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National liberation: Some problems with Eric Blanc's analysis - The value of large multinational socialist states

Friday 6 June 2014, by [ELY Mike](#) (Date first published: 5 June 2014).

The following comments by Mike Ely on Eric Blanc's "National liberation and Bolshevism reexamined: A view from the borderlands" [1] first appeared in Kasama Project [2]. See also Eric Blanc's rejoinder and other comments ("Constituent Assembly" [3] and "Five Views" [4]).

There is value in opening up a deeper discussion of nationality, national liberation and strategies for revolution in multinational states. Having said that, there are some problems with Eric Blanc's approach and analysis. First, he seems to assume that every oppressed nationality needs and wants a separate nation state - that independence is the natural and necessary accompaniment of liberation. And he assumes that the separatist and pro-nationalist forces (somehow) speak FOR those nationalities. Why is that?

Just look at the headline "A view from the borderlands" - why is a promotion of socialist separatists and bundists assumed to be this view from the border lands?

Isn't it (in fact) true that many socialists from those border nationalities were very hostile to separation politics (for very good reasons). Lenin even had to struggle with Polish socialists who were too extreme in their desire to oppose national aspirations in Poland. Many Jewish people were in the Bolshevik party, and viewed the nationalism of the Bund to be a serious problem (and saw it as tied to tailing the awful backwardness of rural stetl life with its domination by super-conservative rabbis and patriarchs.

Why assume that the nationalists are the voice from the borderlands, but the forces wanting a federated multinational state don't represent a voice from the borderlands?

There is a prejudice baked into this piece, right from the subhead.

The value of large multinational socialist states

Second, Eric does not engage (except in passing) the key issue that the Bolsheviks were grappling with: Is it possible to form multinational unity (on a new and liberated basis) and therefore form a relatively large socialist state that could withstand the pressures of external capitalism.

If the Tsarist empire had broken apart into (say) fifteen states, some of them capitalist, some of them

semi-feudal, some of them socialist (but separate from each other in tempo and defense) - would the process have gone very far?

And it is relevant for us today:

Is there value in having a larger multinational socialist state? Or should we just advocate a post-revolutionary balkanization (in the name of maximizing the self-determination of every distinct group)? What are the pros and cons?

Any one who has contemplated socialist revolution in a relatively small country (Nicaragua, Nepal, Cuba) doesn't have to go far before they realize the problems and challenges of attempting socialism in one poor and isolated *and small* country. There are reasons to amalgamate.

Programs of bourgeois democrats within the socialist movement

Third, this essay treats all socialists as socialists, in the sense that he assumes that the separatist Social Democrats of the Russian periphery were as radical and as socialist as the Bolsheviks.

But in reality this was far from true. Most currents in the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (and in the similar parties that emerged outside of it) were not particularly focused on socialist revolution. Their view was to aspire to a "modern" state similar to Germany - which developed a strong capitalist industry, a constitutional monarchy, and had a well organized socialist opposition. In other words, they (and here I am specifically referring to the Menshevik wing, aligned with Kautsky, and the Bundist groupings aligned with the Mensheviks), considered a plan for socialist revolution to be ultra-left. They assumed (mechanically) that capitalism would play a major role in "modernizing" Russia, and that (only over time) would the society (and the people) be advanced enough to undertake socialist measures.

In other words, a lot of these social democrats were not particular socialist (in their goals, program, strategies) - but aspired to be socialist oppositions within a new bourgeois electoral political system (that would be defined by capitalist economics).

In many ways, the radicalism of the Bolsheviks is one of the reasons that they were attracted to the vision of a multinational, country-wide revolution - in which oppressed nationalities had a right to self-determination, but in which they would hopefully not choose to become independent.

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Four, there needs to be some deepening of the discussion around self-determination. For a lot of people in the U.S. left today, self-determination is (quite simply) what revolution is about. Everyone gets to decide everything about their lives. You get self-determination. I get self-determination. This group gets self-determination. That group gets self-determination. (In one discussion of Eric Blanc's essay, a participant even said that isn't socialist revolution in agriculture a violation of self-determination - as if (somehow) revolution can operate by consensus, or as if every property owner has a final say over the property form of ownership in society.

Wasn't that the argument of motel owners in the South who said they had a right to exclude Black people from their facilities? Did those white racist motel and restaurant owners have some right to self-determination for their own property - as libertarians claim?

The view of many leftists (in the U.S.) on self-determination - has much more in common with Ron Paul than with communist politics.

In fact, this approach to self-determination is not particularly deep, and proceeds from the self not from the social.

Society is highly integrated. You can't have every identifiable grouping simply deciding how it lives and functions - there is a core to the economy, it will be either socialist or capitalist. If countries become independent, they will either become socialist or capitalist. They will either be strong enough to stand on their own feet and function as states in a hostile world, or they won't. They will either have national markets that are relatively self-sustaining or not. (I.e. a small country with one cash crop has a hard time not being dominated by capitalist countries that consume that crop.) If factories become worker-controlled - that still doesn't solve the question of whether they form part of a socialist economy or a capitalist one.

So (in communist politics) self-determination is not an assumed good. It is applicable and necessary in some cases, and not in others.

For example, if an ethnic group is highly dispersed, without a territory, without a common economic life and basis for a national market, what does it mean to argue that they need an independent state? Perhaps other forms of liberation are more likely to succeed (forms of local autonomy, overthrow of discriminatory structural features of the larger common society, etc.)

To assume that every nationality in the Russian empire needed or wanted independence is a leap... and starts by asserting precisely what needs to be explored.

A one-sided view of self-determination (lifted whole cloth from current U.S. academic privilege politics and its assumptions) starts to show its problems when you apply it to the U.S. The U.S. is a huge and highly diverse country, where different regions have very different national compositions and histories. But obviously, the slogan of local self-determination is historically problematic: Why are we against states' rights? Why does the advance of African American people repeatedly require the denial of local self-determination for white majorities in the deep South (including by force of arms in the Civil War)? Was that wrong or somehow "Yankee chauvinist"? (The way Eric's essay above repeats claims that the Bolsheviks were chauvinist in Central Asia)

And it also appreciates (or even discusses) that there is a class character to many demands for independence (if it is independence from a socialist federation we are discussing). If the masses of women in Central Asia would endure a theocratic feudal nightmare in independent states - but have a chance for liberation in a Soviet Union of federated republics - perhaps the secession of Central Asian regions isn't a great idea. Who speaks for the people of Central Asia in this case? The patriarchs and mullahs? The heads of each clan? Who speaks for the youth, or the enslaved, or the women? And why shouldn't the communists do that? Why assume that independence in Central Asia is simply an "anti-colonial" development - when the colonialization was Tsarist, and the new Soviet Union was radically different.

Would there have been some kind of special positive virtue to leaving the social systems of Central Asia untouched?

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Five, the piece doesn't really grapple with major, wrenching forms of necessity that confronted the newborn Soviet state. Let me give some examples.

The Bolshevik program argued that communists should aspire to a single multinational socialist state - which they organized as a federation of republics (with their own institutions of various kinds). There was a commitment to overthrowing Russification - which was honored by promoting

local languages (several of which had never existed in written form before the Bolshevik revolution). And there was an argument that by promising to honor a right of self-determination (for larger nationalities like Poles, Finns, Latvians, Azeris, etc) - including a right of secession and independence if desired - that this would strengthen the basis for such multinational unity, and help overcome the distrust and suspicion among various nationalities. (Russia was truly a "prison house of nations.")

In practice, it proved very hard to discern what (precisely) the people wanted. And often the problems were posed by clashes between revolutionary socialist fighters (the Red Army) on one side (seeking to expand liberated areas) and non-revolutionary fighters of various kinds (seeking to demand local independence in alliance with foreign capitalist powers). Did the rightists (in these cases) speak for the aspirations of the people? Or did the soldiers in the Red Army (who often included Poles, and Ukrainians, etc.)?

Further, once it was clear that the Soviet Union would survive, there were efforts to seize (for imperialism) key resources: One example is the Baku oil fields. Could a new socialist state survive if it allowed local political forces (tied to Britain etc.) leave with those oilfields? Were these things too strategic to abandon?

there was a second problem that emerged: The revolution survived in Russia, but was sputtering in Germany. Workers seized key cities in Central Europe (Berlin, Munich, Budapest, and more). But at a certain point, it seemed unlikely that these powerful revolutionary currents would win, unless hooked up with the Soviet zone in Russia. At that point, Lenin (and the Bolsheviks) sent their Red Army marching across Poland in an effort to reach Berlin, and give armed support to the embattled workers there. That land bridge had to cross Poland (where for many reasons there was a nationalist mood, and a rather anticommunist one.)

Most difficult choices in life involve the clash of positive principles - that suddenly are at cross purposes.

Was it wrong to try to cross Poland, to help push the workers revolution to victory in Germany? Wouldn't the whole world benefit if that succeeded? Was the Polish right to self-determination an absolute right, that nixed any other consideration? Or were such decisions necessary to make in context, from an overall view?

We come out of a historic period when the anti-colonial struggles of oppressed people (for national liberation and liberation) have been the storm center of revolution. And it is perhaps natural to assume that this is inherent in movements for independence - i.e. that to fight for independence is the same as liberating people from national oppression, as if the integration of different nationalities in a common socialist project is somehow chauvinist and oppressive.

But the world is also full of reactionary movements for secession and independence - where reactionary cliques mobilize popular sentiments behind their counterrevolutionary banners. Obviously the demands for independence and self-determination of the Southern States of the Confederacy is one vivid example in U.S. history. But wasn't the Pilsutski movement in Poland another? Was the pro-Nazi sheen of Finnish nationalism in the 1930s the result of Soviet errors, or the result of the simple fact that anti-communism and reactionary nationalism had fused in the countries of the cordone sanitaire (in the context of a socialist revolution on their borders)? We have all seen the banners of Tibetan independence and nationalism used (starting in the 1950s when it was explicitly financed by CIA money and arms). Was there something progressive in the demand to have Tibetan theocratic semi-slave society staying separate from the waves of revolution in China?

Any socialist revolution (achieving victory in a large multinational states) will give rise to rightwing

secessionist movements - as reactionary classes seek to demagogically rally people to a counterrevolutionary cause. Will this problem be solved if we simply (and automatically) support every possible proposal for independence, if we agree to divide our communist forces into smaller, parallel and uncoordinated parties? Will that solve the problem, or merely prevent the revolution?

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I am of the view that we should study and assimilate the socialist experiments of the twentieth century. And obviously that means approaching them with an open-mind, with a willingness to criticize as necessary and uphold as possible. There is nothing wrong with asking basic questions about the Bolshevik nationality policies.

But, as you see, I think Eric Blanc's approach adopts some rather influential prejudices (from our current U.S. left) and so makes its criticism without actually engaging the contradictions.

Critically engaging the Bolsheviks and Comintern

Having said that I would like to make some critical points of my own:

1) I think that a real problem emerged when the Bolshevik nationality policies (which I generally uphold) were declared to be universal - and where methods lifted from Eastern Europe were applied (mechanically) to widely different places (including the African American situation in the United States). There was relevance to the Soviet experience, but too many principles were treated as universally applicable.

It is worth noting that in the Chinese revolution, the communists chose not to apply or adopt the Soviet party's theory on nationalities. China too was a nation-state with many nationalities (and like both Russia and the U.S., that nation state had historically had some characteristics of empire. But the many nationalities existed within a larger formation ("China") that was itself (by the twentieth century) fundamentally characterized by domination and its subordination as an oppressed semi-colonial nation.

The approach of the Chinese communists (once Mao defeated the pro-Soviet orthodox factions) was to develop their own theory, their own policies, and work through the very particular contradictions they faced. (Tibet being one example worth discussing at length, if we are going to critically examine Bolshevik approaches to Central Asia).

2) It was a major problem when (after the 1930s) the Soviet party reversed correct verdicts, and started to endorse Russification. First there was the discussion of a new nationality ("the soviet people") - which had some material truth to it - but that gave way to a rather sweeping resurrection of slavophile and Russian exceptionalism.

The Soviet federation became a federation-in-words-only. There was (by World War 2) open discussion about a "special" role of Russian people within the Soviet Union - and a rather clear reversal of historical verdicts, that started to uphold the Tsarist expansion and conquest of neighboring peoples.

This was spurred by the necessity to mobilize Russian nationalism in the defensive war against Nazi invasion - but it has a profound and corrosive effect on the political and ideological life of the USSR.

3) Looking back, we can see that the Soviet communists (and the broad masses of people) endured severe difficulties in assimilating some nationalities into the socialist revolution.

For historical reasons the Catholic and very conservative parts of Western Ukraine were very hostile to socialist revolution (and especially to agricultural collectivization). It not only had a different history but also a distinctive class structure - with many more private family farms and far fewer landlord-owned estates dominated former serfs. I.e. the internal class conditions for a new revolutionary advance were much weaker there, than in other parts of the USSR.

The conflicts over collectivization led to a de facto war situation around 1930. And in the end, it required massive force and repression to assert Soviet policies over that part of the Ukraine - and (in that process) thousands of the best young communists spent their best years rounding up, suppressing and deporting hundreds of thousands of rebel peasants. What happens to a revolution when your decisions force your best forces to repress major sections of the people? What does it do to the revolutionary process?

I suspect that the Soviet experience might have been considerably less harsh and repressive if it had been decided to "let the western Ukraine" leave. Of course, that part of the Ukraine was a precious "bread basket" for a Soviet Union that faced starvation. But perhaps it would have been better to have been more hungry, and not turn the new revolutionary generation into the suppression force for millions.

Mike Ely

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<http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2014/06/05/national-liberation-some-problems-with-eric-blancs-analysis/>

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 32027), [Russian Revolution - The constituent assembly and the national question: Response to Eric Blanc](#).

[2] <http://kasamaproject.org/threads/entry/national-liberation-and-bolshevism-reexamined-a-view-from-the-borderlands>

[3] See on ESSF (article 32027), [Russian Revolution - The constituent assembly and the national question: Response to Eric Blanc](#).

[4] See on ESSF (article 32028), [Russian Revolution, Marxist legacy - Five views on 'National Liberation and Bolshevism': A response](#).