Michael Forman explores the tension between internationalism and nationalism in political ideas developed in the context of the European labour movement, and puts them into perspective with earlier, Enlightenment concepts of a cosmopolitan patriotism. The main thinkers discussed are grouped together as members of the three Internationals, including Bakunin (as a member of the First International). The inclusion of anarchist theory (although represented through Bakunin alone), and Forman’s putting the labour movement into perspective with the Enlightenment (represented mainly by references to Kant), help sharpen the view on the specific contributions and challenges that followed from Marx’s interventions in labour politics. Although Forman does not exhaust the possibilities that his approach opens up, his book is the best starting point available so far for comparative analyses of liberal, anarchist and Marxist conceptions of the nation.

Forman starts out from the observation that, for eighteenth-century political philosophy (Condorcet, Kant), the constitutions of republics had per definitionem a cosmopolitan intent: they were meant to oppose the universality of the European aristocracy with a specifically bourgeois universality (p. 3). In ‘The Idea of a Universal History’, Kant suggested progress in history could be measured through what nations and governments achieve ‘in relation to the cosmopolitan goal’ (p. 18). After 1789 and especially 1848, the ‘political history of the idea of the nation bifurcated’ (p. 3): the bourgeoisie in its majority gave up republicanism and became ‘proudly particular’, while ‘the internationalist movement of the socialist working class’ preserved and developed the older bourgeois conception of ‘cosmopolitan patriotism’ (p. 3). Here, the ‘inter’ provided a critical edge against the ‘-nationalism’, and in the tension between the two elements, a significant number of positions flourished. Forman postulates that, in the socialist context, ‘internationalism cannot exist without nations, and nationalism is self-referential without broader commitments’ (p. 8). Socialist internationalism ‘never meant the simple abrogation of the nation’ (p. 3). In Enlightenment thought, in sans-cullotisme or in Babeuf’s thought, ‘the nation . . . was
always on the agenda’ (p. 9). The international labour movement inherited republicanism along with other ideas of the Enlightenment including equality and cosmopolitanism, and Forman argues that their nexus still needed to be preserved, or rather re-appropriated, in its entirety, against contemporary forms of particularist ideologies: ‘the Left must continue the project of the international labor movement while returning to its radical republican origins’ (p. 17). The strength of Forman’s approach lies in his recognition of two facts: one, that the nation was never absent from the agenda of the labour movement (against, for example, Nairn1 and Nimni2 whose suggestion that the labour movement never took the issue seriously is a smokescreen for criticisms of how it has addressed the nation) and two, that socialist concepts of the nation are indebted to Enlightenment liberalism. Its weakness is the simplistic narrative of the ‘bifurcation’ of an initially wholesome concept. This lends itself to the popular notion that there are good (patriotic, liberal, socialist) and bad (ethnic-cultural, reactionary, bourgeois) nations, which, I argue, renders banal and mystifies the intrinsic contradictions of the nation-form.3

Forman points out that, in discussing nationalism, the three Internationals each had their characteristic pivot (p. 13): for the First International, the national question was an issue of solidarity amongst workers of different countries; for the Second International, it was an issue of workers of different ethnic backgrounds within a country; for the Third International, the issue was nation building (p. 13).

Forman discusses as representatives of the First International (1864–76) Bakunin, Marx and Engels. Bakunin shared with other 1848ers the notion that democracy, nationalism and internationalism together formed the unitary foundation of a new way of politics that, contrary to ancien régime despotism, aimed to identify state politics with the popular will (pp. 28, 30). For Bakunin, the most powerful opposition to the ancien régime and its legalist and ‘legitimist’ ideas seemed to be expressed by claiming, or demanding, that what subsequently came to be called the ‘civic’ and the ‘ethnic’ nation be identical (p. 24). As Forman writes, Bakunin’s understanding of the nation was ‘essentially populist’ and, throughout his life, he ‘held to the intuition that nationality was a cultural fact of existence that had undergirded human personality and development since time immemorial’ (p. 24). His ‘communalist’ view of the nation, and the commitment to insurrectionary politics in which déclassé intellectuals would lead peasants and urban poor, are the two themes that lent continuity to his positions before and after he adopted anarchism.

For most of his life, Bakunin had presupposed that a democratic, republican state was the actual expression of the popular will of a nation, implying that conflicts between such states were actually conflicts between antagonistic nations. Only in the

1 Nairn 1981.
3 Following Balibar 1991a & b.