Once upon a time, Karl Marx thought nationalism would wither away. Now it seems to be back with a vengeance. Tom Morton spoke to Eric Hobsbawm about nationalism, its revival, and the prospects for the new, fragmented states of Europe.

Eric Hobsbawm is emeritus professor of history at Birkbeck College, University of London. He was born in Alexandria in 1917, and emigrated to Britain with his family in his youth. He is the author of such celebrated works of history as Labouring Men, The Age of Empire and Industry and Empire. He was also a key figure in debates within the British Left in the 1980s. His latest book, Nations and Nationalism, is published by Cambridge University Press.

One of the central points you make at the beginning of your recent book about nationalism is that nations are a modern phenomenon. They appeared essentially in the 18th and early 19th centuries and the idea of the nation simply wasn’t in people’s heads before then. Why is it that nationalism appears at that time and what is it about nationalism that’s new?

The first thing to understand is that there’s a tremendous difference between the sense of belonging to a particular group, such as being a Kurd, or a Jew, and the idea that being a Kurd or a Jew should mean having a state of the Kurds or the Jews. If you like, the idea of identity as part of an ethnic or linguistic group belongs to history, to society, to anthropology. Nationalism, on the other hand, belongs to a particular political program. It’s that political program which is new and basically, give or take a few predecessors, it only comes in with the American and French revolutions.

What is it that’s different about people thinking of themselves, say, as French, Spanish or American as compared to thinking of themselves as Romans or Greeks or Goths?
Thinking of yourself as French or Spanish is a political act which means thinking of yourself as a member of a Spanish state or a French state. It's perfectly compatible with thinking yourself as Breton or a Provencal or a Fleming or a Catalan. Practically all the old nation states, including Great Britain, France and Spain were in fact by modern standards multilingual, multiethnic and multinational. To be English or to be British does not mean to be a member of a particular ethnic group. To be English can mean being a member of an ethnic group, just as being French can mean that, but it's not the same thing.

And the other idea is that these new states should be a particular kind of state, a state run by a central government which has a direct pipeline, directly from the centre to each and every last citizen. That's quite new. In the Middle Ages, people weren't governed that way. They were governed through intermediate lords and corporations, through intermediate autonomous groups. And if you put those two ideas together, you get the makings of the modern nation state.

One of the confusing things about nationalism is that, on the one hand, it is very much a modern phenomenon—if we think of the modern era as beginning in the 18th century with the Enlightenment. But on the other hand when people start thinking of themselves as belonging to nations, they imagine those nations as stretching far back into time. How important is it to the emergence of nations to invent histories and traditions for themselves? Of course, sometimes they do stretch back far into time. The problem is the assumption that those age-old traditions mean the same as modern nationalism. There's probably not been a time when the Jews didn't think of themselves as different from the people among whom they lived. But until the 1890s, practically nobody thought that this implied that the Jews should have a state of their own in Palestine. In fact, most Jews didn't live in what is today Israel even in the days of the Romans. They probably lived in Babylonia, in Egypt and elsewhere. The sleight of hand arises in the combination of something which has existed for a very long time, such as the idea that Jews are different from non-Jews, and the much more modern idea—in fact the entirely non-traditional idea—that this should require a particular territorial state. I'm not talking just about the Jews in this regard; I'm talking about any ethnic or linguistic group which makes this claim. That claim almost certainly implies inventing history.

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In many cases these peoples have to invent history because very often their history isn’t that old. For instance, there is the case of the current dispute in the Caucasus between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno Karabakh. The argument is over which of the two the enclave really belongs to. This is entirely conducted in terms of mediaeval history because originally it belonged to neither; it belonged to a people which has now disappeared called the Caucasian Albanians. And so Armenian historians claim that the Armenians that live there now are the lineal descendants of these Caucasian Albanians while the Azerbaijani claim that, in fact, they are the original Caucasian Albanians who have just taken to talking Azerbaijani. That’s the kind of argument which is used to justify current disputes and conflicts. But of course if you could talk to people in the 15th century in these areas, this dispute would have seem completely meaningless.

How does that process work? Who are the agents of reinventing history, reinventing traditions?

Often it used to be “patriotic” historians. In places like Georgia and the Caucasus historical novels were important, and schoolteachers passed on these ideas in class. Today, of course, it’s the media in general. For that matter it could be operatic composers; it could be composers of folk songs; it could be almost anybody. There’s a huge process of invention going on. I’m bound to say that we historians are in this respect a little bit like poppy growers in that we provide the raw material for the drug addicts. Only, unfortunately for nationalism, professional historians don’t provide the right kind of raw material.

In your book you argue that in the latter part of the 19th century the nature of nationalism changes and that, in fact, it’s the emergence of modern forms of the state which transform it. How did this happen?

Part of the transformation occurred through the spread of the franchise. Once universal suffrage becomes the norm, candidates feel that there’s an advantage in appealing to the voters on the strength of those things that voters think they have in common—and being Irish or Polish in multi-lingual societies would be one of those things. And so that becomes quite an important issue. It still doesn’t necessarily explain the modern kind of separatist nationalism, however. Scottish and Welsh nationalism in Britain is longstanding, but it hasn’t always necessarily led to Scottish or Welsh separatism. What it has more usually meant is that, for instance, Welsh voters tended to pick one of the all-British parties—in this instance, first the Liberal Party, then the Labour Party. It took a very long time before Welsh nationalism turned into a specific demand for Welsh autonomy. It didn’t become a major issue in Wales until the 1960s.

Is there also a sense in which the modernising state appropriates some of the rhetoric of nationalism from the kind of democratic nationalist movements which came to prominence in the 1848 revolutions for conservative ends?

There’s no doubt that among the older nations towards the end of the 19th century nationalism switched from being a cause of the Left to one of the Right. In this it was assisted partly by the appeal of imperialism, and partly by the enormous migratory movements which actually brought ordinary citizens face to face with a lot of foreigners, often for the first time. And partly, of course, by the threat of the then new political movements like the labour movement and the socialist movement.

But you also quote the interesting example of Colonel Pilsudski, the liberator of Poland—who himself was a democrat and was identified with the Left. You cite Pilsudski as saying it’s the state which makes the nation and not the nation which makes the state. What do you think he meant by that precisely?

He meant what everybody actually knows; that that there is very little grass roots drive in nationalism until you manage to set up a state. If you’ve got a bottle you can put some wine into it. It’s not the wine that makes the bottle, but the bottle which contains the liquid. Pilsudski knew perfectly well that there were a lot of people who called themselves Poles, but there were also other people in historic Poland who were not Poles. To become Poland and to get a Polish national sentiment was impossible until there was a Polish state.

In Yugoslavia right now the conflict there is seen partly as a conflict between Catholic Croatia and Orthodox Serbia—and we can see similar kinds of conflict elsewhere in Eastern Europe. How important is religion in the making of modern national identities?

It can be an alternative, or a component: but it’s not very often that it is a primary component. In the case of the Croat-Serb conflict, almost the only thing apart from history which distinguishes these two peoples who look the same and talk the same language, is that one is Roman Catholic and the other is Orthodox Christian. But that’s not particularly typical. For example, Islamic fundamentalism is only by the sheerest accident a nationalist factor. To the best of my knowledge Islamic fundamentalism has not actually generated a nationalist movement anywhere.

You make the point in your book that there was an idea current at the end of the 19th century that nations had to be of a certain size to be real nations. For instance, the Sicilians, or the Basques, or the Bohemians or the Welsh wouldn’t qualify to be a nation because there weren’t enough of them or because they didn’t occupy a big enough territory. How important was that for the development of nationalism in the 20th century?

It dominated the way the map of Europe was redrawn in the middle of the 19th century. But at the end of the 19th century they dropped the idea that a nation had to be a minimum viable size. And one of the reasons why the peace treaties at the end of World War I were such a mess was precisely because they drew up frontiers in terms which had no relationship at all to the historic or economic viability of nation states. They drew them up at least in
theory on purely ethnic/linguistic criteria. And now the chickens of the Treaties of Versailles and Brest-Litovsk are, so to speak, coming home to roost.

The same idea seems to dominate the thinking of, say, the European Community—the idea that somehow the small nations like the Baltic States, and even the component republics of Yugoslavia, don’t quite qualify to be nations and things would be much easier if they’d stay in these larger units.

Well, wouldn’t it be easier?

Perhaps it would be. But isn’t there a sense in which we’ve missed the political boat by saying in the West that you should stay together because you won’t cause us so much trouble if you stay together as Yugoslavia or Czechoslovakia or the Soviet Union? Haven’t we perhaps promoted conflicts in these areas by saying you’ve got to stay together because you’re not big enough?

I don’t actually think that is so. The people who argue that it would be better if the Soviet Union or Yugoslavia stayed together are not the people who created the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. We find ourselves faced with a situation in which a lot of new states—in some instances, in the case of the Soviet Union, almost phantom states—are appearing out of the ashes of former federal states. Obviously we have to make the best we can of this, and sooner or later, no doubt, we have to recognise them. But do you honestly believe that a Europe composed of a lot of places like Macedonia and Slovakia is going to be more stable than the European Union we’ve had for 40 to 50 years? Do you believe that the Soviet Union composed of all these quarrelling successor republics is going to be the basis of peace and quiet in the area between Vienna and the Pacific Ocean?

It does seem that we don’t have the analytical tools to understand what’s going on, because it seems as though that within every nation there is a sub-nation or a smaller nation trying to get out. For instance, in Slovakia, you have Slovakia which considers itself perhaps separate from Czechoslovakia. Yet within Slovakia you have a Hungarian minority saying we don’t belong here either; we want to be Hungarians separate from Slovakia. Why has that happened? Why is there this kind of atomisation and disintegration into the smallest possible unit?

It’s happening because the idea that states should be composed of one ethnic or linguistic group, every nation a state, is totally unrealistic. There are maybe 170 states in the world today, and of these I suppose at best a dozen come anywhere near being ethnically or linguistically homogeneous. So it’s patently clear that this is not really a world program. The distribution of peoples over the face of the world including the face of Europe is a lot older that the idea of independent nation states—particularly ethnic nation states—and consequently most of these are in fact just as mixed as larger states from which they break away. What’s more, in the 20th century, the modern economy means that people are constantly moving. So even if you’ve got one homogeneous state as a result of expelling or killing off all the foreigners, somebody else is going to come in. This is how the modern world economy works; it’s an economy of migration. Consequently the idea of a territorial state based on a particular ethnic/linguistic group is not one that can work for any length of time.

It does seem to have come back with a particular virulence now, though, doesn’t it?

That’s right.

Why?

Because these countries are falling apart as political entities. I don’t believe there is intrinsically more ethnic hatred in Yugoslavia than in Spain, or, for that matter, in Great Britain. The difference is that Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union fell apart politically from inside. And naturally they are breaking up along the political fracture lines. They’re breaking up into the republics—Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia, Slovenia and so on—which were supposed to be nationally and ethnically defined. We don’t even know how many of the inhabitants of the Ukraine, Moldavia or Byelorussia initially really felt about secession. It’s pretty certain that in the Soviet Union three years ago, with the exception of the Baltic states, there was no serious mass demand for secession anywhere. They have to secede because the whole box of tricks is falling to pieces; they have to secede in self-defence. Once they secede they have another set of problems.

At the same time as the idea of the modern nation state emerged in the 18th century in Europe and the Americas, there was the emergence in Europe of another kind of idea which has become important in our own time: the notion of a United Europe. You find it in the writings of the German philosopher Kant and some of his contemporaries. I wonder if you think that in our own time the idea of Europe can be a kind of counterbalance for these forces of fragmentation.

Personally, I doubt it. I think the most likely thing is for people to have multiple identification. They might say: I’m a European, when confronted by the Americans or Japanese. But I don’t see that this is going to replace the sentiment of being English or Portuguese or Czech. But then I don’t think we want to abolish the sentiment of being Czech or Croat. What we want to do is to stop people killing each other over it. It has now got to the stage where only a very few among the Irish kill each other over the question of being Irish. That’s a step forward. No doubt in God’s good time this may happen in Eastern Europe, but it will take quite a long time. I think we look forward to a pretty gloomy and conflict-laden time for the next few years.

TOM MORTON is the producer for ABC Radio National’s The Europeans. Excerpts from this interview appeared on The Europeans in January and February.