5 The politics of difference

> The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.
>
> (Joseph Conrad, *The Heart of Darkness*, 1906, chapter 1)

In many ways political geography has been turned on its head since the early 1990s. Influenced by a whole series of powerful writings in cultural geography (Harvey, 1989; Jackson, 1989), the focus has moved from order and certainty, and a search for clearly defined patterns, to the individuality of people and the multitude of continuously shifting relationships in which they are engaged. The acknowledgement of the importance of what is termed difference leads to the acceptance of a state of chronic instability in society, which is extremely difficult to accommodate within any ordered political framework. It is argued that difference is an all-pervasive feature of postmodern society, unsettling most apparent certainties and throwing into question any stable sense of identity (Jackson, 2000, p. 174). Philip Crang goes even further, arguing that the world of difference undermines any sense of authenticity, replacing it with a world of displacement and dislocation (Crang, P., 1996; Crang, M., 1998).

This postmodern reformulation is of crucial importance for two reasons. First, it breaks the apparently inseparable link between identity and place. People's sense of place is in a constant state of flux and has become increasingly global in its reach (Massey, 1995). Second, it removes any limits as to what constitutes a sense of place and a sense of identity. In the new world view, the ties binding people together are almost infinite in their variety and, as a result, are never something that can remotely be taken for granted.

Managing difference

Recognising difference and managing it are two very different things. The world may be complex, but the whole process of government demands it be simplified, even oversimplified, if it is to serve the needs of communities. Compromises are essential, even though they may be no more than temporary political expedients.

Language

Language, more than anything else, determines people's world view. Who people listen and speak to is crucial in shaping the way in which they think and act. At one level this is self-evident, but until relatively recently the role that language plays in political geography had not been fully appreciated. The Swedish geographer, Gunnar Olsson (writing in English of course!), has been pivotal in repairing the omission and raising awareness of what he terms 'linguistic geometry' (Olsson, 1980 and 1992). Previously, although the cultural significance of language had received wide, though intermittent, attention, and maps of language had been commonplace in the geographical literature, their cultural and political power had not been fully explored and put into context.

Subsequently, the situation has changed dramatically and geographers have focused extensively on language and the way it can shape the cultural and political landscape (Zelinsky and Williams, 1988; Jackson, 1989; Moseley and Asher, 1993; Doel, 1993). Nowhere is this more evident than in the gender bias built into most European languages, where traditionally discourses are almost invariably centred around male images. It is also proving very difficult to alter the focus to a more equitable gender balance (Bondi, 1997). National historical narratives are almost always formulated in terms of men and the way in which they have influenced the course of events, while the role of women is largely invisible, because the form of language used excludes a proper representation of their contribution. To a very large extent this reflects the realities of power within societies; women were almost entirely excluded from a role in formal political decision-making before the beginning of the twentieth century, and a hundred years later this is still the case in some countries in the world.

There are many instances where national governments have sought to guide and manage the evolution of language in order to strengthen the

sense of national identity. A recent example of such direct intervention is the state of Israel, which adopted religious Hebrew as its national language when the state was founded in 1948. However, since Hebrew to all intents and purposes had only been used regularly for centuries as the language of worship, the world view it encapsulated was extremely narrow and its vocabulary had to be rapidly expanded for it to be usable as a modern means of communication. The efforts have met with considerable success and Hebrew is now the main spoken and written language of some 6 million Israelis, though it has not spread outside the country. In France there is a government commission, *La delegation générale à la langue française*, whose main duty is to review continuously the French language and ensure that it is not overly corrupted by imports from other languages.

One of the most determined attempts to develop and protect a national linguistic norm is the Gaeltacht in Ireland. As part of a drive to promote Irish Gaelic as a national language, an area of mainland and nearby islands on the west coast of Ireland, centred on the town of Galway, has been designated as the Gaeltacht. Its purpose is to act as a centre for promoting the Irish language and culture in the hope that the influence will spread to the whole of the country. However, despite the best efforts of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, it has met with only limited success in preserving the active use of Irish Gaelic. Indeed, its main purpose now seems to be to promote tourism in western Ireland.

In Europe, the most vivid illustration of the hold that language can exert over political change is the debate that has raged in the EU about which national languages should, and should not, be officially accepted. The member countries of the EU have vigorously eschewed forming themselves into a federation and prefer to see themselves as, at most, a confederation with distinct national identities jealously preserved. As a result, there are twenty official languages, spoken and written translation facilities for which must be available at all times (Figure 5.1). Only five countries have not insisted on the inclusion of their own separate national language – Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Ireland, and Luxembourg – though even some of them can request that documents be translated, notably the Irish requiring translation into Gaelic.

It is obviously a situation that is a practical impossibility as a permanent arrangement, especially as the EU is likely to expand further in the foreseeable future, but a solution is surprisingly difficult to find. English

Figure 5.1 ***Official languages in the EU***

is by far the most popular option as a common language, with 69 per cent preferring it, nearly twice as many as the second most popular alternative, French. Next comes German, though it is actually the most widely spoken as a mother tongue. On the other hand, less than 10 per cent speak Spanish as their mother tongue or as a foreign language, despite its widespread use elsewhere in the world. But the most surprising linguistic twist in the EU is the jump in the proportion of citizens able to speak Russian. Since the most recent expansion to twenty-five members in 2004, Russian has become the fourth most important language, though for obvious political reasons there is little chance of it being adopted as an official language in the EU.

Ethnicity and culture

Ethnicity and cultural difference have been amongst the most fraught and destabilising influences on the dynamics of the modern state and other political subdivisions. They challenge the whole idea of national norms and the belief in the efficacy of universal values, the very things that states strive to encourage in the search to foster national or regional political cohesion (Young, 1990). Attempts to celebrate and accommodate diversity are legion, but frequently they have foundered in the face of racial and cultural prejudice. All too often ethnicity is used as a loosely defined term to describe the habits and customs of minority groups in society, blithely ignoring the fact that majorities too have their distinctive customs and that being part of a minority is not a crime. More sinisterly, ethnicity is taken as being synonymous with the term race and used to demonise particular groups on the basis of their physical characteristics, even though the basis for such categorisations is extremely doubtful, let alone being morally justified (Mason, 1995).

Nevertheless, ethnic segregation is a fact of life in most societies, although the degree to which it is institutionalised varies enormously (Peach *et al*., 1981; Peach, 1996). At one end of the spectrum it is a benign and even affectionate description, as for example with the use of the word 'Chinatown', but at the other it is used as an excuse for brutal and repressive segregation (Smith, 1989). At its most extreme, it takes the form of *de jure* policies, such as those of apartheid in South Africa, which restricted so-called coloureds, blacks, and whites to specific areas of the country (Smith, 1994 and Box 5.1). More frequently, though, it is a de facto process, whereby those who feel a cultural and ethnic affinity congregate together in specific areas of towns and cities.

In an ideal world, such differentiation should be of little political consequence, but in practice it leads to ethnic discrimination and persecution. It is an insidious process; what begins as apparently minor differences in levels of service provision can escalate quickly into overt repression, generating a violent response. In the UK, there was widespread horror at the urban riots that erupted amongst the black and Asian communities in the Brixton area of London in 1981, later spreading to other conurbations in the north of England. The subsequent report on the riots by Lord Scarman (1981) blamed much of the disturbance on the blatant and institutionalised discrimination against ethnic minorities. It made a whole series of recommendations with respect to policing and social provision to counter the discrimination, but

Box 5.1

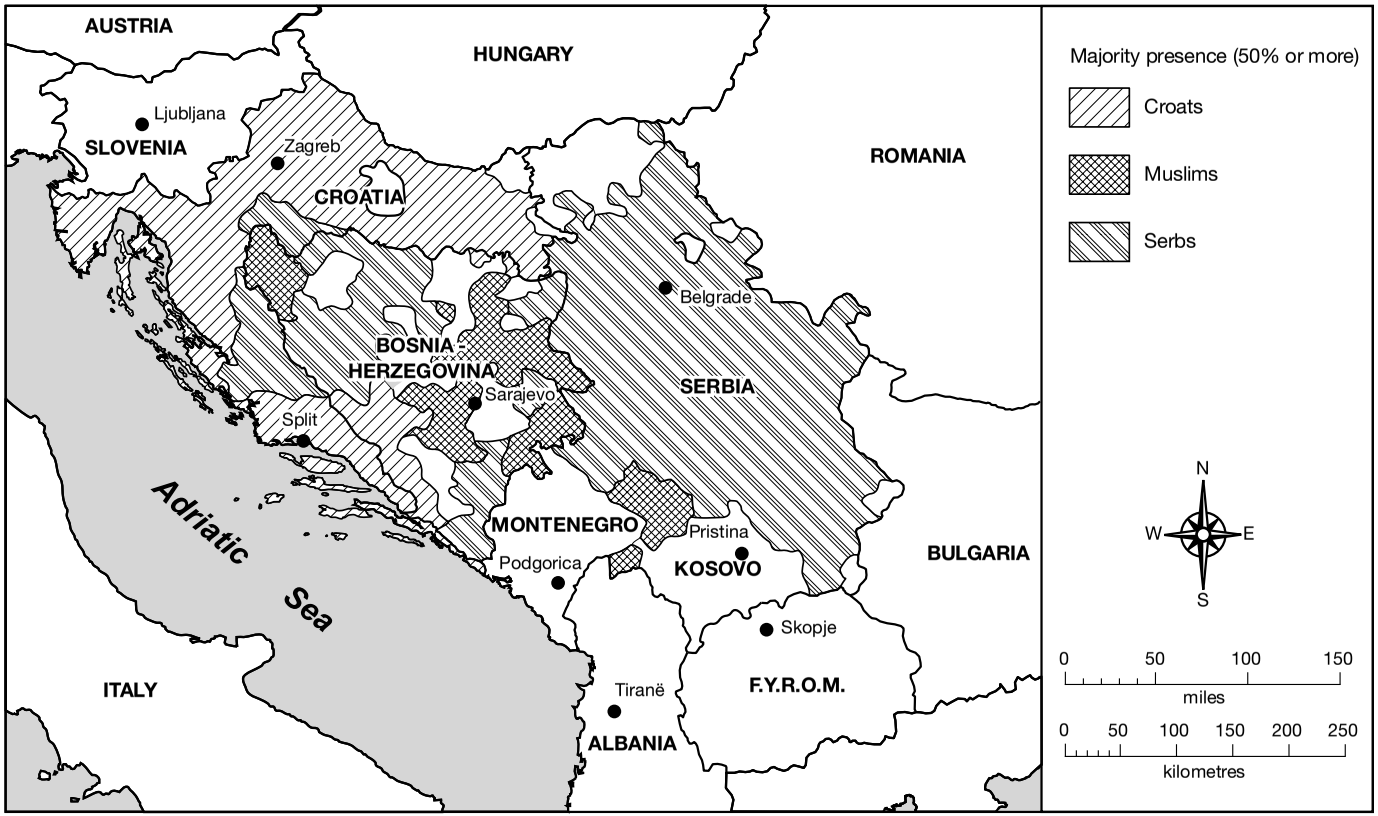
Apartheid in South Africa

Racial segregation and white supremacy had been traditionally accepted in South Africa long before 1948, but when the Afrikaner Nationalist Party swept to power for the first time in the general elections held that year the formal policy of apartheid was born. Its purpose was separation of the races: whites from blacks, non-whites from each other, and one group of Bantu (the pejorative collective noun for all black Africans) from another. Those regarded as non-white included not only the majority black Africans, but also the so-called coloureds, people of mixed race, and people of Asian descent.

In the early years, the emphasis was on segregation in urban areas, which resulted in large parts of the coloured and Asian populations being forced to relocate away from white areas. Later, however, as towns and cities grew and began to engulf the black African townships, the black Africans too were forced to relocate to new, and more remote, townships. In the period between the Group Areas Acts of 1950 and 1986 it is estimated that some 1.5 million black Africans were forcibly driven from the cities into rural reservations. Even before the election in 1994 that brought Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress to power, the policy of apartheid was being dismantled as the Nationalist Party progressively lost its grip on political power.

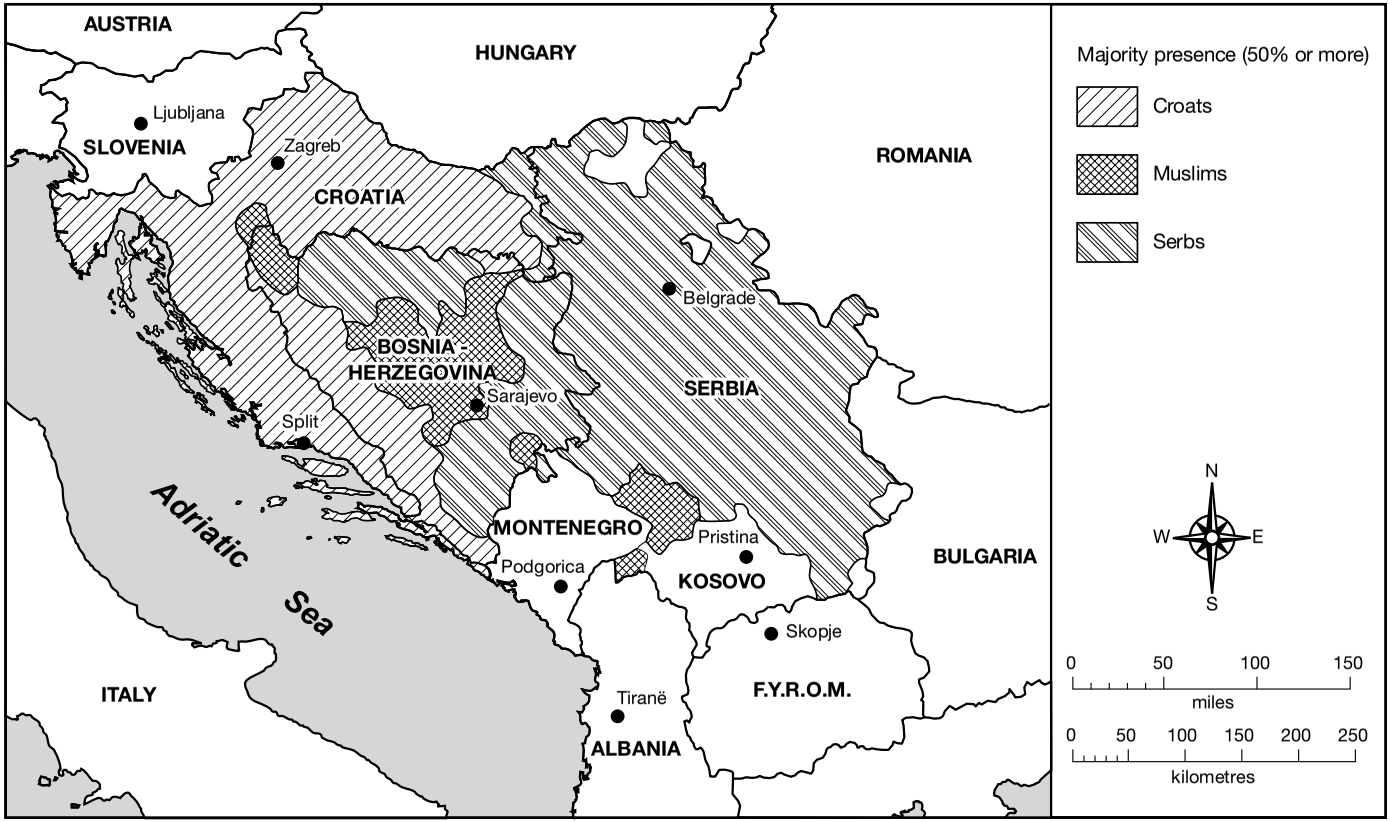
these have proved extraordinarily difficult to implement effectively and ethnic discrimination remains an intractable urban problem.

Unchecked and in the absence of any democratic controls, the consequences of ethnic division can escalate into far more serious violence and what has come to be known as ethnic cleansing and genocide (Figure 5.2). Such state-sponsored crimes are horrific in both their intent and scale, let alone for the cold-bloodied way they are executed. In the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s, the Serbian army systematically eliminated both Croats and Bosnians from what they deemed to be their lands, using a five-stage strategy. They surrounded the area to be ethnically cleansed; they then executed as many of the community leaders and potential leaders as possible; they then separated out women, children, and old men; they then transported them to the nearest border; and they then executed all the remaining men (Donner, 1999). The pattern was repeated across southern Croatia and eastern Bosnia resulting in a whole series of notorious massacres, such as that



(a)

Figure 5.2 ***The process of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia*: *(a) The mixed distribution of ethnic groups before the civil war; (b) The effect of the subsequent ethnic cleansing***


AUSTRIA
HUNGARY
ROMANIA
BULGARIA
SLOVENIA
Ljubljana
Zagreb
CROATIA
BOSNIA - HERZEGOVINA
Sarajevo
Split
Belgrade
SERBIA
MONTENEGRO
Podgorica
Pristina
KOSOVO
Skopje
F.Y.R.O.M.
Tiranë
ALBANIA
ITALY
Adriatic Sea
Majority presence (50% or more)
Croats
Muslims
Serbs
N
W
E
S
0 50 100 150
miles
0 50 100 150 200 250
kilometres

(b)

at Srebrenica in 1995 where 2,000 Muslim prisoners were executed in a single afternoon. There are other even more appalling examples across the globe, including the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, all with similarly brutal profiles (Box 5.2).

Box 5.2

Genocide in Rwanda

Between April and June 1994, it is estimated that about 800,000 Rwandans were killed in the space of 100 days. Two large rival tribes were at the heart of the massacre: most of the dead were Tutsis, and most of those doing the killing were Hutus. Violence has racked Rwanda frequently in the past, but even by its own standards the speed and scale of the slaughter devastated the whole population. The genocide was sparked by the death of the Hutu president, when his aeroplane was shot down on the orders, it emerged later, of the current Tutsi president, Paul Kagame, but it was just the touchstone for a particularly brutal and extensive flare-up in a long-running saga of violence between the Hutu majority and the Tutsi minority. The immediate violence came to an end when Tutsi rebels captured the capital Kagali, but over two million Hutus fled to neighbouring Zaire, creating a long-term refugee problem in the region. Although the new government has promised them a safe return, the legacy of the genocide remains. Over 500 people have already been sentenced to death, but there are about 100,000 more still in prison awaiting trial, while the UN International Court of Justice in the Hague struggles to find a way to bring the ringleaders before a tribunal to face charges of genocide.

Reading

Wood, 2001.

Religion

The most difficult of all differences to control within a political framework are those rooted in religion. Most states adopt a formal stance towards religious observance, be it explicit rejection as in China and other Communist states, a commitment to freedom of religious expression as in the USA and virtually all the Western democracies, or embracing a particular form as an official state religion, as with the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, Italy, and Poland, and Islam across much of the Middle East. In the latter case, the

state often underpins its chosen religion, either by ceding to it certain civil responsibilities, such as the Church of England's right to register marriages, or by encouraging and subsidising the construction of religious buildings, such as mosques in Saudi Arabia and many other of the Gulf States. There is, however, no part of the world where a single religion has a complete monopoly, so that tensions arising from different religious allegiances are a universal feature of society.

Very often these tensions coalesce into formal political parties, so that religious tension is almost institutionalised in the political process, a notable example being the Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India, which is deeply distrusted by the Muslim minority. Indeed, in India, a religiously deeply divided country, one of the electoral attractions of the Congress Party that has formed the government for the greater part of the period since independence in 1947 is that it has no formal religious affiliation. In Northern Ireland, the Unionist parties almost exclusively represent the Protestant majority, while the Social Democratic Party and Sinn Féin represent the Catholic and Irish nationalist minority (Figure 5.3). Thirty years of conflict between the two factions mean that the division between them has become formalised on the ground in a series of religious ghettos, especially in the major cities of Belfast and Londonderry, or Derry as it is universally referred to by the Catholics (Boal, 1969). Non-religious parties, such as the Alliance, have little influence on the province's political landscape.

Religious buildings have been used quite explicitly on occasion to challenge the existing political order. Harvey (1979) argues persuasively that the Basilica of Sacré-Coeur in Paris was an overt attempt to help restore a more conservative political order in the wake of the insurrection of the Paris Commune in 1871. Although France became a republic after the Revolution of 1789, the Catholic Church exerted considerable influence on various French governments in the course of the nineteenth century and it was partly a reaction to this that sparked the urban rebellion of the Commune.

Nationalism and self-determination

Traditionally, in the modern era since the beginning of the industrial revolution in the early nineteenth century, the overt expression of political difference has been nationalism (see also 'The spread of states' in Chapter 3). It is a powerful concept that emerged first in Europe and

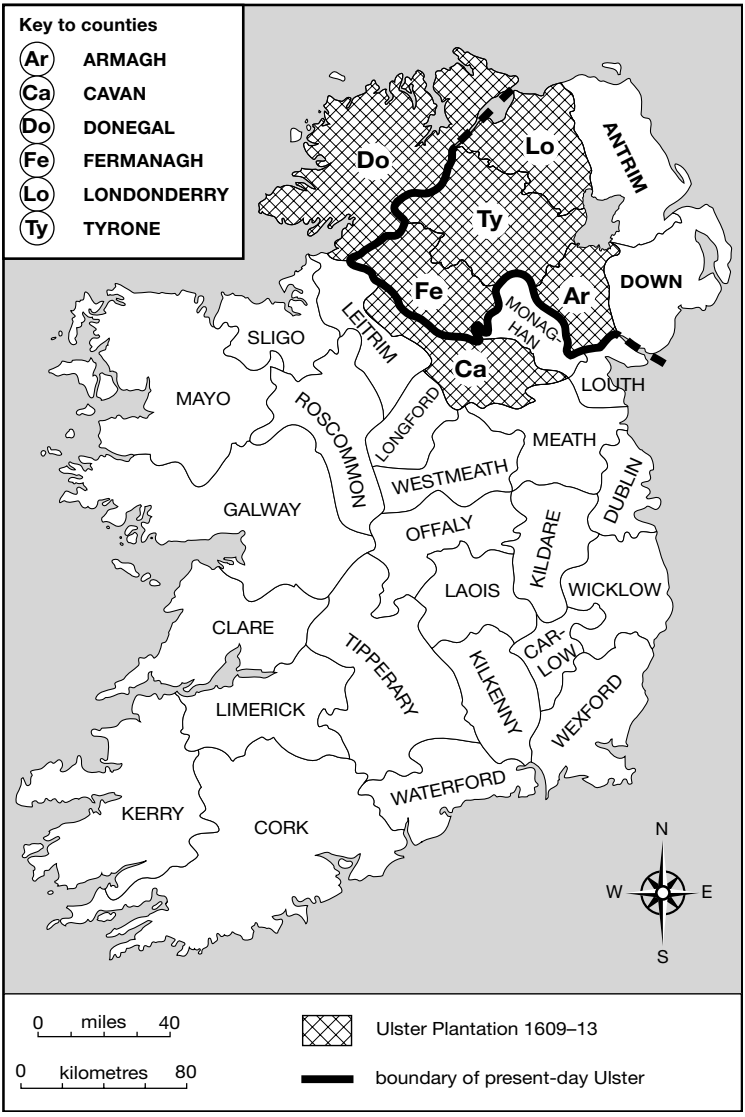


Figure 5.3 ***The partition of Ireland***

has subsequently spread right across the world. Its central aim is to achieve social justice through gaining sovereignty over an exclusive political homeland, the justification being that every nation has a natural right to self-government and control over its own affairs. Thus, whilst the politics of difference do not necessarily develop into a nationalist

movement, this is in fact what has happened to many of the larger and better organised campaigns for the recognition of minority rights.

Almost by definition, nationalist movements in their early stages are a revolt against the established political order and, as such, are invariably seen as a threat and something that needs to be contained and even extinguished. As movements gain momentum, however, especially with the passage of time, they tend to gain legitimacy, but it is rarely easy for state governments to accede to secessionist, or irredentist, demands, because the dividing lines between the opposing groups are confused and overlapping (Chazan, 1991). There are always those who do not wish to secede and campaign vigorously for the status quo.

The Irish struggle for independence throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is a classic secessionist story (Davies, 1999). Born out of the brutal repression of Oliver Cromwell and the English Commonwealth in the mid-seventeenth century, a campaign spanning nearly two centuries culminated, first in the ill-fated Home Rule Act of 1914, the implementation of which was disastrously postponed because of the outbreak of the First World War, and finally in the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. The Treaty led somewhat tortuously to the partition of Ireland, with the twenty-six counties in the south forming the overwhelmingly Catholic Irish Free State and then the Irish Republic, and the remaining six counties in the north and east forming the largely Protestant self-governing province of Ulster within the UK. The frontier between the two cut crudely between the two religious communities and the ensuing years have been spent trying to gain political acceptance for a very imperfect partition. The result has been an irredentist conflict, with the nationalist minority in Northern Ireland seeking to overturn the partition and the Unionist majority determined at almost any cost to resist a weakening of the province's position in the UK.

The origins of nationalism have been the subject of considerable debate (Gellner, 1983). It took root in Europe during the nineteenth century and there has been some argument as to whether industrialisation and modernisation have fed or starved its subsequent growth. Initially, it was thought that as societies developed and became more integrated, nationalism would gradually fade in the face of a more internationalised, or globalised, world but time has thrown increasing doubt on this interpretation. Nationalism has flourished and spread rapidly across the world, becoming particularly potent in the developing countries in Africa and Asia. As a result, it is now argued that it is not so much a result of

industrialisation, as a reaction to its uneven spread. Many regions and countries have been left out of, or sold short by, the benefits of industrialisation and nationalism is now seen as a political response to try and reassert self-determination and control.

Nationalism is a broad and loosely defined term, incorporating a number of different movements. The most obvious is *state nationalism*, where governments appeal to feelings of national unity and promote symbols to bolster those feelings. National flags and national anthems, as well as swearing allegiance, are all universal examples of such manipulation In the USA, for example, the school day must begin by law with all students swearing their allegiance to the flag. Frequently, state nationalism is challenged by *sub-state nationalism*, when an irredentist group seeks to break away, or have greater independence from the central government. Examples are legion across the globe, but the long-standing campaign by the province of Quebec to loosen its ties to the federal government in Canada is a vivid case in point. In the developing world *anti-colonialist nationalism* is a very prevalent variant, whereby an indigenous people seeks to free itself from what it sees as a colonial oppressor. In the second half of the twentieth century such movements were especially active, resulting in political change and independence across virtually the whole of the Indian subcontinent and most of Africa. The biggest beneficiary, in terms of both area and population, was India which is now one of the fastest growing economies in the world. Finally, there is *ethnic and religious nationalism*, resulting from an oppressed ethnic or religious minority seeking to free itself from persecution and oppression. In most instances this can be seen as a variant of sub-state nationalism, but sometimes the persecution is so dispersed and virulent that a new state is established. As the USA spread westwards across North America, there were a number of examples, including Utah, which was founded as refuge for the Mormons, but, as with all the others, was eventually re-incorporated into the Union as a state in 1896. Elsewhere, there is the case of Israel, founded as a completely new state and Jewish homeland and committed to accepting Jewish immigrants from anywhere in the world without any restriction. Nationalist sentiment in Israel is extremely strong and proving very difficult to accommodate within the Middle East as a whole, provoking repeated intermittent conflict.

War and political breakdown

Any change to the established political order is unsettling and disruptive and often cannot be accommodated peacefully. When diplomacy fails the outcome is war and, recently, at any one time, there have been on average about forty different major conflicts across the globe. The seriousness and duration of wars varies enormously and most of the major conflicts are the result of unresolved power struggles between states rather than irredentism. Whatever their cause, they are a shifting and ever-present feature of the political landscape and the commonest mechanism of change to the world political map (Burghardt, 1972).

One of the main drivers behind the establishment of the United Nations Organisation in 1945 was to reduce the level of war in the world and to provide international peacekeeping forces to try to contain or prevent armed conflict (see Chapter 12). Since 1948 it has mounted fifty-nine such operations, though with the exception of the Korean War (1950–3), where at its peak there were over 900,000 troops under UN command, mostly from South Korea and the USA, the numbers involved in peacekeeping operations have been small. In 2004, there were sixteen operations on five continents, involving nearly 60,000 troops from ninety-seven countries, and for the most part they were undertaking policing, rather than combat, duties (Figure 5.4). In terms of service personnel, the most significant UN presence is in Africa, with troops in Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia and Eritrea, Liberia, the Ivory Coast, the Western Sahara, and Burundi, but it also stands between warring factions elsewhere across the globe.

In many instances the UN is not in a position to assist in preventing war breaking out, either because political disagreement within the membership ties its hands, or because it cannot finance a sufficiently large operation – or both. Most wars develop despite its best efforts and, once started, usually prove very difficult to end, not least because invariably what is really at issue is control of resources and any agreement on sharing is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

It is interstate wars that usually command the greatest public attention. In 2004, the most high profile was the invasion of Iraq by the USA, the UK, and to a much lesser extent other European and Asian countries. In little over a year the conflict claimed about 20,000 dead, 95 per cent of them Iraqis and it remains to be seen whether Iraq as a state in its present form can survive and, if not, what kind of new territorial order will

Figure 5.4 ***UN peacekeeping operations, 2004***

emerge. Iraq was previously governed by a despotic dictator, but it also had the second largest proven oil reserves in the world. Whilst overturning a tyrannical regime was undoubtedly a major factor behind the costly, crusading invasion, the promise of access to the oil was undoubtedly another, and it is now sustaining a determination to see through a very unpopular occupation, with massive geostrategic implications for the balance of global political power.

Elsewhere, a classic irredentist conflict over the future of Kashmir has spluttered on intermittently since 1947, threatening to involve the two regional powers, India and Pakistan, in face-to-face conflict. The dispute centres around whether Kashmir should remain a part of India, or become an independent state with closer links to the largely Muslim state of Pakistan. It has claimed over 65,000 Kashmiri lives and, even though peace talks between India and Pakistan started in 2003, it is still not clear whether they will be successful and what the future political status of Kashmir will be.

In Russia, the Republic of Chechnya has been waging a war to secede from the Russian Federation for more than a decade. Chechnya is a landlocked republic in the Caucasus Mountains between the Black and the Caspian seas and is seeking independence largely because its indigenous population is overwhelmingly Muslim. However, it is facing implacable opposition from the Federal Russian government, because it commands the most likely potential route for oil pipelines linking the

Caspian Sea basin with the Black Sea coast and, thus, access to the high seas. As a fully independent state, Chechnya would be in a position to dictate the flow of oil and Russia has been prepared to engage in a guerrilla war to safeguard its own interests. Whatever the politics, the conflict has resulted in at least 150,000 deaths since 1994 and shows no sign of being resolved.

Somewhat cynically, it may be said that such a pattern of international conflict represents 'normality'. There are always wars being waged; it is only the places where they erupt into general conflict that change. Actually, most wars are intra-state, civil wars between opposing factions within states and they too are most often waged over resources. In Colombia, for example, a conflict has been continuing for more than forty years between the government, aided by the US army, and at least four different rebel armies. At issue are drugs and control of the bulk of the illegal supply of cocaine to the world market. The USA justifies its support for the government by arguing that it has a legitimate interest in the drugs trade, as the major market for smuggled cocaine from Colombia. Its stance rather conveniently ignores the fact that all the major guerrilla groups – Fuerzas Armadas Revolutionarias de Colombia (FARC), Ejercito de Liberation National (ELN), Union Patricia Party (UP), and the Popular Army of Liberation (EPL) – are equally opposed to the drug trade in principle, but find the political oppression of the poor in both rural and urban areas by the government unacceptable.

In other instances, foreign intervention in civil wars is justified to prevent the conflicts from spreading to neighbouring states. This has happened often in Africa where the state and sub-state political frameworks usually date from the nineteenth- and twentieth-century European colonial era and, therefore, are at variance with the indigenous, pre-colonial, ethnic map. The civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo between Laurent Desirée Kabila's Congo Armed Forces (FAC) and the Alliance of the Democratic Forces of Congo (AFDL) represents a recent manifestation of a conflict between two deeply opposed tribal groups, the Balendus and the Wahimas. It is a conflict that has involved a number of neighbouring states over the years, often because they too have large minorities belonging to these tribes. Namibia, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, Zambia, and Mozambique have all at times sent peacekeeping forces to try to dampen the conflict and prevent it from spreading, but with limited success.

Historically, the repeated recourse to war and armed conflict is evidence of the limitations of attempts to manage differences in society in a

civilised fashion. Although at times states have built military aggression into their arsenal of foreign and domestic policies, for the most part societies try to avoid the breakdown of war. Throughout the twentieth century somewhat faltering attempts were made to develop international agencies that could act as a buffer and mediator between warring parties (see Chapter 12). However, their very partial success underlines the fact that maintaining a reasonable balance in the weight of military power between states and sub-state groups is still, ironically, usually a prerequisite for stability and peaceful coexistence. The most notable example of such a stand-off in the recent past is the Iron Curtain, that divided Europe for nearly half a century during the Cold War.

Key themes and further reading

The concept of difference is important for understanding the inherent instability built into states and all other governmental structures. Recognising difference and allowing for it within government are, therefore, crucial. The cohesive force of language needs to be appreciated, as does the dangers of racism and discrimination if ethnicity and cultural differences are not accommodated. The ways in which religious and political power are conflated within states are frequently fundamental to understanding how they function. The nature and meaning of nationalism, as well as the distinctions between state, sub-state, anti-colonialist, and ethnic and religious nationalism should now be clear. Ignoring these cleavages in society can encourage irredentism and lead to conflict and war.

Two very good introductions to the impact of cultural, racial, and linguistic differences on the dynamics of societies are: *Maps and Meaning* by Peter Jackson (1989) and *Cultural Geography* by Michael Crang (1998). Both can be recommended without reservation, though *Cultural Geography* has the advantage of being more up to date. To find out how peoples go about reconciling their differences and forging themselves into functioning political units, Norman Davies (1999) in *The Isles* gives a fascinating and very detailed interpretation of how the British Isles developed politically to be the way they are today.