From an Ecological Perspective:

"The National Question" Reconsidered

Jeremy Brecher

Nineteen-eighty-six marked the hundredth anniversary of a general strike throughout the United States for the eight hour day, best remembered today for the trial and judicial murder of the Haymarket Martyrs. That event came to be commemorated in the world-wide holiday May Day celebrating the international solidarity of labor.

One hundred years later, May Day was barely acknowledged in North America, while in Moscow’s Red Square tanks paraded and jet fighters screamed overhead. Similar celebrations occurred in the Soviet-dominated countries of Eastern Europe and in the anti-Soviet and mutually hostile Communist countries of Asia. The festival of international solidarity has been transformed into a celebration of national power.

Yet the insubstantiality of national boundaries was well demonstrated on last year’s May Day, not by workers of all lands joining in The Internationale, but by a cloud of radioactive dust circling the globe, carrying the message “Chernobyl is everywhere.” It is in this context that I want to reconsider what radicals once called “the national question.”

The problems of nationality, nationalism, and the nation state have proved over the past century to be the greatest stumbling blocks to the aspirations for a better world expressed in socialist, anarchist, communist, and related radical movements. Class has not so far proved to be a unifying bond which overcomes the conflicts among different peoples. Nor has the liberation of one people from oppression by another ensured pro-social behavior on the part of the formerly oppressed once in power. Radical movements today, as over the past hundred years, seem pulled between the powerful if chauvinistic sentiments of particular ethnic, racial, and national groups on the one hand and a dedication to an abstract, cosmopolitan concept of human unity that finds little resonance in most people’s actual sense of identity.

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In this article I would like to present a rather unconventional approach to "the national question." It is oriented neither toward cosmopolitanism nor toward national liberation. Rather, it grows out of a historical analysis of how the nation state arose—and out of an "ecological perspective" of a world composed not of sovereign entities but of many levels of open, interacting communities.

State and Nation State

Like the air we breathe, the nation state is today so nearly universal and so little questioned that it is difficult to scrutinize. We know that there are armies, courts, bureaucracies, and congresses, linked together by laws and beliefs, but to grasp the organization of these as one among many possible social forms we need to examine the historical development of the state and the nation.

No equivalent of our concept of the state existed in medieval Europe. Princes and kings exercised what powers they possessed as individuals leading personal retinues and supporters, not as representatives of an institutional structure which existed independently of themselves. They did not monopolize law-making power or legitimate allegiance within their realms, for such prerogatives were shared with both feudal lords and the church. Finally, they were not sovereign, for both the Holy Roman Emperor and the Catholic Church, though often weak, were recognized as universal authorities to which princes and kings were subordinate.

By the 17th century, many Europeans rulers had managed to assert a monopoly of power against church and feudal authorities within their realms and sovereignty against Emperor and Pope. This reality was recognized conceptually in the formulation of Bartolus that the Italian city-states should be recognized as "independent associations not recognizing any superior" and Charles Du Moulin’s argument that the powers of the crown should not be envisioned as the apex of a feudal pyramid, but rather as a unified and absolute authority under which all citizens should be ranged in a legally undifferentiated fashion as subjects. With the subsequent expansion of the royal bureaucracies, theorists like Jean Bodin began to speak of "the state" as an apparatus distinct from the ruler.

These "early modern" states were still far different from modern nation states, however. Those ruled were defined as subjects, not citizens. And neither the monarch nor the state apparatus needed to have any connection of origin or culture in common with those they ruled; a German could be king of England, for example. Such states ruled not nations but empires—ethnically heterogeneous and often geographically scattered agglomerations of peoples and territories. Those they ruled generally identified themselves as members of various local, regional, linguistic, and religious groups who were ruled by one or another monarch, rather than as parts of a nation. As late as 1914, "dynastic states made up the majority of the membership of the world political system."

Starting in the late 18th century, however, nationalist movements began to arise which sought to align states as power centers with nations as communities
of people who asserted common linguistic, ethnic, or historical bonds. As Benedict Anderson emphasizes, the sense of nationality lies in being part of an "imagined community" with a sense of loyalty and even love among community members. It arose first in the colonists' revolts of South and North America, which replaced imperial dynastic rule with national republics. These were followed by European nationalist movements which arose from Ireland to Russia against imperial dynastic rule. These at times involved dramatic popular mobilizations and upheavals which drew previously excluded classes into political life and were experienced as moments of liberation.

In response to such popular nationalism, many imperial monarchies attempted to transform themselves into nation states. These, along with the new states established by nationalist movements, created a kind of "official nationalism" drawing on but not identical to the popular nationalism from which it grew.

In the wake of World War II, nationalist movements throughout the rest of the world put a virtual end to colonial rule. As Anderson writes, "nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time," the value people are most willing not only to kill but also die for.8

**The Nation State and The Left**

Marx's formula that the state consists of "special bodies of armed men" plus a bureaucracy fit the dynastic state well. But it missed the fundamental strength of the nation state, namely its tie to a self-perceived community. This gap in the theory of nationalism underlies what Tom Nairn, in his *The Break-up of Britain*, called "Marxism's great historical failure."

Marx wrote after the rise of the bureaucratic state and concurrently with the flowering of modern popular nationalism. He and Engels fluent in a dozen languages at home in as many cultures, reflected the cosmopolitanism of both the intelligentsia and the working class of that era. His famous statement in *The Communist Manifesto* that "the executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie" reflected the reality of states which ruled subjects not citizens and which sought support from the most powerful groups in society, whoever they might be. His equally famous statement, also in *The Communist Manifesto*, that "the working men have no country" also reflected a period in which national loyalties and the incorporation of the masses into national states was still primarily a thing of the future.

As a progressive cosmopolitan, Marx viewed particularistic loyalties as archaic provincialisms which were being dissolved by the march of international economic progress. This and his preoccupation with economic phenomena obscured his vision of the tremendous nationalist passions developing around him, which would prove the most important political force of the subsequent century. It would be hard to find an observation less prescient than *The Communist Manifesto*'s statement that "National differences, and antagonisms between peoples, are daily more and more vanishing."

Marx' international policy initially focused on supporting "progressive"
states against "reactionary" ones—the former meaning those in which the bourgeoisie, the latter the aristocracy, formed the dominant power. In general, Marx supported the formation of larger nations out of smaller ones as encouraging capitalist economic development and thereby the rise of socialism; even colonialism could be a progressive means of social and economic development. These general precepts were modified according to strategic concerns designed to strengthen potentially revolutionary countries against those which might suppress them.

As nationalist, anti-imperialist movements proliferated, Marxists tended to interpret them primarily in economic terms, as part of an international class struggle. Wars were conflicts among imperial powers for domination of foreign possessions; national liberation movements were struggles against the capitalist powers' exploitation. At the International Congress of the Second International at Basel in 1912, socialist parties from all over the world agreed that, in the event of war among the imperial powers, workers in all countries would conduct unremitting struggle to stop the slaughter.

In the meantime, the actual rise of nationalist sentiments and social structures created a very different reality for the socialist movements in each country. In many cases, especially in Eastern Europe, socialist parties became major expressions of the rising nationalist opposition to imperialist rule. On the other hand, Marxist cosmopolitans like Victor Adler and Rosa Luxemburg opposed nationalist resistance to German domination in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and to Russian rule in Poland as reactionary opposition to larger and therefore economically progressive national units.9

Even more important, socialist parties and their affiliated unions and other mass organizations were becoming solidly established institutions within the developing national political systems of many countries. Socialists ran in elections, sat in parliaments, negotiated with employers, and conducted cultural activities on a mass scale. Whether they maintained a rhetoric of revolutionary internationalism or explicitly accepted the reformism that came to be referred to as "socialist revisionism," the reality was that both in consciousness and in practice they addressed their efforts to a national framework.

The proof of the pudding came with the outbreak of inter-imperialist war in 1914. The working classes and the socialist parties of most of the belligerents supported their national governments; resistance was almost nil. The long-promoted idea of mass action against war found virtually no support among populations who identified overwhelmingly not with the members of their class in other countries but with the members of all classes in their own.

The tremendous devastation of the war of course gave socialist internationalism a new lease on life in the form of the Bolshevik revolution. Lenin and Trotsky explicitly rejected the reformism which had tied the fate of socialism to a national framework and, while supporting national liberation struggles as a form of resistance to imperialism, saw the Russian Revolution primarily as an episode in a movement which would spread across Europe and much of the rest of the world to create a united socialist polity.
By 1921 it was clear to the Soviet leaders that revolution was not on the agenda for Europe. They began the work of reorienting Soviet practice to co-existence with capitalist countries, using Communist parties as a means for forestalling anti-Soviet counter-revolution. This approach moved from practice to doctrine with Stalin’s enunciation of “socialism in one country.”

The Communist gains that followed World War II in many parts of the world occurred almost without exception in a nationalist, rather than an internationalist, framework. The great advances made by Communist parties in France, Italy, Yugoslavia, and elsewhere in Europe were largely based on their leadership of national resistance movements against fascist imperialism. Likewise in the Third World, Communism appeared primarily as radical nationalism. As Anderson writes (p. 12), “Since World War II every successful revolution has defined itself in national terms—the People’s Republic of China, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and so forth.” In Eastern Europe, Communist rule was primarily an expression of Soviet military domination rather than nationalist let alone socialist revolution.

In the 1950s and ‘60s, Communist China enunciated a theory of world revolution based on the encirclement of the advanced imperialist powers (including the “social imperialist” Soviet Union) by the revolutionary movements of the impoverished third world—the “encirclement of the cities by the countryside.” But Chinese national interest soon led to an abandonment of this approach in favor of a de facto alliance with the United States—including support for some of its most reactionary clients. Today, a handful of small groups around the world propagate the concept of socialist internationalism; otherwise it is no longer a historical force.

A basic concept of labor-oriented radicalism was that the rise of the working class would create a community which cut across more particularistic identities of nationality, religion, gender, and race. What has happened instead is that class has been widely recognized as a reality, expressed in class consciousness and in working class organizations, but class identity has in the great majority of cases been seen as an addition to, rather than a replacement of, other identities. In many cases, especially that of national identity, class identity has been regarded as subordinate. For that reason, class solidarity has not provided a basis for human unity.

An Ecological Perspective

The Earth, its waters, and its atmosphere, do not conform to national boundaries: that is why Chernobyl poses questions that go beyond a national framework. The same applies to the catastrophic chemical spill that polluted the Rhine in five nations;* to acid rain, which moves northward without respect for the U.S.-Canadian border; to the defoliation of the Third World forests; and to

* The correspondence of the Chernobyl and Rhine disasters aptly demonstrates that neither Communist nor capitalist systems can deal safely with contemporary technology.
the continuing burning of carbon products which are currently destroying the atmospheric balance of carbon and oxygen on which life depends.

Prior to the rise of environmentalism, most radicals shared with mainstream thought a conception of the world as a collection of entities, individuals, states, pieces of property, or similar units, which, whether dominating one another or living in equality, were separate and bounded. This conception leads to a perception of rigid dichotomies between individual and society, cosmopolitanism and particularism, central authority and disorganization. While this vision no longer finds authority in the biological or physical sciences, it continues to dominate reflection on politics and society. Contemporary political discourse continues in terms of sovereign individuals, sovereign states, and private or government property.

Environmentalism, influenced in part by the science of ecology, has introduced profoundly different ways of looking at the world in which boundaries are also connections and individual entities are parts of interacting, multi-leveled natural and human systems. I believe the social world, too, can be far better seen with such an ecological vision, in which the boundaries of individuals and groups are only relative and in which, while retaining their own identity, they are also part of larger, many-leveled wholes and likewise contain interacting parts within themselves.

Such a shift of perspective, abstract as it may appear, can open up creative approaches to many sterile conflicts that have led to gridlock in contemporary discourse and life.* So far, however, it has rarely been applied to those problems that radicals traditionally referred to as “the national question.”

Historically, much radical discourse on the state has swung between the poles of cosmopolitanism and nationalism. Programmatically, these poles have involved alternatively the ideal of a world state or that of a national state ruled by the working class. In practice, movements aiming for increased working class power in the nation state have been ubiquitous while those aiming for world government have been marginal and generally regarded as totally utopian.

A more ecological perspective would eschew both the ideal of a world state and that of a world of sovereign nation states, however classless they might be. It would regard the whole idea of sovereign social organizations as an anti-ecological conception.

Such an approach would aim, in effect, to reverse the three processes which led to the formation of states in the first place. First, by establishing the autonomy of lower-level forms of organization. Second, by creating transnational links, loyalties, and institutions that are binding on individuals,

* This shift can help us reinterpret many of the basic issues in the tradition of working-class oriented radicalism. I have explored some of these in my review of two recent books by Stanley Aronowitz in Our Generation, Fall/Winter, 1985–86 and in “Socialism is What You Make It” in Socialist Visions, edited by Steve Rosskamm Shalom (South End Press, Boston, 1983).
groups, and nations. Third, by moving what remains of the state toward a fully participatory democracy, thereby reducing its reified, institutionalized character and making it more subject to continuing human shaping.* In short, a program of devolving power from the state downward and upward simultaneously, while making the residual power subject to more egalitarian and popular control.

**The Devolution Downward**

**The animating idea of nationalism**, belief in a national community, has always presumed a set of common traits, biological, cultural, or historical, among community members. But in reality, all modern nations have been formed to a greater or lesser extent by the willing or unwilling incorporation of diverse human groups. The period of nationalism has, in consequence, been continuously marked by the domination or destruction of “national minorities”—Jews in Central and Eastern Europe, Afro-Americans in the United States, Moslems in India, Koreans in Japan, Amerasians in Vietnam, Kurds and non-Islamic religious groups in Iran, Armenians in Turkey, and, most recently, Turks in Bulgaria.**

Traditionally, social movements of national minorities within nation states have taken two forms. One has been toward equality, full civil rights, and integration within the mainstream national community, the other toward separatism and the formation of an independent nation; most minority movements have swung between these poles. Over the past couple of decades, however, a third alternative has emerged in many countries which can perhaps best be characterized as “multiculturalism.” This approach challenges the underlying nationalist ideal of a state which represents a homogeneous national community. Instead, minority movements today often push for both equal rights and ethnic pluralism within states, sometimes accompanied by demands for federalism with autonomy for different ethnic regions.

Multiculturalism, with its emphasis on the positive value of human diversity, can represent an important step toward a more ecologically-oriented reconstruction of politics. Indeed, carried to its logical conclusion, it would amount to a historical shift in the character of the nation state, comparable perhaps to the rise of religious toleration and the disestablishment of official religions that followed the Protestant Reformation.

Such an approach fits well with the efforts to devolve power downward that have marked recent social movements in both communist and capitalist societies. Polish Solidarity and the German Greens have both developed

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* I have tried to deal with some of the issues of making institutions subject to human control through reversibility of decisionmaking and other means in “Socialism Is What You Make It” in Steve Rosskam Shalom, ed., Socialist Visions op. cit.

** As part of Bulgaria’s campaign against its Turkish minority, the Islamic custom of male circumcision has been denounced as “a key link in the arsenal of ideological diversion of imperialism for the isolation and separation of the workers of our country.” “New Line in Bulgaria: Turks? What Turks?”, The New York Times. April 20, 1986.
decentralist alternatives to traditional left concepts of “seizing state power,” albeit each within a national framework.

Both Solidarity and the Greens speak in terms of transferring functions of the state to society. According to Adam Michnik, the essence of the Polish movement “lay in the attempt to reconstruct society, to restore social bonds outside official institutions.”* Given the very different historical context, the theoretical similarity of the Greens’ approach is striking. The Greens “do not define power as simple control of the central state apparatus but view it as a broader network of social and political relations to be transformed throughout the whole of society.”12 This theory of power leads to a strategy for change which does not fit established models of either revolution or reform. Their goal is “to assail the State, to crumble it”; one Green slogan says, “Let’s make the State into cucumber salad.”13 Far from trying to “capture state power” by either electoral or revolutionary means, their demands on the state are designed to transfer wealth and power away from centralized corporate and bureaucratic structures to decentralized communities.14

Both multiculturalism and decentralism lead toward a society based on multiple identities: local, regional, national, global, ethnic, gender, linguistic, religious, political, and so forth. Such a vision is not the same as an abstract cosmopolitanism, for it recognizes and even cherishes the historically developed differences among groups. But it refuses to reduce human individuals and groups to such abstract definitions as “bourgeois,” “worker,” “Russian,” “American” because it always sees them as many other things as well. And it undermines all forms of chauvinism, because it recognizes not only the relative boundaries that divide people but also the various larger commonalities that unite them. It provides a framework for abolishing today’s lethal concentrations of national power while protecting social groups which want to preserve and elaborate their cultural identities.

The Devolution Upward

It is widely recognized that nation states are not able to perform the basic functions that generally legitimate them. No state in the world provides an effective medium for ordinary people to organize their common interests in ways they themselves control. No state is able to provide security to its own people against either environmental degradation or nuclear annihilation. Like the duels and rebellions of feudal lords in the early modern period, most of the actions of state authorities are anti-social and threatening to those they affect.

But this understanding has not yet been translated into a consciousness of

* Quoted in “Reflections: A Better Today” by Jonathan Schell, in The New Yorker. February 3, 1986. Of course the dichotomy between “state” and “society” means something different in state socialist countries than in capitalist ones, since in the latter many of the most oppressive and undemocratic institutions, notably corporations, are part not of the state but of “society.”
the need to transcend the nation state system *per se*. In this regard the left is generally no more radical than the right: generally leftists simply defend those nationalisms they perceive as anti-imperialist. * This approach leaves the system of nation states unquestioned.

It is not one or another country but the nation state system as now constituted that threatens the future of humanity. ** In itself, a decentralist devolution of power downward will not solve the basic problems of environmental and nuclear destruction, for units smaller than the nation can still wield genocidal destructive capacity. Some sort of global regulation is required to create a secure and livable world. Yet the devolution of power upward from the nation state raises the thorny issues of international law and/or a world state.

**World Law**

The concept of international law has not been a popular one with the left. For anarchists, the concept of law itself is problematic, and the image of a uniform global authority system can resemble the ultimate statist nightmare. More conventional leftists generally hold that the real power issues will be determined by a struggle among nations and classes and that concepts of world law tend to suppress this struggle by legitimating the privileges of those who are presently on top. They point to the tendency of contemporary international law to favor established regimes against insurgencies *** and to require the payment of international debts that have been forced on debtors through imperialist domination.

Leftist suspicion also grows out of the conservatism of international law's main tradition of support. Important strands of the world federalist movement, for example, originated in a concept of Anglo-American cooperation to use international law against Bolshevism. Much of the support for international law comes from lawyers, who often give it a conservative interpretation. But we need to take a fresh look at these questions in the framework of the "ecological perspective" sketched above.

The concept of law itself is subject to so much mystification that one almost wishes to use a new term. For most people, the law still has something of the sacred about it. In practice, law is usually connected to two often contradictory realities: the norms of the community on the one hand and the ability of particular social groups to use the legal apparatus to shape society to

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* Some leftists attempt to consistently support the right of self-determination of all nations; others define certain nations as "imperialist" and thereby define all opposition to them as "anti-imperialist" and therefore good.

** This of course does not imply that individual nations should not be held accountable for their actions in the here and now.

*** For example, it is legal to supply weapons to a government but not to an insurgency against it. This principle does not always favor imperialism: it has been a crucial legal support of the Sandinista government in its struggle against the U.S.-backed Contra insurgency, for example.
their wishes on the other. Modern legal historians have taught us to think of law as an arena of conflicting interests, rather than either an imposition by the state or a pure expression of the will of the community. What laws exist and how they are interpreted and administered at a given time is a result of the historical power relations among different groups. For purposes of this essay, I will use "law" simply to mean rules which define the acceptable behavior of individuals and organizations, together with procedures intended to enforce those rules.

Within an ecological perspective, law thus conceived is entirely appropriate: it is essentially a higher-level regulation which can serve as a means for the community as a whole and its constituent parts to maintain their conditions of existence.* Since the human species has no biologically pre-program means for such regulation, we must provide it through conscious social regulation—or face the threat of power centers run amok which confronts us at present.

If this concept of "law in general" should be an acceptable one, it does not imply that existing law, whether national or international, should be accepted. Even if law provides for the survival of the community by putting limits on the actions of individuals, states, or other units, that does not justify its use for the strong to dominate the weak or the wealthy to exploit the poor. A commitment to rules limiting acceptable behavior does not necessarily entail accepting all existing laws as just. Indeed, there is undoubtedly a place for civil disobedience against international law just as there is against national law.**

Perhaps we should think in terms of a people’s concept of world law, law as something to be imposed on nation states by the cumulative pressure of individuals and social groups. I suspect that the content of such law will turn out to be largely in accord with international law as it now exists. A large proportion of the evil things nation states do are today illegal.*** A large part of the things one would wish to stop are already defined as war crimes and crimes against humanity. For example, it is presently illegal for one nation to use military force against another without United Nations’ authorization except to repel a direct attack. The U.S. harassment of Nicaragua and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan each violate international law in at least half-a-dozen different ways.

While the language of international law speaks in terms of national sovereignty, I believe that the right is correct in asserting that it actually restricts the most important aspects of national sovereignty. Strictly applied, even

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* Many anarchists accept the concept of law in this very broad sense. They then ask very pertinent questions about whether it is created by free agreement or coercion and deceit; whether it is enforced by coercion; whether it perpetuates hierarchy and domination; and whether it is subject to and supportive of change and development.

** A plausible example might be repudiation of debts run up by regimes that have been imposed by imperial powers.

*** I came to this conclusion, much to my own surprise, while exploring the application of international law to U.S. military intervention in Central America.
today’s international law would limit nation states to a sovereignty more like that of the U.S. states or the Canadian provinces than that of the lawless rampagers sovereign states are today.

In sum, we should wholeheartedly support the concept of world law as a system of limitations on the sovereignty of nation states. Where states and other organizations violate those aspects of international law which protect peace and serve human needs, we should bring every possible internal and external pressure to bear to stop them.* At the same time, we should articulate a critique of those (I believe relatively minor) aspects of international law which form obstacles to the struggle for social justice.

Global Organization

Similar doubts surround moves toward global organization or a world state. Leftists (if they think about the subject at all) generally fear that, given the present distribution of power, such a state would simply be a vehicle to enforce the interests of some alignment of the world’s present ruling classes. Its primary function would be to suppress those attempting to achieve social change throughout the globe. For anarchists, a world state implies the same problems as a national state—with the added horror that it is universal and therefore inescapable. Here again, an ecological perspective seems to suggest alternative approaches that cut across some of the neat categories of established discourse.

I believe the fear of a world state is a legitimate one on both anarchist and Marxist grounds. A world state (most plausibly created by a voluntary or forced unification of the existing dominant social groups of different countries) has the potential, at least in theory, for becoming a means for greatly curtailing human freedom, indeed, even for creating universal slavery under a world ruling class monopolizing the means of violence and subsistence.

There is no reason, however, that international regulation need take the form of a world state. An agency whose function is to regulate the use of nuclear energy, for example, need not be more than loosely coordinated with one which oversees disarmament or use of ocean food resources. The devolution downward of the powers of nation states and corporations can provide an additional protection against overcentralized authority.**

Some of the rudiments of the kinds of organs we need already exist in the form of the World Court, the U.N., and the agencies created by various international treaties. Others will have to be created through transnational links.

* This is the logic underlying various international law-based defenses now being used in U.S. courts by those arrested for protesting U.S. intervention in Central America, the denial of political asylum to Central American refugees, and the production of first-strike weapons. Their demand that the U.S. government conform to international law advocated above, in which individuals and groups try to enforce law on states.

** Keeping global institutions accountable to ordinary people and responsive to their changing needs will always remain a problem. The same is true, however, of any social institutions.
among individuals and organizations* and through new, sovereignty-limiting treaties. Certain needs—notably for peace protection of the environment, and global redistribution of resources**—can be achieved only through global institutions.

It is often alleged that these institutions simply reflect the opinions of whatever superpower is able to dominate them. In the post-World War II period, leftists routinely charged, with some reason, that the United Nations and most other international agencies were dominated by the United States. During the 1960s and 1970s, the right charged, again with some reason, that these groups had become in effect pawns of Soviet foreign policy, with large majorities consistently favoring even the most blatantly improper Soviet activities.

In the past few years, however, the U.N., the World Court, and other international agencies have become increasingly independent of either superpower—as indicated by their condemnation of both U.S. policy in Nicaragua and Soviet policy in Afghanistan. If this independence can be sustained, it can be one starting point for limiting both superpower domination and the destructive features of national sovereignty.

**Strategy**

**NATION STATES ARE POWERFUL** and they try to use their power to perpetuate themselves. The most obvious criticism of a program for the devolution of power—either downward or upward—is simply that existing power centers will prevent it. But it is also apparent that given enough time the nation state system is likely to destroy itself—taking the world along with it. Our search should be, not for an alternative whose success can be guaranteed, but for the strategy that offers us the best basis for hope.

The institutions of the modern state were not built up overnight; they are the result of a long series of partial struggles growing out of specific issues and particular alignments.¹⁶ The devolution of state power upward and downward, by the same token, is unlikely to be either rapid or smooth.

State power depends on a coalition of supporters and a broad base of consent, both internal and external. It can therefore in principle be effectively challenged by the withdrawal or threatened withdrawal of support or consent.¹⁷

The overall process by which the powers of nation states can be devolved finds no clear historical precedent. It is unlikely to look very much like a national revolution or like traditional concepts of a world revolution, although national revolutions and world crises certainly might be part of such a process.

But an ecological approach suggests myriad opportunities for actions based

* For example, agencies have been created directly by people in different countries without recourse to the treaty-making powers of states for such purposes as preserving threatened varieties of grain and monitoring the arms race.

** It is striking that one of the few voices recently to call for global regulation of capital allocation in the interest of poor countries has been the rather conservative Catholic Pope Paul II.
on internationalization, decentralization, and democratization. While these opportunities arise out of concrete historical junctures which must be taken as they come, such junctures are predictable and we can learn how to take advantage of them to move in the directions we need to go.

Radical change is possible in part because we confront not a unified ruling class but rather a collection of quarreling power centers struggling with each other and blind to most of the consequences of their own actions. A strategy for developing power can take advantage of this by playing on contradictions within and among ruling classes and state bureaucracies which make it difficult for them to consistently oppose such a development. Some examples:

- Nuclear war, environmental degradation, and national lawlessness threaten the existence of everyone, including the leaders of all the world’s ruling groups.*
- We are witnessing a “decoupling” of the nation state from the multinational corporation and the world economy, which is eroding the longstanding alliance between capitalist business groupings and the nation state and creating new alignments that are as yet difficult to discern.
- Military spending is devastating the economies of all countries, including the superpowers, whose leaders know that military spending is undermining internal stability and their ability to achieve their own goals.

By combining the threat of withdrawal of external and internal consent, it is possible to take advantage of the disunity among different ruling groups and the contradictions among the interests of each. I am proposing a basic pincer strategy of “piggy in the middle” in which internal and external forces combine to pressure each nation into accepting restrictions on its sovereign right to do ill. Here are some of the elements of such a strategy.

### Changing Society

**While any strategy will eventually have to challenge states, people can start changing society without being strong enough to change government policies.** Direct linking of communities via “sister city” arrangements and other person-to-person activities—used recently to link communities in the U.S. to communities in Nicaragua and the Soviet Union and to build grass-roots connections between local peace groups in various countries—provides one example. Actions which promote a multicultural perspective within a country can help undermine attitudes of national chauvinism and promote a valuing of or at least a live-and-let-live attitude toward the people of other countries. Such activities can transform social attitudes and help lay the basis for a withdrawal of consent from the nation state system.

For those of us on the left, one contribution we can make to such a process is transforming our own thinking. All over the world radicals need to extend

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* This is the grain of truth in the somewhat misleading cliché that “nobody wants a nuclear war”—misleading because there are those who want the benefits of being able to threaten a nuclear war.
their discussions beyond determining who are the good guy and bad guy nations to a critique of the nation state system itself and the necessity of moving beyond it.*

Those who share such a vision can then begin to argue for it in whatever arenas are available to them, encourage its adoption by a variety of social movements, and support its incorporation within a larger domestic bloc. The nature of this process will of course differ in different places; in some countries, nationalism is already widely regarded as an archaic and dangerous world view, while in others national pride and strength remain primary values.**

If sovereignty is the right of nations to do whatever they want in the world, progressively limiting their freedom of action is the key to reducing the destructive aspects of sovereignty. Nations can be pressured both to cease particular evils, such as an illegal war, and to change broader policies, by, for example, acceding to international disarmament treaties.

The extent to which internal and external constraints already limit the supposed sovereignty of even the superpowers is not always recognized. The rise of the Solidarity union in Poland and the decision of the Soviet Union not to invade to suppress it (thereby allowing it to remain as a massive underground presence) resulted in large part from the devastating effects on Soviet relations in Eastern and Western Europe and the rest of the world that such an invasion would have had.\(^\text{18}\) The Reagan Administration, almost panting in its eagerness to destroy the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, has nonetheless been forestalled from doing so by a combination of active resistance in the U.S., more passive but widespread popular fear of involvement in "another Vietnam," diplomatic opposition from Latin America and Europe, and world public opinion, all buttressing the resistance of the Sandinistas themselves. Such pressure sometimes fails, but even in defeat it can exact a heavy price, for example the price—a split with its European allies and the revitalization of the European peace movement—that the U.S. paid for its bombing of Libya and its abandonment of SALT II.\(^\text{***}\)

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** Breakup of Blocs

EXTERNAL CONSENT TO THE SUPERPOWER arms race and imperialism primarily takes the form of the bloc system. The withdrawal of such consent has been the basic goal of those parts of the peace movement, such as the European Nuclear

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* This doesn’t mean abandoning judgment of bad actions by nations, but asserting the framework of supra-national law to which nations must be made accountable.

** Various polls indicate that the United States and the United Kingdom value national pride and power very highly while most of continental Europe and Japan tend to deride them. Many analysts plausibly relate these values to experiences of victory, defeat, and devastation in past wars.

*** The bombing of Libya, highly popular within the U.S., also illustrates the point that constraints upon national sovereignty are more likely to be effective when they combine internal and external pressure.
Disarmament campaign (END), which have aimed for the removal of their countries from the superpower blocs and the development of nuclear free zones. This approach represents a crucial part of a "piggy-in-the-middle" strategy for limiting the superpowers. Indeed, fear of the European peace movement and its demands for withdrawal from the U.S. bloc is perhaps the principal restraint today on U.S. foreign policy. Even though the movement is not yet strong enough to force any country to pull out of NATO, the threat to do so nonetheless exercises a significant deterrent effect on the U.S.

The overall strategy proposed here requires coordinating a variety of efforts inside and outside each country to enforce rules of behavior which may conflict with national sovereignty but which are necessary for human survival. Models for such coordination—not necessarily adequate ones—can be seen in the labor and leftist internationals, Amnesty International, Greenpeace, the movement for a free South Africa, etc.

Such international movements can nurture the development of a worldwide bloc or alignment of forces to represent the withdrawal of consent from the system of national sovereignty. A sketch of the elements of such a bloc might include independent international institutions; peace movements; groupings of nonaligned countries; religious and other transnational bodies. While such a bloc is unlikely to find a single organizational embodiment, its constituents can certainly articulate the concept of a community of those individuals and institutions everywhere who are attempting to move the world from a sovereign state system to global regulation.

Such a bloc can become the constituency for a wide range of programs which represent the clear interests of the great majority of people in all countries. The efforts of Greenpeace and other groups to create international pressure for a complete ban on nuclear testing, for example, give one indication of what pulling together such a bloc would entail. Pressure on the U.S. to cease its harassment of Nicaragua, and the development of the Contadora alternative for reducing superpower involvement in Central America, are others. END proposals for the denuclearization of Europe suggest a third. In the wake of Three Mile Island and Chernobyl, an international ban on nuclear power plants and the phasing out of those that exist might provide another.

Such efforts do not require new movements, but rather the stressing of an additional dimension of environmental, peace, and human rights struggles already under way. Focusing on such issues can be a means toward simultaneously transforming consciousness within each country and forcing concrete limits on the unbridled destructiveness of nation states.

The nation state system represents a historically created concentration of power that threatens the freedom and the existence of individuals and social groups. The solution is neither to replace it with a world state nor to dissolve it into isolated communes. Rather, we need to devolve some of its powers upward to higher level, regional and global institutions, and devolve others of its powers downward to the many kinds of groups that make up society.
The goal would be a many-layered system in which each aspect of social life would be regulated at the appropriate level: the abolition of nuclear weapons and the preservation of oceans and atmosphere would be organized globally, the plans for a particular community would be made by those directly affected, and intermediate issues would be decided by networks of decision-making institutions in between. Individuals would recognize themselves and each other as members of many groups, some larger, some smaller, but no one of which is so closed off from others as to justify their annihilation.

Such an overall vision can be incorporated into the goals of many different movements in all parts of the world. It involves both the withdrawal of consent from the existing state system and the construction of new identities and communities. The historical development toward such a world is likely to occur neither through a single revolutionary upheaval nor through a smooth process of constitutionally sanctioned reform, but rather through confrontations which force one or another state to devolve some of its power downward or upward. It is the cumulative effect of such actions that can turn the state from its present menace to a delicious cucumber salad. Chernobyl is everywhere; so, therefore, is the struggle against Chernobyl.

This article grows out of several years of discussions among members of Commonwork Pamphlets. I also appreciate the comments, often critical, I have received on this paper from Martin Bresnick, John Childs, Jill Cutler, Michael Ferber, Staughton Lynd, Dimitri Roussopoulos, Morris Schappes, and Bruce Shapiro.

NOTES

1. The following discussion of the rise of the state is based on Quentin Skinner’s The Foundations of Modern Political Thought (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1978). It focuses on European-originated societies because they are where the modern state and nation initially arose.


3. As paraphrased in Skinner, 352.

4. Skinner, 356. It is hard not to be struck by the parallels of this concept of the state and the bourgeois concept of private property, the liberal concept of the private individual, and even the Newtonian concept of physical objects. Recent scholarship has indeed traced links in the development of these conceptions—links which were noted long ago by William Blake.


7. Anderson traces a number of causes of the development of national communities, emphasizing the role of newspapers and other forms of “print capitalism.” Definitions of nationality are of course multiple, ambiguous, and even contradictory: far from being “natural” entities, they are constructed, synthetic creations, often based on historical and racial myths with little basis in fact. I think Anderson underestimates the role that racial concepts and aspirations for economic integration have played in the development of national consciousness and the extent to which national consciousness is a response to intrusion and oppression by other groups.


11. Among the many efforts to formulate this idea, some of the most interesting are in Gregory Bateson's *Steps Toward an Ecology of Mind* (Ballantine Books, New York, 1972). For a classic statement, see Ludwig von Bertalanffy's *General Systems Theory* (George Braziller, New York, 1968). Murray Bookchin's pioneering efforts to apply ecology to politics are presented in *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (Ramparts Press, Berkeley, 1968) and other works. Obviously such ideas are not entirely new and have affinities with many earlier approaches. Hegelian and Marxist dialectics also stress the relativity of boundaries and the importance of the wholes of which individuals are part, but their goal of conscious human domination of nature distinguishes them from an ecological perspective. The organic philosophies of China, notably Taoism, generated similar perspectives, albeit in a pre-scientific context. See Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1956), Volume II. Many so-called primitive people, for instance Native Americans, incorporated similar elements in their worldviews.


16. For a sense of the way this process unfolded in many different historical contexts, see the essays in *Statemaking and Social Movements*, Charles Bright and Susan Harding, eds. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1984), especially "Swordplay and Statemaking" by Robert A. Schneider.

17. This crucial argument, which underlies both Marxist and Gandhian theories of political power, is developed at length in Gene Sharp's *The Politics of Nonviolence* (Porter Sargent, Boston, 1973). Of course, the process is made more complex by the fact that those whose support is essential may not be those most likely to withdraw support.