

There is No Progressive Nationalism

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Many on the Left advance nationalism and the nation-state as a bulwark against imperialism. This is a dangerous fallacy. Of course, the role of nationalism in the struggle for human development and liberation has always been a source of conflict on the Left.

To the classical Left of the 19th and early 20th century, nationalism and borders were generally viewed as an artificial division of people that functioned as a lightning rod for the bourgeoisie – turning the struggle between the rich and the poor into a struggle between the oppressed.

The Second World War

After the Second World War, this changed drastically. Mainly as a result of massive state intervention in the economy, capitalism came out strengthened in the period after 1945 – putting into question the Marxist belief that the proletariat would be driven to an international revolution by the logic of capitalism. Simultaneously, it became increasingly obvious that the Soviet Union, which in the 1920s and 30s was regarded as the “fatherland of Socialism” by many on the Left, had degenerated into a capitalist and totalitarian state.

Consequently, post-war Western radicals began to look to struggles in what they called “The Third World” for revolutionary forces. In the post-war era, the de-colonization process contributed to the spread of nationalism, and the fight against imperialist exploitation and plunder took the form of attempts to achieve independence from imperialist powers. On the Left – and especially within its Stalinist and Maoist excrescences – these struggles were understood as anti-imperialist, and “national liberation” began to be viewed as progressive. The highly statist and often authoritarian goals of these movements, however, were not taken into consideration.

Marxist-Leninism in Norway

The radical wave of the 1960s, coming to Norway a few years later than the rest of Europe, never found the libertarian and populist expressions that had been characteristic of the “New Left” in its early stages. To the contrary, the political radicalism that gained a foothold in Norway during the 1970s was immediately set in an extremely authoritarian direction. The spread of Marxist-Leninism in this era, which viewed the Chinese Cultural Revolution as the definitive model for modern revolutionaries, was in no respect a distinct Norwegian phenomenon, but they became disproportionately influential on the Left in this country.

The worldview of the Marxist-Leninist movement, first and foremost represented by the Workers’ Communist Party (AKP-ML), was deeply infused by authoritarian traits from the beginning. It combined an uncritical devotion to “socialist” movements and regimes in the Third World – first Ho Chi Minh’s Vietnam and Mao Zedong’s China, and then Pol Pot’s Cambodia and Enver Hoxha’s Albania – with an equally boundless belief in the centralized Party as the guiding star of a future socialist upheaval.

The “Principal Enemy”

The affection for these “socialist lighthouses” – in reality totalitarian states draped in a state sanctioned socialist rhetoric – found its equivalent in an uncritical attachment to notions such as “progressive nationalism” and “national liberation.” Old Bolshevik dogmas were here coupled

with new Maoist dogmas. According to Lenin, the struggles for national liberation in colonized countries were progressive by nature, because they undermined imperialism and international monopoly capital. Through Maoism, Lenin's theories took a new and peculiar form. According to Mao Zedong, a people always have the right to fight for independence with weapons in hand. The struggle against the imperialist powers would, according to Mao, give birth to socialist revolutions that would spread as "prairie fires" and swallow the capitalist world. An important idea in Maoism, taken up by AKP-ML, was to look for the "principal contradiction" and to find the "principal enemy." The enemy of the principal enemy should in turn be supported. Therefore, during the Vietnam War, the Viet Cong – in fact, unadulterated Stalinists – came to be considered as the good guys.

Apparently, they did not care too much about what kind of "socialism" these independent nations would create once the dominant powers were driven out, or what kind of "liberation" the masses would really achieve within these new nations. By elevating the principle of "national sovereignty" and by looking to the "principal contradiction," the AKP-ML, as well as other leftists, evaded criticizing the totalitarian terror-regimes of the Third World. In turn, this led to a relativization, and in the worst instances a defense of both state repression and genocide.

The "National Line"

Besides the uncritical support to national liberation movements, another event would add to the stronghold of "the national appeal" in the worldview of the Norwegian Left. After 1971, the question of Norwegian membership in the European Economic Community (EEC), which today has become the European Union, was the most important issue on the political agenda. Initially, resistance to membership was framed as a blend of social and national demands.

However, the arguments of the Maoist movement became increasingly nationalist, and the defense of national sovereignty was coupled with a romanticization of "Norwegian culture" and specific "Norwegian values." The U.S. was considered the principal enemy – with West-Germany as its local deputy – and it was held that a membership in the community would make Norway into a dependent of West-Germany – something that resonated with the nationalist sentiments from the days when Norway was a dependent of Denmark.

A referendum was held in 1972 where a majority of the population of Norway voted no to membership in EEC, which only bolstered the nationalism of the Left. Enthusiasm for a supposedly authentic Norwegian language and the many local dialects flourished, and works of radical fiction increasingly picked up themes from the countryside. The leadership of the Maoist party at one point even decided that everyone should listen to folk music instead of "imperialist" rock.

Soviet Invasion

From the mid-1970s, AKP-ML launched a campaign against soviet imperialism and it was claimed that the rivaling between Soviet Union and the USA would drag the world into a Third World War followed by an unavoidable battle for Europe. The threat of a soviet occupation as a consequence of the presumed war was also viewed as unavoidable. In the war, the Maoist party saw its last chance. The Party would be at the helm of the liberation struggle and lead the people to victory, and Norway would become a socialist state.

The AKP-ML, of course, never got its chance and the party slowly withered away. However, there has not been a confrontation with the “progressive nationalism” of the 1970s, and “the national line” continues to characterize left-wing thinking into the 21st century. No principled debate exists regarding the support to national liberation movements, why the social goals of these movements normally are channelized into authoritarian, pro-state and even xenophobic movements, or on the excluding and particularistic essence of nationalism itself.

From Anti-Capitalism to Anti-War

The growing radicalism in the wake of the “Battle of Seattle” has not managed to exorcize nationalism from left-wing circles – neither on the established Left nor among new activists. A widespread misconception among many “globalization critics” is that the nation-state has been weakened by the global economy, and that it should be rebuilt as a bulwark against capitalism.

Since 9/11, the burgeoning anti-capitalist movements have moved in a highly disturbing direction. As a result of the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, a large part of the energy on the Left has been directed towards exposing the assaults and dirty foreign policy ambitions of the elites in the USA. The move from “anti- capitalism” to “anti-war” has been welcomed by many on the Left, and they claim that the connection between capitalism, militarism and imperialism is apparent to young activists.

Unfortunately, another thing has happened that normally occurs when war and peace is on the agenda: The tendency of forming a block politics based on the classical Maoist conception of fighting the principal enemy. One of the main reasons for the degeneration of the libertarian and populist impulses of the New Left in the 1960s and 70s were the changing political circumstances and especially the outbreak of the Vietnam War. Justified resistance to U.S. militarism, today, has its counterpart in uncritical declarations of support to the “enemy of the enemy.” This contributes to legitimizing, or in the worst cases defending, the reactionary forces around the world – like Hezbollah, Hamas, and other Islamic resistance movements in the Middle East – or a disregard of authoritarian developments in countries like Venezuela.

A Libertarian and Humanist Left

Of course, this is not about denying the right of a suppressed people to establish its independence; neither is it about dismissing the need to combat imperialist aggression and exploitation. But resisting one oppressor is not the same as supporting movements that seek to oppress its own people. The enemy of my enemy is not my friend.

So how should left-wing radicals relate to nationalism and the nation-state? Can nationalism be a progressive force?

If we are to recreate a modern Left, and give it a libertarian and humanistic shape, we need to provide fresh answers these questions. Maoist influence on the Left has been disastrous: The Norwegian Left has for many years chosen a pro-nationalist line, where uncritical support to national liberation movements has been cast with absurd notions of a progressive Norwegian nationalism.

We need to get out of the current deadlock, marked by Leninist dogmatism, pro-state elitism and a narrow-minded particularism. For too long the exclusionary nature of nationalism – which

with its mere existence tends to defend the worst illnesses our societies; statism, xenophobia, “ethnic” blood-baths, not to speak of elitism and militarism – has not been given sufficient attention.

Nationalism, in its essence, is a poison. It produces artificial borders between human beings on minimal, and often arbitrary, biological, linguistic and cultural differences, and it conceals hierarchical and class-based conflicts. There is no “benevolent” or “progressive nationalism.” So let us search for answers elsewhere, and create a truly libertarian form of collectivism.

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