3 The Nation and the Species

The liberal and Marxist branches of political economy in the nineteenth century assumed that the species would be united by the process of industrialisation. The coming of industrial society confirmed only part of their argument. As expected, the economic and social unification of the species turned out to be one of the most important tendencies in the nineteenth century, but an unanticipated concurrent increase in the level of international conflict was to prove that industrialisation was a more complex and paradoxical force than liberalism and Marxism had supposed. Neither perspective had been alert to the possibility that the process of national unification would rapidly overtake the trend towards international integration, and neither had envisaged the increase of state power in both the domestic and the international realm.

Prior to "the dawn of universal history", Raymond Aron once argued, societies were conscious of their cultural differences above all else. The age of industrialism produced a far greater sensitivity to inequalities of power and wealth. The more the world was unified, the greater was the capacity of societies to measure their economic and political differences. The nationalist claim that political frontiers should correspond with cultural boundaries flourished in this environment, although some of the early statements of nationalism continued to uphold the value of internationalism. Mazzini's nationalism was one such example. The dominant strand of nationalist thought pointed in a different direction. During the nineteenth century, the "democratisation" and "socialisation" of the nation brought the "most international of modern historical epochs" to an end. The "international of monarchs" and the age of "aristocratic universalism" were rapidly superseded. This trend posed the first major challenge to liberal and Marxist analyses of the probable course of universal history. It was the first major threat to their conviction that the species would be united in a politics of universal emancipation.

When Marxists began to respond to these developments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries they confronted many of the same problems which Marx and Engels had addressed earlier. They were faced with the question of whether historical materialism had presented an oversimplified analysis of human development in which too much weight was attached to the class struggle. Since it was clearly wrong to suppose that all forms of national conflict were simply a distorted expression of the class struggle, it became even more important to define the conditions in which the struggle for national rights might deserve the support of the socialist movement and it became essential to decide whether support for national liberation might represent a necessary
detour from the expected path towards the goal of internationalism. The resilience of nationalism raised the question of whether revolutionary socialists should continue to subscribe to the cosmopolitan ideal or foreshadow a world of nations in which cultural differences would flourish and not merely survive.

One of the most original and enduring lines of argument to develop in this context regarded nationalism as a product of the uneven development of the world economy. From this perspective, progressive national movements are similar to subordinate classes in that each represents a radical challenge to social inequalities. The literature on the uneven development of the world economy has attempted to explain why capitalism failed to fulfil its promise of universality. It is far from clear that this argument goes far enough to explain either the existence of nationalism in the capitalist world economy or the nationalist antagonisms which have divided socialist states. At least since the outbreak of the First World War when the European working class was shattered into national fragments, it has been abundantly clear that nationalism is much more than a mere antidote to class divisions in capitalist societies and far more than a response to international economic inequalities. Since then the impact of war and state-building on the formation of nationalism has warranted equal emphasis. The fact that nationalism has been a divisive force in the socialist as well as in the capitalist regions of the world system has prompted the argument that Marxist sociology has failed to appreciate the interconnections between war, state-formation and the reproduction of particularistic loyalties, and that Marxism has failed to address these problems in its efforts to construct an emancipatory politics. What is more, Marxist theory has been slow to recognise that the preservation of national loyalties and antagonisms (not least in the socialist bloc) reveals the extent to which cultural differences can be valued for their intrinsic worth.

The conclusion that nationalism has been Marxism's "greatest historical failure" would seem incontrovertible in light of these arguments, although it would be a mistake to conclude that Marxism is powerless to contribute to a theory of nationalism. Its apparent failure was the subject of an interview in the 1970s in which Regis Debray maintained that the frequency with which Marxism was "broken...upon the reality of the nation" led him to question Marxist social theory and political practice. Debray's central claim was that the persistence of nationalism exposed Marxism's erroneous belief in the "plasticity" of human nature. The Marxist notion of the malleability of human nature explained the belief that nationalism was a transient phenomenon whose dominance was about to pass. Debray did not take issue with the argument that nationalism was a specifically modern political doctrine. Where he differed from Marxism was in arguing that nationalism was a modern manifestation of immutable and universal "laws governing the survival of the human species". Debray cited the human need to locate societies in time (through the creation of foundations myths, for example) and the need to anchor human communities in a determinate space as the two principal social universals. Consequently, what was novel or unique about nationalism was less important than its similarities with other doctrines of social closure.