

PASSION AND PARADOX

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Joan Cocks. *Passion and Paradox: Intellectuals Confront the National Question*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton U. P., 2002. Pp. 220. US\$49.50; pb \$16.95.

According to an ancient legend, four Rabbis ventured into the garden of philosophy. One, it is said, went insane, another became a heretic, a third died and only the fourth emerged unscathed. A modern variation of this story might go like this. Four or perhaps 400 philosophers entered the jungle of nationalism and for the most part went insane. There were those who embraced nationalism and consequently abandoned the universality of philosophy for the promotion of xenophobia, racism and even Nazism. Others remained internationalist and hence became futile—philosophical Canutes—commanding the raging beasts of nationality to be still. No one struggled harder with nationalism than Bertrand Russell. In 1917, writing as an internationalist, he announced the demise of the principle of nationality only to see nationalisms explode in every region of the world (see his “National Independence and Internationalism”, *Papers* 14). He opposed it relentlessly and without compromise until near the end of his life when he found himself endorsing wars of national liberation. Nationalism is often depicted as a howling beast. It would be better to think of it as an anaconda that wraps itself around everyone who ventures into its domain.

Joan Cocks’ *Passion and Paradox* is an important book on nationalism and the intelligentsia. She traces the intellectual encounter with nationalism of a number of figures—Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Isaiah Berlin and the Scottish nationalist Tom Nairn, among others. All are exiles, most are Jews, and all try to hack their way through a jungle of conundrums of nationalist thought. Her accounts of these thinkers sometimes read like complex legal briefs, but are always illuminating. Though an internationalist, she sees the power of nationalist imperatives. Her approach to the contradictory strains of nationalism and hostility to nationalism echoes that of Hegel. She presents critical but sympathetic accounts of each side of the nationalist problematic and shows how their difficulties might be resolved in a higher synthesis. Alas! her resolution suffers from the unworldliness that she finds in other versions of internationalism.

Her argument begins with a personal experience. In the early ’90s she joined a group of Arabs and Jews against the Gulf War. In the course of their associ-

ation she learned that the Jews were all internationalists, while the Arabs were outspoken nationalists. This experience presumably demonstrated that a happy collusion of nationalism and internationalism was possible. But, of course, there was another side: those prosecuting the war she opposed were also nationalists. Her central thesis addresses the tragedy of opposition. It states that nationalism is “dilemmatic”, that is, that “all paths of thought obscured equally telling contrary thoughts; all courses of action were strewn with causes for regret and remorse” (p. 2). The horns of the dilemma are the valid claims of the internationalist who sees the underlying self-destructive deep structures of nationalism on one side, and the claims of the national particularistic who is engaged in the compelling theatre of national liberation and the protection of local customs and roots on the other. Her book is an account of how her thinkers are framed by this dilemma, locked in by the imperatives of either side.

In the period between the Gulf War and the composition of this book in 2002 Cocks was able to observe what she identifies as the destructive logic of nationalism. The '90s were a period of postmodernist celebration of the local, a sensibility that helped to legitimate nationalism. The explosion of nationalism that followed the breakup of the Communist imperium was a time of liberation of the imprisoned nations—a springtime when it was good to be alive. But as the decade wore on the concealed pit bulls came out—in Yugoslavia, in Rwanda and elsewhere. In Cocks' view nationalism showed an inner logic, of a sort that Russell called attention to in the early '20s—a logic that led from euphoria to self-destruction (see his *Prospects*). Her aim is to revive the half-remembered internationalist tradition as formulated by Marx and Luxemburg—but also to show its limitations, and to give a hearing to what is compelling in nationalism.

In Cocks' hands the internationalist counterattack to the '90s celebration of localism is very compelling indeed. Both Marx and Luxemburg view nationalism as a hangover from religion, a “false subjectivity”, which binds the nation but conceals the sources of its divisions. Cocks is right that their arguments are relevant today. According to both, the nation conceals the fact that its sovereignty is undermined by the international economy, what we call globalization; it is also undermined by its inner divisions, a fact evident in countries from Canada to Yugoslavia. Often the state is a power against the people, as in Iraq. Luxemburg calls attention to what had become obvious in the latter part of the nineteenth century, that nations are usually flung together with other nations within the same borders, so that the group that defines the nation is often led to persecute the minorities within its borders. These contentions resonate today.

But Cocks also gives a compelling account of the counter-arguments. The nation may be a mythic subject, but so is the “international proletariat”: the Marxists' critique of inner division is vitiated by the constitutional inability of Marxists to appreciate any form of diversity and finally by the disastrous invest-

ment of Marxism in a single universal culture to which they believed all societies are converging. For example, twentieth-century Marxists pointed to the societies of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union as the model for the future, but Cocks remarks these have been exposed as the pickle barrels of fundamentalist religion. Her champion of nationalism is the Scottish writer, Tom Nairn. Nairn's theory is a derivation of Marxism, or perhaps of Lenin's theory of uneven development—that the global economy creates an explosion of centralized imperia and their peripheries. For him nationalism is the creative revolt of the peripheries against the phony universalism of the centre. He admits that nationalism creates chaos, but the chaos of the '90s, he declares, is better than the monoculture and reign of terror of the “universalistic” Cold War period. Yet he glosses over the dark side of nationalism.

Hannah Arendt, who lays bare the underside of nationalism and internationalism, dominates the volume. Arendt is sympathetic to the primal impulse of nationalism, the desire to create a nation-state that offers a forum, or, as the Greeks would have said, an agora, for free thought and free action, but she also is the keenest observer of the modern conditions that subvert this noble aspiration. The nation-state promised freedom but was devoured by its bourgeois citizens who became more attached to the international flow of capital and, by many of its other citizens, by the international appeal of racism and the various ethnic pan movements of the century. Internationalism, in Arendt's account, is the villainous demon that makes the world inhuman.

In the end Cocks tries to discover a new combination of the allure of local power and rootedness with the generosity of internationalism. Her own default position is internationalism, which she sets out to reconstruct. For the twenty-first century she recommends an internationalism that rejects the empty sameness of a universal culture. Through a critical account of the two diasporic exiles, Edward Said and V. S. Naipaul, she comes to an internationalism that celebrates variety and the mingling of cultures. She also calls for a new localism that can see into the broader horizons of other cultures, while seeking appropriate power and security in its own domain.

This proposition is surely very attractive. It seems to me to be encapsulated in the recent concepts of “creolization”. We see this in Canada, in our students—especially those from different cultures, who are totally assimilated but also totally engaged in their own cultural roots.

Cocks' volume is a valuable addition to the literature of nationalism. She lays bare the destructive logics of nationalism as well as of internationalism in the forms that we know them. She endeavours to create new forms but by arguments that assume the passing of international capitalism and the nation-state. We are certainly far from this. She sees with chilling clarity the collision of both extremes in the nationalist debate but tries to reconcile them beyond the stars.
