

National Liberation & Anarchism

Reactionary or Revolutionary?

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Introduction

The world today is rife with conflict, as a multiplicity of struggles are waged in the broader fight for freedom. At this point, it's pretty blatantly clear that there are more wars than just the class war. Truth is, there always have been, despite the dogmatic assertions of some class reductionists. We must be intersectional, struggling also against the patriarchy, white supremacy, ecological destruction, and much, much more, as liberation cannot be fought in relation to the class war alone.

Today, I hope to clarify what I believe is the most reasonable position on one such struggle against domination. I hope to answer the question of national liberation and how we should navigate it as committed internationalists in a world rife with national oppressions.

What is a Nation?

I'm using the term nation throughout this video to refer, not to a nation state, country, or political constitution, but to an imagined community of people formed on the basis of a common language, history, ancestry, society, or culture, who are conscious of their autonomy. I'm using it as a synonym for ethnic group, basically. Therefore a nation is not geographically bound, like the popular Western conception of a nation. Diasporas are, in fact, fairly common. Some nations are united under a banner of nations, such as in the case of Pan-Africanism, which seeks to unite the thousands of ethnic groups on the continent and in the diaspora.

Nations are often the target of suppression, subjugation, and erasure. African peoples were stolen from the continent and thoroughly stripped of their languages, histories, and cultures, and continue to be oppressed throughout the so-called new world. Indigenous nations across the world also continue to be denied their autonomy as minorities within a domineering state. Armenians were systematically murdered under the Ottomans, the Kurds are divided and suppressed across four countries, and Palestinians continue to be colonized by the Israeli state. Hawaii and Puerto Rico remain occupied by the US empire, while Tibetans and Uyghurs remain dominated by the Chinese state. I really could go on and on. Across the world, struggles have been and are being fought by nations for their liberation.

What is National Liberation?

The national liberation struggle is a struggle against the relationship of exploitation and domination inflicted upon a nation. It's a struggle against the domination of one people by another, often centered on questions of language, culture, welfare, equality, and land. It's not something we can just stand by neutrally and ignore. Ignoring national liberation struggles would mean siding with national oppression.

And don't try to squeeze them all into one box. National liberation struggles are diverse. Within them, there usually many tendencies at play, from the most reactionary to the most revolutionary. Thus, within the struggle for national liberation, there are other ongoing struggles, including class struggle. While the oppressed classes cling to national liberation struggle in an effort to defend against foreign subjugation and exploitation, the capitalist class uses the strug-

gle for national liberation to consolidate power and monopolize the exploitation of the working class.

Which brings me, inevitably, to nationalism.

What is Nationalism?

Nationalism is one of the programs that has been proposed as the solution to national liberation struggles. It hasn't been the only program, mind you, and it's not synonymous with national liberation, but it has been one of the most popular. Terminology can be easily muddled here, as nationalism has referred to ideologies of both oppressor nations and oppressed nations. There is a vast chasm between the violent supremacy and colonialism of white nationalism or Zionism and the self-determination movements of Black nationalism or Palestinian nationalism. Let's not get it twisted.

The program of nationalism, specifically among oppressed nations, has generally seen the oppressed nation as a united bloc, ignoring class, gender, religion, and other divisions, in favour of the development of an independent state, which is usually some form of capitalist, either state capitalist, welfare capitalist, or neoliberal capitalist.

Nationalism is often weaponized and promoted by the ruling class in order to unite the oppressed classes with domestic oppressors, replacing foreign capitalists with local capitalists, foreign generals with local generals, and foreign government officials, with local officials. In a word, to conceal the importance of class struggle.

Nationalism has repeatedly failed to solve poverty, oppression, exploitation, and suffering. While many states have become formally independent from their colonial masters thanks to nationalist movements, neocolonialism perseveres. Yet the continuation of national oppression often results in the revival of nationalism as opposed to an exploration of other options. For example, the Middle East has been severely subjugated by Western imperialists, even post-independence, but proposed solutions have included reactionary, authoritarian Ba'athism and Salafi jihadism, which aims for a global caliphate.

Hence why nationalism is usually criticized and opposed by anarchists. Again, there's a difference between nationalism and national liberation. But in that criticism of nationalism, some anarchists, while recognizing that there are class divisions within a nation, have ignored national divisions within a class in favour of some ideal united working class. The truth is that the oppressed classes of some nations have benefited from the domination of the oppressed classes in other nations. Don't do the class reductionism thing nah.

Obviously nations that have had constant war waged against them for centuries tend to turn to nationalism for their national liberation. Forgive them for not thinking about the global working class when they're literally under assault for their national identity. When you're fighting colonial administrators and foreign armies, you not exactly studying class war. Which is why, historically, national liberation struggles, using nationalism, have ignored class divisions among the oppressed nation. But not always. Let's look at two examples, one flying under the banner of nationalism and one rejecting it entirely: revolutionary Black nationalism and the Kurdish national liberation movement.

Revolutionary Black Nationalism

Black nationalism is a very diverse political movement, with several currents and opposing perspectives within it, but a common thread throughout: resistance to the domination of the white supremacist system and the assertion of Black sovereignty. It's a recognition that we have to free ourselves, without waiting for permission. A recognition that we have to protect ourselves from the continued assault of the empire. A recognition that we can be proud of and love our bodies, our minds, and our heritage. A rejection of eurocentrism. Some manifestations of Black nationalism have been reactionary, capitalistic, homophobic, and patriarchal. Others have stood in stark opposition to those currents. In particular, revolutionary Black nationalism, which, unlike some forms of Black nationalism, stands in opposition to all forms of oppression, including imperialism, white supremacy, and capitalism. In my view, as many Black anarchists have noted, revolutionary Black nationalism has a place in the struggle, in conjunction with the struggle against patriarchy, capitalism, and the state, as we aim to prefigure a world free of all forms of domination.

Kurdish National Liberation Struggle

The Kurdish national liberation struggle is a deeply fractured movement with many groups and approaches, each proposing different solutions. After hundreds of years of oppression under the Ottoman Empire, the Kurds were divided into four states: Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. But the existence of those independent states did not solve the Kurdish national question: they have remained an oppressed minority. They are commonly seen as the largest nation without a state.

In the 1990s, one of the Kurdish national liberation groups, the PKK, broke with Marxism-Leninism and Kurdish nationalism in pursuit of democratic confederalism, which developed out of communalism and anarchism. The PKK now stands in opposition to capitalism, feudalism, imperialism, and statism, favouring a "democratic system of a people without a State," that "takes its power from the people and adapts to reach self-sufficiency in every field." The PKK still maintains independence as the ultimate goal, but through society-building rather than state-building. They have established the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, which was called Rojava up until 2016, when the Kurdish word was dropped to promote multiethnic unity.

So, we have our critiques of how nationalism tends to manifest, and we know it's not the only way. We've seen how the PKK has fought for Kurdish national liberation while opposing the state and capitalism and we've seen how revolutionary Black nationalism, despite its name, incorporates a fight against capitalism, and sometimes the state. We recognize the importance of national liberation, but how do we support such struggles while staying true to our principles?

True Internationalism

While the nationalism of oppressed nations has often manifested with close ties to capitalist and statist domination, national liberation against domination is a stance that any true internationalist should hold. A true internationalist is one who recognizes that human unity can only be achieved through mutual respect, solidarity, and alliance among all peoples. Part of the international revolution must involve participation in national struggle for self determination and human dignity against imperialist domination.

If we oppose male supremacy, which is the patriarchy, we must support women's fight against it. This doesn't mean blindly supporting bourgeois liberal girl boss feminism. It means listening, learning from, and collaboratively developing the revolutionary anarcho-feminist project to liberate all women from patriarchal domination. If workers decide to form a union, in many cases the existing union is pro-capitalist and hierarchical. Nevertheless, we stand with the workers against the bosses, even as we try to convince them of the need for union democracy, militancy, and opposition to bureaucracy, in order to liberate them from class domination.

The price of solidarity could never be subservience. Solidarity is not a reward for compliance. Solidarity is a discourse between peoples about how we determine our own freedom. So while we may disagree with the development of states, people are free to make mistakes and learn from them. Of course, we can fairly critique statist elements within these movements. After all, as we've seen again and again, independent states remain dominated by global powers and corporations. Independent states remain tools for local capitalists to exploit their own people. Please remember, our aim is definitely not to stand in support with the leaders. Just to make that clear, because the most common anti-imperialism I've been seeing these days has been so vulgar.

Anti-imperialism is more than anti-Americanism and it definitely isn't supporting leaders and parties, who often have imperialist ambitions themselves yet claim to be anti-imperialist. Anti-imperialism is not about denying genocide, it is not about ignoring the internally oppressed minorities within oppressed countries, and it definitely is not about conflating the state with the people. You have to have principles. You have to be able to engage in the complexity and contradictions of national liberation struggles, offering critique where needs be, and resisting reactionary, capitalist, patriarchal, and statist elements where they manifest. Our aim is to support the oppressed masses in their fight for autonomy while engaging in the dialogue of solidarity.

Never treat the people you stand in solidarity with as a monolith and don't trust people who claim to speak for them as though they're a hive mind either. Majority approval doesn't make something right. There is always disagreement within national liberation movements, and you can elevate those whose visions are close to your own. We can participate in and support these struggles while helping our comrades within them to shape them in a more revolutionary, libertarian, socialist direction. There are always voices willing to stand against class oppression and authoritarianism, even if they don't call themselves anarchists.

So...how do we engage in national liberation struggles? Circumstances vary. These struggles are often taking place in other parts of the world, quite far from our reach. But reach out nonetheless. To organizations and comrades on the ground, involved in the fight. Start a dialogue with them, and find out how you can support them. Listen more than you speak.

Peace.

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