

Toward a Cosmopolitan Socialist Nationalism

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Introduction

Socialists, if genuine, are internationalists and cosmopolitans so it is standardly thought that they must be anti-nationalists. I shall challenge that familiar claim. There are, of course, nationalisms and nationalisms, and times and contexts when, or so I shall argue, one should be a nationalist and times and contexts when one should not. Much nationalism is barbarous and a good bit of it, though not quite that bad, is xenophobic or at least ethnocentric and exclusionary where nationality is traced to descent and there is something like a conception of a favored *volk*. Socialists or indeed any morally aware person will reject such nationalisms out of hand. But there is by contrast liberal nationalism which has none of those features. It was exemplified, when it was needed, in Iceland, Norway and Finland and it is exemplified today in Catalonia, Québec, Scotland and Wales, though I do not deny that even in these places it was and is sometimes abused. I shall characterize such a liberal nationalism and show where there are circumstances in which it is (and not just for tactical reasons) a good thing. I shall then (a) consider how it must be transformed for it to be a *socialist* nationalism but certainly not the national socialism of the Nazis which wasn't a socialism at all, and (b) argue that socialist nationalism is, at least under conditions of modernity, everything considered, desirable and the most adequate form of liberal nationalism that we can achieve. I shall further argue that some form of group identity or cultural identity is essential for human beings and that in historical circumstances where there are nations it will take the form of a sense of national identity. (Gellner

1983) A recognition and acceptance of this should be, I shall argue, a part of any adequate socialist theory.

I

If the sentiments and commitments of cosmopolitan socialist nationalism become effectively defused in our societies, it will constitute an effective counterweight to capitalist globalization with its neoliberal cheery banker's fatalism where the bottom line is the maximization of profits for a small dominating capitalist class no matter what the domination of peoples, no matter what anti-democratic measures it requires, no matter what impoverishment of people or destruction of cultures it carries with it. (Bourdieu 1998a and 1998b) They, of course, do not mind a trickle-down effect to the underclass as long as that does not enhance their power or interfere with capitalist profits, but the bottom line remains their profits. Economic rationality—a subspecies of instrumental rationality, on their account, the only genuine rationality there is—requires the continued and relentless development of the productive forces, but, on a neoliberal understanding of it, not with the aim of maximally meeting human needs, but in order to maximize the profits of the capitalist class whether it broadly answers to human needs or not. The whole world—people, the environment, the whole lot—is the raw material of this economic rationality. Resistance to it, this neoliberal ideology has it, is irrational atavistic nostalgia for things that never were and never could be in a rational social order (Bourdieu 1998a).

Cosmopolitan socialist nationalism provides resources to resist this *theoretically* in the way it opposes neoliberalism's conceptualization of rationality and in its conception of what constitutes a maximal development of the productive forces (powers). *Practically* it attempts to resist it by seeking ways to generate, sustain and develop underclass solidarities both in the individual nations and between the peoples of different nations in their common struggles against the exploitation and dehumanization that goes with capitalist globalization in this neoliberal world order. Peoples, in

striving to preserve their own national identities—their own cultural and political identities—in the face of the imperatives of globalization and neoliberalism, will come to see, if socialists articulate the case intelligently and forcefully, the need to cooperate and stand in solidarity and they will come to see, as well, that they have class interests in common that require their liberation from capitalist hegemony. (They may, of course, see this without socialist help, but nonetheless it is part of the vocation of socialist intellectuals to try to push these matters along.) Neoliberalism undermines both their national identities and cultural identities and intensifies the depth of masses of people being dominated as a class (more accurately as several lower classes). If these people, both nationally and across nations, do not hang together they will surely hang separately.

So in seeking their autonomy and flourishing the peoples of the world have a dual task: they must protect and sustain their national identities (their distinctive cultural membership) while recognizing the value and importance of multiculturalism. Hindu nationalism is a misfortune. Note its ill effect on Indian education. Moreover, peoples must recognize and fully take to heart that they live in class divided societies and in a neoliberal world order, something that is increasingly the norm in places, where it will not be the case that the interests of ruling elites in their nations will square with the interests of working class people and underclass people on welfare. The emancipation of the underclasses—the gaining of something like an effective control over their lives—is a requirement of democracy. Sustaining their cultural identity is a *necessary* condition, but surely not a sufficient condition, for democratic sovereignty. But while it is not *sufficient* it is essential, if people are to have a democratic life. It is essential that *they break the hegemony of the capitalist class*: the ability of the rich to control and dominate the lives of the rest. Liberal nationalism is not enough; it must also be a socialist nationalism. I will return to that in Section IV.

II

Nationalist projects are justified (1) for a people to throw off colonial control (as, say, in Africa); (2) to throw off a foreign oppressor who has taken their state and incorporated it into their own (as was true of the Baltic states); or (3) where a people, historically rooted in a determinate territory where they constitute a clear majority on that territory, wish, and show this democratically, to attain self-rule (e.g. once Norway from Sweden and Iceland from Denmark). People in such situations should be nationalists *and* socialists, and other liberal cosmopolitans not in such nations so struggling for their emancipation should support them. On the other hand, the nationalisms to be resisted are nationalisms of great powers—principally the United States at present—seeking to dominate the world and the previous nationalisms of Britain, Germany, Russia, Japan and, farther back, Spain and France. These nation-states with their nationalist agendas seek to dominate the world, or at least a considerable portion of it. We must struggle to attain their failure.

Where a nation, even a small nation, is secure in its culture and language and in the political control of its own affairs, as much as any country can have such control in the contemporary globalizing world, then nationalism is not only unnecessary, its absence is unseemly. Still, a country, in such circumstances, without stomping on the rights of people, must take steps to preserve its own culture if that is what its people want (as they no doubt will). Thus it is justified for the Danes, for example, to have restrictions on the purchase of land by foreigners on its west coast so that the west of Jutland from the German border to its tip should not become a *klein Deutschland* or at least a summer *Deutschland*. This should not, if it is to be reasonable and decent, and must not be rooted in an animosity towards Germans, but in the desire on the part of the Danes to preserve in their own country their language and culture: their perfectly proper wish to provide a living space for it in their own country without having it swamped from influences from outside. And when in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Icelandic nationalists raised the slogan “Iceland for Icelanders”, it

should not have been as an expression of a dislike of foreigners but as a protest against the control of their economy by Danish merchants and of the political and cultural imperialism of the *Dansk Reich* which had little concern for Icelandic culture and its language and crippled the development of its political institutions. But in the United States “America for Americans” (Trump, for example, building a wall on the U.S. border with Mexico to keep Mexicans out) is, to not put too fine a point on it, obscene as is “France for the French”, “Germany for the Germans”, “Canada for the Canadians” or “Britain for the British” in their respective countries. Nationalism is only in place where a nation’s survival and flourishing or its cultural identity is in question. Where it is not, it is not justified, though pride in country (where there is something to be proud of) and shame over its misdeeds is natural and so is a moderate patriotism as long as it is not jingoistic, chauvinist, xenophobic or militaristic. Unfortunately, it not infrequently is. Herderian nationalism is fine; Fichteian nationalism is unacceptable.

III

However, even where nationalism is a key element in a people’s emancipation or flourishing, not all forms of nationalism are acceptable. In a socialist society its nationalism must be a liberal nationalism and not an ethnic nationalism. It must, that is, not be based on race or cultural *origin* but must be open to all who acquire the national language, gain some reasonable knowledge of and an attunement to its culture, have some knowledge of its history and traditions, wish to settle on its land and abide by its laws and have a commitment to the nation in question though not necessarily to what at a particular time is its government or political ideology. Imagine Syrian immigrants with Trump if he becomes President of the United States just shortly after they became immigrants to the United States. People, if they are to flourish, must either have these things or, if they come to the country as immigrants, must be committed to acquiring them under normal circumstances. (I do not, of course, mean for either the citizen or the immigrant as an aspiring citizen that they have a

commitment to ‘My country, right or wrong, but still my country’. The Bloomsbury Group was right about such thinking.) Moreover, while these conditions are normally necessary conditions for membership in a nation there can sometimes be membership in a nation without one or another of these conditions obtaining. Sometimes, for example, whole families immigrate and some members of the family might be too old to learn the language. That cannot help but be an impediment for that person. Still, that should not be a barrier to that person being accepted as a full-fledged member of the nation. All rules, or at least almost all, must have implicit *ceteris paribus* clauses. Here, as elsewhere, we must not be essentialists. We must take Wittgenstein’s insights about such matters to heart.

Such a liberal nationalism comports well with internationalism and cosmopolitanism. There is cultural protection on such a conception but no favored *volk*, no acceptance of beliefs of national superiority or expansionist aims and zero tolerance of failure to protect the historically established rights of its national minorities or of treating them or immigrants who become citizens as anything less than full-fledged citizens.¹ They, every bit as much as those who were born there and whose parents and grandparents were rooted in the nation’s soil, are welcome in the nation as long as they show respect for and have some attunement to the nation and meet the conditions described above. All nationalisms are cultural *and* political. (A *purely* ‘civic nationalism’ is an oxymoron. (See Nielsen 1996-97.) A nation, after all, is a political community. But in liberal nationalism, unlike ethnic nationalism, there is nothing rooted in blood and soil.

A liberal nationalism will also be reiteratable. Liberal nationalists, if they are thinking clearly, will recognize that culture or group membership with the sense of identity that goes with it is a *primary* good; that is, it is something that is necessary not only for the people of their nation but for all people everywhere and at all times to have for their lives to be sustainable let alone to flourish (Kymlicka 1989, 166-69.) In conditions of modernity (the era of nations), group identity often takes the form of national identity and thus it is a primary good for people so situated. But people with a

particular nationalist project, if they will reflect, will realize that people in other nations do *not* in that respect differ from them. Thus, given even the most minimal conception of *universalizability*, since it is a primary good for them it is a primary good for others—members of other nations—as well. Moreover, since they are justified in protecting their own cultural membership others similarly situated are as well. They recognize for themselves that it is something that they should have. Indeed it is, as a primary good, something crucial for them to have if they are to flourish. This being so, then, if nationalists are reasonable and fair-minded, they must recognize that others living in modern societies need it in the same way that they and all the people of their nation do. Since in this respect there are no relevant differences between them, they are equally entitled to cultural membership and thus in fairness they must support it for all in such circumstances. This is something Israel must learn about its Palestinian citizens. This is what it is for a nationalism to be reiteratable and not only reiteratable but actually reiterated and with that committed to impartiality and attuned to internationalism. Moreover, there is no particularism here which conflicts with ethical universalism.

It is a small step from internationalism to cosmopolitanism. But it is a step. Someone who was not very curious about others, was only at home in his own society and accepted reiteratable liberal nationalism only because it was reasonable and fair would be an internationalist but certainly not a cosmopolitan. To be a cosmopolitan it is not enough simply to have respect for other cultures—other ways of doing and being—but to take a lively interest in many cultures, traditions, literatures and the like and feel at home in many places. Turgenev and Trotsky, and in our time Isaac Deutscher, Stanley Ryerson, Simone de Beauvoir and Isaiah Berlin, are paradigm cases of cosmopolitan people. Few of us can get within a country mile of being such cosmopolitans, but it is something, if we are morally sensitive and reflective, we admire and aspire to approximate. We aspire to live under the formula that nothing human is alien to us. And that has been part of the socialist tradition, our firm and justified commitment to the importance of class and class struggle notwithstanding.

IV

Why should it be the case—or indeed should it be the case—that a liberal nationalism should be transformed into a socialist nationalism, a nationalism that while remaining liberal (but definitely not neoliberal) will also be socialist? The reason is that class and class struggle remain important and that, to their detriment as emancipatory movements or theories of such movements, most nationalist movements, including liberal nationalisms, ignore that or at least downplay it and it is, as well, occluded in most nationalist-oriented theorizing about nations and nationalism. That one-sidedness impoverishes otherwise fine theories of nationalism and diminishes the emancipatory potential of nationalist movements. As classical Marxism has been woefully inadequate in its treatment of nationalism, so most theorizing about nationalism—most committed nationalist intellectuals and most nationalist movements—have failed to advert to the importance of class, class struggle and to what the class divisions in our society do to people (Cohen 1988, 132-56; Purvis 1996; Nielsen 1998). It is not a matter of class *reductionism* on the socialist side—something which is actually a pseudo-Marxist notion that is incompatible with a proper understanding of historical materialism (Cohen 1978; 1988, 3-179). Both nation and class are evident enough social realities. Neither can be reasonably denied in an adequate understanding of social life nor can one be reduced to the other. For a people to achieve social emancipation, for them to be self-governing, for democracy to have a real life among them, their nation must not only have a nation state of its own *or* be an equal subunit in a genuinely multination state; it must be a nation in a state in which the class domination of capitalist elites has been firmly broken and the great masses of people have at long last control over their own lives in a mass based democracy, not a plutocracy which parades as a democracy. It must not be a dictatorship *over* the proletariat but a genuine people's democracy with political institutions in the control of the people and it must as well be a democracy extended to

the workplace. Without that a people cannot attain the autonomy and human flourishing that nationalism promises.

On the best case scenario for liberal nationalism, a people will get cultural protection in certain areas of their lives, including protection of the mother tongue of their nation. And that is certainly essential. But they will not just with that get a just society or the autonomy or democratic control promised by nationalism. They will still be ruled by elites, only they will now be their own elites. And in the rich capitalist democracies the political elites who are nominated by any of the mainline parties—parties which have a chance of governing—will themselves be selected by a small elite from a small pool of candidates often themselves from those very same elites who do the selecting. Normally none of them will dare to stray very far from the imperatives of the capitalist order with a media sometimes more overtly, sometimes somewhat less so, in support of that order. And if someone does get out of line (Henry Wallace or Eugene McCarthy to take historical American examples) his or her political career will be short lived. This is an old socialist story, some might say a tired old socialist story, but is it not at least substantially true for all of that? (Offe 1984; 1985)

Marxists have noted again and again how nationalist movements have misled the working class and impeded human emancipation; less metaphorically, how they have stood in the way of as full an answering to human needs as was possible in the circumstances. A classic—perhaps the classic—example was the First World War which was a brutal and devastating war that had no non-capitalist rationale. Just prior to the First World War, working class, socialist and Marxist political parties had gained unparalleled strength (both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary) in Germany, Austria, France and Italy and in many of the smaller European nations as well. Working class consciousness was extensive and many workers, along with their intellectual allies, were confident and militant. The beginning of socialism, it was widely believed, was near to hand. However, when the conflicting ruling elites of the great European powers driven by competing capitalist interests moved to settle their conflicts by war, they played successfully in each country on chauvinistic

nationalist sentiments. They caught and made effective use of (and perhaps some were caught up with such sentiments themselves) the dark and irrational side of nationalism (Poole 1991, 90-109). The working classes of Germany, Austria, France, Russia, Italy and Britain were suckered into this nationalist maelstrom. Forgetting their class interests, they rallied around their respective flags and marched off to war. If they had had even a minimal clarity about their common class interests and had not been so led astray by their nationalist passions, they could have united and said no to a totally senseless war and perhaps in that process, as it played itself out in their struggles, working class people in the advanced capitalist countries could have gained socialist hegemony and a genuine experiment in a socialist organization of society could have begun in a situation where the material, social and political conditions were in place for its success.

This perhaps in part explains Rosa Luxemburg's—one of the wisest and best socialists among us—extreme animus toward nationalism (Luxemburg 1995, 198-207). Where what was needed in the lead up to the First World War was working class solidarity and militant determination, we got competing patriotic national chauvinisms. And when the socialist revolution finally did get started it was in a backward capitalistically and democratically underdeveloped country. Luxemburg realized full well that there in backward Russia the socialist experiment was doomed from the start unless the revolution spread rapidly to the West. But there the various capitalist countries with their conflicting nationalisms were not about to follow suit and with that a great historical opportunity was lost. Blinded by their nationalist passions the workers of Western and Central Europe did not act in accordance with what plainly was in their class interests.

However, nationalism does not always have such untoward effects. It was mildly emancipatory in Norway and Iceland and it is reasonable to expect that it will be so in Catalonia, Belgium, Québec, Scotland and Wales. Life will go somewhat better, everything considered, for more people because of these nationalist movements. And that makes them worth supporting. (If Podemos gains power in Spain and Catalonia does not go with it, this may no longer be true of

Catalonia.) But it is important that workers and the underclass engage in such nationalist projects with their eyes open. Let me, in closing, illustrate what I mean by this by taking something that is close to home for me because I am a Quebecker. I wholeheartedly support the Sovereigntist movement in Québec. But we need to be very clear that none of the political parties in Québec with a reasonable possibility of gaining power or sharing in it in a coalition or even gaining much attention represents or embodies the interests of the Québec people, *except in the very vital matter of protecting the French language and some of our culture*. The interests of the party elites and the poor of Hochelaga Maisonneuve (to translate into the concrete) are not even nearly the same. The leadership of all these political parties come from revolving elites selected principally by the Québec capitalist class as political leaders who will answer to their interests and not to the interests of the vast majority of the people of Québec and certainly not to the interests of the working class and the underclass. We must not forget that all the parties in Québec that have any chance of being heard are capitalist parties. That they do not so represent themselves and that they are not usually so perceived attests to the power of ideology. *The most* that we can hope for from such sources—some cultural protection aside—is neoliberalism with a somewhat more social democratic hue: something, that is, like what Blair’s social democratic party in Britain was. What will very likely come into power in Germany will hardly be any better. Merkel, principally because of her policies toward refugees, will likely not retain power. However, that—little as it is—is still not nothing: the cultural protection side is a matter of great importance. Together they justify our—that is we socialists in Québec—not doing anything to rock the boat until after sovereignty is securely achieved. Indeed prior to that secure achievement we should make common cause with other sovereigntists—bourgeois sovereigntists, if you will, though so labeling them will hardly contribute to cooperation and trust between us. We should be keenly aware of it ourselves that it is a marriage of conscience. But that prudence and good tactics to the contrary notwithstanding, we need to be thinking and preparing now a credible socialist party to go into firm opposition *after* Québec sovereignty. But I am still speaking of democratic elections.

That will remain so whether our sovereignty option is accepted or defeated. The sovereigntist movement in Québec does not at all add an extra dimension of injury to the working classes and the underclass beyond what is already there in the capitalist order and it may even marginally help them.

The situation in present day Québec does not yield much in the way of comparison with that of Western and Central Europe just before the First World War. And (and this is central)—Québec Sovereigntists—a thoroughly generally neoliberal nationalist movement—afford at present the Québec people the best chance they have of protecting and sustaining their own distinctive identity. Sustaining that identity does not hurt the class interests of the Québec working class and underclass, and sustaining it and strengthening it gives people (including, of course, the working class and underclass) a better sense of who they are; a sense that strengthens their identity and contributes to their coming to have more control over their lives and to realizing themselves (Cohen 1988, 132-154; Nielsen 1998). So sustaining it and strengthening it is worth struggling for and should have unequivocal socialist support. More than that, there is room in places like Québec for a cosmopolitan *socialist* nationalism. But that will be a nationalism that will never forget that class matters and matters a lot. It will seek to make a sense of class vivid to the working class and the underclass so that it will become as much a part of them as is their sense of being Quebeckers.

Note

¹ It might be said that in a complex modern society with a nation-state and national minorities there can hardly be cultural protection without automatically generating a favored *volk*, whatever the good liberal intentions of the nationalists. This, the argument goes, obtains no matter how open membership is into the nation and no matter how non-ethnic it is. It is not a matter of the bad intentions or ethnocentricity of anyone. Cultural protection cannot but privilege the people of the majority over the people of the minority. Where they have two different languages, for example, and cultural protection comes (among other things) to having the majority language being the official language of the society then to that extent the national minority is disadvantaged. But cultural protection for the nation cannot be achieved without in some way privileging its language. So inevitably there is *in some ways something like* a favored *volk*. But that is a tendentious, or at least a misleading, way of describing the situation if the national minority has language rights (language rights that are firmly honored) in having their own schools, service in their language in hospitals and other social services, the right to use their own language in parliament and the like—all things to which liberal nationalism is unequivocally committed. Of course the majority culture is advantaged, but to have a nation (a comprehensive culture) at all this cannot be avoided. But without that we would have a Tower of Babel and no society at all.

In this very important way the state *cannot* be neutral. The thing to do is to compensate the minority as much as possible by protecting their rights which comes to very centrally protecting their culture while facilitating their *access* to the majority culture without requiring, or even encouraging, their *assimilation* to the majority culture. That option is there and some will take it, but there should be no *nudging them down this assimilationist road*. They should be secure, as a national minority, in their own culture if that is where they want to remain. But this is what Québec does and it is what Québec sovereigntists are committed to. In a democracy numbers count. But that majoritarianism, at least in the situation described above, can be honored without violating the human rights of anyone. I am indebted to Margaret Moore for making me see the need to add this note. I hope it goes some way toward meeting her worries about the consistency of liberal nationalism.

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