

# Marxism and nationalism in the era of globalization

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## Abstract

Marxists have been engaging with nationalism from the days of Marx and Engels until the present, generating much debate (for an overview, see Lowy, 1998, Munck, 1986 and Nimni, 1991), but also considerable confusion. This article traces the genealogy of Marxist engagement with nationalism in the work and practice of Marx and Engels; in the later response by the communist movement following the Russian Revolution of 1917; in relation to the unorthodox theory of nationalism produced by the Austro-Marxist Otto Bauer; and, finally, in some of the debates within the broad Marxist/post-Marxist strands of political thought that seek to place nationalism in the era of globalization.

## Great historical failure

It was Tom Nairn who famously argued, *'The theory of nationalism represents Marxism's great historical failure. It may have others as well, and some have been more debated ... Yet none ... is as important, as fundamental, as the problem of nationalism, either in theory or in political practice'* (Nairn, 1981: 329). This dictum has become something of a truism accepted by non-Marxist and Marxist writers alike. It is sometimes argued or implied that nationalism is so primordial that a political ideology, such as Marxism, would find it somehow ungraspable. It is also argued that Marxism failed to understand nationalism because of its inherent reductionism (superstructures determined by the economic base) and its class essentialism, thanks to which only class ideologies were seen. Both these lines of attack are based on certain undeniable features of classical Marxism. However, when considering the interaction of Marx and Engels with the 'national question', it is probably best to start by situating them within the politics of their day. They were men of their times, they were not disembodied; and they were politicians, not sociologists.

In mid-nineteenth-century Europe, *'To support nationalist aspirations for unity, autonomy, or independence was to support popular liberties against empire and absolutism'* (Benner, 1995: 9). For a Mazzini or a Herder, nationalist icons of the day, the flourishing of nation states was synonymous with democracy. The negative connotations of nationalism so patent after the conflagration of 1914-18 were articulated only really by the anarchists and a small group of left liberals. Marx and Engels had a politically discriminating attitude towards the various national issues of the day, and displayed a normative approach towards the nationalisms of their day. For

them, the guiding light was democracy, and later also internationalism. In a sense, they were not interested in analyzing nationalism as a unified or consistent entity because they did not believe it was such. As Erica Benner writes, they could not have grasped the differences between the new forms of national politics and the democratic politics they advocated had they treated nationalism *'as a phenomenon sui generis, rather than analysing national movements as a variety of distinct political programmes based on conflicting social interests'* (Benner, 1995: 10). It is this discriminating, deconstructionist approach to nationalism that we now need to outline.

Though Marx and Engels were keen supporters of German unification, they were not German nationalists. For them, national unification was a preliminary task of the German democratic revolution. Marx and Engels were equally sympathetic to the ongoing process of national unification in Italy, writing *'No people, apart from the Poles, has been so shamefully oppressed by the superior power of its neighbours, no people has so often and so courageously tried to throw off the yoke oppressing it'* (Marx and Engels, 1977b: 10). Here, we get a hint that support for nationalist demands was not unconditional for the founders of Marxism. Rather, it was tied to the big power politics of the day, and in particular to the dominating role of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires. For Marx and Engels, neither a common language and traditions nor geographical and historical homogeneity were sufficient in themselves to define a nation. Rather, a certain level of economic and social development was required, and priority was given, on the whole, to larger units. The right of nations to self-determination was far from absolute for Marx and Engels, and depended, rather, on the international political conjuncture and the developments of the class struggle—or lack of it—in each national situation. They were, of course, practical politicians, and they were guided on national issues largely by political action considerations rather than theory. Where Marx and Engels seemed to break with their unfortunate binary opposition between historic and non-historic nations was in regard to Ireland. The 'Irish turn' is clearly signalled by Marx in a letter to Engels in 1867: *'Previously I thought Ireland's separation from England impossible. Now I think it inevitable'* (Marx and Engels, 1971: 143). What Marx now prescribed for Ireland was independence, protective tariffs and agrarian reform. In a glimmer of what would one day be called 'dependency theory', Engels wrote that *'Every time Ireland was about to develop industrially, she was crushed and reconverted into a purely agricultural land'* (Marx and Engels, 1971: 132). Ireland's domination by British force of arms had converted the country into an agricultural and labour reserve for the Industrial Revolution. Marx and Engels now stood squarely behind the Irish democratic movement for national independence. Their stance was summed up in the simple yet eloquent phrase, *'Any nation that oppresses another forges its own chains'* (Marx and Engels, 1971: 163). It seemed that they were recognizing the fundamental political, even class, differences between a nationalism of the oppressed and the aggressive, expansionist nationalism of the oppressor.

So, what is the legacy of Marx and Engels on the national question? It was probably not the 'great historical failure' it has been portrayed as being by some, although it was certainly contradictory. Though living in the age of nationalism, Marx and Engels preached internationalism, and probably exaggerated or over-estimated its homogenizing effect on the world. Furthermore, as Paul James notes: *'ideologies like nationalism were in Marx's writings often reduced to imaginary or fictitious representations of the really real'* (James, 1996: 69). As with religion, for Marx famously the 'opium of the people', nationalism was most often portrayed as being a veil over people's eyes—a false consciousness masking the true class struggle. Nationalism belonged to the realm of subjectivity, whereas the class level was somehow more objective and material. If there was a negative normative yardstick in the shape of 'progress' with which to measure nations, there was also in Marx and Engels' work a consistent commitment to democracy as the litmus test for an understanding of the political significance of particular nationalist movements. They do, perhaps lay themselves open to the criticism by Bakunin and other anarchists that any Faustian pact with nationalism will, at the end of the day, be anti-progressive.

## **Communists and nationalism**

It is sometimes forgotten that communists and nationalists have often been political rivals, 'fishing in the same pond', as it were. We should thus reject the idea that the one is always 'scientific' and rational, whereas the other is just 'primordial' and irrational. As in the case of the so-called 'woman question', communists have often been found trying to locate ways in which their Marxist theories could provide a strategy for action towards a recalcitrant social reality they did not always comprehend. Lenin, as the Marxist leader of the multi-ethnic Soviet Union, was called upon to develop the Marxist theory of nationalism. His contribution, the so-called 'right of nations to self-determination', has been codified in the Marxist-Leninist system. The right of nations to self-determination had become part of the Bolshevik armoury in 1903 as a response to the more 'nationalist' position of the Jewish workers' organization, the Bund. The 1905 Russian Revolution was to bring the national question more fully into the centre of Bolshevik politics. Lenin took his position against both the demands for Jewish (and Ukrainian) national cultural autonomy, and what he saw as the abstract leftist denial of national oppression by Rosa Luxemburg and those among the Bolsheviks who followed her position. Basically, Lenin advocated the right of self-determination (including secession) for smaller nations where they were oppressed by a dominant larger nation. Like Marx, he favoured larger economic units, which he considered more conducive to economic development. To a large extent, Lenin's support for nationalist movements was tactical, designed to undermine the Tsarist regime in a Russia he recognized to be 'a prison of peoples'. Once in power, the Bolsheviks were loath to put the 'right' to self-determination of these peoples into practice. There is much that could be said about the Leninist 'principle' of the right of nations to self-determination. I could start (and finish) with Tom Nairn's caustic remarks that what Marxist 'orthodoxy required was a plausible way of both supporting and not supporting national movements at the same time. It needed an agile and imposing non-position which would keep its options permanently open. That was what Lenin supplied' (Nairn, 1997: 39).

Rosa Luxemburg, as she did in all her political positions and practice, sought to refuse any opportunism on the national question. For her, the 'right' of nations to self-determination made as much sense as the 'right' of workers to eat off gold plates. This right seemed to her either an empty, noncommittal phrase that meant nothing, or else it was false and misleading if it implied that socialists had an unconditional duty to support all nationalist aspirations. While welcoming the Russian Revolution of 1917, she believed that the Bolshevik policy on national self-determination would lead to the disintegration of Russia and was storing up trouble for the Soviet state. In her critique of the Bolsheviks, Rosa Luxemburg posed the highly pertinent question of who decided a nation's will to secede: '*But who is that "nation" and who has the authority and the "right" to speak for the "nation" and express its will?*' (Davis [ed.], 1976: 141). In this, Luxemburg was being consistent with her critique of the notion of representation implicit in the Leninist concept of the vanguard party. She was also sensitive to the perspectives of non-European peoples (in her work on imperialism), and also recognised that: '*The working class is interested in the cultural and democratic content of nationalism, which is to say that workers are interested in such political systems as assure a free development of culture and democracy in national life*' (Davis [ed.], 1976: 175).

As Soviet Marxism began to consolidate its grip on the Russian state, so its attention turned to spreading the revolution. Orthodox Marxism pointed west to the proletariat in the advanced capitalist countries such as Germany. However, Lenin severely underestimated '*the Western proletariat's deep attachment to national and democratic values. The nation and democracy were, historically, products of capitalism, but they were also conquests won by the working masses*' (Claudin, 1975: 60). Frustrated in the West, the young Bolshevik Revolution turned its sights to the East, with far-reaching consequences.

Nationalism came to the fore at the 1920 First Congress of the Peoples of the East, held at Baku, Azerbaijan. The leaders of the Communist (or Third) International wooed the revolutionary nationalist leaders with a discourse that could scarcely be called Marxist. Zinoviev proclaimed, *'Brothers, we summon you to a holy war against British imperialism!' while the delegates brandished their sabres and revolvers in the air with cries of 'Jihad!' and 'Long live the renaissance in the East!'* (Carriere d'Encausse and Schram [eds.], 1969: 173). It was indeed a renaissance, as communism was reborn in the East in local colours; and an anti-imperialist movement, with communists in the vanguard, that became a crucial factor in world history. Most Marxists and the communists would have hitherto held the most circumspect views on the prospects of non-European peoples' contributing to the world revolution. Events in India or Ireland, for example, were usually only read in terms of their effects in Britain. The national question was still primarily a European question: for example, that of how to handle the various ethnic groupings in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. By 1922, however, the Fourth Congress of the Communist International had adopted a position that prefigured the idea of the anti-imperialist united front: *'Taking full cognizance of the fact that those who represent the national will to State independence may ... be ... of the most varied kind, the Communist International supports every national revolutionary movement against imperialism'* (Degras [ed.], 1971: 385 my emphasis). With the temporary blip of the ultra-left turn between 1928 and 1934, the international communist movement began its adaptation towards and accommodation with/to Third World nationalist movements. Lenin himself had made the epistemological break in order to seek a way out of the imperialist blockade of the Soviet Union. Few now remembered his words: *'Marxism cannot be reconciled with nationalism, be it even of the "most just", "purest", most refined and civilised brand'* (Lenin, 1963: 34). In conclusion, the engagement of communists with nationalism has not been, in theoretical terms, too fruitful. In Lenin's work, ultimately nationalism was conceived as a transient problem in the inexorable march of history towards socialism. The turn towards the non-European colonial world gave rise to a sturdy hybrid of nationalist communism in which, to a large extent, Marxism was domesticated by nationalism, and Leninism became an ideology for development. Within European Marxism, nationalism continued to be underestimated and misunderstood. Thus, Eric Hobsbawm could write in 1989, in a broad retrospective on nationalism since 1780, that: *'Post-1945 world politics have been basically the politics of revolution and counter-revolution, with national issues intervening only to underline or disturb the main theme'* (Hobsbawm, 1990: 176). Hobsbawm has always followed Lenin in not wishing to 'paint nationalism red', but it is difficult to understand such a blinkered view of world politics. If there has been a 'great historical failure', it would probably not be at the theoretical level, but at this practical level where an ideology which is supposed to be a guide to action can blind one to the overwhelming importance on the world stage of nationalism and ethnicity in all its variants.

### **Bauer's epistemological break**

In most socialist engagements with nationalism, Otto Bauer's work would have been mentioned, if at all, only in relation to a few cutting remarks directed at it by Lenin and Stalin. Yet Kolakowski's encyclopaedic history of Marxism refers to Bauer's forgotten 1907 classic, *'The nationalities question and social democracy'*, as being *'the best treatise on nationality problems to be found in Marxist literature and one of the most significant products of Marxist theory in general'* (Kolakowski, 1982: 255). For reasons that will become clear, Bauer's approach was difficult for orthodox Marxists to digest, but he did accomplish an important, if partial, break with the reductionism so evident in the classics—a break that has only recently been recognized (Nimni, 1991; Munck, 1986). The context of Otto Bauer's writing on nationalism was set by Austrian social democracy, which had to operate within a multinational state. Bauer formed part of the political current known as Austro-Marxism, a term that describes a number of theorists active in the Austrian socialist movement at the turn of the century. They belonged to a tendency within the social-democratic movement, 'the

Marxist Centre', led by Kautsky, and after the First World War they sought a third alternative between bankrupt social democracy and the new communist current. National tensions in the Habsburg Empire posed an obvious threat to the unity of the working-class movement. Until almost the turn of the century, the German-speaking social democrats of Austria had professed what Bauer called a 'naive cosmopolitanism', which simply rejected nationalism as diversionary and preached a humanist message of fraternization (Bauer, 1979: 298). The Czech workers' movement, on the other hand, was under considerable nationalist influence, not surprisingly given the predominant role of the Germans in the Austrian part of the Habsburg Empire. As one critic points out, 'what this meant politically was, above all, that the Social Democratic Party lacked any common analysis of national conflicts within the multinational state, and could offer no united guidelines beyond an abstract profession of internationalism (Loew, 1989: 19). Bauer himself saw the main strength of his work as being its description of the derivation of nationalism from the process of economic development, changes in the social structure, and the articulation of classes in society (Bauer, 1979: 19). However, much of his work and the debates to which it gave rise centred on his definition of 'nation'. In a nutshell, this was that *'The nation is the totality of human beings bound together through a common destiny into a community of character'* (Bauer, 1979: 142). The nation was seen as being a 'community of fate' whose character resulted from the long history of the conditions under which people laboured to survive, and divided the products of this labour (the social division of labour). Before deriding this conception as a form of idealism, we should note that Bauer repeatedly criticized *'national spiritualism [which] saw the nation as a mysterious spirit of the people'* (Bauer, 1979: 130). He also explicitly rejected psychological theories of the nation. His working definition of the nation was rather a methodological postulate that posed *'the task of understanding the phenomenon of the nation, explaining on the basis of the uniqueness of its history all that constitutes the peculiarity, the individuality of each nation, and which differentiates it from other nations, that is, showing the nationality of each individual as the historical with respect to him, and the historical within him'* (Bauer, 1979: 14). Only by pursuing this task of uncovering the national components can we dissolve the false appearance of the substantiality of the nation, to which nationalist conceptions of history always succumb, he concludes.

For Bauer, above all, the nation is a product of history. This is true in two respects: firstly, *'in terms of its material content it is a historical phenomenon, since the living national character which operates in every one of its members is the residue of a historical development'*; and secondly, *'from the point of view of its formal structure it is a historical phenomenon, because diverse broad circles are bound together in a nation by different means and in different ways at the various stages of historical development'* (Bauer, 1979: 144). In short, the way in which the 'community of character' is engendered is historically conditioned. It follows that this 'community of character' is not a timeless abstraction, but is modified over time. Bauer refers to national character as being something specific to a particular decade, and not something that can be traced back to the origins of history. Nor is it seen as being an explanation in itself, but as something that needs to be explained. Internationalism cannot simply ignore national characteristics, but must show how they are the result of historical processes. Though today Bauer's theory of nationalism suffers from almost total oblivion, even—or perhaps especially—amongst Marxists, in its day it was a subject of intense polemic. Karl Kautsky was the recognized 'expert' on the national question in the Second International, and it was his task to reassert orthodoxy. Kautsky argued firstly that *'Bauer has not taken sufficiently into account the importance of language both for the nation and the state'* (1978: 149). For Kautsky, language was the foremost constant in the historic development of the nation. Bauer responded, quite persuasively, that he fully recognized the nation as a 'community of culture' that lay behind the generation, transformation and limits of language (Bauer, 1978a: 176). Kautsky went on to argue, more generally, that the main weakness of Bauer's work was *'its enormous exaggeration of the national factor'* (Kautsky, 1978: 166). For Kautsky, it was simply a question of Bauer's not

understanding that the proletariat was predominantly international in orientation rather than national. Kautsky saw the proletariat as aspiring towards an international rather than national culture, especially as international trade was leading to a worldwide language. To these abstractions, Bauer counterposed a more realistic appraisal of the meshing of class and national struggles. As we have seen above, Bauer sought to confront nationalism on its own ground: *'the art of war teaches us not to avoid the adversary but to take the war to his own country'* (Bauer, 1978a: 184). This seems a more fruitful strategy than the development of Esperanto as the key to workers' international solidarity.

Perhaps the most relevant part of Bauer's work today is his detailed consideration of the relation between class struggle and nationalism. In a striking phrase, he wrote that *'nationalist hatred is a transformed class hatred'* (Bauer, 1979: 259). Bauer was referring specifically to the reactions of the petty-bourgeoisie of an oppressed nation, as it was affected by shifts in population and other convulsions engendered by capitalist development. But the point is a more general one, and Bauer shows clearly how class and national struggles were intertwined. For example, in the case of the Czech worker, *'the state which enslaved him [sic] was German; German too were the courts which protected property owners and threw the dispossessed into jail; each death sentence was written in German; and orders in the army sent against each strike of the hungry and defenceless workers were given in German'* (Bauer, 1979: 296). The workers of the 'nonhistoric' nations adopted in the first instance a 'naïve nationalism' to match the 'naive cosmopolitanism' of the proletariat of larger nations. Only gradually, in such cases, does a genuinely international policy develop that overcomes both 'deviations' and recognizes the particularity of the proletariat of all nations. Although Bauer preached the need for working-class autonomy in the struggle for the socialist form of production as the best means for seizing power, he argued that *'within capitalist society, national autonomy is, however, the indispensable revindication of a working class which is obliged to carry out its class struggle in a state of (different) nationalities'* (Bauer, 1979: 314). This was not a 'state-preserving' response, he argued, but was a necessary aim for a proletariat that sought to make the whole people into a nation.

In conclusion, we could argue that Bauer's work represents a major break with economism: in it, politics and ideology are no longer seen as mere 'reflections' of rigid economic processes. The very context in which Austrian social democracy operated made it particularly sensitive to cultural diversity and to the complex social processes of economic development. The economic determinism and basic evolutionism of Second International Marxism was implicitly rejected in Bauer's treatise on the national question. In terms of its substantial contribution, Bauer advanced a concept of the nation as historical process, in pages of rich and subtle historical analysis. The nation was no longer seen as a natural phenomenon, but as a relative and historical one. This allowed Bauer to break decisively with the Marx-Engels position on 'non-historic' nations, a category still employed by most contemporary Marxists. As with Gramsci's much more influential work on the national-popular, we find in Bauer's work a welcome move beyond most Marxists' continuous (mis)understanding of the nation and of nationalism as 'problems', and not just an integral element of the human condition.

## **Globalization challenges**

With the rise of globalization in the 1990s, there was a general assumption that nationalism would become a thing of the past. From a rather economic perspective, Marxists could view globalization as a progressive expansion of capitalist relations across the globe, more or less as Marx had predicted. According to Hardt and Negri, in their classic turn-of-the-century work *Empire*, it is now necessary to understand that *'the construction of Empire [shorthand for globalization] is a step forward in order to do away with any nostalgia ... such as trying to resurrect the nation-state to*

*protect against global capital*' (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 43). Any form of localism or nationalism is deemed both false and damaging from the perspective of social transformation, and thus Hardt and Negri viewed globalization as progressive in the same way that Bill Warren (1980) had claimed that imperialism was progressive for an earlier period of capitalism. The problem with this mechanistic view is that it necessarily ignores the way nationalism continues to articulate social discontent and is the source of new solidarities as well as the expression of older ones. Marxists are left with few tools with which to analyse nationalism in the era of globalization if they simply dismiss the phenomenon as being backward-looking. From an 'onward march of history' perspective, capitalism has now spread across the world, and we could argue that global democracy is an achievable objective. Thus there is a thriving body of literature and political project around the need to construct 'global civil society' (see Kaldor, 2003). This project is strongly antagonistic to all forms of nationalism or localism as well as to any use of armed struggle in pursuit of political objectives. Its general ethos is strongly reminiscent of the 'false cosmopolitanism' criticized by Otto Bauer, as we saw above. It seemingly ignores the fact that *'nationalism is a positive sense of meaning—and even sometimes inspiration and of mutual commitment among very large groups of people. If it were merely illusion and manipulation it could not have the power that it does'* (Calhoun, 1997: 126). The 'global civil society' theorists have not stopped at casting out the 'uncivil' elements of civil society, but they go on to articulate a very western liberal cosmopolitanism that acts as a thin veneer for a new 'humanitarian imperialism', and a renewal of the idea of the 'white man's burden' in terms of teaching manners to the majority world, including through military means where they prove recalcitrant (on the global civil society paradigm, see Chandler, 2004 and Taylor, 2004). Against the somewhat mechanistic or evolutionary view that the spread of capitalist relations worldwide will generate a movement towards global democracy, we could ask with Tom Nairn, *'Why has globalization engendered nationalism, instead of transcending it?'* (Nairn, 1997: 63). That is, arguably, the crucial question for critical theory in the current era. A retreat into liberal internationalism is not really an adequate guide to action from a radical perspective. Demonising nationalism along with tribalism and fundamentalism as pathological phenomena that are not in the same league as Western civil society (see James, 2006) is not particularly helpful. From a historical-materialist perspective, there is a longstanding, interesting uneven and combined development that would prove more fruitful in helping us to understand the political complexity of globalization. In an earlier academic debate (see Orridge, 1981), this approach was posed as a question of nationalism being a simple and direct response to the uneven development of capitalism, but a more nuanced, less necessitarian reading of uneven development may prove more illuminating to a renewed Marxist engagement with contemporary nationalisms. Recent works by Justin Rosenberg (see, for example, Callinicos and Rosenberg, 2008) and Marcel Van der Linden (2007) provide pointers for this area of theoretical practice.

Within the various writings of Marxists, from Karl Marx through Otto Bauer to more contemporary writers, there is a richness of perspectives from which to understand nationalism, even if there is not a 'Marxist theory of nationalism' as such. However, from my own perspective, Marxism is as inextricably bound up with modernists as is nationalism. Thus it is limited, in its classical expressions, as a guide to action in a global postmodern era. We are now much more attuned to the profoundly gendered nature of the nationalist discourse. We are less prone to reduce culture to any economic determinants, and we do not think that social classes are born with a pre-set ideology. Against all essentialisms, we are now more focused on deconstructing the meanings, values and implicit identities associated with nationalism. By focusing on nationalism as discursive formation, we are less likely to fall into the trap of seeking to detect and separate the 'bad' (probably racist) nationalisms from the 'good' (presumed) civic nationalisms. It is not that nationalism is something primordial and thus beyond social theory, but its study does require a non-essentialist, interdisciplinary approach attuned to the nuances of the cultural production and reproduction of meaning through political practices and discourses.

If we take a broad-sweep look at nationalism from a materialist perspective, we can relate its modern origins to the first Great Transformation, to use Polanyi's expression, which saw the emergence of the national capitalist market (Polanyi, 2000). Nationalism was both a response to and an integral element in the transformation attendant on the Industrial Revolution; and nationalism, as Partha Chatterjee has argued, was a key functional element in Europe's domination of the rest of the world for the century that followed (Chatterjee, 1996). Now, since the collapse of 'actually, existing socialism' in the 1990s, a second Great Transformation has been underway, disembedding the market from society as part of the so-called 'globalization revolution'.

Just as in Polanyi's earlier transformation, this one has given rise to a massive social counter-movement seeking to protect society from the impact of the unregulated market—a model that collapsed in 2008, so recently that it is as yet unclear what form of regulation will be implemented at a global level, and what social and political forces will come to the fore in the largely defensive social counter-movement. What is certain, in the era of globalization, is that nationalism will play an important role in that struggle. Marxists will take very different stances towards these emerging forms of nationalism: some will provide 'critical support', while others will denounce these movements as reactionary. Nevertheless, all Marxists need to be appraised of the rich, if contradictory, debates around nationalism that have taken place within the broad Marxist tradition since its inception.

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