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**Joan Cocks: Passion and Paradox**

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## *Introduction*

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### THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

Nationalism began to outweigh all other political problems for me in 1991, when a large segment of the American people backed the U.S. offensive against Iraq in retaliation for Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Inevitably, the Gulf War flagged that enduring question in the modern age of how a first state is able to whip up popular feeling against a second, often for its intrusions in a more distant third. Why do the citizens of any one state see themselves as violated by violations of the sovereignty and borders of another state they may know or care little about? How is the identification of a people not only with its own state but also with the entire state system accomplished, and to what ends?

In common with the whole post-cold war period, however, the war raised knottier questions about the meaning of ethnic identity and the relation of ethnicity to nationalism and the nation-state. These questions surfaced in a personal sense when, for the first time in my life, I joined a political organization as a Jew rather than simply as an individual with these or those principles and ideals. The organization, "Arabs and Jews against the Gulf War," so publicly allied two peoples who were usually bitter foes that I was drawn to it, even though my criticism of the Gulf War was not a function in any direct way of what I was, as opposed to what I thought. But once inside the group—which, alas, lived only as briefly as the war did—I was confronted with new puzzles that had nothing to do with the popular magnetism of states but a great deal to do with what it means to belong to a people. On the one hand, in addition to shared objections to U.S. military hubris, there was what I can only describe as a family resemblance among all the individuals in the room uncharacteristic of any other political movement I had known. The gestures, intonations, sense of humor, and manner of expression of thought and feeling were immediately familiar to me in the case of the Jews and vaguely familiar to me in the case of the Arabs. The atmosphere had something about it for which no English word comes to mind but which the Yiddish word *haimish* nearly captures.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the group was split along more particularistic lines in its attitude toward the national question. Every Jew in the

room was, as one of them, Paul Breines, put it, “tone-deaf to nationalism.” This condition partly could be traced to the leftist politics that separated the Jews in the group from all Jews outside it who supported Israel as a Jewish state, thereby proving the banality of the phrase “the Jewish community.” But as I dimly realized even then, such tone deafness also registered the modern history of a diasporic minority threatened by movements against the multinational European empires on the part of those vying to become majority peoples of their own nation-states. In contrast, all the Arabs in the room were scathing in their criticisms of Middle Eastern regimes for being reactionary and antipopular—and proudly declared themselves Arab nationalists.

These similarities and incongruities among Jews and Arabs against the Gulf War pushed me to bracket my own hostility to nationalism in order to investigate it as a real question, instead of a question that already had repudiation for its answer. But the further I plunged into my research, the more this question seemed to generate new paradoxes and conundrums. Every theoretical explanation of nationalism ultimately gave way to its own negation. Every assessment of the value of nationalist movements was inadequate in the absence of some other assessment with which it was mutually exclusive. Every practical response to nationalism in politics promised as many disturbing as reassuring results. The only conclusions it was possible to reach and the only decisions it was possible to make were of the sort Bonnie Honig has dubbed “dilemmatic.”<sup>2</sup> That is, all paths of thought obscured equally telling contrary thoughts; all paths of action were strewn with causes for regret and remorse. Moreover, these conundrums were intrinsic to nationalism and so were inescapable elements of all epochs in which nationalism plays a central part.

One of those epochs has clearly turned out to be our own. In the pauses between violent contests among states such as the Gulf War, dilemmas of national belonging, assertion, and exclusion might have sunk back to the level of the merely theoretical. Instead, our age has witnessed an escalation of tensions articulated in ethnic terms, a migration of peoples sometimes as cause and sometimes as consequence of state-orchestrated ethnic persecution, and a surge of separatist nationalist politics worldwide. It may be awkward to recall it after Bosnia and Kosovo, but the West’s initial response at least to ethnonational movements in the disintegrating Soviet Empire was

one of great glee, as if bids for national self-determination assured the triumph of democracy and freedom over the communist world. I happened to be teaching Rosa Luxemburg during this bright, fleeting moment of the new nationalisms. She supplied all the reasons why the West's affirmation was at worst opportunistic—as she would have put it, it would not be the first time that Western liberals had thrown their cards in with nationalism against communism—and at best exceptionally naive. Luxemburg was condemned in her day and has been dismissed in ours as someone obtuse to the genuinely populist realities of nationalism. Still, this passionate Marxist was far more alert at the beginning of the century to the incendiary potentialities of nationalism wherever diverse peoples are intertwined than liberals were near the end. Anyone who read Luxemburg in the late 1980s could have predicted all that speedily occurred afterward.

This book was written mainly during this decade of high nationalist drama, punctuated at one end by the first glimmerings of the new nationalist movements in the Soviet Union, at the other end by the crushing of the Serbian campaign against Albanian Kosovars, and in between by the genocidal war against the Tutsis in Rwanda, the “hurricane of violence”<sup>3</sup> in multicultural Bosnia, communal strife in India, and a host of other ethnic upheavals from Germany to Turkey to Indonesia to the United States. The politics of the period are reflected in the three threads of intention that with varying degrees of visibility weave their way through my chapters. One thread is the attempt to understand the disparate tendencies of thought that inform a sympathy for ethnonationalism, a sympathy for heterogeneous political community, and sometimes a contradictory sympathy for both. A second thread is the attempt to dive for pearls among the wreckage of old universalist ideas in order to help crystallize a new way of linking an appreciation of cultural particularity and variety to a feeling of solidarity across “difference” lines. A third thread is an attempt to consider how nonparticipants might judge and act in response to ventures in ethnic cleansing.

The discerning reader will notice that the book's introduction and conclusion, written last, are much more chastened with respect to this third thread than the book's earliest main chapters. After NATO's bombing of the Serbs, the Serbs' initial success at driving ethnic Albanians from Kosovo, and the revenge of the Albanian Kosovars against the Serbs and the Gypsies, it is less easy to be sure of the relative virtues of action and inaction on the part of those who

wish to stop atrocities inside any state other than their own. For individuals, simply being on the outside is a problem, although one would have to worship the state form in order to see it as an insurmountable problem. The typical outsider's ignorance of the complexities of the inside is a worse problem, even if it is only a highly exaggerated version of the ignorance that any self has of everything outside itself—and of much inside itself too, for that matter. When the outsider is a state rather than a person, another kind of trouble compounds this one. The participation of all states in domestic cruelties of various kinds, the self-interest of states in upholding the inviolability of borders, and the gross inequality of power internationally mean that most states will have neither the will nor the capacity to orchestrate interventions against atrocities elsewhere, while the few that are strong enough in capacity always will be susceptible to the charge of hypocrisy and Machiavellianism, whether they have the will to intervene or not. But it is the effectiveness of intervention, the ability of even the most knowledgeable and well-intentioned international organizations to secure a better rather than worse fate for targets of ethnic violence, that now appears catastrophically unclear. Hannah Arendt makes the compelling argument that not self-determination but creativity, not the absolute control of action but the unpredictability of action and its consequences, is the true condition of human freedom. Still, such unpredictability can bring to life as much tragedy as adventure. It also guarantees that we never can know after the fact if some other action would have led to as great a tragedy as an action that was actually taken.

Moreover, the historical precedents for any current crisis are often unclear and always politically contestable and thus can never be a fully reliable guide for determining how that crisis should be met. For example, many postcolonial and left-wing intellectuals attacked the bombing of Kosovo by assimilating it to instances of imperialist intervention for the sake of magnifying the power of the United States rather than to a new form of internationalist intervention to stop crimes against humanity. They cited as evidence the record of U.S. interventions to prop up right-wing regimes, along with the failure of the United States to intervene against ethnic persecution in countries where it considered the victimized populations unimportant or where the victimizing parties were allies of the West. For other critics, some of them also left-wing, Kosovo was reminiscent not of Central America and Vietnam but of the interwar period in

Europe that climaxed in the Holocaust. If the Allied powers had intervened with force in Germany before the end of the 1930s, these critics had reason to wonder, would that intervention have accelerated the murder of thousands and the expulsion of millions of Jews? And would six million refugees have horrified the world at the time, while that same number could only appear a miraculous gift to Jews looking backward today? Against both positions, certain Balkan specialists argued that the situation in Kosovo was so complicated that it could only be treated as *sui generis*. They also implied that only those who understood the complexities of the area could possibly determine the right response to them.<sup>4</sup> And indeed, area specialists might be, perhaps, the best authorities on what outsiders should do in a given situation, if situations were always unique instead of echoing or connecting to other events, times, and places and if political judgment were a function of empirical knowledge alone, rather than of a political perspective on, interest in, and cunning about the world, more or less empirically well-informed.

#### NATIONALISM IN POLITICS

The focus of this volume is on nationalism in politics, especially the drive for political unity by any group that asserts itself as ethnically distinct and self-identical, but also on claims to national distinctiveness and self-identity by established states. The felt grounds for such assertions may be racial, religious, linguistic, historico-political, civilizational, or what Michael Ignatieff describes as minor differences among similar peoples narcissistically reconceived as major differences.<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of this volume is to probe, in the context of nationalism in politics, how one might think, feel, and judge in order to act well. This is the oldest political philosophical question, and the ancients who originally asked it did so under the cover of two overarching presumptions. One was the presumption of an objective order of truth and value penetrable by philosophical reason, against which differing ideas, feelings, and judgments about the world could themselves be judged. The other was the presumption that not only theoretical wisdom about the eternal cosmos but also the practical wisdom required to act well in the flux of political life were prerogatives of those with the essential aptitude, cultivated intelligence, and social leisure for philosophical investigations. Both the assurance of

an objective moral order and the limitation of political excellence to a philosophically educated elite long since have been weakened by modernity's relativizing and democratizing tendencies. This does not mean, however, that the political philosophical question is no longer pertinent. To the contrary, the semi-decline of the idea of objective truth and value means that questions of how to think, feel, and judge in order to act will be more perplexing because they are intrinsically open-ended: they are real questions rather than staged or artificial steps to an answer that is fixed in advance. This change in the logic of questioning from the classical period to our own implies that different political perspectives may point the way to different judgments and decisions that are equally compelling within their distinctive worldviews. In turn, the semi-decline of the idea of a philosophically cultivated political elite means that the question of how to think in order to act should be treated as a question not just for any political perspective but for any person with any stake in the world. That is, it should be posed as a question not for the privileged and powerful few but, hypothetically at least, for everyone.

If this book's interest in the questions that nationalism raises for everyone distinguishes it on the one side from classical political philosophy, it distinguishes it on the other from many other contemporary studies of nationalism. The purpose of those studies is to understand the origins, or causes, or historical development, or popular resonance, or economic functions either of nationalism in general or of some nationalist movement in particular. Mark Beissinger complains, with specific reference to Ernest Gellner, that contemporary scholars of nationalism in general have downplayed its political and hence contingent elements in favor of its structural and seemingly inevitable determinants.<sup>6</sup> My related complaint is that scholars too often position themselves as if they were peering in from the outside on the constellation of elements of which nationalism is a part, thereby evading their own political entanglement in that constellation. There are, to be sure, many advantages to taking a temporary position of principled detachment from the world, as if one had come to it from elsewhere. One can see, microscopically, all the details of a given situation and how they appear from all the different engaged perspectives on it as well as, macroscopically, the larger patterns made by different situations that are significantly alike. The danger of detachment is that it can freeze into a permanent posture.

This happens when those who look down on ordinary mortals invested in the play of politics delude themselves into thinking that they have no political investments of their own. It also happens when those who look down become immobilized by seeing so much from so many angles that every conceivable course of action seems hopelessly coarse and one-sided. Professional intellectuals are especially susceptible to such self-deception and political paralysis.

Like social scientific analysis, a political philosophical consideration of how to think and act entails a moment of detachment or abstraction from immediately lived life. Still, political philosophy must find a way to convey and promote a passion for that life rather than an aloofness from it. Michael Ignatieff, who addresses the same kind of normative-practical questions that I do, combines passion and abstraction by interviewing participants in ethnic conflicts and then musing on the ethical dilemmas such conflicts raise for insiders and outsiders alike. My own, admittedly more self-serving method is to look to intellectuals forced by history to confront the national question, who reflected on politics in order to decide how to step into or sidestep the fray, and whose writings illustrate how particular lines of thought and feeling open up into particular lines of action. Inevitably, there will seem to be something in this tack of the ancients' prejudice for those who are philosophically cultivated over everyone else. The individuals on whom I draw—Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Hannah Arendt, Frantz Fanon, Isaiah Berlin, Tom Nairn, Edward Said, and V. S. Naipaul—elaborated theoretical positions (or, in Naipaul's case, literary narratives) on ethnic identity, belonging, national self-determination, internationalism, cosmopolitanism, and rootlessness. They all published their ideas in pamphlets, articles, and books. Again with the possible exception of Naipaul, whose ties to the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party remain somewhat obscure, they played noteworthy roles as theoreticians of political parties, as troublesome gadflies in political movements, or as confidants of political leaders and policymakers behind the scenes. The fact that they were intellectuals who left public marks on the world makes it possible to study their commitments and ideas. It is unavoidable that the same fact distinguishes them as special cases—more famous or infamous than most people, and more indefatigably reflective about the predicaments that nationalism precipitates. But they are also ordinary cases in not being professional experts on



those predicaments. They grappled with the national question not to accumulate specialized knowledge about it but to light a way for themselves and others through the semi-darkness of political life.

What accounts for the semi-darkness of nationalism in politics? The obscurity begins with the category itself. On the one hand, “nationalism” and its cognates “the nation,” “nationality,” and “the nation-state” can be said to cover political identities based on the experience of shared ethnic ancestry or “blood,” cultural heritage, and the memory, if not the physical actuality, of a homeland.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, ethnonationalism can be considered only one variety of nationalism, the most prominent other being based on common citizenship, subjection to the same laws, and habitation in a unified geographical territory. Then again, these two kinds of nationalism with such different starting points—ethnic and civic—seem to reach the same practical conclusion when they are successful. In the first case, the experience of a common ethnic identity leads to a national movement to create a political state; in the second case, the development of a political state leads to the solidification of a national culture and the consolidation of a new people.<sup>8</sup> If ethno- and civic nationalism do inevitably converge, one must wonder if there ever can be a people that does not ultimately imagine itself in ethnic terms or a state that does not legitimate its power by recourse to such imaginings.

Equally murky are the conceptual relationships among “nationalism,” “the people,” and “the state.” This is so because the category of nationalism is elastic enough to accommodate both a state-generated or state-manipulated collective identity and an identity that rises from the bottom up and is as likely to work against the established state as for it. That category also covers movements whose impetus is neither official nor popular but derives instead from an ambitious intelligentsia or an ascending economic class. If political concepts simply served the purposes of analytic rigor, talk about nationalism could be clarified by assigning a different word to each different idea. But political concepts have their foundation in life, and the life of ethnicities, nationalities, peoples, and nation-states is enough of a morass that these entities frequently run into one another in practice. The concepts of ethnicity, nationality, peoples, and nation-states do, and must, follow suit.

The connotative complexity of these concepts permits clashing explanations of what they denote as the same thing. For example, scholars who highlight the ethnic aspect of nation-ness will tend to

trace the chronological origins of modern nations to older ethnic identities and the ontological origins of national feeling to some humanly fundamental experience of group belonging. Scholars who foreground the political aspect of the nation will hook national solidarities to modern historical changes in the late eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries that redivided the world along politically independent and ideologically populist nation-state lines. In turn, those who point to the ethnic origin of nations are likely to see national identity as long-lived enough to be counted as almost biologically rooted, while those who underscore the nation's modernity will see national identity as culturally fabricated and historically contingent. Attitudes toward the relative coherence of national identity versus its propensity for internal contradiction and fracture do not divide as neatly along essentialist and constructionist lines. Those who are adamant about the modernity of nationhood are capable of seeing national identity as internally stable and unitary,<sup>9</sup> while those who tie modern nation-ness to older ethnic identifications can be more aware of national identity's transmogrifications and fractures precisely because they take the historical long view. Over three thousand instead of three hundred years, any identity is bound to vary, splinter, and mutate.

The complexity of nationalism does not lie only or even mainly at the level of conceptualization. There is also no political phenomenon more ambiguous than this "terrible beauty" from an evaluative point of view. Strong communal feeling, a sense of cultural distinctiveness, the love of a particular landscape, pride in shared historical accomplishments, a collective political agency—seen from another angle, these virtues become the vices of a suspicion of critics inside the community, a contempt for foreigners outside, a drive to dispossess aliens and conquer new territory, a self-mystified relation to the past, a collective political bellicosity. The negative features of nationalism are so weirdly the same features as the positive that anyone who reflects on the national question must have a high tolerance for contradiction and double-sidedness.

These evaluative ambiguities forecast the moral-political quandaries that confront every age in which politics have taken a nationalist turn. What constitutes a people, historically, geographically, and, to use an old-fashioned but fitting term, spiritually? Does national identity merit territorial autonomy? Is national self-determination a condition of political freedom? Of human freedom? Whose will

makes up the national will? Does national identity require national homogeneity, and if so, what is the fate in a national community of ethnic and racial minorities, diaspora populations, immigrants, and “guestworkers”?

Everyone pitched into nationalist conflicts will be pressed to take a stand on such questions. The answers to them, however, are not objective truths waiting to be discovered but possibilities that become actualities through collective efforts to inscribe in the world this idea of the nation or that. Nationalism’s most exhilarating feature is its capacity for wrenching a group out from under the heel of a more powerful group, if necessary by matching physical force with physical force. At the same time, its most disturbing feature is its capacity for inscribing its own positive idea of the nation through violence. The capacity becomes a propensity with the victory of the view that the quandaries of constituting a people, a national will, and a national identity can be settled once and for all by persecution, dispossession, exclusion, and annihilation. If nationalist violence drives such quandaries into the minds of participants and onlookers alike, it quickly drives them out again, as the brute material realities of warfare, mass rape, coerced refugee marches, and genocidal killings obliterate all speculative thought about collective identity. In any case, while physical force sometimes may be the only way to overcome physical force, it logically cannot resolve moral-political problems. This is why these problems always surface again after nationalist wars have been lost or won.<sup>10</sup>

Nationalism raises its conceptual, evaluative, and moral-practical questions for intellectuals because it raises those questions for everyone. But nationalism also raises important questions about intellectuals as a separate group.

One such question concerns the tension between the intellectual’s mental constitution as a critical thinker and social constitution as a member of a group whose status and power has come to depend on its control over the language, literature, and public life of a national society.

As professional critics, intellectuals are likely to be skeptical of nationalist claims, given that those claims always have a mythical dimension to them<sup>11</sup> and given that it is the overriding impulse of the intellectual to puncture myths. Moreover, in comparison with social types either settled in one place or bound to that place by memory and longing, intellectuals tend to be imaginatively and often physi-

cally deracinated. They are frequently unmindful of inherited affiliations, attuned to the pleasures of exile,<sup>12</sup> and cynical about communities of any sort, the more cosmopolitan among them being estranged from all particular settings or, to put the point positively, living perpetually as universal “citizens of the world.”<sup>13</sup> Driven by the desire for individual honor and prestige, and priding themselves on their independence of mind and their imperviousness to the emotions of the crowd, intellectuals also can be expected to find mass movements irritating and upsurges of nationalism among the masses nerve-racking, although those among them who are power hungry and politically astute may be willing to manipulate nationalist sentiments for their own self-aggrandizing ends. Finally, intellectuals by constitution are unhappy with anything in life that is unexamined and simply given and so would be likely to gravitate away from identities and solidarities that are a function of ethnic lineage or state dictation, toward those that are freely constructed and self-consciously chosen.<sup>14</sup> This antipathy toward the unexamined and simply given is so pronounced that even intellectuals who are antirationalist in their ideals of identity and solidarity rely on critical-rational argument to make their case.<sup>15</sup>

Yet there are good reasons to contest the claim that intellectuals as a social group are immune to the partialities and prejudices of nationalism. Intellectuals may be stylistically agile enough to speak and write in the language of pure aestheticism, moral disinterestedness, or philosophical universalism, but this does not mean they do not cloak special interests and commitments underneath, including nationalist interests and commitments. Historically, furthermore, intellectuals have played a central affirmative part in the development of nationalist movements. As linguists, teachers, journalists, poets, and political philosophers, they have generated and disseminated ideas and myths of nationhood.<sup>16</sup> As political orators and leaders inflamed by passion for a larger cause, they have mobilized people into nations who once were identified with a locality, social stratum, or tribe. In the modeling of new nationalisms after old ones, intellectuals have been the first social segment to absorb, through formal education and professional training, ideas of nationhood and values of national self-determination. They also have had strong class interests in supporting nationalist movements when the political autonomy of their own language group would win them a monopoly of

positions in education, communications, artistic production, the state bureaucracy, and the law.<sup>17</sup>

Another important question about the intellectual's relation to nationalism concerns the tension between the intellectual's critical mentality and political affinities when those affinities are even distantly democratic. The tension between criticism and democracy has generated two vexing predicaments for the intellectual in the nationalist context. The first is the predicament of alienation from the people on the part of intellectuals who align themselves with popular causes while criticizing nationalism for being based on illusion, self-delusion, resentment, and/or a dialectic of rebellion that begins in a desire for justice but ends in injustice. These intellectuals may try to fight against, or transform from within, or expose, or ameliorate, or simply outwait nationalist movements, but in all cases their criticism puts them at odds with the people on behalf of whom they think and act. The second is the predicament of alienation from politics on the part of intellectuals who appreciate, defend, and even celebrate the popular resonance of the national narrative, or fiction, or myth, without believing in that myth. Such intellectuals are as unable to be out-and-out nationalists as they are unwilling to be out-and-out anti-nationalists. One might say, at a gross level of generalization, that these two forms of alienation are opposed and that the first kind is more characteristic of intellectuals in the first half of the twentieth century and the second more characteristic of intellectuals today. But at a finer level of magnification, the two kinds of alienation can be seen logically and chronologically to overlap. Many thinkers in this book move back and forth between them.

Besides exhibiting, in different ways, the strain between critical reflexes and popular politics, the intellectuals I have chosen to explore have much to recommend them as a set. Most important, from a theoretical standpoint, they are deft at handling the conceptual antinomies that crowd this field. The antinomy of particularism and universalism stars in every discussion of the national question and in my discussion, too. Other key antinomies include, roughly in the order of their appearance in the text: civil society and political society; class division and national unity; ethno- and civic nationalism; separation and assimilation; liberal individualism and national-cultural pluralism; the country and the city; tradition and modernity; and nationalism and cosmopolitanism. A few antinomies take the

form of ideal types: the pariah and the parvenu; the native and the exile. A few, finally, are methodological, providing the means to challenge what Alasdair MacIntyre once called the self-images of the age. Thus, many of my thinkers implicitly or explicitly draw on the distinctions between surface and depth, center and periphery, or darkness and light to capture, respectively, hidden aspects of power, inequalities of identities and regions, and disfigurements of private and public life.

As personalities, my thinkers display a wide variety of temperaments: some earnest, others ironic; some optimistic, others despairing; some kindhearted, others caustic. Their politics stretch from the left to the right and their habits of thought from the systematic to the picaresque. They write in response to different decades of the twentieth century, with the obvious exception of Marx, and they bear the markings of different cultures and regions. At the same time, they are tied together by similar preoccupations and the fact that almost all of them are exiles of some sort. Marx migrates from Prussia to France to England; Luxemburg moves among Russia, Switzerland, Germany, and Poland; Arendt flees from Germany to France to the United States. Fanon moves from Martinique to France to Algeria; Berlin emigrates from Russia to England; Said leaves Palestine for Egypt and then for the United States, afterward crisscrossing all the great world capitals; Naipaul makes his way from the Caribbean to England, and from there makes his innumerable visits to the Americas, Africa, and Asia. Only Nairn, the staunchest defender of nationalism of the lot, does not have the exile's tangled geographical roots and ambiguous geographical location. Even so, he is a traveler in his political imagination, sweeping his sights over Scotland, Great Britain, Europe, and nationalist struggles against imperial power across the globe. As for the others, many move from one place to another as the result of coercion of some sort, but they also are voluntary wanderers, propelled from place to place by political commitments, social connections, and/or intellectual curiosity. Their heightened sensitivity to the national question is not happenstance. As Said reminds us, anyone catapulted out of his or her native place will likely be hyperconscious of place and belonging. That same person also will be poised to look at the old home, the new, and the very idea of "home" with an acute because alienated, although not unblinkerred, eye.

I selected my thinkers for their representative intellectual and personal qualities, but my tastes—*aesthetic, theoretical, political*—have much to do with their array. These tastes help explain my point of departure with Marx, which puts me politically at odds with Ignatieff and Gellner, even though such liberals owe their own debt to universalist philosophy and exhibit their own universalist insights and blindnesses. Ignatieff, for example, often writes as if a civilized and humanistic West faced a violent and particularistic rest, as if liberalism were the only source of a universalistic ethic, and as if Marxism were merely a synonym for Soviet-style oppression or even a form of particularistic identity politics, rather than a competing Enlightenment tradition with a concomitant set of virtues and vices.<sup>18</sup> Gellner makes similarly sweeping distinctions between the West's appreciation of the true conditions of freedom and the impulse to tyranny of everyone else, especially those in "backward" nations and Islamic societies. Although he views "free economic enterprise" as civil society's necessary condition, Gellner describes liberal civil society in lofty philosophical terms far removed from capitalism's gritty realities. He attributes Marxist criticisms of those realities to a communist totalitarian mentality, and Marxism's lack of popular appeal as a state ideology to the merciless demands it makes on individuals through its sacralization of the secular world. On the latter grounds, however, nationalism should have failed, too. One must demur that for Marxism's unattractiveness to "the people," its stringent and unforgiving rationalism, not its religiosity, is really to blame.<sup>19</sup>

My point of departure also separates me from many contemporary critics on the left. For both advocates of identity politics and Habermasians, Marxism's treatment of national identity and national political unity as a function of capital accumulation, as secondary to class division, and as shot through with mystifications makes it substantively wrongheaded and epistemologically anti-democratic. For postmodernists, so do Marx's rationalism and universalism, which they, unlike Ignatieff and Gellner, darkly underline. Today, left-leaning thinkers in general champion the particular, the local, the self-generated creative fiction, the collective solidarity that is spontaneously felt as a function of identity or desire rather than chosen on the basis of instrumental or critical reason. I hope to show, against all these positions, the fruitfulness of Marxism as a way into conundrums of nationalism that are, as of yet, unresolved.

Marxism, however, is not the point of arrival of this book or the

only path taken to get there. I examine modernist and postmodernist tendencies of thought, liberal pluralist positions, and anti- and post-colonial perspectives that issue from (to use terms that may sound outmoded) revolutionary, conservative, and radical camps. But it is the singular Hannah Arendt, a partisan of no camp at all, who haunts this volume more than anyone else. This is partly because the interwar period Arendt studied—with its collapsing multinational empires, its aggressive majority peoples, its persecuted minorities and stateless refugees—so eerily resembles our own. It is also because Arendt understood the essential lineaments of her own time in her own time, without being trapped inside the myopic limits of her time. This is why she can speak with what seems like exquisite timelessness to us.

### THE JEWISH QUESTION

The Gulf War piqued my interest in the national question, and the unfolding catastrophe in the former Yugoslavia sustained it. But books have a way of taking off in surprising although not accidental directions, and in this one it was the emergence of the Jewish question that surprised me. In hindsight that emergence seems entirely predictable. I had avoided the national question for most of my life, in part because other questions seemed more pressing to me and to my generation but also because of my almost instinctive antipathy toward nationalist sentiments. One deep source of that antipathy were the bits and pieces I had picked up as a child about the terrible effects European nationalism had on the Jewish diaspora and a growing anxiety, as *I* grew, that a Jewish state was fated to follow some variant of nationalism's logic of discrimination, persecution, and expulsion. Once I confronted the national question instead of evading it, the Jewish implications of that question surfaced like the return of the repressed. Perhaps that is why, of the thinkers I chose to explore initially for other reasons, Marx, Luxemburg, Arendt, and Berlin all happened to be Jews (although, to be sure, Marx was baptized, and Marx and Luxemburg detested religion). Their own interest in Jewish identity prompted Berlin and Arendt to inspect the lives of other controversial Jews, who also make guest appearances here. Finally, for Berlin the question of Israel/Palestine was pressing; for Arendt it was urgent; for Said it is burning. These details lend a certain particularistic quality to this volume—but then, particular-



ism is always what the national question purports to be about. Nevertheless, I strongly agree with the early, skeptical Nairn when he writes, with his signature sarcasm:

Most approaches to the . . . [huge and complicated problem of nationalism] are vitiated from the start by a country-by-country attitude. Of course, it is the ideology of world nationalism itself which induces us along this road, by suggesting that human society consists essentially of several hundred different and discrete “nations”, each of which has (or ought to have) its own postage-stamps and national soul. The secret of the forest is the trees, so to speak. Fortunately, this is just the usual mangled half-truth of commonsense.<sup>20</sup>

Regardless of its self-delusions, nationalism is never wholly or even primarily about self-contained particulars. The case of Jewish nationalism embraces the special situation of the Jewish minority in European society. However, it also has to do with the special threat that nationalist movements pose to all those whom the Jewish Algerian writer, Albert Memmi, once self-referentially called half-breeds; the conditions common to all diasporas; and the same larger dilemmas about belonging, citizenship, exclusion, and obligation to outsiders that every other special case of nationalism entails.<sup>21</sup>

These larger dilemmas are this book’s real subject of inquiry. Hence its destination is not a resolution of the question of Israel or Yugoslavia or any other specific nationalist conflict. Neither is its destination a single formula for the ideal political community, which would only be a new assault on the variety of cultures that, against all odds, still manage to cling to the world. Instead, the book concludes with what I see as two necessary conditions of political community today that are unfulfilled and unfulfillable by the nation-state form. The first, “nationalist” condition is an effective, material respect for the human attachment to place that the British conservative Michael Oakeshott calls “the love of the familiar.” This condition requires that political communities provide and safeguard, from both the political pressures of ethnic homogenization and the economic pressures of the infinite accumulation of wealth, a home in the world for all human beings. The second, “cosmopolitan” condition is a popular, visceral delight in human variety inside political unity, which is not at all the same thing as an intellectual affirmation of variety between one political society and another. This condition requires an amelioration of group resentments and humiliations that

drive collective searches for recognition and movements for national self-determination. It requires the extension to all those who live within the borders of a state, for the time they live there, whatever political rights and obligations the citizens of that state enjoy. Most elusive of all, it requires a release of the springs that snap open hearts and minds to the reciprocal engagement with strangers that Said rightly praises as “true worldliness.”