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National and class

1971: On the dialectic of nation and class struggle

- Features - Ernest Mandel Archive -

Publication date: Saturday 23 May 2020

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Only by starting from the centrality of class struggle can we explain the development of nationalism. However, that the theory of historical materialism gives class struggle a primary place in history does not mean class struggle is the only factor in history. In fact, at different times in history other factors can become primary. But whenever we ask why other factors can become primary, we are lead back to the question of class struggle. The development of nationalism is a case in point.

Origin of the nation in bourgeois society

The national question arises from the class struggle. To identify the national question with the existence of the state, the ethnic group, tribal grouping, or the communal or village association is a complete misuse of language. The Roman Empire was no more an example of a national entity than was the Holy Roman Empire of the Middle Ages. England was not a nation in the twelfth or thirteenth century for the good reason that a considerable part of the ruling class there spoke a language different from the language of the people and had a different origin—the Normans who had conquered England.

The Marxist view on the question maintains that the nation is the product of the struggle of a specific class, namely the modern bourgeoisie, the first class in history to give birth to a nation. It created a nation economically, because it required a unified national market. In order to safeguard the unity of this national market it eliminated every pre-capitalist, semi-feudal, guild, and regional obstacle to the free circulation of commodities. It also created this national unity from the politico-cultural point of view, because it based itself on the principle of popular sovereignty—a principle opposed to the legitimacy of the monarchy, nobility, or church—in order to mobilize the masses against the old democratic revolutions.

The concept of the nation arose with the great bourgeois democratic revolutions. The first great bourgeois-democratic revolution in history took place in the Low Countries. It was the national uprising against the king of Spain that began in Flanders that was defeated there but succeeded in Holland, that gave birth to the first modern nation with a national consciousness based on a capitalist infrastructure. The same process was next seen in Great Britain, in France with the French Revolution, in Spain, in Germany, in Italy, in Poland, in Ireland, etc. In each of these processes the material interests underlying the concept of the nation are hardly the cause of mystery or speculation. During this period of its history, that is, the era in which it was still revolutionary and progressive, the bourgeoisie itself did not beat around the bush and stated things rather bluntly. If one reads the declarations of the Gironde - which was at the time the most bourgeois and the most nationalist party in the French Revolution, much more nationalist than the Jacobins since they were the ones who pushed for continuing the war and not the Jacobins - you will see the link between these factors. And, because in 1790 we are already in a more advanced period than in the Netherlands of the sixteenth century or in the United States of 1776, there is a third theme as well: commercial competition between the industrial-manufacturing bourgeoisie of France and the English bourgeoisie. According to historians of the French Revolution, notably the school of Lefebvre, this competition played a much more important role in the wars of the Revolution and Empire. These wars were not merely a struggle between the French bourgeoisie against the other, more or less counter-revolutionary, European powers who intervened to defend the privileges of the French nobility and royalty.

The nation is born from a specific class struggle, the struggle of the bourgeoisie against feudalism and pre-capitalist semi-feudal forces. The role played by the absolute monarchy in this can not be ignored. In the case of France it is

quite clear. The nationalism embodied in a personage such as Louis XIV is not yet nationalism in the modern meaning of the term, but is a dynastic pre-nationalism in the sense that the absolute monarchy prefigures a change in the relationship of forces between the nobility and the bourgeoisie. What happens when the bourgeois state, the bourgeois revolution, triumphs? The class struggle evidently does not halt, although the bourgeoisie would very much like it to stop at this time. As soon as the class struggle regains momentum after the victory of the bourgeoisie, it shifts ground accordingly. The struggle of defeated classes shifts toward the sphere of the superstructure. I call this to the attention of Maoist comrades because they must explain why, despite the survival of semi-feudal ideology throughout the entire nineteenth century, no feudal regime regained power in any of the countries where this ideology remained quite powerful. I am thinking principally of France, where the predominant ideology of this period remained the ideology of Catholicism—a typically pre-capitalist, pre-bourgeois, semi-feudal ideology, which condemned the French Revolution up to the 1880s and for an entire period remained the ideology of the non-working classes.) Just as this survival of an ideology did not permit the restoration of a class in the nineteenth century, so I believe the survival of bourgeois or petty-bourgeois ideology following the overthrow of capitalism cannot in itself be used as evidence of a danger of the restoration of capitalism. For this danger to take a sufficiently concrete form powerful material interests and social forces must be engaged in struggle on the side of this restoration, and not merely ideological, political, or other carry-overs in the superstructural sphere as is believed, if not by Mao Zedong (he is much more prudent on this subject), at least by many of his followers or those who swear by him.

The proletariat and the bourgeois-democratic revolutions in Europe

While the class struggle with pre-capitalist forces shifts towards the superstructural sphere, the center of gravity of the class struggle shifts toward the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. It is at this very moment, Marx wrote as early as 1847 (very early; according to his own historical scheme, one could even say prematurely, a point to which we will later), that the proletariat has no country, which means that in the leadership of a workers' organization nationalism or the concept of a nation must not take precedence over the international solidarity of the working class.

We said "prematurely" because the Communist Manifesto proclaims a historical principle that actually represents an anticipation that did not yet correspond with immediate reality. In fact, just one year after drafting the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels themselves took part in a class struggle in Germany that was also a national struggle. They declared the struggle for the unification of Germany, for the creation of a united and indivisible German republic, one of the central objectives of the Revolution of 1848. From the economic, social, and cultural point of view, and particularly from the point of view of the possibility of an upsurge in the workers' movement and the class struggle, the unification of Germany would have represented an enormous step forward. The Revolution of 1848 had as its historical function the completion of the historic tasks of the bourgeois-democratic revolution in five European countries: Germany, Italy, Austria, Hungary, and Poland. These were the nationalities incorporated into the Austro-Hungarian Empire and in part overlapping the czarist empire as well. However, it were the counter-revolutionary victors of the battles of 1848-49 who were compelled to carry out the testament of this revolution. It was Bismarck, the very incarnation of the Prussian nobility, who carried out the unification of Germany, not the bourgeoisie, the petty bourgeoisie, or the working class. The same phenomenon, or something very close to it, took place in Italy, where the country was united by the Savoy dynasty.

Marx, at that time, had to take a position in practice that differed somewhat from the general principle proclaimed in the Communist Manifesto. In reality, the principle that "the proletariat has no country" applied only to the epoch in which the bourgeois revolution has already been accomplished. In the world of 1848, Marx and Engels were confronted with a situation of combined development. In every country of Europe where national unification was not carried out by the bourgeoisie it was because in a certain sense, this bourgeoisie had arrived too late on the historical scene, at a moment when the working class was already strong enough to play an independent political role. The

bourgeoisie's fear of aiding the revolutionary process was greater than their desire to accomplish the task of national unification. In other words, in all these countries a process of permanent revolution was on the agenda.

Moreover, it was at this moment and in this specific context that in 1850, for the first time in the history of Marxist thought, Marx made use of the formula of the permanent revolution. Workers in Germany must begin, he said, by supporting the struggle for the unification of the country, for the victory of a bourgeois-democratic republic. But they must not interrupt the struggle when this classic victory of bourgeois democracy is accomplished. They must continue the struggle to defend their own interests as a class opposed to the bourgeoisie. At no time should they give up their independent organization, especially in view of the fact that it was highly unlikely, if not impossible, that even these bourgeois tasks would be accomplished under the leadership of the bourgeoisie. It was much more likely that the Jacobin petty bourgeoisie, with their sword in the back of the working class, would be the ones to accomplish this national unification. This was a possible pattern for the Revolution of 1848. It was not realized. We paid a very high price for this because all the conservative and reactionary forces of Germany pushed forward in the wake of this defeat influenced the fate of Europe, including the destiny of German imperialism and the birth of Nazism.

Nationality then is the product of the struggle of the bourgeois class against feudal and semi-feudal forces, while proletarian internationalism is the product of the struggle of the working class against capitalism. The bourgeoisie developed productive forces on the basis of unified national markets. Its commodities conquered and constituted the world market. But this market was far from unified: there was no worldwide development of capitalist industry. The framework for capitalist competition was founded on national markets and nation-states. The capitalists tried to carry over this competition into the working class. From the period of the First International on, the most conscious workers replied that it was in their interest, including their immediate economic interest, to counter-pose international solidarity of workers to worldwide competition by the capitalists. Without this solidarity, the workers are defenseless and would be systematically crushed by the capitalists. The only effective counter-blow they could use in face of the enormous superiority of financial power was as broad as possible a joint, cooperative organization unrestricted by national boundaries, race, or ethnic group.

And thus we arrive at the point, where the principle stated by Marx in the Communist Manifesto begins to have a universal application—namely, the beginning of the imperialist epoch. At this stage the bourgeoisie of the countries of Western and Central Europe, as well as of countries like Japan, Russia, and the United States, lost any possibility of playing progressive historical role and became a conservative reactionary, counter-revolutionary class, exploiting in addition to their own working class, a large part the world as well. Marxists—first of all Lenin and the Leninist school, but before the First World all those who called themselves Marxists—without reservation considered the nationalism of this imperial bourgeoisie strictly reactionary. Kautsky himself and other Social Democrats before 1914 repeated that whenever the imperialist bourgeoisie used the words "defense of the country," or "defense of the nation," what they really meant was not defense of a cultural entity or of democratic rights in general but rather the defense of their privileged position in the world market, defense of colonial super-profits, and defense of the possibilities for super-exploitation in the part of the world they controlled.

Nothing what has happened since 1914 is reason to question this judgment. If we examine the analyses made by sociologists, historians, and economists who sought to deny this evident causal connection between chauvinism, imperialism, and the material interests of the imperialist bourgeoisie, it is apparent that they have totally failed. I will give one example. It is perhaps the most remarkable and at the same time the most lamentable. I mean the great Austrian economist Schumpeter, who, apart from the Marxists, is one of the greatest thinkers of the twentieth century. He wrote a brilliant article to demonstrate that imperialism and chauvinism have nothing to do with the existence of a monopolist bourgeoisie. As proof he cited the fact that the country with the most powerful monopolies was neither imperialist nor chauvinist. He meant the United States. This may have seemed convincing in 1912; it is less so today, when the argument lends itself to ridicule. Compared to this sort of analysis, the predictions made by the Marxists and Lenin's definitions in his 1917 pamphlet on imperialism stand the test of history quite well, proving to be extremely useful instruments for explaining what has taken place in the twentieth century.

Socialist revolution and nationalism

Does this mean that Marxists, and particularly Marxists of the Leninist school, identify every national idea and all nationalism in the twentieth century with imperialist nationalism? They do not. An idea already present in the writings of the older Marx, of the Marx in the last ten years of his life, was expanded upon in Marxist thought in the imperialist epoch and assumed an absolutely decisive place for assessing national struggles in our century. It is the simple notion that it is necessary to make a distinction between the nationalism of oppressors and exploiters and the nationalism of the oppressed and exploited. I say that this notion has a Marxist origin. It was Marx who was first to develop this notion in response to two concrete questions which he accorded a colossal importance in his entire strategy for the international class struggle: the Polish and Irish situations.

We will pass over the Polish question because it is the best known. (It has, however, been incorrectly interpreted from time to time as a specific tactic against the czarist regime and only a tactic with no relation to any more fundamental principle.) But the Irish question is much more clear and precise in this regard. As early as 1869-1870, in an article appearing in the Belgian journal *L'internationale*, Marx wrote that as long as the English workers failed to understand that it was their duty to help the Irish obtain their national independence, there would be no socialist revolution in England. Far from the notion that English and Irish nationalism were equivalent, that the nationalism of an oppressor nation and an oppressed nation are identical, Marx begins from this fundamental distinction. And we must say that history has shown him to be correct. If the English workers did not identify with the Irish struggle, he said, the exploitation and oppression of the Irish nation by the English bourgeoisie would result in the Irish workers, who were destined to become a growing minority of the English proletariat, being lost to the class struggle for a long time. The Irish workers would be unable to form a united front against the English employing class because the English workers, in effect, would have formed a united front with their own bourgeoisie against the Irish nation.

It is a singular feature of the imperialist epoch that making this distinction between the nationalism of the exploiters and the nationalism of the exploited does not divert the proletariat from the struggle for state power and socialism but, on the contrary, leads them toward it. This is because of the fact that in the imperialist epoch the tasks of national liberation and unification of oppressed nations can only be accomplished through an alliance of the proletariat and the poor peasantry, under the leadership of the proletariat, and through the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Revolutionary victory in an underdeveloped country under the leadership of the proletariat cannot be restricted to achieving national and democratic tasks. It gives impetus to a process of permanent revolution, culminates by achieving the historical tasks of the socialist revolution, and stimulates an international extension of the revolution to the highly industrialized countries where the immediate revolutionary task is the achievement of socialism. A figure like Guy Mollet attempts to give lessons in internationalism when he expounds the argument, as he did in 1955 when he was the Social-Democratic prime minister of imperialist France, that in the twentieth century, in an epoch when the concept of nationalism was outmoded, the Algerians were wrong to demand national independence. Anyone with common sense could have replied to Monsieur Guy Mollet: "A fine thing. The concept of nationalism is outmoded! Why don't you begin by rejecting the concept of the French nation? Why do you demand that an oppressed nation first overcome its nationalism, while you, the leader of a colonial and oppressor state, then refuse to give up the nationalist outlook yourself?" The slave is not required to set the example. It is not the slave who should be asked to refrain from violence in ridding himself of his chains. It is necessary, if one wishes to speak in this tone, to begin by demanding that the policeman, the slave-master, cease their oppression and cease to defend their exploitation with violence. Then we can see.

We reject any equating of the nationalism of the oppressed with the nationalism of the oppressors. Inasmuch as the nationalism of the oppressors is detestable and makes no contribution to ideological or moral progress, it is all the more important to take a careful, concrete approach to the nationalism of the oppressed. When we speak of colonized peoples (not only of peoples colonized from the outside, of peoples who live in overseas colonies, but also those who live in internal colonies, like Black people in the United States), when we see the deplorable state in which these oppressed populations find themselves, when we see that they are the victims of economic, political, moral,

and cultural oppression, and that this moral and cultural oppression very often constitutes an indispensable superstructure for maintaining economic and political oppression, then we must repeat what Trotsky said. The birth of national consciousness in a nation so oppressed, the attempt to win liberation not only from economic and political imperialism but also from cultural imperialism, is a first step on the path toward a realization of one's own human dignity and thus represents an enormous advance for humanity.

We must think back to the condition of the Black slaves in the nineteenth century. We must recall what the Black share-croppers were like after the American Civil War in order to understand that the gaining of national consciousness by this super-exploited and super-oppressed layer represents an enormous advance. It is a step that is absolutely inevitable and indispensable for making possible a further one, the fusion of oppressed nations of this sort in a unified humanity. Internationalism tends toward the fusion of nations in a world society without classes. But this fusion will come about as the result of a previously established equality among nations. As long as nations remain on an unequal footing we will never see the national consciousness of the oppressed disappear. Fortunately, no power is capable of smothering the spark of revolt that will not permit a passive acceptance of injustice and inequality.

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