Left-Nationalism: A History of the Disease

The question of nationalism on the left is rarely asked in socialist circles and even when it is asked, it's mostly, unfortunately, answered by old dogmatic phrases or populist rhetoric lacking any serious analysis. Although it should be clear from the start that socialism – as the ideology of the international working class – is inherently incompatible with any kind of nationalism, a good part of nominally socialist and communist organizations actively propagates that sort of reactionary, anti-worker rhetoric. Whether they do so consciously or not is another question altogether. For that reason, we must once again explain the roots and class foundations of nationalism and point out its harmful influence on the contemporary socialist movement, however small the latter might be.

I

The Croatian Encyclopedia defines nationalism as: “an idea and political movement in the modern epoch which stresses the unity of the nation, its interests, rights or political goals, understanding of a common national history and the relationship towards other nations or states; that is, its collective identity.” It's clear from the above-stated definition that the concept of nationalism is inseparably linked with the concept of the nation, so we should start our discussion there.

Nations are a construct of the modern era. This claim might sound counterintuitive at first, but its validity becomes clear after delving just a bit deeper into the topic at hand. It is generally considered in historiography that nations (in the modern sense of the word) started coming into existence at the end of the 18th century, or rather with the French Revolution. Although it's possible that some sort of feeling of national identity existed earlier in economically developed countries like England or the Netherlands (especially in the period of mercantilism), it remains a fact that the human race has spent most of its history without any knowledge of the concept of nation. Let us look once again in the Encyclopedia, for its definition of “nation”: “a community based on: a) the belief of its members in a common origin and destiny in the past; b) the particularity of language, religion, customs and an array of symbolic means of presenting affiliation to a collective (anthems, flags, coats of arms, monuments, celebrations); c) the feeling of mutual solidarity, pride and social equality; d) political organization spanning from movements for the protection of cultural particularities to those struggling for state independence.” None of the above existed before the modern epoch on any scale larger than that of the family or tribe. In the past (at least until the end of the Middle Ages) the only forms of social belonging on a scale higher than that of the tribe were religious affiliation and loyalty to a certain nobleman or king. If we could even speak of “national identity” in that period, it was strictly limited to the nobility; both well-known Marxist historians like Hobsbawm and early nationalist ideologues, for instance the 19th century Croatian “pater patriae” Ante Starčević, agree on that matter. Relations between the common folk and the nobility were full of contempt – they often didn't speak the same language, they (obviously) didn't have the same customs and sometimes they even belonged to different religions. If there were such a thing as “Croatian people” during the Middle Ages, it was confined to the nobility which happened to be born in, or rule over some part of Croatia.

If it used to be like that, what happened in the meantime? Nations and nationalities are an undeniable part of our reality. How and why did millions of poor commoners accept nationality as their main source of social identity? The answer lies in the great changes of the late 18th and 19th centuries, that is, in bourgeois revolutions of that time, by means of which feudalism gave way to capitalism. Citizenry – or rather, the bourgeoisie – of western and central Europe couldn't take any more autocratic rule, high taxes and other problems which the rotten feudal system imposed on their constantly growing businesses and the market on which they made money. However, getting rid of the nobility was impossible without support from the common masses, and support had to be obtained some way or other. Rulers placed by god's will were counterposed to – the will of the people. In a sense which best fitted the bourgeoisie, of course. In short, the nation served
the purpose of uniting European citizenry with peasants and the industrial proletariat in the making against a common enemy – the nobility. In other words, it blurred the differences in their respective class interests just enough for that sort of union to even be possible. And so, carried by the winds of change and industrial progress, the concept of nation spread around most of the world by the 20th century, closely followed by the dark shadow of nationalism.

If, then, nationalism is the ideology of the international bourgeoisie, socialism is the ideology of the international working class. Coming to existence during the French Revolution, socialism had its roots in the experiences of the young working class in the deadly factories and filthy streets of European cities. Socialism evolved with time, and so its most progressive communist branches – Marxism and some strains of anarchism – started to break the confines of bourgeois ideology and their supporters understood the need for the transboundary cooperation of the working class; in one word, the need for – internationalism.

Despite that, a lively discussion on the relation towards nationalism arose in the historic socialist movement; more precisely, a discussion about the relation towards struggles of oppressed nations for their national liberation. The earliest Marxist thinkers – including Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels themselves – supported the struggles of some nations (the Poles, for instance) because they considered their independence necessary for spreading capitalism, which was still in its “progressive“ phase at the time, to the backward eastern regions of Europe. On the other hand, nationalist movements of some other peoples (like the Czechs or south Slavs) were considered reactionary adventures, only serving the purpose of preserving the status quo. Such a materialist analysis, as Rosa Luxemburg explained decades later in her National Question, was correct in principle, even though some of its practical applications were quite problematic and later proven to be wrong. But with the development of social democracy in the ethnically diverse Russian Empire, the political line of the international workers’ movement slipped from analyzing every specific national movement (and its influence on socialism) on its own to declaring general support for all struggles of national liberation.

That sort of approach was later, under Lenin's influence, canonized in the “right of nations to self-determination“, which was used as an alibi for forming opportunist alliances with all sorts of nationalist forces during the Comintern period and afterwards. Lenin's (and the official Bolshevik) argument was at least two-pronged: on the one hand, it was considered that the independence of some nations (stress is once more on the Poles) could bring the Russian tsarist regime's downfall closer; the second argument was much more drowned in idealism – it was expected that solving the national question by means of national independence would help weaken the influence of nationalism on the oppressed nation’s working class. While the first argument (though substituting the tsarist regime with modern imperialist powers) has experienced reincarnation in the form of various Maoist and/or Trotskyist grouplets offering "critical support" to nationalist and often chauvinist or fundamentalist organizations – let us remember the support which groups like the PFLP, ETA or IRA, but also extremist Islamist organizations like Hamas still enjoy on the left – the other argument is still used by many “moderate“ groups in their calls for independence of new (mostly European) countries.

The first to vocally oppose that kind of argumentation was Rosa Luxemburg, a Pole who has clearly seen the influence of nationalist rhetoric on the development of Socialism in her homeland, and a similar stance was kept by members of the so-called “Communist left“ after the Comintern was founded. Luxemburg chiefly claimed than nations, as homogenous communities with clearly defined demands, do not exist in reality and that national autonomy or independence only serve the interests of the national bourgeoisie, while not helping the local working class any more than simple linguistic and cultural equality inside the framework of the old state would (but she clearly understood the threat of chauvinism and racism, which is often overlooked by modern left-communists). History proved Rosa Luxemburg right in that regard; Poland, the Baltics, countries of the Balkans – all achieved independence but we're no closer to overthrowing capitalist relations than we were a hundred years ago, when the “right of nations to self-determination“ became Holy Scripture of the 'official' communist movement. However, she was
wrong in one respect: nations didn't begin to disappear with the development of a global market, as she once predicted, but instead the complete opposite happened—“balkanization” is the order of the day as seemingly independent states play their role of spreading nationalist propaganda very well. The region of what used to be Yugoslavia experienced its consequences more than most.

II

It shouldn't be necessary to waste a lot of time explaining the destructive influence of nationalism on everyday life and the worker's movement. No matter if we're discussing “traditional” Balkan nationalism or modern anti-immigrant racism, those phenomena serve one basic purpose—dividing the working class and making its fight for improving living conditions harder; or to put it more simply, making capitalist exploitation of workers easier. The state apparatus is constantly spreading national division among the populace, either by way of active media propaganda (especially in times of war) or “passively”, through the system of education in which history is mostly presented as black-and-white, with special focus on national conflicts.

National differences are constantly used for creating strife in the working class in order to obstruct organizing, both on the workplace and on the class level. This is done in several ways. First of all, by spreading “traditional” hatred—a very common kind in the Balkans, where it's so ingrained in collective consciousness that it's only necessary to maintain it through regular celebrations (mostly of 20th century events) and galvanize it during periods of friction with neighboring states, when “flexing muscles” seems like a good scare tactic. Apart from the Balkans, traditional ethnic hatred often (almost constantly, in fact) appears in the Middle East, especially in Israel/Palestine where discrimination against the Arabic population is rampant, as well as in Turkey in the endless Turkish-Kurdish conflicts. This sort of strife is strongest in wartime, as we have witnessed in the 1990s and earlier, and the advantage it creates for the bourgeoisie over the working class is commonly expressed by one maxim in ex-Yugoslavia: “while we slaughter each other, they become richer.”

Another form of nationalism is much younger—though not any less dangerous—and has only appeared recently in Southeast Europe: xenophobia, or rather, nativism. It is increasingly presented as a “workers’” form of nationalism because of its supposed opposition to ruling liberal ideology. Nativism mostly presents itself through anti-immigrant rhetoric, which is based on the idea that employers are using the influx of immigrant workforce for lowering or at least hindering growth of real wages, while middle class nativist ideologues add additional layers of racist pseudoscience in order to create as much hysteria as possible in the general populace. There are several issues with nativist rhetoric; first off, there's the fact that a constant flow of young workers is necessary for the normal functioning of western economies. Young workforce is ever more scarce in Europe in recent years due to expected demographic reasons, i.e., the process of demographic transition, and its lack will soon be felt even in a country as economically devastated as Croatia. This problem can only be realistically solved by allowing further immigration, although conservative political groupings—with the help of traditionally strong religious institutions and anti-immigrant hysteria—are trying to “encourage” demographic growth through restrictive laws such as abortion bans, stricter divorce legislation and legal discrimination of the LGBT community. The fact that labor is a sought-after commodity in Europe and North America, especially in times of economic growth such as today, should play into the hands of the working class, regardless of its ethnic or geographical origin. However, anti-immigrant rhetoric is being spread in an attempt to inhibit cooperation between the immigrant and indigenous working class, creating strife within the proletariat during which the capitalist class and the system itself will remain intact.

Since replenishing the workforce is of vital importance for the (modern) economy, immigration to the West could only be stopped by creating a net positive natural population growth rate by using aforementioned restrictive laws (which would probably yield no results) or by a huge increase in work hours coupled with no increase in wages, i.e., by militarization of labor last seen in the period preceding and during World War Two. The impact of such policies on the living standard of the working class should be easy to imagine. It is thus unrealistic—and
absolutely undesirable – to wish for a complete ban on immigration, but it's quite likely that conservative political options will come to power in Europe in the following years on the platform of implementing racist legislation which will cause further ghettoization and harassment of immigrant minorities. There are some cases such movements fulfilled their promises and had, for instance, nationalized socialist workers' movement still hasn't recovered from the blows it took in the late 20th century and who knows when (or if it ever will) succeed in overcoming them. Despite that, almost all socialist organizations have an official position regarding the national question, with most of them following the traditional Leninist dogma of “the right of nations to self-determination”. We mentioned earlier what sort of reasoning historically stood behind advocating that “right” and have shown its negative role in history so that we could finally start with a critique of its use in the present day.

Some basic reasons for supporting struggles of “national liberation” have partly stayed the same – solving the national question supposedly clears the way for “pure” class struggle – and partly they got a new dimension, that of anti-imperialism. It doesn't take much to challenge the first argument, as anyone with a grain of knowledge of contemporary history can clearly see that the creation of new nation-states doesn't contribute to the extinction of nationalism among the working class of a certain nation. This (counterproductive) tactic is widely popular within the “soft”, more or less reformist European and American left; as was best shown during the campaign for Scottish secession from the United Kingdom, when large parts of the left supported Scottish independence using arguments, or rather wishful thinking which could be summed up as “Scottish workers will understand that the SNP is no different than the old Labor or Conservative parties after independence is achieved, so they will start denouncing nationalism.” Sure they will.

Another guiding principle of national liberation supporters is anti-imperialism. It comes in at least two versions: first of all, related to the paragraph above, a certain number of socialists believes that national independence predetermines a “left” economic policy of the newly established state which can, finally free of the bondage imposed upon it by the old exploiting (“imperial”) seat of power, start implementing progressive economic reforms for the good of the people. In this case, not only national liberation movements are supported but also all kinds of nationalist and isolationist parties intent on pushing their state's economies away from the western sphere of influence. It should be mentioned, though, that in some cases such movements fulfilled their promises and had, for instance, nationalized
important segments of the economy; but this raises another question — is nationalization really a measure socialists should support in and of itself?\(^\text{12}\)

In an even worse form this tactic includes supporting parties and movements with a protectionist political platform, i.e., those in favor of larger subsidies to domestic entrepreneurs (in order for them to be more competitive on the global market) or state-sponsored rejection of foreign investment in the economy, usually under the mask of patriotism. Some good examples of this would include the national-nepotist regimes of Franjo Tuđman and Slobodan Milošević in Croatia and Serbia respectively\(^{13}\), which are still being praised by local leftists using similar rhetoric. Looking closer in time, this line of argumentation was used by the right-wing, but also by parts of the “soft left”, during the Brexit campaign. Still, the question of why socialists should care more about “home-grown” capitalists than about “foreign” ones (that is, why should we care about them at all) remains unanswered.

Another, more ideologically burdened version of anti-imperialism, can easily be explained by the childish maxim “the enemy of my enemy is my friend“, which is then used as basis for giving out support to all sorts of nationalist and fundamentalist movements. This tactic is mainly justified by the idea that “a blow to imperialism is a blow to capitalism”, while only western (European and American) imperialism tends to be considered the enemy and Russian and Chinese neo-imperialism are given a free pass or even considered to be a positive process. So nominally internationalist political organizations end up supporting, for example, all three or four sides in the Yugoslav Wars\(^{14}\), Russian neo-fascists in Ukraine and even Hamas, Hezbollah and, believe it or not, groups as reactionary as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.\(^{15}\)

A silver lining is that groups upholding these positions are small sects whose only purpose is preserving the “correct line“, made up and fossilized in the 1970s at the latest, without any real-life impact on the working class. Is it even worth talking about “critical support“ for some African Islamist militia when that support is being given by a group of half a dozen American students with internet access? A somewhat bigger problem arises when the entire Left starts begging their own respective states for military intervention in support of a certain nationalist gang, thus putting aside the interests of workers in a given country in exchange for vague promises of democracy and decentralization.\(^{16}\) Their states are more than willing to appease them — after all, it’s not often that the left shares a common interest with imperialism coming from their own country. Still, a sad fact remains that most socialist organizations keep taking sides in ethnic conflicts, mostly just for the sake of conducting pathetic internet fights with other useless sects with a different stance regarding the given bloodbath.

At this moment, we should present an alternative. Most leftists will by this point start making reflexive reactions to the text above: “you are supporting imperialism“, “should people facing death just accept their fate?“, “[insert ethnic militia] is the lesser evil“, “you’re a small group and you talk down to us?“ etc. We can just laugh off the accusation for supporting imperialism. If it is capable to do so, the working class should fight against their own state’s imperialism (to quote German communist Karl Liebknecht — “the main enemy is at home“):

historically, and even recently\(^{17}\), that was a common occurrence, but foiling the plans of your “domestic“ capitalists is not the same as supporting the invaded nation’s ruling class. The task of communists is to encourage such workplace struggles instead of vainly rallying to support foreign, often autocratic regimes. When it comes to other common critiques, the size of our group(s) is precisely reason why we understand that our support for any nationalist movement is of no value either for them or for the working class as a whole. In short, while we are small in numbers, our support is meaningless; if, as communists, we become somewhat influential in the workers’ movement, then our support for nationalist gangs becomes equal to treason both of socialism and of the interests of workers themselves. Syrian Kurds will defeat ISIS with or without our nominal support; equally so, they will — or maybe they will not — establish another generic ethnically cleansed (quasi-)state forced to operate by the laws of market and capital.

In conclusion, what are we socialists meant to do in this hostile nationalist environment? Let’s go back to the basics — the struggle against nationalism on the workplace is one of the most important and achievable tasks we can do, even as
dispersed and few in numbers as we currently are. On a higher level, the political independence of the working class remains a distant but desirable goal. How important our influence is in achieving it and how much it is a result of the more or less spontaneous flashes of class struggle, remains open for debate. Regardless, the principle of internationalism must remain strong at least in currently existing political groups and the slogan of the socialist workers’ movement must forever be “no war between nations, no peace between classes.”

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1 http://www.encyclopedia.hr/natuknica.aspx?id=42695
2 http://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1667/nation-state-and-nationalism/
3 http://www.encyclopedia.hr/natuknica.aspx?id=42693
4 “Do you think that, for example, count Toulouse, the duke of Burgundy and other great French noblemen knew and cared more for the kingdom of France than, say, for India? Not at all. They knew only for the king of France, they held on to him and defended him, so that he may defend them from their neighbors and vassals if need be. It was like that in all feudal lands. Nobles and priests were considered the people, for the nation in the modern sense was unknown at the time.” (See: Istočno pitanje, Inačica, 1995, p. 34)
5 Although the process of transformation of feudal Europe into a capitalist powerhouse lasted for a longer period of time, it was marked by sparks of clear class struggle in the shape of revolutions. “Stalling” with the abolition of feudal relationships took its toll on the development of nations in Eastern Europe. For instance, the claim that south Slavic peoples are “ahistorical” and doomed to ruin and assimilation into larger surrounding nations. But such stances were mostly remnants of Marx’ and Engels’ Hegelian Slavophobic approach, which disappeared with time (the change of approach is clearly visible in Engels’ foreword to the Russian edition of the Communist Manifesto from 1882, in which he praises Russian revolutionaries - https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/preface.htm#preface-1882 )
6 Or even worse - Luxemburg claimed that earliest Polish nationalism was used mostly as a rallying cry of the endangered nobility and a similar pattern can be noticed in other parts of eastern and southern Europe as well. This phenomenon requires a deeper analysis in an essay of its own.
7 “The form that best serves the interests of exploitation in the contemporary world is not the “national” state, as Kautsky thinks, but a state bent on conquest.” – The National Question, R. Luxemburg (https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1909/national-question/)
8 An obvious example would be the Yugoslav wars of the 90s; schoolbooks in Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina often contain completely different accounts of the conflict, depending on the target audience’s nationality. However, a similar policy was established in socialist Yugoslavia with regard to the German minority, which was usually equated with Nazis in order to justify its expulsion in the late 1940s.
9 A good example would be the German AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) party which threatens to send the army to guard state borders and introduce discriminatory laws towards the German Muslim community, such as bans on building minarets.
10 “Despite the spectacle of the dysfunction and inadequacy of the borders when they are violated, the borders actually function as filters for the selection of labor power because they put obstacles (which sometimes are lethal) that sort out the younger, more vigorous and more physically and mentally healthy immigrants, that favor men much more than women and children, that give preferentiality to those who have some money and personal or family resources. For the immigrants who seek a better life in Europe the severe hardships they experience when they cross the borders constitute a harsh endurance test, a preparation for a longer or shorter period of precarious labor and “illegality”.” (See: Vogelrein. Migration, deportations, capital and its state http://antithesi.gr/?p=44)
11 Salvador Allende’s government in Chile is often mentioned in this context, especially because it was toppled by a CIA orchestrated coup d’état in 1973. But it is all too common to forget the passivating influence Allende’s rule had on the Chilean working class, which ultimately resulted in a lack of resistance to the coup itself. (See: Strange defeat: The Chilean revolution, 1973; https://libcom.org/library/strange-defeat-chilean-revolution-1973-pointblank)
15 We’re mostly referring to the Syrian Kurdish rebels led by the PYD party which enjoys almost uniform support from the western leftist scene and also, unsurprisingly, from NATO air forces responsible for thousands of civilian deaths in Iraq and Syria. (See more: The Bloodbath in Syria: class war or ethnic war?, D. Valerian, 2014 - https://libcom.org/blog/bloodbath-syria-class-war-or-ethnic-war-03112014)
16 One of the better and yet mostly unknown recent examples of internationalism would be the British railroad workers strike during preparations for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. (See here: http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/the-untold-story-of-how-scottish-train-drivers-tried-to-derail-the-iraq-war).