

LITERATURE, PARTITION AND THE NATION-STATE

*Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel
and Palestine*

Joe Cleary



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Ireland, Palestine and the antinomies of self-determination in ‘the badlands of modernity’

I

The subject of partition receives little attention in the remarkable corpus of writing on nations and nationalism that has emerged over the past two decades or so. In the now canonical works of Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, Tom Nairn, Anthony D. Smith, Miroslav Hroch and Liah Greenfeld the topic never emerges as an issue for serious reflection. More surprisingly perhaps, it is also ignored in the more influential works on anti-colonial and postcolonial nationalism – such as those by Partha Chatterjee, Homi Bhabha, James M. Blaut and Basil Davidson – that have emerged in the same period, and only in John Breuilly’s brief survey of Indian nationalism in *Nationalism and the State* does it receive any consideration.¹ The tendency to bypass the topic in these studies is curious since partition has played an important role in the annals of British decolonisation especially, and because it raises serious theoretical questions about the nature of postcolonial state formation, state division and nation-building.

One of the reasons why the subject of partition tends to be bypassed in contemporary studies of nationalism, it would appear, is that it is taken for granted in most of these works that the newly independent postcolonial states inherited the territorial boundaries of the colonial states that preceded them. In Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, the single most influential work on nations and nationalism in recent times, this continuity between colonial and postcolonial state borders is axiomatic. Comparing twentieth-century anti-colonial nationalisms in Asia and Africa with eighteenth-century Creole nationalisms in Latin America, Anderson writes: ‘In considering the

origins of recent “colonial nationalism”, one central similarity with the colonial nationalisms of an earlier age immediately strikes the eye: *the isomorphism between each nationalism’s territorial stretch and that of the previous imperial administrative unit.*¹² Going on to contemplate the means by which the ‘imperial administrative unit came to acquire a national meaning’, Anderson attributes central significance to the colony-confined bureaucratic pilgrimages that shaped the careers of both the earlier Latin American Creole élites and those of their twentieth-century native Asian and African counterparts. He asserts, therefore: ‘Out of this pattern [of restricted pilgrimages or colony-confined career routes] came that subtle, half-concealed transformation, step by step, of the colonial-state into the national-state, a transformation made possible not only by a solid continuity of personnel, but by the established skein of journeys through which each state was experienced by its functionaries.’¹³

When Anderson writes of ‘the isomorphism between each nationalism’s territorial stretch and that of the previous imperial administrative unit’ or of the evolutionary ‘transformation, step by step, of the colonial-state into the national-state’, his statements command the authority they do because they seem accurately to describe the experience of most of the previously colonised world. In South America, Asia and Africa, the great majority of independent postcolonial states have indeed assumed the inherited boundaries of the previous colonial units. The experience of Sub-Saharan Africa especially seems to underwrite the trajectory from colonial-state to nation-state that Anderson ascribes to the colonial world in general. The imperial partition of Sub-Saharan Africa in the late nineteenth century carved that continent into colonial states that largely disregarded precolonial patterns of ethnic and political organisation, requiring local communities radically to adjust their concepts of social space. Nevertheless, the emergent postcolonial African nation-states have generally retained the old colonial frontiers and have attempted to nationalise the multi-ethnic communities within the erstwhile colonial territorial units.¹⁴

At the same time, Ireland, India and Palestine, to mention only the most obvious cases, clearly do not fit into the model of postcolonial nation-building and state-formation described here. In these situations, as elsewhere, nationalist anti-colonial independence movements did indeed anticipate that the new nation-states would inherit the territorial stretch of the existing imperial administrative unit, but in each case such expectations were eventually to be frustrated. In these countries, the majority nationalist movements within the colonial state

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found themselves confronted by a minority opposition movement that commanded sufficient popular support and political influence to compel the territorial sub-division of the imperial administrative unit. Anderson's *Imagined Communities* neither invites us to ask nor provides us with the theoretical equipment to consider why territorial cleavages of this kind should have happened in some colonies and not others.

It might be argued that Ireland, India and Palestine are simply aberrations and that even if they do not conform to Anderson's model neither do they seriously trouble its overall validity since it accurately captures the general, even if not universal, pattern of development from colonial-state to nation-state in the old European empires. When one reads his chapter on twentieth-century anti-colonial nationalism with Ireland, India or Palestine in mind, it soon becomes apparent, however, that matters are more complex than this allows. When Anderson contemplates nationalism in the colonies he does so more or less exclusively in terms, firstly, of the indigenous native élites (conceived as quite a cohesive bloc) and, secondly, in terms of the majority nationalist movements that opposed the imperial power in each unit. When he deals with either the Latin American Creole nationalisms that won their independence in the early nineteenth century or the later twentieth-century anti-colonial indigenous nationalist movements (and he stresses only the similarities between the two phenomena), Anderson makes almost no mention of either loyalist nationalisms within the settler colonies or what might be called minority or sub-nationalist movements within either set of colonies. Consequently, his conceptual scheme makes little provision for the fact that the imperial powers could sometimes manipulate minority sub-nationalisms within the colonies to frustrate majority demands for independence or for the fact that minority nationalist movements could sometimes on their own account pose serious difficulties for majority nationalist movements.⁵

Moreover, as his consistent emphasis on the bureaucratic pilgrimages of native functionaries in the imperial administration system makes clear, for Anderson the shaping of national consciousness and identity is something essentially conducted by the nationalist élites. While its importance is not to be underestimated, Anderson's exclusive focus on this class nevertheless causes him to underestimate the extent to which subaltern classes could sometimes provide important initiative and momentum for nationalist struggles against imperial rule and the extent to which the need to mobilise such classes could

constrain the political options open to the élites. Even if the leading role of the élites is accepted, therefore, Anderson's work still seems largely indifferent to the ways in which struggles between different classes can infuse the prescriptive content of nationhood with conflicting aspirations.

What I am suggesting, then, is that the processes by which the nation is imagined, national struggles mobilised, and the colonial-state transformed into a nation-state do not simply follow the smoothly evolutionary top-down trajectory that Anderson implies. Such processes are much more sharply contested – in class, ethnic, regional and religious terms – within the colony than his conceptual scheme allows, and these contests have important consequences for the social character or ideological content of the nationalisms that emerge. Only if we take account of the complex articulation of nationalist struggles with those of other social movements, and of the ways in which the latter were often inflected in terms of class, religious or regional loyalties, can we begin to understand why in some situations – such as Ireland, India and Palestine – the territorial borders of the colonial state did not become those of the nation-state, or indeed why in others – as in some African states today – inherited colonial borders continue to represent serious obstacles to ongoing projects of nation-building. Instead of the relatively steady élite-controlled 'transformation, step by step, of the colonial-state into the nation-state' that *Imagined Communities* assumes as normative, a greater appreciation of the significance of rival sub-national movements within each colony would allow us to begin to understand why in some colonies communal cleavages should have resulted in territorial division while in other situations where communal or regional cleavages were no less acute – cases such as South Africa, Nigeria or Lebanon for instance – partition was avoided.

The aim of this chapter is not to trace the history of partition in Ireland or Palestine since the historical literature on the events that culminated in partition in these countries is already vast.⁶ The chapter will assume some general familiarity with these histories, and will concentrate instead on some of the common theoretical concerns prompted by the issue of partition in these regions. I want to begin in the next section, therefore, by contesting the stubbornly popular thesis that it is the strength or virulence of ethnic nationalism in Ireland and Palestine that accounts for the original partitions there and for the subsequent conflicts that have persisted since then. Nationalist and liberal commentators, who otherwise recognise little in common, share the assumption that the conflicts in question can be ascribed to

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the persistence of aggressively chauvinistic and illiberal ethnic nationalisms, but this, I want to suggest, is drastically to over-simplify and mis-identify the issues involved. For the rival communities in Ireland and Palestine, I will suggest, the real dilemma was – and still remains – how to exercise conflicting claims to national self-determination in conditions where the national communities involved are territorially interspersed. Since this dilemma poses serious problems for civic or liberal as well as ethnic nationalisms, it is misleading to isolate ethnic nationalism as the prime root of political conflict in such circumstances and to proffer civic nationalism as the benign alternative. In both Ireland and Palestine, the original partition settlements in 1921 and 1948 respectively failed to come to grips in a just manner with the conflicting claims to self-determination asserted by the communities involved. In the final section of the chapter, the degree to which the current ‘peace processes’ in these regions recognise and attempt to remedy the intrinsic deficiencies inherent in the original partition settlements will briefly be assessed.

II

What kind of a political phenomenon is partition? Perhaps the most useful definition is Stanley Waterman’s: ‘Partition can be said to have occurred when two or more new states are created out of what had previously been a single [administrative] entity and when at least one of the new units claims a direct link with the prior state.’⁷ The manner in which links between newly created states and the older pre-partition territorial units continue to be expressed after partition varies from one situation to another. In some instances one or more of the new states have claimed to be the sole legitimate successor to the territory of the divided administrative unit and have asserted constitutional title to that territory: examples include the Irish Republic, West Germany and the two Koreas. Though the Palestinians did not control any of Palestine after 1948, their national charter claimed title to the whole territorial stretch of pre-partitioned British Palestine, and Israel, too, has always regarded the areas of historic Palestine beyond its official state boundaries as ‘lost’ territories to which it has powerful claim. Even in cases such as India and Pakistan, where partition was accepted as irreversible, or that of East Germany, where a commitment to reunification was eventually abandoned, the new states have usually claimed to embody the best traditions of the older pre-partitioned unit.

The issue of state division, however, always involves matters of *national identity* as well. Where one of the new states claims continuity with the older pre-partitioned territorial unit, this creates the dilemma as to how the national community is to be defined in such circumstances. Should 'the nation' in the wake of partition be reformulated to include only the population resident within the territory that the state in question actually administers? Or, should the state continue to define 'the nation' in terms of the wider trans-border community and/or territory that it also claims as 'its' own? If, as a consequence of partition, a section of the national community finds itself resident in the state across the border, then what obligations to support and protect the interests of that extra-state section of the nation should the 'parent' state recognise? For minority national communities stranded in states on the 'wrong' side of the partitioning border, there is also the question of how to reconcile commitments to the state in which they actually live with commitments to their ethno-national kin in the 'parent' nation-state. Partition, in short, entails a reorganisation of political space that invariably triggers complex reconstructions of national identity within and across the borders of the states involved. Further distinctions might be made here between imposed partitions that divided relatively homogeneous nations along ideological lines as a direct result of Cold War rivalries (as in Germany, Korea or Vietnam) and those implemented to resolve communal conflicts within ethnically heterogeneous colonial states at the moment of the transfer of imperial power (as in Ireland, India and Palestine). Although such distinctions are vital, the dilemmas concerning definitions of citizenship and the reconstruction of national identities that emerge in the wake of both Cold War and post-imperial partitions nonetheless share important similarities.

The strongest and most common defence of partition in the colonial situations that will concern us here is that which contends that in situations of acute inter-communal conflict partition represents a 'best-worst solution' since it is the only alternative to the greater evil of total ethno-nationalist civil war. The assumption, as D. L. Horowitz characterises it, is that, '[i]f it is impossible for groups to live together in a heterogeneous state, perhaps it is better for them to live apart in more than one homogeneous state, even if this necessitates population transfers'.⁸ For its advocates, then, in a situation of violent ethnic conflict partition represents the only humane means of intervention available since its aim is to separate the conflicting groups into ethnically homogeneous states that would eventually, it is assumed,

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be created in any event through bloody war. From this standpoint, an imposed partition, conducted under superpower supervision, has at least the advantage that it delivers in a more controlled manner what inter-communal war would otherwise deliver in any case. Where the territorial intermixing of the peoples involved renders a complete separation of the ethnic groups into homogeneous states impossible, the assumption is that borders can be redrawn or population transfers conducted in ways that reduce ethnic minorities to such a small proportion of the 'core' state population that they can no longer be construed as a serious political threat to the states in which they find themselves.⁹

It is imperative to recognise that the principle that subtends partition as a political policy – though often decried by nationalists as an imperialist desecration of 'the nation' or a grotesque violation of the national territory – is, philosophically speaking, impeccably and even dogmatically ethnic nationalist. After all, those who advocate partition as a solution to supposedly intractable ethno-national conflicts operate on the impeccably ethnic nationalist premise that nation-states should be ethnically homogeneous or should at least have clear ethnic-majority groups exercising sovereignty over their own delimited territory. In other words, advocates of partition share the ethno-nationalist assumption that geographically interspersed communities with different national affiliations represent an impediment to secure nation-building and are inherently conducive to political instability. From this perspective, the range of options available in such situations is narrowly limited: there is a simple choice between nationalist homogenisation through the cultural assimilation of minorities or the territorial division of ethnic communities into separate states, something which also produces another nationalist homogenisation though by different means.

In effect, therefore, partition has always represented an attempt to engineer, usually in an extremely compressed period, nation-states with clear and decisive ethnic majorities in precisely those situations where ethnically intermingled populations were least amenable to such results. Not surprisingly, therefore, the attempt to implement partition has invariably been accompanied by various forms of ethnic cleansing, forced population transfer and coerced assimilation – all in the name of producing the supposedly normative conditions of liberal democratic nationhood. In India and Palestine and in contemporary Yugoslavia, humanly catastrophic population transfers and expulsions have gone hand in hand with the policy of partition.¹⁰

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In most instances the conflicting communities have been so inter-mixed, however, that partition could not finally deliver the 'clean cut' it was supposed to do. Even where massive population transfers did take place, the post-imperial partitions have always left substantial national minorities stranded on 'the wrong side' of the new state borders, and these have continued to be a source of both domestic and interstate conflict. The loyalties of communities such as Northern Irish Catholics, Israeli Arabs or Indian Muslims to the states in which they resided were from the outset deemed highly suspect. In times of aggravated conflict between the divided states, these communities are still regularly viewed as 'fifth columnists' whose real allegiance is to the enemy-state across the border, and they can therefore serve as 'hostage communities' to be punished if that enemy-state is deemed to pose a threat. Since the assumption that subtends partitionist thinking is that ethnically homogeneous states will be more stable than ethnically heterogeneous ones, the policy tends to see 'minorities' in an intrinsically negative light as a problem that has somehow to be resolved. Hence after partition Northern Irish Catholics or Southern Irish Protestants, Israeli Arabs or Indian Muslims found themselves locked into states defined overwhelmingly in terms of the nationality of the majority groups. For nearly all of these communities, the struggle to undo the negative consequences of this majoritarian legacy is still ongoing.

For a variety of reasons, then, the utility of partition as a problem-solving device is questionable. In the situations listed above, the actual settlements have provided potent material for ongoing conflict. Far from bringing an incipient or ongoing civil war between populations to a decisive end, partition has generally served rather as a watershed, as a decisive realignment not only of the communal forces but of the very terms of that conflict whereby what was a smouldering 'hot' civil war between populations is afterwards resumed – in slower gear as it were – as a more cautious and protracted 'cold' war between and within states. Moreover, once they have been established, the new state regimes on both sides of the partitioning divide have often relied on whipping up fear of the external antagonist across the border to maintain domestic control at home. In many divided states, the incumbent regimes have continued to be, to paraphrase Perry Anderson, torn like Buridan's ass between contradictory desires to undermine their rivals and to avoid precipitating their ultimate collapse – lest doing so might unleash an accelerated process of change that would also undermine their own position.¹¹ In many instances, this unspoken

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collusion of interests between rival state regimes can constitute a major obstacle to any kind of reconciliation between the divided peoples involved.

Most contemporary theorists stress that nations and nationalisms are not elemental or primordial givens, but that they have emerged, rather, in response to relatively recent historical conditions. Nevertheless, despite considerable academic agreement on this point, it still remains the case, as Ernest Gellner has rightly remarked, that '[t]he most widely held theory of nationalism' continues to be 'the one that believes it to be not merely the reawakening of cultures, but the re-emergence of atavistic instincts of *Blut und Boden* in the human breast.'¹² The resilience of this particular conception of nationalism, which conceives of the phenomenon not as a response to modernity but as the unfortunate persistence into the modern of a recalcitrant pre-modern tribalism, is clearly attested by the dominant conception of recent events in the Balkans. During the past decade the conflicts in that region have been repeatedly characterised as the return of repressed ethno-national hatreds. Checked for decades by the authoritarian communist regimes in the area, so the argument runs, the instinctive age-old hatreds between Serbs, Muslims and Croats soon ran amok once the old authoritarian regimes collapsed after 1989. Closely associated with this 'return of the repressed' view of nationalism is the manichean conception that there are essentially two kinds of nationalism – a good civic kind and a bad ethnic kind – that promote two corresponding understandings of nationhood. From this perspective, the good civic conception of nationhood is based on common citizenship and the bad ethnic kind is based on common ethnic descent. Hence the customary distinction between the aggressive and illiberal ethnic nationalisms, supposedly characteristic of the 'badlands of modernity' such as the Balkans or Ireland or the 'Third World', and the saner civic nationalisms of the industrially developed world, which are identified with the democratising and unifying projects of the progressive middle classes.¹³

In essence, the arguments developed about the Balkans in recent times reiterate those deployed in earlier decades to legitimate the partitions of Ireland, India and Palestine. In these situations, too, it was widely believed, the ethno-national animosities, nurtured over centuries, were so intractable that partition represented the only practicable solution to the dilemmas involved. From this perspective, the authoritarian British imperial regime in these areas, like the Communist ones in contemporary Eastern Europe, had at least served to check

the seething ethno-national animosities within the colonies, but when the departure of the British became imminent the usual mechanisms of restraint dissolved and violent ethnic nationalist conflict inevitably ensued. The manichean distinction between ethnic and civic nationalism described above – which holds that some peoples have developed a tolerant civic nationalism that others patently have failed to do – is expressed, for example, by Reginald Coupland, in the *Palestine Royal Commission Report* in 1937. Coupland was Beit Professor of Colonial History at Oxford with expertise in British Commonwealth affairs, especially nationality conflicts in South Africa and Canada, and he was also an informed student of the partition settlement in Ireland. He went to Palestine as a member of the Royal Commission under Lord Peel to investigate possible solutions to the communal conflict there in the wake of the Arab Revolt, which had begun in 1936. While there he became committed to the idea that partition represented the only viable solution to the conflicting claims of the Jewish and Arab national movements. In the *Peel Commission Report*, Coupland argued that ‘where the conflict of nationalities has been overcome and unity achieved – in Britain itself, in Canada, in South Africa – one of the parties concerned was English or British, and . . . where that has not been so, as in the schism between the Northern and Southern Irish, or between Hindus and Moslems in India, the quarrel, though it is centuries old, has not yet been composed’.¹⁴ In Palestine, he contended, because of the immense differences between a traditional rural Arab society and a modern European urban Jewish one, ‘the gulf between the races’¹⁵ was so vast as to make compromises of the kind between, say, the British and French in Canada impossible.

For Coupland, then, the English or British possess a temperamental capacity to live harmoniously with other races in heterogeneous societies.¹⁶ On the other hand, the ‘schism’ (the suggestion of fundamental religious divergence is telling) that divides communities in Ireland, India or Palestine suggests that these peoples lack the tolerant capacity to construct viable common nationalities in the way the British and Afrikaner settlers in South Africa or the British and French in Canada had done. What is occluded here is the fact that the structural hierarchies of communal domination and subordination between Catholic and Protestant in Ulster or Jew and Arab in Palestine might be quite different to those that existed where two different settler groups, such as the French and British in Canada or British and Afrikaner in South Africa, shared a common supremacy over the natives. In short, the *structures* of communal relationship

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are eclipsed here; instead, communal antagonisms are ascribed not to structures of dominance and subordination but to essentialised 'cultural' or 'temperamental' differences. From this it is but a short step to the conclusion that the old available means to resolve such situations is to divide the peoples involved into separate states.

The argument that communal or ethnic nationalist hatreds in places such as Ireland, India and Palestine were so implacable as to make partition the only feasible solution is open to serious theoretical objection on several counts. Firstly, to make communal antagonisms the prime explanation for partition conveniently minimises the role of the imperial powers in determining such an outcome. At the most obvious level, the British imperial state had a long history in moulding ethnic identities and manipulating inter-communal conflicts within the various colonies as a means to maintain its own power. The politics of ethnicity within the colonies, in short, was not an innate or autonomous reality but was largely shaped in its modern form in response to imperial policy. Secondly, British imperial rule within the various colonies rested to a considerable degree on what John Breuilly has called 'collaborator systems' that generally required the co-operation of usually privileged élites drawn from minority communities within each administrative unit.¹⁷ In Ireland, imperial rule depended in the nineteenth century on the co-operation of an élite comprised mainly of Anglo-Irish Protestants. In Palestine, circumstances were somewhat different in this respect, but there the British presented themselves as the special guarantors of the Jewish community in the region. The point here is not to denigrate these minority élites as the witting or unwitting tools of the imperialists. It is to suggest that one of the reasons why the separatist strategies of Ulster Unionists and the Jewish Zionists could develop as successfully as they did was because these groups, despite the fact that they were minorities, already controlled important institutions within the colonies that were developed with British acquiescence or support to shore up imperial control. In short, these institutions were vitally important since they provided minority sub-nationalist élites, despite their demographic disadvantages, with the instruments that enabled them to resist the majority nationalist movements at the moment when national independence became imminent.

It also needs to be remembered in this context that even if at the actual time of the transfer of power British governments might well have preferred solutions other than partition, in each situation sections of the British establishment had provided crucial impetus to

the demand for partition at some point. In the case of Ireland, leading British conservative and imperialist politicians threw their weight behind the idea of partition in a calculated attempt to make Irish Home Rule, viewed by them as a threat to the maintenance of the wider Empire, unworkable. In Palestine, the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which committed Britain to support the establishment of both Jewish and Palestinian national homes in Palestine, set the terms for the conflicting national demands that culminated in the division of that territory. In India, the British division of Bengal in 1905 lent added fuel to communal politics and supplied an important precedent for the later partition of the subcontinent as a whole.

None of this is to suggest that 'perfidious Albion' was the sole or even chief architect of partition in the colonies or that Britain implemented partition in any of these cases simply to suit its own selfish purposes. To suppose as much is to confer on the British a degree of absolute agency that nullifies that of the other parties involved. In the colonies where partition was implemented, there were internal divisions within the British establishments of the day concerning its wisdom, and it is also the case that in some situations the British were more strongly supportive of the policy than in others. On the whole, for example, the level of British support for partition in Ireland seems to have outweighed that for the later division of Palestine.¹⁸ Nonetheless, the general point stands: the role of British imperial power, whether by indirect or direct means, in channelling communal divisions in Ireland, India and Palestine towards state division was by no means the trivial one that a convenient emphasis on supposedly primordial or innate ethno-national antagonisms would suggest. This is not simply an academic matter of correctly distributing historical blame. To lose sight of the role of the imperial powers in moulding communal identities and animosities within the colonies, and in providing the institutions that articulated such identities, is inevitably to distort the way in which we understand such conflicts and the solutions we envision to them.

Secondly, the assumption that it is chiefly the intensity of local communal animosities that determines whether or not partition will emerge as the only viable solution is also open to the objection, mentioned earlier, that in other colonies where disputes have been equally acute this has not occurred. Many examples might be cited: the ethnic disputes that temporarily divided Nigeria; Tutsi and Hutu cleavages in Rwanda in the 1990s; the rival Afrikaner, Inkatha and African National Congress national movements that might well have

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sub-divided South Africa. It is tempting to surmise in this context that where religious confession was tied to the manufacture of ethno-national identity – as in Ireland, India and Palestine – the communal cleavages would ultimately prove more fractious than their racial counterparts in, say, apartheid South Africa. Nevertheless, the case of Lebanon, which has survived as a single unit despite violent communal clashes along confessional lines, tends to complicate this hypothesis. It may ultimately be more significant perhaps that in the cases of Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa and Lebanon none of the sub-national movements with secessionist or partitionist intent won the support of major external powers. This is in direct contrast with the Ulster Unionists and the Jewish Zionists since each of these groups has secured important strategic alliances with major superpowers with the ability to enforce a solution. It would appear, therefore, that it is not the strength of ethno-national animosities per se, but rather the extent to which a sub-national movement with separatist intentions can secure external support for its ambitions, that determines whether or not partition will take place. In short, international power politics, and not simply domestic factors, would seem crucial to any understanding of which minority sub-nationalisms are likely to succeed in securing their own state and which are not.

The notion that it is the innate strength of ethnic nationalism that accounts for partition is also open to a third serious objection. One of the most important difficulties with any view that starts from this assumption is that it generally fails to distinguish adequately between the social contents of different nationalist projects. For the most part, once it is assumed that the regressive clash of rival ethnic nationalisms is responsible for the persistent conflicts in Ireland, India, Palestine or the Balkans, then commentators are released from the onerous task of discriminating between the various types of national projects in these regions. In such event, there is no need to differentiate between Irish nationalism and Irish Unionism (let alone between the variant strands of each), between Zionist and Palestinian nationalism, or indeed between Serb and Albanian nationalism in contemporary Yugoslavia, since all are construed as equally violent and destructive. Once it is assumed that these contending nationalisms are more or less the same, or that the differences between various national programmes are simply trivial variations on the same will to power, then this agnosticism tends inevitably to lead to moral and political paralysis. It must be said that many contemporary mainstream theories of nationalism, as well as some theories advanced by scholars on the political left

and in postcolonial studies, provide ample support for such agnosticism.¹⁹ Since they start from the dogmatic assumption that all nationalisms are regressive, these theories, to use Erica Benner's terms, 'discourage attempts to draw distinctions' and 'insulate a general phenomenon called "nationalism" from the more specific interests and values and political programmes that make it assume different forms'.²⁰ In many instances, if these theories distinguish at all between progressive and regressive national movements, they do so only by falling back on the manichean contrast between atavistic ethnic and modern civic nationalism mentioned earlier. The tendency either to see all nationalisms as the same, or simply to divide them into 'civic' and 'ethnic' categories, is completely antithetical to the socialist conception of nationalism developed by Marx, Engels and Lenin. From the activist standpoint of these theorists, it was vital to understand the causes of national conflicts and to discriminate between the different social contents of various nationalist movements: to decide which were generally progressive and emancipatory, which authoritarian and repressive, which contributed to the advance or retardation of domestic and international class struggles. Such tasks were indispensable since only in this way could socialists work towards practical resolutions of conflict or decide for themselves which movements deserved socialist support and which their opposition.

One final objection can also be lodged against the argument that ethno-nationalist ideology and sentiment alone are sufficient to account for partition. Although those who support such opinions tend to be anti-nationalist in intent (since they make nationalist passion responsible for the communal calamities in Ireland, India, Palestine or the Balkans), the argument itself is, ironically, deeply nationalist in its assumptions. By making nationalist passions wholly responsible for such calamities, the argument attributes to national sentiment and to national identity what Erica Benner calls an 'overwhelming magnetic pull' that supposedly overrides all other collective social loyalties and interests.²¹ Only nationalists themselves perhaps would grant that national identity could exert such autonomous causal force. A grim fatalism inheres in such notions (whether held by nationalists or their opponents) since if nationalist ideology and sentiment can command such absolute loyalty, then, as Benner observes, 'it is hard indeed to see how such conflicts can be alleviated by the politics of bargaining, compromise, and clear-headed discussion'.²² Against such views, however, a socialist conception of things would insist that nationalism does not have the absolute autonomy, and cannot compel

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the unqualified allegiance, such views presuppose. Nationalism should by no means be reduced, as some mechanical versions of socialism suppose, to a mere epiphenomenon of more fundamental class or economic interests. But neither do nationalist sentiments invariably override and subsume all other social interests and allegiances.

In sum, the thesis that partition offers the 'best-worst' solution to situations of seething communal conflict can be sustained only if one starts with the premise that the real nature of the problem is a clash of ethnic nationalisms possessed of such strength and mobilising power as to override all other social considerations and to make all other solutions unworkable. To attribute such autonomous strength to ethnic or any other kind of nationalism is, however, a nationalist fallacy. Once the autonomous strength of nationalist sentiment and ideology is accepted as a starting point for social analysis, then the significance of other factors – such as the role of imperialism in shaping and institutionalising ethnic identities in the colonies, or the different social contents of various national programmes – tends to be underestimated. As a practical policy that starts from an overestimation of nationalist appeals, the chief difficulty with partition is that it takes virulent ethno-national conflict as an absolute given. Consequently, it is designed to restructure political space to accommodate such conflict rather than to tackle or transform the wider conditions that generated it in the first instance.

III

Communalism or sectarianism, subaltern and especially élite class economic interests, strategic imperial interests – these all contributed to the conflicts that led to partition in Ireland, India and Palestine. In each case, moreover, conservative and regressive forms of nationalism (including the imperialist nationalism of the British) clearly played an important role in setting the terms within which political debate developed. Nevertheless, as argued in the preceding section, it is much too simple to attribute communal conflict and eventual partition to the strength of illiberal ethnic nationalism in these regions. The complex dilemmas that emerged in these situations – which essentially have to do with clashing rights to self-determination and with whether or not minorities within a colonial state are entitled to collective cultural recognition or simply the rights of individual citizenship – trouble not only so-called backward and illiberal ethnic nationalisms but the supposedly more civic versions as well.

Literature, Partition and the Nation-State

As majority nationalist movements in Ireland, India and Palestine mobilised a mass base and moved towards the attainment of political independence, in each case a dissident minority movement also came into existence in tandem with them. Each of these movements claimed that it represented not a religious or ethnic minority but a second and separate 'nation' within the colony whose interests would be negated in any sovereign state ruled over by the majority nationalist movement. Circumstances varied in important ways from one situation to the next, and the kinds of political settlements that the minority national movements demanded also differed. Unlike the Muslim League in India, for example, Irish Unionists did not demand a separate national homeland of their own. Instead, they initially opposed Irish Home Rule and campaigned that Ireland as a whole be retained within the United Kingdom (UK). Only when it became clear that this optimal demand could not be met did Unionists alter strategy and seek instead a partition of the island and accept a Northern Irish state that would still remain an integral part of the UK. In Palestine, on the other hand, though Jewish settlers remained a minority throughout the period of British rule, the Zionist movement claimed all the land of Palestine on the basis of ancient Biblical title. After considerable internal debate and dissent in the 1930s, Zionists reluctantly accepted the idea of partition on the grounds that it at least allowed them to secure a smaller Jewish state rather than none at all.²³

Nevertheless, though circumstances and ambitions varied, the fundamental dilemma in each situation shared some resemblance. In each case, the majority nationalist movement contended that there was only one legitimate nation within the colonial state, and that its opponents – Irish Unionists, the Muslim League, the Jewish Zionists – represented not a second 'nation' but rather a religious minority.²⁴ From this perspective, those who belonged to these minorities would be entitled to full civil and religious liberties as individual citizens within a sovereign Ireland, India or Palestine, but not to their own separate homeland. When confronted with the imminent possibility of partition, the majority nationalist movements were willing to contemplate some limited kinds of regional autonomy and self-government to appease these religious minorities (as they saw them), but each remained adamantly opposed to the concept of state division.

The minority movement in each instance, on the other hand, contended that it represented not simply a religious community or an ethnic minority but rather a historically and culturally distinct people with collective national rights. Accordingly, even if its members'

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individual civil and religious liberties could be protected within the new state (and none of the movements accepted that such protection could reasonably be expected), it was collective self-determination and not individual rights that was essentially at issue. In all three cases, then, the initial dilemma that had to be decided was whether there was 'one nation or two' within the existing administrative unit. Were it allowed that there were two culturally distinct peoples or nations, the issue then became how to resolve conflicting claims to self-determination. Since the communities in each case were not geographically concentrated in separate regions, there was also the complex issue as to how minority self-determination could practically be implemented even were it deemed legitimate. In all three situations, therefore, the antinomies of national self-determination generated not only complex issues of principle but acute practical problems as well.

Liberal political theory seems to encounter some severe difficulties when confronted with such situations. Liberal theory holds as a fundamental principle the idea that the state, and all public institutions, will treat all citizens equally, irrespective of race, sex, religion or other cultural particularities. For liberals, it is only when everyone is treated equally that the basic needs of people, shared universally, can adequately be satisfied. But in order to uphold such freedoms, the locus of rights must be the individual citizen, the bearer of human needs. As Partha Chatterjee has argued, liberal political theory in its strict sense, then, cannot recognise the validity of any collective rights of cultural groups; to recognise rights that belong exclusively to particular groups within the state is to destroy the very principles on which liberalism rests. It follows, as Chatterjee contends, that it is extremely difficult to justify the granting of substantively different collective rights to cultural groups on the basis of liberalism's commitment to procedural equality and universal citizenship. Accordingly, the charge that is made against liberalism is not merely that it forces everyone into a single homogeneous mould, thus threatening the distinct identities of minority groups; it is also that the homogeneous mould of state citizenship itself is by no means a neutral one (whatever the claims to the contrary), but invariably reflects the culture of the dominant group, so that it is not everyone but only minorities that are forced to forego their cultural identities.²⁵

This was precisely the dilemma that confronted the minority communities in Ireland, India and Palestine. Mass support for the majority nationalist movements in all three cases came preponderantly, though not exclusively in Ireland or India at any rate, from

one ethnic and religious community within the colonial state. For the minority communities, then, even were their *individual* cultural and religious rights indeed upheld by the soon-to-be independent states, they would still have to forego their own *collective* cultural and national identities, and essentially be assimilated into the national culture of the dominant group within the new state. Whether or not an independent united Ireland, India or Palestine would indeed have proved as inimical to the individual religious and cultural liberties as the minority communities claimed is now a matter of polemical speculation. In the strictest sense, the issue is somewhat beside the point, however, since the most important concern for the minority communities was not individual citizenship but the collective political and cultural autonomy of their communities.

Despite the claims of Irish or Palestinian nationalists at the time, it may be allowed that both Ulster Protestants and Jewish settlers in Palestine were not simply religious minorities and that they did indeed constitute, as they themselves claimed, distinctive peoples with a separate nationality to the local ethnic majority.²⁶ It can also be accepted that both Zionists and Ulster Unionists had some reasonable grounds to fear that their opponents might impose their own cultures on them in the event of independence. Historical instances of attempts to coerce national minorities into the culture of national majorities were common enough to warrant such fears. In both situations, therefore, the minority communities had reason to think that securing their own states would best protect their collective cultural identities and interests.

Nevertheless, it does not follow from this that either Unionists or Zionists had an unqualified right to their own independent territorial states. The difficulty for both of these communities was that even in the regions in which they were most territorially concentrated there were also substantial Irish nationalist and Palestinian communities. A critical impediment to both the Unionist and Zionist demands for a separate state that would allow them to exercise full self-determination was that such states could not be produced without denying the same rights to substantial communities of Irish or Palestinian nationalists. In situations where different national groups are intermingled in this way, and where the national self-determination of one group can only be exercised at the expense of another, most liberal theories of self-determination hold that minorities will have to settle for something less than full self-determination. From this liberal standpoint, then, both Unionists and Zionists could legitimately claim a right to the

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protection of their distinct national cultures. But given the constraints that stemmed from the geographical intermixing of peoples within the colonial unit in both situations, their demands for autonomy would have to be settled by solutions that fell short of traditional statehood.²⁷

In Ireland, things were especially complicated by the fact that the question of whether Irish nationalists or Irish Unionists should be considered the minority depended on how the legitimate unit of self-determination was construed. Since Ireland had been integrated as a sub-state of the UK since 1800, Unionists could argue that the British Isles as a whole (and not the island of Ireland) constituted the natural unit of plebiscite to decide such issues. From this perspective, it was the Irish nationalists that constituted the secessionist regional minority that wished to exercise its own self-determination at Unionist expense. Even if the Unionist argument about the proper unit of plebiscite is accepted, however, their case is still quite weak on liberal terms. Before 1918 at least, the leading Irish nationalist party was not in fact demanding complete separation from the UK or full political autonomy, but only a devolved or limited Home Rule parliament in Dublin. Liberal theory would generally accept that national 'minorities' such as Irish nationalists (defined as such within the context of the British Isles as a whole that is) were entitled to this limited measure of sovereignty. On this premise, Unionists had little grounds to object to Irish Home Rule, even if they had stronger ones to oppose complete independence for Ireland. But Unionists were in fact equally opposed to both. Moreover, since a democratic majority in the UK parliament carried the vote for Irish Home Rule, Unionists could not legitimately claim that their opposition to this measure was justified by the fact that it enjoyed the support of the majority of British citizens. In fact, when the British Parliament seemed about to implement Home Rule, Unionists, with the support of leading British Conservatives, imported guns from Germany and organised on a paramilitary basis to defy the democratic will of parliament. Even were Unionist arguments about what constituted the proper unit of plebiscite to determine self-determination to be accepted, then by most liberal standards of adjudication on such matters, Unionist opposition to Irish Home Rule would have to be deemed contrary to liberal and democratic principle.

From the perspective of the majority nationalist communities in Ireland and Palestine, the existing administrative boundaries of the colonial state comprised the natural plebiscite unit in which to decide the question of self-determination. In Ireland, as already noted, this claim was open to Unionist dispute since the island had been part of

the UK since 1800. Nevertheless, it is also the case that after the Act of Union Westminster had continued to treat Ireland as a single and largely distinct administrative unit. There was no equivalent to Dublin Castle (the administrative headquarters of British rule in Ireland) or to the position of the Irish Lord Lieutenant in either Scotland or Wales, for example. Ireland also retained its own legal apparatus and was governed by a separate armed police system. The British Conservative or Liberal political parties had never organised in Ireland as they had done in the other three countries that comprised the UK. Moreover, most 'mainland' British politicians did not seem to regard any part of Ireland, including Ulster, as an integral part of the British State in the same way as Scotland and Wales. This is suggested by the fact that even after Northern Ireland was excluded from Irish Home Rule in the South it was accorded its own quasi-autonomous parliament in Belfast, something which clearly set it at a remove from the rest of the UK state. There is much to substantiate the Irish nationalist claim, therefore, that the administrative boundaries of the Irish colonial state constituted the obvious *historical* (not natural) unit within which the exercise of self-determination should be decided.

Within the respective colonial units, Irish and Palestinian nationalists constituted clear demographic majorities and could on this account claim title to national self-determination as a democratic right. In the 1918 General Election, the first conducted in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland under rules approximating universal adult suffrage, the two major Irish nationalist parties that supported independence, and opposed partition, won 79 out of 109 seats, over three quarters of the Irish vote. The will of the overwhelming majority of the Irish people within the long-established electoral and administrative unit could not be in doubt therefore. In Palestine, Jews still legally held only 6 per cent of the land of Palestine and accounted for only 30 per cent of the population there in the period before the State of Israel was established. The United Nations (UN) Partition Plan, as David McDowall comments, 'awarded 54 per cent of the land area to the proposed Jewish state, even though Jews constituted less than one third of the population. It was manifestly unjust (and arguably absurd) in its demographic division, since it proposed a Jewish state that would be virtually 50 per cent Arab, but an Arab state that would be no less than 98.7 per cent Arab.'²⁸ In such context, partition cannot be construed as an equitable attempt to solve conflicting principles. Instead, it arbitrarily tried to manufacture a Jewish territorial