



Back to the future

Nationalism, internationally

From Yugoslavia to Somalia, from Iraq to Zaire ... Nationalism and nationhood are tearing the world apart. **PIERRE BAUDET** investigates

THE FEVER OF NATIONALISM HAS spread across our globe. Nightly, on TV screens, we encounter an extreme expression of the crisis of the nation state: the Yugoslavian catastrophe.

The ex-Soviet Union is the theatre of multiple cataclysms, as the old republics collapse. Similar processes are jolting Canada, Spain, Italy, even historically strong states like Britain and France.

The phenomenon is just as pronounced in the third world. Centrifugal forces are pulling apart Senegal, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, Zaire, Iraq, Lebanon, Sri Lanka, India and many other countries.

More than 70 years after the intense debates of the 1920s on nationalism and nationhood — and three decades after the wave of post-colonial states emerged — the questions of nationalism and nationhood are back with a vengeance. Can we make sense of them?

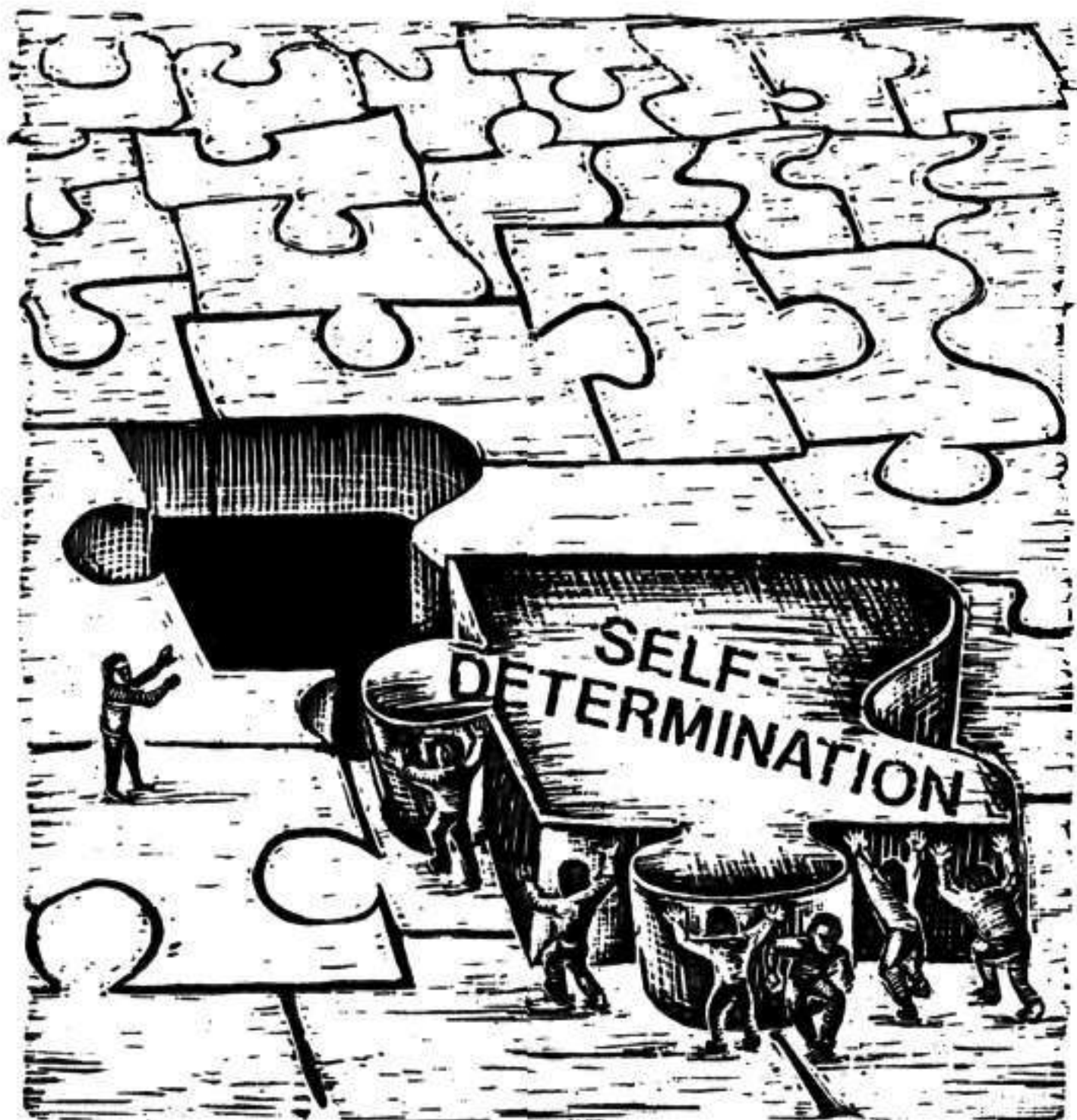
Viva neo-nationalism!

The debate has spawned some combative views. On the one side are those who promote this flourishing neo-nationalism as an escape route from the crisis of the “big” centralised states. “National liberation struggles,” as the National Somali Movement declares in ‘independent’ Somaliland, have become more than “simply decolonisation struggles”. Increasingly, the boundaries of many nation-states, especially in the third world, seem to be “unviable” vessels for nationhood.

In his new book, *The Black Man's Burden*, Basil Davidson tries to explain the failure of such states in Africa. He describes how they mimicked European state-building by forcing proto-nations and proto-states to abandon the stage of history — only to watch them bounce back a few decades

later.

That argument is now catching on. Along the Casamance in West Africa, Western Senegalese are rediscovering their roots. The Oromos in Ethiopia are demanding independence or autonomy. Although not linguistically or ethnically homogenous, south-



■ THE 90s PUZZLE: The hunger for self-determination has swept the world

Missionary zeal

Despite its own historical origins, Kurdish nationalism has been exploited in several superpower gameplans. To support the shah of Iran (right) in a dispute with Iraq, the CIA in 1974 and 1975 encouraged the Kurds to revolt against the Iraqi government, providing them with arms and other resources. When the shah struck a deal with the Iraqis, the support was abruptly cut off, leaving the Kurds at the mercy of fierce reprisals. Former US secretary-of-state Henry Kissinger's subsequent comment during testimony became infamous: 'One must not confuse the intelligence business with missionary work.'



macro-social and -economic forces.

We have a lift-off

Keynesianism emerged as a new, dominant form of statehood after 1945. It was developed in a variety of forms, in different parts of the world, in response to the global crisis triggered by decades of intense struggle, revolution and war.

At its most sophisticated, the Keynesian state integrated the popular classes into a comprehensive social compact. The process was never complete, and relatively large social or national minorities were left out. But it nonetheless built statehood that was solid enough to sustain nationhood.

The state became the central pillar of "development" (read "capital accumulation"). It did not substitute itself for the private sector — the bourgeoisie still dominated the economy. But the regime of accumulation required a central "regulating" role from the state.

Thanks to the extension of the social wage, and other co-opting measures, the bulk of the popular classes came to locate their interests within the ambit of the state. As an historic compromise between the dominant classes themselves, Keynesianism offered the popular classes some stability and a slow growth in standards of living — in exchange for basic obedience to the capitalist state. Opposition was permitted by legalising leftwing parties; but on condition that they agreed, in principle, to respect "the rules of the game".

The same applied to most of the minorities. They could organise, agitate, demand reforms and, in many cases, win substantial changes. The French-speaking minority in Quebec in the 1960s entered a social, political and economic renaissance known as the "quiet revolution". Of course, this did not rid the system of gross injustices. But the majority of the popular classes (also within the national minorities) came to understand that change lay within the system, not outside it.

In the East, the social deal took another form, though it arose from similar strategies. During the 1950s and

epoch.

Although such interpretations are useful when analysing specific situations, they rely on an overtly political interpretation of this upsurge of nationalism.

After decolonisation in the 1960s, African states seemed to be viable entities despite ethnic and linguistic differences. In the west, the aspirations of national minorities like the Quebecois in Canada or the Basques in Spain did not translate automatically into separatist struggles. The Left, with a strong presence in these struggles, proposed strategies that combined national and social demands. Their aim was to challenge the hegemony of the bourgeois centralised state, and develop forms of popular power within a decentralised state system.

Polarisation within these central states tended to occur more in terms of political options — more democracy, social justice, respect for minorities. There was no rupture, no drive to create a new state.

This suggests that the current march of neo-nationalism is grounded in processes that lie beyond the question of the state, processes that refer to

ern Sudanese are leaning towards secession. Unita might push the Angolan Ovimbundus along a similar route. The list goes on.

Then one finds arguments, following on Benedict Anderson's path-breaking work *Imagined Communities*, that ascribe the rise of neo-nationalism to global political upheaval.

In the ex-Soviet Union, with its over-centralised and fragile "nation-empire", nationalisms coalesced to create new independent states. In the Baltic states these nationalisms were always resilient, and had remained low-key under the rule of empire. They were dormant, though, in ex-Soviet Asia, where nation-states had never existed. Amid the convulsions of political crisis, "imagined communities" leapt to the fore.

Elsewhere, a similar pattern of destruction / reconstruction occurs. Traditional identities — based on clan (Somalia), ethno-linguistics (Ethiopia), or religion (Sri Lanka) — become stronger because they enable people and communities to survive in the midst of economic and political collapse.

Neo-nationalism, in this view, serves an ideological function. It creates or imagines new "essential" identities that have little substantive historical basis, but nevertheless do bond communities in their struggle for survival.

Related to this are the geo-politics of the "new world order", where splitting nations into micro-states is seen as a desirable way to contain or discipline troublesome third world states.

Iraq is an example. The destruction of the Iraqi state, with its weak historical foundations (it never existed as a state before the British and the French carved up the Middle East in the 1920s), appeals as one way to strike back at an "insolent" Arab nationalism (see box).

But different contexts will produce different strategies. US imperialism now opposes — for geo-strategic reasons — neo-nationalist movements in Russia, much as it opposed them in Ethiopia during the Haile Selassie

If new nationalist movements cannot find answers, they might be confronted by neo-neo-nationalist movements from within their own populations

1960s, the Soviet Union's partial stability was not only the result of repressive policies. A majority of its citizens (including those in the republics outside the Russian centre) were able to obtain substantial improvement in their standards of living. Nationalist agitation was limited to nostalgia for the "ancien regimes", especially in the Baltic states. After the 1970s, their struggles became fuelled less by nationalism and more by democratic demands.

In decolonised Africa and Asia of the early 1960s, the new nationalist states promised and, to some extent, delivered "development" — capital accumulation based on industrialisation, rural reform and modern infrastructure. For a while that "model" seemed to persuade national, ethno-linguistic and religious groupings that their interests were best guarded by the state.

Wipe-out

This process faltered when the crisis of the 1970s hit. It was a structural and prolonged crisis, one that continues today. The breakdown took many forms in different countries. Generally, it pushed central states to the point of economic, social and political bankruptcy. Societies began to implode.

Ex-Yugoslavia is a case in point. In 1990, a chauvinist Serbian movement began taking control of the old Communist Party. Slobodan Milosevic, the current Serbian leader, kicked off his electoral campaign by demagogically accusing the International Monetary Fund and the Croats of responsibility for Yugoslavia's decline.

Croatia's new nationalist elite cut its contributions to the federal state and turned towards independence, with the support of Germany and other western states.

The mainstream explanation of the subsequent crisis is that broiling nationalisms, long squashed under stalinist-titoist rule, burst into the open again. Serbs, Croats and Bosnians are presented as basically inward-looking tribes, unified around religious, linguistic or ethnic identities that stretch back to time immemorial. Their tribal divisions were temporarily checked by an authoritarian state, but "nature" finally imposed itself. This, however, makes sense only if one ignores history.

Like any other modern states, Yugoslavia was "created" by a subjective collective will — in its case by a popular, national movement that resisted Nazi domination. The Titoist version of stalinism shaped modern Yugoslavia out of this nationalist tradition.

Today's national-socialist war of ethnic cleansing is neither the rebirth of "secular hatred" nor the deformed continuation of "national communism". The death of Tito marked the end of the "national" principle created after 1945. The war is neither the "result" of Titoism nor the consequence of nebulous national processes: it is the problem of post-Titoism.

Either the state is able to re-establish a new "national" principle, for instance a framework where a critical mass of the people will find itself in agreement with the state, or it enters into crisis. If that crisis deepens, basic "identities" will resurface, people will fall back onto their immediate networks — family, clan, tribe, village. They will "discover" themselves as Croats, Catholics, Serbs, Orthodox, Muslims, from the "north", from the "south" and so on.

Post-nationalism?

In the third world, the breakdown takes other forms. Although most extreme in Africa, the Andean region of Latin American and the Middle East, the economic crisis batters virtually every country of the south, a few Asian "tigers" excepted.

In that context, old identities resurface. A lot of the old nationalist legitimacy associated with the con-

frontation with the coloniser is lost, and national populism becomes emptied of meaning. These states lack the capacities to integrate and build a "new nation". States lose their power to co-opt, and national or ethno-linguistic groups become more critical of them.

Whether in Algeria's Kabylie region or the Tamil-speaking areas of Sri Lanka, or Kurdistan, petty bourgeois elites and intellectuals have discovered that their identification with Algeria, Sri Lanka, Iraq or Senegal no longer yields sufficient returns.

This begs a central question. Is independent Eritrea better equipped to confront the IMF and neoliberal policies that marginalised the multinational state of Ethiopia in the 1970s and 1980s? If the Tamils gain independence in northern Sri Lanka, will the condition of the marginalised peasantry improve? Will the nationalist Quebecois movement be able to reduce a 20% unemployment rate and rebuild the economy?

If the new nationalist movements cannot find answers, they might be confronted by "neo-neo-nationalist" movements emerging from within their own multinational populations. Smaller, impoverished states could find themselves much worse equipped to confront the sorts of macro-policies that precipitated the crises of the 1980s. They could become autocratic, using nationalism to eliminate dissent and, at worst, engage in "ethnic cleansing", reducing other nationalities to scapegoats.

On the other hand, if they can invest the new state with legitimacy, and unite and re-organise communities to build a new future, then they might obtain enough social strength to confront the new world order.

They will have to find new ways to work with other states and nations, including the former state structures they abandoned. They might seek new confederations capable of creating enough of a critical mass to impose a new correlation of forces in their regions and further afield. If that path is chosen, neo-nationalism would have to re-invent a political project. ■

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