9

The Angel of History

We began this brief study with the recent wars between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Democratic Kampuchea, and the People's Republic of China; so it is only fitting to return finally to that point of departure. Does anything of what has meantime been said help to deepen our understanding of their outbreak?

In *The Break-up of Britain*, Tom Nairn has some valuable words on the relationship between the British political system and those of the rest of the modern world.[1]

> Alone, [the British system] represented a 'slow, conventional growth, not like the others, the product of deliberate *invention*, resulting from a theory.' Arriving later, those others 'attempted to sum up at a stroke the fruits of the experience of the state which had evolved its constitutionalism through several centuries' . . . Because it was first, the English – later British – experience remained distinct. Because they came second, into a world where the English Revolution had already succeeded and expanded, later bourgeois societies could not repeat this early development. Their *study and imitation engendered something substantially different*: the truly modern doctrine of the

1. At pp. 17–18. Emphases added. The inner quotation is taken from Charles Frederick Strong's *Modern Political Constitutions*, p. 28.

> abstract or 'impersonal' state which, because of its abstract nature, could be imitated in subsequent history.
>
> This may of course be seen as the ordinary logic of developmental processes. It was an early specimen of what was later dignified with such titles as 'the law of uneven and combined development.' Actual repetition and imitation are scarcely ever possible, whether politically, economically, socially, or technologically, because the universe is already too much altered by the first cause one is copying.

What Nairn says of the modern state is no less true of the twin conceptions of which our three embattled socialist countries are contemporary realizations: revolution and nationalism. It is perhaps too easy to forget that this pair, like capitalism and Marxism, are *inventions*, on which patents are impossible to preserve. They are there, so to speak, for the pirating. Out of these piracies and *only* out of them, comes this well-known anomaly: societies such as those of Cuba, Albania, and China, which, insofar as they are revolutionary-socialist, conceive of themselves as 'ahead' of those of France, Switzerland, and the United States, but which, insofar as they are characterized by low productivity, miserable living standards, and backward technology, are no less certainly understood as 'behind.' (Thus Chou En-lai's melancholy dream of catching up with capitalist Britain by the year 2000.)

As noted earlier, Hobsbawm was right to observe that 'the French Revolution was not made or led by a formed party or movement in the modern sense, nor by men attempting to carry out a systematic programme.' But, thanks to print-capitalism, the French experience was not merely ineradicable from human memory, it was also learnable-from. Out of almost a century of modular theorizing and practical experimentation came the Bolsheviks, who made the first successful 'planned' revolution (even if the success would not have been possible without Hindenburg's earlier triumphs at Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes) and attempted to carry out a systematic programme (even if in practice improvisation was the order of the day). It also seems clear that *without* such plans and programmes a revolution in a realm barely entering the era of industrial capitalism was out of the question. The Bolshevik revolutionary model has been decisive for all twentieth-

century revolutions because it made them imaginable in societies still more backward than All the Russias. (It opened the possibility of, so to speak, cutting history off at the pass.) The skilful early experimentations of Mao Tse-tung confirmed the utility of the model outside Europe. One can thus see a sort of culmination of the modular process in the case of Cambodia, where in 1962 less than 2.5 per cent of the two-and-a-half-million-strong adult work-force was 'working class,' and less than 0.5 per cent 'capitalists.'[2]

In much the same way, since the end of the eighteenth century nationalism has undergone a process of modulation and adaptation, according to different eras, political regimes, economies and social structures. The 'imagined community' has, as a result, spread out to every conceivable contemporary society. If it is permissible to use modern Cambodia to illustrate an extreme modular transfer of 'revolution,' it is perhaps equitable to use Vietnam to illustrate that of nationalism, by a brief excursus on the nation's name.

On his coronation in 1802, Gia-long wished to call his realm 'Nam Việt' and sent envoys to gain Peking's assent. The Manchu Son of Heaven, however, insisted that it be 'Việt Nam.' The reason for this inversion is as follows: 'Việt Nam' (or in Chinese Yüeh-nan) means, roughly, 'to the south of Việt (Yüeh),' a realm conquered by the Han seventeen centuries earlier and reputed to cover today's Chinese provinces of Kwangtung and Kwangsi, as well as the Red River valley. Gia-long's 'Nam Việt,' however, meant 'Southern Việt/Yüeh,' in effect a claim *to* the old realm. In the words of Alexander Woodside, 'the name "Vietnam" as a whole was hardly so well esteemed by Vietnamese rulers a century ago, emanating as it had from Peking, as it is in this century. An artificial appellation then, it was used extensively neither by the Chinese nor by the Vietnamese. The Chinese clung to the offensive T'ang word "Annam" . . . The

2. According to the calculations of Edwin Wells, on the basis of Table 9 in Cambodge, Ministère du Plan et Institut National de la Statistique et des Recherches Economiques, *Résultats finals du Recensement Général de la Population 1962*. Wells divides the rest of the working population as follows: government officials and new petty bourgeoisie, 8%; traditional petty bourgeoisie (traders, etc.), 7.5%; agricultural proletariat, 1.8%; peasants, 78.3%. There were less than 1,300 capitalists owning actual manufacturing enterprises.

Vietnamese court, on the other hand, privately invented another name for its kingdom in 1838–39 and did not bother to inform the Chinese. Its new name, Dại Nam, the "Great South" or "Imperial South," appeared with regularity on court documents and official historical compilations. But it has not survived to the present.'[3] This new name is interesting in two respects. First, it contains no 'Viet'-namese element. Second, its territorial reference seems purely relational – 'south' (of the Middle Kingdom).[4]

That today's Vietnamese proudly defend a Việet Nam scornfully invented by a nineteenth-century Manchu dynast reminds us of Renan's dictum that nations must have 'oublié bien des choses,' but also, paradoxically, of the imaginative power of nationalism.

If one looks back at the Vietnam of the 1930s or the Cambodia of the 1960s, one finds, *mutatis mutandis*, many similarities: a huge, illiterate, exploited peasantry, a minuscule working class, a fragmentary bourgeoisie, and a tiny, divided intelligentsia.[5] No sober contemporary analyst, viewing these conditions objectively, would in either case have predicted the revolutions soon to follow, or their wrecked triumphs. (In fact, much the same could be said, and for much the same reasons, of the China of 1910.) What made them possible, in the end, was 'planning revolution' and 'imagining the nation.'[6]

---

3. *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, pp. 120–21.

4. This is not altogether surprising. 'The Vietnamese bureaucrat looked Chinese; the Vietnamese peasant looked Southeast Asian. The bureaucrat had to write Chinese, wear Chinese-style gowns, live in a Chinese-style house, ride in a Chinese-style sedan chair, and even follow Chinese-style idiosyncracies of conspicuous consumption, like keeping a goldfish pond in his Southeast Asian garden.' Ibid., p. 199.

5. According to the 1937 census, 93–95% of the Vietnamese population was still living in rural areas. No more than 10% of the population was functionally literate in any script. No more than 20,000 persons had completed upper primary (grade 7–10) schooling between 1920 and 1938. And what Vietnamese Marxists called the 'indigenous bourgeoisie' – described by Marr as mainly absentee landlords, combined with some entrepreneurs and a few higher officials – totalled about 10,500 families, or about 0.5% of the population. *Vietnamese Tradition*, 25–26, 34, and 37. Compare the data in note 2 above.

6. And, as in the case of the Bolsheviks, fortunate catastrophes: for China, Japan's massive invasion in 1937; for Vietnam, the smashing of the Maginot Line and her own

The policies of the Pol Pot regime can only in a very limited sense be attributed to traditional Khmer culture or to its leaders' cruelty, paranoia, and megalomania. The Khmer have had their share of megalomaniac despots; some of these, however, were responsible for Angkor. Far more important are the models of what revolutions have, can, should, and should not do, drawn from France, the USSR, China, and Vietnam – and all the books written about them in French.[7]

Much the same is true of nationalism. Contemporary nationalism is the heir to two centuries of historic change. For all the reasons that I have attempted to sketch out, the legacies are truly Janus-headed. For the legators include not only San Martín and Garibaldi, but Uvarov and Macaulay. As we have seen, 'official nationalism' was from the start a conscious, self-protective *policy*, intimately linked to the preservation of imperial-dynastic interests. But once 'out there for all to see,' it was as copyable as Prussia's early-nineteenth-century military reforms, and by the same variety of political and social systems. The one persistent feature of this style of nationalism was, and is, that it is *official* – i.e. something emanating from the state, and serving the interests of the state first and foremost.

Thus the model of official nationalism assumes its relevance above all at the moment when revolutionaries successfully take control of the state, and are for the first time in a position to use the power of the state in pursuit of their visions. The relevance is all the greater insofar as even the most determinedly radical revolutionaries always, to some degree, inherit the state from the fallen regime. Some of

---

brief occupation by the Japanese; for Cambodia, the massive overflow of the American war on Vietnam into her eastern territories after March 1970. In each case the existing *ancien régime*, whether Kuomintang, French colonial, or feudal-monarchist, was fatally undermined by extraneous forces.

7. One might suggest 'yes' to the *levée en masse* and the Terror, 'no' to Thermidor and Bonapartism, for France; 'yes' to War Communism, collectivization, and the Moscow Trials, 'no' to N.E.P. and de-Stalinization, for the Soviet Union; 'yes' to peasant guerrilla communism, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution, 'no' to the Lushan Plenum, for China; 'yes' to the August Revolution and the formal liquidation of the Indochinese Communist Party in 1945, 'no' to damaging concessions to 'senior' communist parties as exemplified in the Geneva Accords, for Vietnam.

these legacies are symbolic, but not the less important for that. Despite Trotsky's unease, the capital of the USSR was moved back to the old Czarist capital of Moscow; and for over 65 years CPSU leaders have made policy in the Kremlin, ancient citadel of Czarist power – out of all possible sites in the socialist state's vast territories. Similarly, the PRC's capital is that of the Manchus (while Chiang Kai-shek had moved it to Nanking), and the CCP leaders congregate in the Forbidden City of the Sons of Heaven. In fact, there are very few, if any, socialist leaderships which have *not* clambered up into such worn, warm seats. At a less obvious level, successful revolutionaries also inherit the wiring of the old state: sometimes functionaries and informers, but always files, dossiers, archives, laws, financial records, censuses, maps, treaties, correspondence, memoranda, and so on. Like the complex electrical system in any large mansion when the owner has fled, the state awaits the new owner's hand at the switch to be very much its old brilliant self again.

One should therefore not be much surprised if revolutionary *leaderships*, consciously or unconsciously, come to play lord of the manor. We are not thinking here simply of Djugashvili's self-identification with Ivan Groznii, or Mao's expressed admiration for the tyrant Ch'in Shih Huang-ti, or Josip Broz's revival of Ruritanian pomp and ceremony.[8] 'Official nationalism' enters post-revolutionary leadership styles in a much more subtle way. By this I mean that such leaderships come easily to adopt the putative *nationalnost* of the older dynasts *and* the dynastic state. In a striking retroactive movement, dynasts who knew nothing of 'China,' 'Yugoslavia,' 'Vietnam' or 'Cambodia' become nationals (even if not always 'deserving' nationals). Out of this accommodation comes invariably that 'state' Machiavellism which is so striking a feature of post-revolutionary regimes in contrast to revolutionary nationalist movements. The more the ancient dynastic state is naturalized, the more its antique finery can be wrapped around revolutionary shoulders. The image of Sūryavarman II's Angkor Wat, emblazoned on the flag of Marxist Democratic Kampuchea (as on those of Lon Nol's puppet

8. See the extraordinary account, by no means wholly polemical, in Milovan Djilas, *Tito: the Story from Inside*, chapter 4, especially pp. 133 ff.

republic and of Sihanouk's monarchical Cambodge), is a rebus not of piety but of power.[9]

I emphasize *leaderships*, because it is leaderships, not people, who inherit old switchboards and palaces. No one imagines, I presume, that the broad masses of the Chinese people give a fig for what happens along the colonial border between Cambodia and Vietnam. Nor is it at all likely that Khmer and Vietnamese peasants wanted wars between their peoples, or were consulted in the matter. In a very real sense these were 'chancellory wars' in which popular nationalism was mobilized largely after the fact and always in a language of self-defence. (Hence the particularly low enthusiasm in China, where this language was least plausible, even under the neon-lit blazon of 'Soviet hegemonism.')[10]

In all of this, China, Vietnam, and Cambodia are not in the least unique.[11] This is why there are small grounds for hope that the precedents they have set for inter-socialist wars will not be followed, or that the imagined community of the socialist nation will soon be remaindered. But nothing can be usefully done to limit or prevent such wars unless we abandon fictions like 'Marxists as such are not nationalists,' or 'nationalism is the pathology of modern developmental history,' and, instead, do our slow best to learn the real, and imagined, experience of the past.

Of the Angel of History, Walter Benjamin wrote that:[12]

---

9. Obviously, the tendencies outlined above are by no means characteristic only of revolutionary Marxist regimes. The focus here is on such regimes both because of the historic Marxist commitment to proletarian internationalism and the destruction of feudal and capitalist states, and because of the new Indochina wars. For a decipherment of the archaizing iconography of the right-wing Suharto regime in Indonesia, see my *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia*, chapter 5.

10. The difference between the inventions of 'official nationalism' and those of other types is usually that between lies and myths.

11. On the other hand, it is possible that at the end of this century historians may attribute 'official nationalist' excesses committed by post-revolutionary socialist regimes in no small part to the disjuncture between socialist model and agrarian reality.

12. *Illuminations*, p. 259. The angel's eye is that of *Weekend*'s back-turned moving camera, before which wreck after wreck looms up momentarily on an endless highway before vanishing over the horizon.

> His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

But the Angel is immortal, and our faces are turned towards the obscurity ahead.

10

Census, Map, Museum

In the original edition of *Imagined Communities* I wrote that 'so often in the "nation-building" policies of the new states one sees both a genuine, popular nationalist enthusiasm, and a systematic, even Machiavellian, instilling of nationalist ideology through the mass media, the educational system, administrative regulations, and so forth.'[1] My short-sighted assumption then was that official nationalism in the colonized worlds of Asia and Africa was modelled directly on that of the dynastic states of nineteenth-century Europe. Subsequent reflection has persuaded me that this view was hasty and superficial, and that the immediate genealogy should be traced to the imaginings of the colonial state. At first sight, this conclusion may seem surprising, since colonial states were typically *anti*-nationalist, and often violently so. But if one looks beneath colonial ideologies and policies to the grammar in which, from the mid nineteenth century, they were deployed, the lineage becomes decidedly more clear.

Few things bring this grammar into more visible relief than three institutions of power which, although invented before the mid nineteenth century, changed their form and function as the colonized zones entered the age of mechanical reproduction. These three institutions were the census, the map, and the museum: together, they profoundly

1. See above, pp. 113–14.