot follow this way.' Quoted in G Evans and K Rowley, *Red Brotherhood At War* (London, 1984), p251.

67 This was true even during the First World War, which Nairn repeatedly cites as an example of spontaneous national feeling. The issue has been dealt with in recent editions of this journal, so I will not repeat the arguments here. See [M Trudell, 'Prelude to Revolution: Class Consciousness and the First World War', \*International Socialism\* 2:76, Autumn 1997, pp71-85](#), supplemented by [I Birchall, 'The Vice-Like Hold of Nationalism? A Comment on Megan Trudell's 'Prelude to Revolution' \*International Socialism\* 2:78, Spring 1978.](#)

68 The following two paragraphs are based on information and--in the case of the first--analysis contained in A Callinicos and M Simons, *The Great Strike: International Socialism* 2:27/8, Spring/Summer 1985, pp84-92, and K Aitken, *The Bairns O' Adam* (Edinburgh, 1997), pp273-281. The latter is a semi-official history of the Scottish TUC.

69 Quoted in J Owens, *Miners 1984-1994* (Edinburgh, 1994), p91. The editor and the interviewee are not the same person.

70 K Aitken, op cit, p292.

71 Ibid, p295.

72 A Law, 'Neither Historic Nor Colonial': Workers' Organisation in a Scottish Dockyard', in A Day and K Lum (eds), *A History Of Labour In The Royal Dockyards* (London, forthcoming). One the stewards was Alex Falconer, who became the Labour MEP for Fife and Mid-Scotland in 1984. I am grateful to Alex Law for showing me this article prior to publication.

73 J Pilger, 'The Dockers', *Hidden Agendas* (London, 1998), p351.

74 T Nairn, 'From Civil Society to Civic Nationalism', pp87, 88, my emphasis.

75 Ibid, p84.

76 T Nairn, 'Identities in Scotland', *Faces of Nationalism*, p187.

77 Ibid, p193. This was written in March 1991.

78 R Burnett, 'Socialists and the SNP', in G Brown (ed), op cit, p121.

79 *The Scotsman*, 5 June 1998.

80 J McMillan, 'Foreign Lesson in Pressing for Home Rule', *Scotland On Sunday*, 22 August 1993.

81 *The Scotsman*, 1 July 1998.

82 See [N Davidson and K McKechnie, 'Riotous Assembly?', \*Socialist Review\* 219, May 1998, pp4-5.](#)

83 T Nairn, 'Sovereignty After the Election', *Faces of Nationalism*, p221.

84 Ibid, p223. The reference here to 'recalling' Parliament presumably alludes to the feudal estates which dissolved themselves on 28 April 1707!

85 'British Sovereignty Since the Election', *Scottish Affairs*, Special Issue, *Understanding Constitutional Change*, 1998, p36. Nairn's contribution begins with an unseemly grovel to Donald Dewar 'our last and greatest Scottish Secretary of State', who had preceded him on the platform. So much for the iniquities of the Labour Party. See *ibid*, p13.

86 P Surridge, L Patterson, A Brown and D McCrone, 'The Scottish Electorate and the Scottish Parliament', *Understanding Constitutional Change*, p43.

87 T Nairn, 'Empire and Union', *Faces of Nationalism*, p208.

88 'Scots Awa', *The Economist*, 26 May-1 June 1990, pp18-19.

89 A Gowers, 'L'Ecosse Libre', *Financial Times*, 14 August 1998.

90 A Neil, 'Scotland the Self-Deluded', *The Spectator*, 15 August 1998, p12. I am unable to recall the source of this memorable piece of Nairnian invective--aimed at a deserving target, for once--but it springs to mind every time Neil's sanctimonious features loom out over one his odious op-ed pieces in *The Scotsman*, a paper which regularly falls, under his regime as editor-in-chief, to new lows of right wing hysteria.

91 T Nairn, 'Race and Nationalism', *Faces of Nationalism*, p121.

92 'Why it Happened', A Quattrochi and T Nairn, *The Beginning Of The End* (London, 1968), p173. A review of the reissue of this book by Jonathan Neale recommends that readers 'skip the second half of the book, by Tom Nairn'. ['1968: The Year the Monolith Cracked'](#), *Socialist Review* 219, May 1998, p17. It is true that in comparison with Quattrochi's Situationalist fireworks Nairn's contribution seems rather drab, but in comparison with the latter's other work, both before and since, it positively soars.

93 T Nairn, 'The Three Dreams of Scottish Nationalism', *Memoirs Of A Modern Scotland*, op cit, p54.

94 L D Trotsky, 'The Tragedy of the German Proletariat: the German Workers Will Rise Again--Stalinism, Never!', in G Breitman and M Maisel (eds), *The Struggle Against Fascism In Germany* (New York, 1971), p377.