

Marxists and the National Question

The aim of this article is to isolate certain key theoretical and methodological aspects of the classic Marxist debate on the national question: a debate which had its starting-point in the relatively imprecise positions developed by Marx and Engels themselves in their writings, and which was carried on vigorously in the Second International before the First World War, culminating in Lenin's formulation of a realistic revolutionary theory of the right of nations to self-determination.

Marx and Engels: Nationality and Internationalism

Marx offered neither a systematic theory of the national question, a precise definition of the concept of a 'nation', nor a general political strategy for the proletariat in this domain. His articles on the subject were, for the most part, concrete political statements relating to specific cases. As far as the 'theoretical' texts proper are concerned, the best-known and most influential are undoubtedly

the rather cryptic passages in the *Manifesto* concerning communists and the nation. These passages have the historical value of proclaiming in a bold and uncompromising way the internationalist nature of the proletarian movement, but they are not always free from a certain economism and a surprising amount of Free Tradist optimism. This can be seen particularly in the suggestion that the victorious proletariat will merely carry on the task of abolishing national antagonisms which was begun by 'the development of the bourgeoisie, Free Trade, the world market', etc. This idea, however, is contradicted in other texts from the same period, in which Marx stressed that 'while the bourgeoisie of each nation still retained separate national interests, big industry created a class, which in all nations has the same interest and with which nationality is already dead'.¹ In his later writings (particularly those on the question of Ireland), Marx showed that not only does the bourgeoisie tend to foster national antagonisms, but it actually tends to increase them, since: 1. the struggle to control markets creates conflicts between the capitalist powers; 2. the exploitation of one nation by another produces national hostility; 3. chauvinism is one of the ideological tools which enables the bourgeoisie to maintain its domination over the proletariat.

Marx was on firm ground in stressing the internationalization of the economy by the capitalist mode of production: the emergence of the world market which 'has destroyed industry's national base' by creating 'the universal interdependence of nations'. However, there was a tendency towards economism in his idea that the 'standardization of industrial production and corresponding living conditions' helps to dissolve national barriers (*Absonderungen*) and antagonisms, as though national differences could be equated simply with differences in the production process.

As for Marx's famous ironical and provocative statement that 'the proletariat has no country', this must be interpreted first and foremost in the sense that the proletariat of all nations have the *same interests*, a fact that Marx considered as being tendentially equivalent to the abolition of nationality (see the passage from *The German Ideology* quoted above): for the proletariat, the nation is merely the immediate political framework for the seizure of power. But Marx's anti-patriotism had a deeper significance: 1. for proletarian humanism, the whole of humanity is the meaningful totality, the supreme value, the final goal; 2. for historical materialism, communism can only be established on a world scale, due to the immense development of productive forces which surpass the narrow framework of nation states.

¹ Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, Moscow 1964, p. 76. Cf. Friedrich Engels, 'Das Fest der Nationen in London' (1846), in Marx, Engels, Lassalle, *Aus dem literarische Nachlass*, Stuttgart 1902, Vol. 2, p. 408: 'The dreams of a European Republic, of a lasting peace under political organization, have become as grotesque as phrases about the unity of nations under the aegis of universal freedom of commerce . . . In each country the bourgeoisie has its own particular interests and cannot transcend nationality . . . But in every country the proletariat has a sole and common interest, a sole and common enemy, a sole and common struggle. Only the proletariat can abolish nationality, only the vigilant proletariat can make the brotherhood of nations possible . . .'

While the *Communist Manifesto* did lay the basis for proletarian internationalism, it gave hardly any indication of a concrete political strategy in relation to the national question. Such a strategy was only developed later, particularly in Marx's writings on Poland and Ireland (as well as in the struggle he waged in the International against the liberal-democratic nationalism of Mazzini and the national nihilism of the Proudhonists). Support for Poland's struggle for national emancipation was a tradition in the democratic workers' movement of the nineteenth century. Although they belonged to this tradition, Marx and Engels supported Poland less in the name of the general democratic principle of self-determination of nations than because of the struggle of the Poles against Tsarist Russia, the main bastion of reaction in Europe and the *bête noire* of the founding fathers of scientific socialism. This approach contained a certain ambiguity: if Poland was only to be supported because her national struggle was also an anti-Tsarist struggle, did this mean that pro-Russian Slavs (like the Czechs) did not have the right to self-determination? This was precisely the problem with which Engels was grappling in 1848–9.

The writings on Ireland, on the other hand, have a far wider application and state, implicitly, some general principles on the question of oppressed nations. In an early phase, Marx was in favour of Ireland having autonomy within a union with Britain and believed that the solution to the oppression of the Irish (by the big English landlords) would come through a working-class (Chartist) victory in England. In the sixties, on the other hand, he saw the liberation of Ireland as the condition for the liberation of the English proletariat. His writings on Ireland in this period elaborated three themes which were to be important for the future development of the Marxist theory of national self-determination, in its dialectical relationship with proletarian internationalism: 1. only the national liberation of the oppressed nation enables national divisions and antagonisms to be overcome, and permits the working class of both nations to unite against their common enemy, the capitalists; 2. the oppression of another nation helps to reinforce the ideological hegemony of the bourgeoisie over workers in the oppressing nation: 'Any nation that oppresses another forges its own chains'; 3. the emancipation of the oppressed nation weakens the economic, political, military and ideological bases of the dominating classes in the oppressor nation and this contributes to the revolutionary struggle of the working class of that nation.

Engels

Engels's positions on Poland and Ireland were broadly similar to those of Marx. However, in his writings one finds a curious theoretical concept, the doctrine of 'non-historic nations', which—although in my view fundamentally foreign to Marxism²—is well worth examining as an extreme example of the mistakes which can be made on the national question, even when one bases oneself on a revolutionary socialist, democratic position.

² See on this question the remarkable essay of the Polish Marxist, Roman Rosdolsky, 'Friedrich Engels and das Problem der "geschichtlosen Völker"', *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* IV, 1964.

In 1848–9, analysing the failure of the democratic revolution in Central Europe, Engels attributed it to the counter-revolutionary role played by the South Slav nations (Czechs, Slovaks, Croats, Serbs, Rumanians, Slovenes, Dalmatians, Moravians, Ruthenians, etc.), who enlisted *en masse* in the Imperial Austrian and Russian armies and were used by the forces of reaction to crush the liberal revolution in Hungary, Poland, Austria and Italy.

In fact, the Imperial Austrian army consisted of peasants, both Slavs and German/Austrians. The victory of the counter-revolution was made possible by one important factor: the bourgeois-liberal leadership of the revolution was too hesitant, too 'moderate', too fearful, to spark off a national agrarian revolution. Consequently, it was unable to win the mass of the peasants and national minorities to its side and prevent them from becoming the blind instrument of reaction. The 1848 revolution is the classic example of a revolution which failed because it did not provide a radical solution to the agrarian question and the national question (precisely what made the 1917 October Revolution successful!). This failure resulted from the narrow social base of its leadership: the central European liberal bourgeoisie was, by the nineteenth century, no longer a significant revolutionary class.

Because he failed to grasp the true *class* reasons for the failure of 1848–9, Engels tried to explain it with a metaphysical ideology: the theory of inherently counter-revolutionary 'non-historic nations'—a category in which he includes, pell-mell, Southern Slavs, Bretons, Scots and Basques. According to Engels, these 'remnants of a nation, mercilessly crushed, as Hegel said, by the course of history, this *national refuse*, is always the fanatical representative of counter-revolution and remains so until it is completely exterminated or de-nationalized, as its whole existence is in itself a protest against a great historical revolution'.³ Hegel, the originator of the theory, had argued that nations which have not succeeded in creating a state, or whose state has long since been destroyed, are 'non-historic' and condemned to disappear. As examples, he mentioned precisely the Southern Slavs—the Bulgarians, Serbs, etc. Engels developed this pseudo-historical metaphysical argument in an article in 1855, which stated that 'Pan-Slavism is a movement which is attempting to wipe out what a thousand years of history have created, a movement which cannot achieve its aims without sweeping Turkey, Hungary and half of Germany off the map of Europe . . .'⁴ There is no need to add that such an argument owed more to the conservative principles of the historical school of law (Savigny, etc.) than to the revolutionary ideas of historical materialism! Paradoxically, the same Engels, in an article from the same period (1853), had stressed that the Turkish Empire was destined to disintegrate as a result of the liberation of the Balkan nations, a fact which in no way surprised him since, as a good dialectician, he admired in history 'the eternal changes in human destiny . . . where nothing is

³ Engels, 'The Magyar Struggle', in Marx, *The Revolutions of 1848*, London 1973, pp. 221–2.

⁴ Engels, 'Deutschland und der Panslawismus', (*Neue Oder Zeitung* 1855), MEW XI, cited in Rosdolsky, *op. cit.* p. 174.

stable except instability, nothing is immovable, except movement'.⁵

An 1866 series of articles on Poland⁶ demonstrated the ideological consistency of Engels, who persisted in contrasting the 'great historical nations of Europe' (Italy, Poland, Hungary, Germany), whose right to national unity and independence was accepted, and the 'many traces of nations' of no 'European importance' and with no 'national vitality' (Rumanians, Serbs, Croats, Czechs, Slovaks, etc.) which were instruments in the hands of the Tsar and Napoleon III. However, we might claim in Engels's defence that these were newspaper articles, lacking the rigorous character of a scientific work, and thus having a different status from his theoretical writings proper. Moreover, the basis of Engels's position was democratic and revolutionary: how to defeat Tsarism and the Austrian Empire. He was in no way motivated by any kind of Slavophobia. In an article written before the 1848 revolution, he had called for the defeat of the Austrian Empire in order to 'clear all obstacles from the road to the liberation of the Italians and Slavs'.⁷ Neither was Engels prey to German chauvinism, as is proved by his attacks on the German minority in Hungary (Siebenburger Sachsen), who 'persist in retaining an absurd nationality in the middle of a foreign country'.⁸

The Radical Left against National Separatism

The 'radical left' current (*Linksradikale*) represented by Luxemburg, Pannekoek, Trotsky (before 1917) and Strasser was characterized, to varying degrees and sometimes in very different forms, by its opposition to national separatism, in the name of the principle of proletarian internationalism. Moreover, its stance on the national question was one of the principal differences between this current and Lenin, to whom it was close in its Marxist and revolutionary approach.

Rosa Luxemburg

In 1893 Rosa Luxemburg founded the Social-Democratic Party of the Kingdom of Poland (SDKP), with a Marxist and internationalist programme, as a counter to the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), whose aim was to fight for the independence of Poland. Denouncing the PPS (with some justification) as a social-patriotic party, Rosa and her comrades of the SDKP were resolutely opposed to the slogan of independence for Poland and stressed, on the contrary, the close link between the Russian and Polish proletariats and their common destiny. The 'Kingdom of Poland' (part of Poland annexed to the Tsarist Empire), they said, should proceed towards territorial *autonomy*, not towards independence, within the framework of a future Russian democratic republic.

In 1896 Luxemburg represented the SDKP at the Congress of the

⁵ Engels, 'What is to Become of Turkey in Europe?' (*New York Daily Tribune* 1853), MEW IX, cited in Rosdolsky, op. cit. p. 174.

⁶ Engels, 'What Have the Working Classes to Do with Poland?', in Marx, *The First International and After*, London 1974, pp. 378–88.

⁷ Engels, 'Anfang des Endes in Österreich' (1847), MEW IV, p. 510.

⁸ Engels, 'The Magyar Struggle', op. cit. p. 279.

Second International. The positions for which she argued in her intervention were set out in a subsequent article:⁹ the liberation of Poland is as utopian as the liberation of Czechoslovakia, Ireland or Alsace-Lorraine . . . The unifying political struggle of the proletariat should not be supplanted by a 'series of sterile national struggles'. The theoretical bases for this position were to be provided by the research she did for her doctoral thesis, 'The Industrial Development of Poland' (1898).¹⁰ The central theme of this work was that, from the economic point of view, Poland was already integrated into Russia. The industrial growth of Poland was being achieved thanks to Russian markets and, consequently, the Polish economy could no longer exist in isolation from the Russian economy. Polish independence was the aspiration of the feudal Polish nobility; now industrial development had undermined the basis of this aspiration. Neither the Polish bourgeoisie, whose economic future depended on the Russian economy, nor the Polish proletariat, whose historic interests lay in a revolutionary alliance with the Russian proletariat, was nationalist. Only the petty bourgeoisie and the pre-capitalist layers still cherished the utopian dream of a united, independent Poland. In this respect, Luxemburg considered her book to be the Polish equivalent of Lenin's 'The Development of Capitalism in Russia',¹¹ which was directed against the utopian and retrogressive aspirations of the Russian populists.

Her most controversial statement on the national question (which Lenin, in particular, attacked) was the 1908 series of articles published under the title 'The National Question and Autonomy' in the journal of the Polish social-democratic party (which had become the SDKPiL, after a Lithuanian Marxist group had joined). The main—and most debatable—ideas put forward in these articles were the following: 1. the right of self-determination is an *abstract* and *metaphysical* right such as the so-called 'right to work' advocated by the nineteenth century Utopians, or the laughable 'right of every man to eat from gold plates' proclaimed by the writer Chernichevsky; 2. support for the right of secession of each nation implies in reality support for *bourgeois* nationalism: the nation as a uniform and homogenous entity does not exist—each class in the nation has conflicting interests and 'rights'; 3. the independence of small nations in general, and Poland in particular, is utopian from the economic point of view and condemned by the laws of history. For Luxemburg, there was only one exception to this rule: the Balkan nations of the Turkish Empire (Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians, Armenians). These nations had reached a degree of economic, social and cultural development superior to Turkey, a decadent empire whose dead weight oppressed them. From 1896 (following a Greek national uprising on the island of Crete) Luxemburg considered—in contrast to the position defended by Marx at the time of the Crimean War—that the Turkish Empire was not viable, and that its decomposition into nation states was necessary for historical progress.

⁹ 'La questione polacca al congresso internazionale di Londra', *Critica Sociale*, 16 July 1896, No. 14, pp. 217–20.

¹⁰ *Die industrielle Entwicklung Polens*, Leipzig 1898.

¹¹ V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 3.

To back up her views on the lack of future for small nations, Luxemburg used Engels's articles on 'non-historic nations' (though she attributed them to Marx: their true authorship was in fact only established in 1913, with the discovery of unpublished Marx/Engels letters). In particular, she used the article of January 1849 on the Hungarian struggle, quoting the passage we have already mentioned on 'remnants of a nation mercilessly crushed by the course of history'. She recognized that Engels's views on the Southern Slavs were mistaken, but she believed his method was correct and praised his 'sober realism, free from all sentimentality' as well as his contempt for the metaphysical ideology of the rights of nations.¹²

As is well known, in 1914 Luxemburg was one of the few leaders of the Second International who did not succumb to the great wave of social-patriotism which engulfed Europe with the advent of war. Imprisoned by the German authorities for her internationalist and anti-militarist propaganda, in 1915 she wrote and smuggled out of prison her famous Junius Pamphlet. In this text Luxemburg to some extent adopted the principle of self-determination: 'socialism gives to every people the right of independence and the freedom of independent control of its own destinies'.¹³ However, for her this self-determination could not be exercised within existing capitalist states, particularly colonialist states. How could one speak of 'free choice' in relation to imperialist states like France, Turkey or Tsarist Russia? In the age of imperialism the struggle for the 'national interest' is a mystification, not only in relation to the large colonial powers, but also for the small nations which are 'only the pawns on the imperialist chessboard of the great powers'.¹⁴

Luxemburg's theories on the national question, developed between 1893 and 1917, are based on four fundamental theoretical, methodological and political errors.

1. Particularly before 1914, she adopted an economist approach to the problem: Poland is economically dependent on Russia, therefore cannot be politically independent—an argument which tends to ignore the specificity and the relative individuality of each political situation. This determinist-economist method is particularly striking in her doctoral thesis and her early writings on the Polish question: the industrial development of Poland, linked to the Russian market, determines 'with the iron strength of historical necessity' (an expression which Luxemburg frequently used at this time, together with another of the same type: 'with the inevitability of natural law') on one hand, the utopian nature of Polish independence and, on the other hand, the unity between the Russian and Polish proletariats. A characteristic example of this unmediated assimilation of politics to economics occurs in an article she wrote in 1902 on social-patriotism, which stressed that the economic tendency—'and therefore' the political tendency—in Poland was for union with Russia; the phrase 'and there-

¹² Luxemburg, 'Nationalität und Autonomie' (1908), in *Internationalismus und Klassenkampf*, Neuwied 1971, pp. 236, 239.

¹³ Luxemburg, 'The Junius Pamphlet', in Mary-Alice Waters (ed.), *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, New York 1970, p. 304.

¹⁴ Luxemburg, 'Theses on the Tasks of International Social Democracy', *ibid.* p. 329.

fore' was an expression of this lack of mediation, which was not demonstrated but simply assumed to be self-evident.¹⁵ However, this type of argument began to disappear as Luxemburg increasingly succeeded in avoiding the economist trap, i.e. particularly after 1914, when she coined the phrase 'socialism or barbarism' (Junius Pamphlet), which represented a fundamental methodological break with fatalistic, Kautsky-type economism. Her arguments on the national question in the Junius Pamphlet were essentially political and not based on any mechanistic preconception.

2. For Luxemburg the nation was essentially a cultural phenomenon. Again, this tends to play down its political dimension, which cannot be equated simply with economy or ideology and whose concrete form is the independent nation state (or the struggle to establish it). This is why Luxemburg was in favour of abolishing national oppression and allowing 'free cultural development', but refused to countenance separatism or the right to political independence. She did not understand that the denial of the right to form an independent nation state is precisely one of the main forms of national oppression.

3. Luxemburg saw only the anachronistic, petty-bourgeois and reactionary aspects of national liberation movements and did not grasp their revolutionary potential against Tsarism (and later, in another context, against imperialism and colonialism). In other words, she did not understand the complex and contradictory dialectic of the *dual nature* of these nationalist movements. With regard to Russia, in general she under-estimated the revolutionary role of the non-proletarian allies of the working class: the peasantry, the oppressed nations. She saw the Russian Revolution as *purely* working class, and not—like Lenin—as *led* by the proletariat.¹⁶

4. She failed to understand that the national liberation of oppressed nations is not only a demand of the 'utopian', 'reactionary' and 'pre-capitalist' petty bourgeoisie, but also of *the masses as a whole*, including the proletariat; and that, therefore, the recognition by the Russian proletariat of the right of nations to self-determination was an *indispensable condition* of its solidarity with the proletariat of oppressed nations.

What was the source of these mistakes, inconsistencies and shortcomings? It would be wrong to think that they were logically linked to Luxemburg's method (apart from pre-1914 economism) or to her political positions as a whole (e.g. on the Party, democracy, etc.). In fact, these theories on the national question were not peculiar to Luxemburg, but were shared by the other leaders of the SDKPiL, even those who, like Dzerzhinsky, supported Bolshevism. It is most likely that Luxemburg's one-sided position was, in the last analysis, an ideological by-product of the continual, intense and bitter ideological struggle of the SDKPiL against the PPS.¹⁷

¹⁵ Luxemburg, 'Sozial-patriotische Programakrobatik', in *Internationalismus und Klassenkampf*, op. cit.

¹⁶ Cf. Georg Lukács, 'Critical Observations on Rosa Luxemburg's "Critique of the Russian Revolution"', in *History and Class Consciousness*, London 1971, pp. 272–95.

¹⁷ Cf. Lenin, 'On the Right of Nations to Self-Determination', *Collected Works*, Vol. 20, p. 430: 'It is quite understandable that in their zeal (sometimes a little excessive, perhaps) to combat the nationalistically blinded petty bourgeoisie of Poland the Polish Social Democrats should overdo things.'

The difference between Lenin and Luxemburg was, therefore, to a certain extent (at least as regards Poland), a result of the different standpoints of the Russian internationalists (struggling to defeat Great Russian chauvinism) and the Polish internationalists (combating Polish social-patriotism). Lenin at one time seemed to recognize a certain 'division of labour' between Russian and Polish Marxists on this question. Having said this, his major criticism of Luxemburg was that she tried to generalize from a certain specific situation (Poland at a particular point in history) and therefore to deny not just Polish independence, but that of all other small oppressed nations.

However, in one article Luxemburg stated the problem in terms very similar to Lenin's: the 1905 Introduction to the collection *The Polish Question and the Socialist Movement*.¹⁸ In this essay, Luxemburg made a careful distinction between the undeniable *right* of every nation to independence ('which stems from the elementary principles of Socialism'), which she recognized, and the *desirability* of this independence for Poland, which she denied. This is also one of the few texts in which she recognized the importance, depth and even justification of national feelings (though treating them as merely a 'cultural' phenomenon), and stressed that national oppression is the 'most intolerable oppression in its barbarity' and can only arouse 'hostility and rebellion'. This work, together with certain passages in the Junius Pamphlet, shows that Luxemburg's thought was too realistic, in the revolutionary sense of the word, simply to present a linear coherence, of a metaphysical and rigid kind.

Trotsky

Trotsky's writings on the national question prior to 1917 can be defined as 'eclectic' (the word Lenin used to criticize them), occupying a half-way position between Luxemburg and Lenin. It was in particular after 1914 that Trotsky became interested in the national question. He took it up in his pamphlet *The War and the International* (1914)—a polemical work directed against social-patriotism—from two different—if not contradictory—standpoints.

1. *A historical/economic approach.* The world war was a product of the contradiction between the productive forces, which tend towards a world economy, and the restrictive framework of the nation state. Trotsky therefore heralded 'the destruction of the nation state *as an independent economic entity*'—which, from the strictly economic point of view, was a totally justifiable proposition. However, he concluded from this premise the 'collapse' (*Zusammenbruch*) and the 'destruction' (*Zertrümmerung*) of the nation state *altogether*; the nation state as such, the very concept of the nation, would only be able to exist in the future as a 'cultural, ideological and psychological phenomenon'. Of course, this was an evident *non sequitur*. The ending of the economic independence of a nation state is in no way synonymous with the disappearance of the nation state as a political entity. Like Luxemburg, Trotsky

¹⁸ Luxemburg, 'Vorwort zu dem Sammelband "Die polnische Frage und die sozialistische Bewegung"', in *Internationalismus und Klassenkampf*, op. cit.

tended to reduce the nation either to economics or to culture, and thus lost sight of the specifically political aspect of the problem: the nation state as a political phenomenon, distinct from the economic or ideological spheres (though, of course, having mediated relations with both).

2. *A concrete political approach.* Unlike Luxemburg, Trotsky explicitly proclaimed the right of nations to self-determination as one of the conditions for 'peace between nations', which he contrasted with 'the peace of the diplomats'. Moreover, he supported the perspective of an independent and united Poland (i.e. free from Tsarist, Austrian and German domination) as well as the independence of Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Bohemia, etc. It was in the liberation of these nations and their association in a Balkan federation that he saw the best barrier to Tsarism in Europe. Furthermore, with remarkable perception Trotsky demonstrated the dialectical relationship between proletarian internationalism and national rights: the destruction of the International by the social-patriots was a crime not just against socialism, but against the 'national interest, in its widest and correct sense', since it dissolved the only force capable of reconstructing Europe on the basis of democratic principles and the right of nations to self-determination.¹⁹

In a series of articles in 1915 ('Nation and Economy'²⁰), Trotsky tried to define the national question in a more precise way, but not without a certain ambiguity. The contradictory lines of his argument were indicative of a thought which had not yet crystallized. He began with a polemic against the social-imperialists, who justified their political position by the need to expand markets and productive forces. This polemic, from the methodological point of view, seemed to reject economism: yes, Marxists are in favour of the greatest possible expansion in the economic sphere, but not at the expense of dividing, disorganizing and weakening the workers' movement. Trotsky's argument was somewhat confused, in that he wrote of the workers' movement as 'the most important productive force in modern society'; nevertheless, what he did was to affirm the overriding importance of a *political* criterion. However, throughout both articles he returned to the 'centralizing needs of economic development', which call for the destruction of the nation state as a hindrance to the expansion of productive forces. How could these 'needs' be reconciled with the right of nations to self-determination, which Trotsky also recognized? He escaped this dilemma by means of a theoretical somersault which led him back into economism: 'the state is essentially an economic organization, it will be forced to adapt to the needs of economic development'. Therefore, the nation state would be dissolved into the 'Republican United States of Europe', while the nation, divorced from the economy and freed from the old framework of the state, would have the right to self-determination . . . in the sphere of 'cultural development'.

¹⁹ Leon Trotsky, *The Bolsheviks and World Peace*, New York 1918, pp. 21, 230–1, etc.

²⁰ *Nashe Slovo* 130, 135 (3 and 9 July 1915), reprinted in Vol. 9 (1927) of Trotsky's *Collected Works* in Russian.

In 1917 Trotsky abandoned these 'eclectic' positions and adopted the Leninist conception of the national question, which he brilliantly defended at Brest-Litovsk in his capacity as People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs.²¹

Pannekoek and Strasser

Pannekoek's *Class Struggle and Nation* and Strasser's *Worker and Nation* were both published in 1912 at Reichenberg (Bohemia), as an internationalist response to the theses of Otto Bauer.²² The common central idea of both writers was the superiority of class interest over national interest; the practical conclusion was the unity of the Austrian social-democratic party and the refusal to divide it into separate or autonomous national sections. Both compared the nation with religion, as an ideology destined to disappear with the advent of socialism, and rejected as a-historical, idealist and national-opportunist Bauer's doctrine on the national question.

For Pannekoek, the 'national phenomenon is a bourgeois ideological phenomenon'. Bauer's belief that this ideology can be an independent force was characteristic of a Kantian and not a materialist method. However, the interesting thing is that both Pannekoek and Strasser accepted in its essentials the national programme of Bauer and Austrian social-democracy: national autonomy, within the framework of the multi-national Austro-Hungarian state. Pannekoek further stressed that this was an autonomy founded on the personal principle and not the territorial principle, which was consistent with his conception of the national phenomenon as purely ideological and cultural. It is true that Pannekoek and Strasser, in contrast to Bauer, did not consider the programme could be realized within the framework of capitalism, but attributed to it a purely propagandist and educative value.

Economism was indirectly present in the common basic premise of the two writers: the priority of class interest over national interest was due to the economic origins of the former. In a very amusing passage of his pamphlet, Strasser explained that the good German-Austrian patriot would still do his shopping in Czech-owned shops if they were cheaper than their German equivalents. But is this really sufficient to allow one to say, as Strasser did, that when national and economic interests come into conflict, economic interests will triumph? Pannekoek's and Strasser's polemic against Bauer was inserted in a revolutionary perspective, but it was incomplete, to the extent that it confined itself to contrasting internationalism with Austro-Marxist national-reformism, without laying down an alternative concrete political approach in the actual sphere of the national problem and particularly the struggle of oppressed nations.

²¹ Cf. Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, London 1967, Vol. 3, p. 62.: 'Whatever may be the further destiny of the Soviet Union . . . the national policy of Lenin will find its place among the eternal treasures of mankind.'

²² Anton Pannekoek, *Klassenkampf und Nation*, Reichenberg 1912; Josef Strasser, *Der Arbeiter und die Nation*, Reichenberg 1912.

The Austro-Marxist Centre and Cultural Autonomy

The main idea of the Austro-Marxists was cultural autonomy within the framework of a multi-national state, by means of the arrangement of nationalities into public juridical corporations, with a whole series of cultural, administrative and legal powers. With regard to the national question, as all political questions, their doctrine was marked by 'centrism', halfway between reform and revolution, between nationalism and internationalism. They wished both to recognize the rights of national minorities and at the same time to maintain the unity of the Austro-Hungarian state. Although, like the radical left, they tended to reject separatism as a solution to the national question, the Austro-Marxists did so not just for different reasons, but from an almost diametrically opposite standpoint.

Karl Renner

Prior to 1917, the future Chancellor of Austria (1918–20) published several studies on the national question, of which the first and best known is *The State and the Nation* (1899). His method was basically legal/constitutionalist and his conception of the state had more in common with Lassalle than with Marx (as was correctly pointed out by Mehring, Kautsky and the bourgeois lawyer, Hans Kelsen). The influence of Lassalle's statism was implicit even in his early writings, but became much more obvious after 1914, for example in his work *Marxism, the War and the International* (1917), which contained the following ideas (their relationship to Marxism is somewhat problematical): 1. 'The economy serves the capitalist class more and more exclusively; on the other hand the state increasingly serves the proletariat.' 2. 'The germ of socialism is to be found today in all the institutions of the capitalist state.'²³

It is in the light of this 'social-statism' that Renner's positions on the national question must be understood; his essential aim was to stop the 'disintegration of the Empire' and the 'dissolution of Austria', i.e. to save the 'historic Austrian state'. The Austro-Hungarian Imperial state therefore appeared as the basic framework of Renner's political thought, a framework which had to be preserved, through a certain number of democratic reforms and concessions (cultural, legal, etc.) to national minorities. Paradoxically, it was because of this statism that Renner tried to de-politicize the national question, to reduce it to an administrative and constitutional question,²⁴ to transform it into a legal problem. He sought to neutralize the danger of political separatism and the break-up of the multi-national state by means of a subtle and complex juridical-institutional apparatus: national corporations based on the principle of personality, a 'national register' listing all people having chosen a nationality, separate electoral rolls for each national minority, territorial and/or national bodies with administrative autonomy, etc. In reality, Renner's positions, which lacked any class per-

²³ Karl Renner, *Marxismus, Krieg und Internationale*, Stuttgart 1917, p. 26.

²⁴ Cf. Arduino Agnelli, *Questione nazionale e socialismo: K. Renner e O. Bauer*, Bologna 1969, p. 109.

spective or revolutionary direction, despite their author's claims, lay largely outside the political and theoretical sphere of Marxism.

Otto Bauer

Bauer's great work *The National Question and Social Democracy* (1907) had considerably more theoretical weight and influence than Renner's writings. However, Bauer shared with Renner the fundamental premise of Austro-Marxism: the preservation of the multi-national state. Bauer saw the solution to the national question in reformist terms ('national evolution' was the phrase he used to describe his strategy), as the progressive manipulation of the institutions of the Austro-Hungarian state: 'It is hardly likely that national autonomy could be the result of a momentous decision, or a bold action. In a long process of evolution, in difficult struggles . . . Austria will journey step by step towards national autonomy. The new Constitution will not be created by a great legislative act, but by a series of provincial and local laws.'²⁵

What was peculiar to Bauer's analysis was the psycho-cultural nature of his theory of the national question, which was constructed on the basis of the vague and mysterious concept of 'national characteristics', defined in psychological terms: 'diversity of purpose, the fact that the same stimulus can provoke different movements and that the same external situation can lead to different decisions'. In fact, this concept was purely metaphysical, of neo-Kantian origin. It was hardly surprising that it was severely criticized by Bauer's Marxist opponents (Kautsky, Pannekoek, Strasser, etc.).

The second key concept in Bauer's theoretical edifice was, of course, national culture, the basis for his entire strategy of national autonomy. Placing the analysis on the level of culture naturally leads one to ignore the political problem: self-determination through the creation of nation states. In this sense, Bauer's 'culturalism' played the same methodological role as Renner's 'juridicism': it de-politicized the national question.

What is more, Bauer almost completely excluded classes and the class struggle from the sphere of national culture. His programme aimed to give the working class access to 'cultural advantages' and to 'the national cultural community' from which they were excluded by capitalism. He therefore seemed to consider 'cultural values' to be absolutely *neutral* and devoid of class content. He thus made the reverse mistake to the devotees of 'Proletkult', who ignored the relative autonomy of the cultural world and wished to reduce it directly to its social base ('proletarian culture' versus 'bourgeois culture'). It was thus easy for Pannekoek to stress in his polemic against Bauer that the proletariat reads very different things into Goethe and Schiller (or Freiligrath and Heine) than the bourgeoisie. The complex relationship of the proletariat to the bourgeois cultural heritage, a dialectical relationship of *Aufhebung* (conservation/negation/transcendence), was reduced by

²⁵ Otto Bauer, *Die Nationalitätenfrage und die Sozialdemokratie*, Vienna 1924, p. 404.

Bauer to a simple act of appropriation, or rather passive acceptance. Obviously Bauer was correct to stress the decisive importance of culture in defining the national question, but his theory resulted in a real fetishization of national culture, the most striking expression of which was the idea that socialism leads to a *growth in cultural differentiation* between nations.²⁶

Because of his tendency to ‘nationalize’ socialism and the workers’ movement, his rejection of what he called the ‘naive cosmopolitanism’ of the proletariat in its infancy, and his inability to conceive of an international socialist culture, Bauer’s theory was to some degree contaminated by the nationalist ideology it was seeking to defeat. It is thus not surprising that it became the doctrine of ‘nationalist/cultural’ currents in the workers’ movement, not just in Austria-Hungary but also in the Russian Empire (Bund, Caucasian social-democrats, etc.) and elsewhere. However, despite these limitations, Bauer’s work had an undeniable theoretical value, particularly with regard to the *historicist* nature of its method. In defining the nation as the product of a common historical destiny (the material basis of which is man’s struggle against nature), as the ‘never-finished outcome of a constant process’, as a crystallization of past events, a ‘frozen piece of history’, Bauer stood firmly on the ground of historical materialism and in outright opposition to bourgeois national conservatism, the reactionary myths of the ‘eternal nation’ and racist ideology. This historical approach gave Bauer’s book a real methodological superiority, not just over Renner, but over most Marxist writers of the period, whose writings on the national question often had an abstract and rigid character. In so far as Bauer’s method entailed not only a historical explanation for existing national structures, but a conception of the nation as a process, a movement in perpetual transformation, he was able to avoid Engels’s mistake in 1848–9: the fact that a nation (like the Czechs) ‘has had no history’ does not necessarily mean that it will have no future. The development of capitalism in Central Europe and the Balkans leads not to the assimilation but to the *awakening* of ‘non-historic’ nations.²⁷

Lenin and the Right of Self-Determination

The national question is one of the fields in which Lenin greatly developed Marxist theory, by spelling out (on the basis of Marx’s writings, but going far beyond them) a coherent, revolutionary strategy for the workers’ movement, based on the fundamental slogan of national self-determination. In its coherence and realism, the Leninist doctrine was far in advance of the positions of other Marxists of the period, even those closest to Lenin on this question: Kautsky and Stalin.

Kautsky’s position prior to 1914 was similar to Lenin’s, but was distinguished by its unilateral and almost exclusive concentration on

²⁶ Ibid. pp. 105–8.

²⁷ Ibid. pp. 239–72. It should be added that Bauer’s programme of cultural autonomy had some value as a *complement*—not an alternative—to a policy based on recognition of the right to self-determination. Indeed, the first constitution of the Soviet Union in a sense incorporated the principle of cultural autonomy of national minorities.

language as the basis of the nation, and by a lack of clarity and boldness in the formulation of the right of nations to secession. After 1914, the ambiguous and contradictory positions of Kautsky on the rights of nations in the context of the war were violently denounced by Lenin as 'hypocritical' and 'opportunist'.

Stalin

As for the famous article by Stalin 'Marxism and the National Question',²⁸ it is true that it was Lenin who sent Stalin to Vienna to write this, and that in a letter to Gorky in February 1913 he spoke of the 'marvellous Georgian who has sat down to write a big article'.²⁹ But once the article was finished, it does not appear (contrary to a popular myth) that Lenin was particularly enthusiastic about it, as he does not mention it in any of his numerous writings on the national question, apart from a brief, parenthetical reference in passing in an article dated 28 December 1913. It is obvious that the main ideas in Stalin's work were those of the Bolshevik party and Lenin. Having said this, Trotsky's suggestion that the article was inspired, supervised and corrected 'line by line' by Lenin seems questionable.³⁰ On the contrary, on a certain number of fairly important points Stalin's work implicitly and explicitly differs from, and even contradicts, Lenin's writings.

1. The concept of 'national character', of 'common psychological make-up' or 'psychological particularity' of nations *is not at all Leninist*. This problematical is a legacy from Bauer, whom Lenin explicitly criticized for his 'psychological theory'.³¹ In fact, the idea of a national psychology has more in common with a certain superficial and pre-scientific folklore than with a Marxist analysis of the national question.

2. By baldly stating that 'it is only when all these characteristics [common language, territory, economic life and "psychic formation"] are present together that we have a nation', Stalin gave his theory a dogmatic, restrictive and rigid character which one never finds in Lenin. The Stalinist conception of a nation was a real ideological Procrustean bed. According to Stalin, Georgia before the second half of the nineteenth century was not a nation, because it had no 'common economic life', being divided into economically independent principalities. There is no need to add that on this criterion Germany, prior to the Customs Union, would not have been a nation either . . . Nowhere in Lenin's writings do we find such an ultimatum, rigid and arbitrary 'definition' of a nation.

3. Stalin explicitly refused to allow the possibility of the unity or association of national groups scattered within a multi-national state: 'The question arises: is it possible to unite into a single national union groups that have grown so distinct? . . . Is it conceivable, that, for instance, the Germans of the Baltic Provinces and the Germans of Trans-caucasia can

²⁸ Joseph Stalin, 'Marxism and the National Question', in *Works*, Moscow 1953, Vol. 2, pp. 300–381.

²⁹ Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 35, p. 84.

³⁰ Cf. Trotsky, *Stalin*, London 1969, Vol. 1, p. 233.

³¹ Lenin, 'The Right of Nations to Self-Determination', in *Collected Works*, Vol. 20, p. 398.

be “united into a single nation”?’ The answer given, of course, was that all this was ‘not conceivable’, ‘not possible’ and ‘utopian’.³² Lenin, by contrast, vigorously defended the ‘freedom of association, including the association of any communities no matter what their nationality, in any given State’, citing as an example precisely the Germans of the Caucasus, the Baltic and the Petrograd area. He added that freedom of association of every kind between members of the nation, scattered in different parts of the country or even the globe, was ‘indisputable, and can be argued against only from the hidebound, bureaucratic point of view’.³³

4. Stalin made no distinction between Great-Russian Tsarist oppressive nationalism and the nationalism of oppressed nations. In a very revealing paragraph in his article, he rejected in one breath the ‘warlike and repressive’ nationalism of the Tsars ‘from above’ and the ‘wave of nationalism from below which sometimes turns into crass chauvinism’ of the Poles, Jews, Tatars, Georgians, Ukrainians, etc. Not only did he fail to make any distinction between nationalism ‘from above’ and ‘from below’, but he aimed his most severe criticisms at social-democrats in oppressed countries who had not ‘stood firm’ in the face of the nationalist movement. Lenin, on the other hand, not only considered the difference between the nationalism of the oppressor and the oppressed nation to be absolutely decisive, but always attacked most bitterly those who capitulated, consciously or unconsciously, to Great-Russian national chauvinism. It is no accident that one of the main targets of his polemic were the Marxist social democrats of an oppressed nation, Poland, who by their ‘firm’ stand against Polish nationalism ended up by denying Poland’s right to secede from the Russian Empire. This difference between Lenin and Stalin was highly significant, and already contained the germ of the later violent conflict between them on the national question in Georgia (December 1922)—Lenin’s famous ‘last fight’.

Lenin

Lenin’s starting-point in working out a strategy on the national question was the same as for Luxemburg, Trotsky and Pannekoek: proletarian internationalism. However, Lenin understood better than his comrades of the revolutionary left the dialectical relationship between internationalism and the right of national self-determination. He understood, firstly, that only the *freedom* to secede makes possible *free* and voluntary union, association, co-operation and, in the long term, fusion between nations. Secondly, that only the recognition by the workers’ movement in the oppressor nation of the right of the oppressed nation to self-determination can help to eliminate the hostility and suspicion of the oppressed, and unite the proletariat of both nations in the international struggle against the bourgeoisie.

Similarly, Lenin grasped the dialectical relationship between national-

³² Stalin, *op. cit.* pp. 306–7, 309, 305 and 339.

³³ Lenin, ‘The National Programme of the RSDLP’, *Collected Works*, Vol. 19, p. 543 and ‘Critical Remarks on the National Question’, in *Collected Works*, Vol. 20, pp. 39, 50.

democratic struggles and the socialist revolution and showed that the popular masses (not just the proletariat, but also the peasantry and petty bourgeoisie) of the oppressed nation were the allies of the conscious proletariat: a proletariat whose task it would be to *lead* the struggle of this 'disparate, discordant and heterogenous mass', containing elements of the petty bourgeoisie and backward workers with their 'preconceptions, reactionary fantasies, weaknesses and errors', against capitalism and the bourgeois state.³⁴ It is true, however, that in relation to Russia it was only really after April 1917, when Lenin adopted the strategy of permanent revolution, that he began to see the national liberation struggle of oppressed nations within the Russian Empire not only as a *democratic* movement, but as an ally of the proletariat in the Soviet *socialist* revolution.

From the methodological point of view, Lenin's principal superiority over most of his contemporaries was his capacity to 'put politics in command', i.e. his obstinate, inflexible, constant and unflinching tendency to grasp and highlight the *political* aspect of every problem and every contradiction. This tendency stood out in his polemic against the Economists on the question of the Party in 1902–3; in his discussion with the Mensheviks on the question of the democratic revolution in 1905; in the originality of his writings on Imperialism in 1916; in the inspired turn which the April Theses represented in 1917; in the whole of his most important work *State and Revolution* and, of course, in his writings on the national question. It is this methodological aspect which explains (amongst other things) the striking *actuality* of Lenin's ideas in the twentieth century, an age of imperialism, which has seen the political level become increasingly *dominant* (even though, in the last analysis, it is of course *determined* by the economic).

On the national question, while most other Marxist writers saw only the economic, cultural or 'psychological' dimension of the problem, Lenin stated clearly that the question of self-determination 'belongs wholly and exclusively to the sphere of political democracy'³⁵, i.e. to the realm of the right of *political* secession and the establishment of an independent nation state. What is more, Lenin was perfectly conscious of the methodological foundation of the differences: 'An "autonomous" nation does not enjoy rights equal to those of a "sovereign" nation; our Polish comrades could not have failed to notice this had they not (like our old Economists) obstinately avoided making an analysis of *political* concepts and categories.'³⁶ Thanks to Lenin's understanding of the relative autonomy of the political process, he was able to avoid both subjectivism and economism in his analysis of the national question.³⁷

³⁴ On this question, Lenin's analysis of the 1916 Rising in Ireland is a model of revolutionary realism: see 'The Discussion of Self-Determination Summed Up', *Collected Works*, Vol. 22, pp. 353–8.

³⁵ Lenin, 'The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination', *Collected Works*, Vol. 22, p. 145.

³⁶ Lenin, 'The Discussion on Self-Determination Summed Up', op. cit. p. 344. (Translation modified.)

³⁷ As A. S. Naïr and C. Scalabrino stressed in their excellent article, 'La question nationale dans la théorie marxiste révolutionnaire', *Partisans* 59–60, May–August 1971.

Needless to say, the political aspect of the national question for Lenin was not at all that with which chancelleries, diplomats and armies concern themselves. He was totally indifferent to whether this or that nation had an independent state or what the frontiers were between two states. His aim was *democracy* and the *internationalist unity* of the proletariat, which both require the recognition of the right of nations to self-determination. What is more, precisely because it concentrates on the political aspect, his theory of self-determination makes absolutely no concession to nationalism. It is situated solely in the sphere of the democratic struggle and the proletarian revolution.

It is true that these two aims did not have equal importance in Lenin's eyes; democratic demands must always be subordinated to the overriding interests of the revolutionary class struggle of the world proletariat. For example, according to Lenin, if the republican movement turns out, in a particular case, to be an instrument of reaction (Cambodia 1971!), Marxists will not support it. This does not mean that the working-class movement must strike out republicanism from its programme. The same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for self-determination. Even though there are some exceptions, the general rule is the right of secession for each nation. In fact, Lenin's analysis that the recognition of the right to self-determination is of primary importance in creating the conditions for internationalist unity among workers tends implicitly to exclude even the possibility of 'exceptions', i.e. of a contradiction between the interests of the proletariat and the democratic rights of nations.

Conclusion : The Lesson of History

Some of the specific debates among Marxists on aspects of the national question have been settled by history. The multi-national state of Austria-Hungary broke up into several nation states after the First World War. The Basques, 'an essentially reactionary nation' according to Engels, are today at the peak of revolutionary struggle in Spain. The reunification of Poland, which Luxemburg referred to as petty-bourgeois Utopianism, became a reality in 1918. The 'non-historic' Czech nation, which was destined to disappear because of its lack of 'national vitality' (Engels), did set up a state, through voluntary federation with the Slovak nation.

The experience of post-1917 history also shows us that the nation is not simply a collection of abstract, external criteria. The subjective element, i.e. the consciousness of a national identity, a national political movement, are no less important. Obviously these 'subjective factors' do not come out of the blue; they are the result of certain historical conditions—persecution, oppression, etc. But this means that self-determination must have a wider application; it must relate not just to secession, but to the 'national entity' itself. It is not a doctrinaire 'expert' armed with a list of 'objective criteria' (of the Stalin type) who will determine whether a community constitutes a nation or not, but *the community itself*.³⁸

³⁸ Cf. Trotsky on the Blacks in the United States: 'An abstract criterion is not decisive in this case: much more decisive are historical consciousness, feelings and emotions.' *Trotsky on Black Nationalism and Self-Determination*, New York 1967, p. 16.

On the other hand, ever since Woodrow Wilson, the nationalism of the great powers has re-stocked its ideological arsenal by appropriating the slogans of democracy, equality of nations and the right of self-determination. These principles are now proclaimed by bourgeois statesmen everywhere. Lyndon Johnson, when President of the United States, declared solemnly in 1966: 'We are fighting to uphold the principle of self-determination, so that the people of South Vietnam may be free to choose their own future.'³⁹ Since the nineteenth century—when Treitschke wrote, on the occasion of an uprising in Africa: 'It is pure mockery to apply normal principles of war in wars with savages. A negro tribe must be chastised by setting its villages on fire, because this is the only kind of remedy that is effective'⁴⁰—how the policy of the great powers in relation to small nations has changed out of all recognition!

The real threat today to the political health of the workers' movement is not the infantile disorder which Luxemburg's generous errors represented, but pathological phenomena of a far more dangerous kind: the viruses of great-power chauvinism and opportunist capitulation to bourgeois nationalism which are spread abroad by the Russian and Chinese bureaucracies and their disciples internationally. Indeed, 'ultra-leftism' on the national question hardly survives today. Only in certain sectors of the revolutionary Left does one still sometimes find a distant echo of Luxemburg's theses, in the form of an abstract opposition to national liberation movements, in the name of 'working-class unity' and internationalism. The same is true with respect to Engels' notion of 'reactionary nations'. Thus, if one looks at certain of the national questions of today, complex questions where national, colonial, religious and ethnic aspects combine and interlace—for example, the Arab-Israeli conflict or the struggle between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland—one can see that there are two contrary temptations which haunt the revolutionary Left. The first temptation is to deny the legitimacy of the national movement of Palestinians or Catholics in Ulster: to condemn these movements as 'petty-bourgeois' and divisive of the working class, and to proclaim abstractly against them the principle of the necessary unity between proletarians of all nationalities, races or religions. The second temptation is to espouse uncritically the nationalist ideology of these movements and condemn the dominant nations (Israeli Jews or Northern Irish Protestants) en bloc, without distinction of class, as 'reactionary nations'—nations to which the right of self-determination is denied.

The task facing revolutionary Marxists is to avoid these twin reefs and discover—through a concrete analysis of each concrete situation—an authentically internationalist course, which draws its inspiration from the nationalities policy of the Comintern when it was led by Lenin and Trotsky (1919–23) and from the famous resolution of the Second International's 1896 Congress whose rare privilege it was to be approved by both Lenin and Luxemburg: 'The Congress proclaims the full right to self-determination of all nations; and it expresses its sympathy to

³⁹ Quoted in A. Schlesinger Jnr, *The Bitter Heritage*, Boston 1967, p. 108.

⁴⁰ Heinrich von Treitschke, *Politics*, London 1916, Vol. 2, p. 614.

the workers of all countries at present suffering beneath the yoke of military, national or any other kind of absolutism; the Congress calls on the workers of these countries to join the ranks of the conscious workers of the whole world, in order to struggle beside them to defeat international capitalism and attain the goals of international social democracy.'

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