

# *Revolutionary Socialists and the National Question : Five Draft Points*

**1. Nations as such do not exist (apart from in the minds of nationalist theoreticians) other than in the form of national consciousness and national movements; national existence itself is a function of national movements and national consciousness, and not the other way round.**

What is a nation? A nation, in the sense in which the word is commonly used and understood, refers to group of people which is demarcated off through the special and unique – ‘national’ – qualities they share and embody; special qualities – comprising British-ness, Spanish-ness, German-ness, and so forth – which are not ultimately reducible to such tangibles as language, territory, or political institutions, but which take the form of the ‘national character’ that the people both embody in the present and have embodied since time immemorial. For each nation thus understood the world is divided into ‘them’ and ‘us’: us-ness being defined by the special foundational qualities of our own national character, and them-ness by their absence, which is, for each nation, the one thing that all other nations have in common. Nations do not therefore treat other nations with equanimity: being national does not signify being an equal member of a brotherhood of nations but precisely being different from all the other nations put together. The lack in other nations of that which makes us what we are not only makes us unique but also frequently marks us off as superior, and often our superiority over the rest of the other nations comes from the fact that we have been chosen by God as special: with alarming frequency, the native tongue of each nation is quite literally the language of heaven.

That Marxists over the years have been so unsuccessful in coming up with a satisfactory *materialist* definition of the nation – through trying to explain national movements and national consciousness as functions of an ‘objective’ national existence, in effect inverting the real order of things – should not then surprise us; that they have been so frequently moved to try at all perhaps should, since to accept the very existence of nations in this sense is to accept the essential premises of a metaphysical discourse.

Notwithstanding all this, of course, that the world is divided into national *states* is incontestable. But to conflate the national state with ‘the nation’ would be unpardonable. That ‘membership’ of a given nation should be reducible to living within its demarcated territory, holding the relevant passport and coming under the jurisdiction of its legal system would be regarded as absurd by even the most pedestrian of nationalist ideologues. For, in nationalist discourse, the national state is the construction of the nation, and not, as in reality, the other way round.

That this world of ours is also composed of people who, to a greater or lesser degree, have a consciousness of belonging to one nationality or another, is equally obvious (the idea of a person without nationality almost obviates for us the very idea of ‘person’ itself). But the conflation of national state and nationality is precisely the trap that every failed attempt to carve out a materialist definition of the nation has fallen into: for not only is the arithmetic of ‘nationality plus national state equals nation’ completely unwarranted when compared to the real historical process of the formation of both national states and nationalities, the whole construction on closer inspection collapses into tautology: for if what makes Ruritanians Ruritanian is their membership of the Ruritanian nation, then, shorn of foundational mythology – of divine origin or otherwise – Ruritania itself can owe its ‘Ruritanianity’ solely to the fact that it is composed of Ruritanians.

Thus it is fundamental to register that, when we come to address what we are accustomed to call the ‘national question’, a prior and agreed definition of what a nation *is* – either at the level of the general and whether or not a given people compose a nation at the level of the concrete – is not only unnecessary but is in fact a barrier to

real progress. All we need to say is that the only sense in which nations *can* be said to exist is at the level of consciousness and political movements; and the only criterion by which the existence of a nation needs be determined is that of consciousness itself.

There are many interesting historical debates to be had about why and how national consciousness at both the general and the specific level has come into being; but from the point of view of practical politics it is only necessary to say that if a people think of themselves as a nation then, completely irrespectively of whether this belief has a rational foundation, a nation is what they are.

**2. Revolutionary socialists oppose ourselves to national prejudice, chauvinism and injustice in all its forms, not only because we oppose injustice in general, but because we understand that it is only through the struggle against concrete injustices that the tools necessary for the liberation of all humanity from all oppression will be built.**

The very falsity of an idea never meant that it could not be held to be true by very many people: that God (or a suitable equivalent) does not exist has not been a barrier to real and sincere religious devotion over centuries; that the completely unscientific Victorian classification of the peoples of the world into distinct ‘races’ is bereft of any rational basis has sadly been no obstacle to racism. By the same token, that the idea of ‘the nation’ is a metaphysical tautology without real historical justification has not prevented ‘nationality’ – in the sense of consciousness of belonging to a nation – being the predominant mode of public self-identification in the modern world. And naturally the world has to be taken as it is: neither national consciousness nor nationality will wilt before the orator.

It is in addition equally undeniable that for many national groups the ability to express their nationality, as much through the exercise of their national culture (including language) as through the expression of national existence through the formation of national states has been limited – oppressed – by other national groups and states.

It is therefore necessary to say that, although we, as revolutionary socialists, are not nationalists, in the sense that we do not believe that the nation is the natural form of organisation of the human species, and in the sense that, despite the very real and tangible existence of national consciousness and movements for the realisation of national rights and liberation, we do not believe that, as such, nations exist at all, we are not *abstentionists* in the field of the national. We are *opposed* to national oppression in all its forms, and for two very good reasons.

First, precisely *because* we are against injustice: the oppression of one national group by another, discrimination against national cultures, languages and customs, are further manifestations of the ugliness and chauvinism that capitalism imposes on all people and on all peoples, limiting their development and denying them the full enjoyment of their lives. Any political point of view that sets itself the task of the liberation of humanity cannot stand aside from the practical manifestation of oppression and prejudice in any form, including the national, and remain true to its ideals.

But we also oppose ourselves to national oppression for practical reasons. We believe that ‘a nation that oppresses another cannot itself be free’. We believe that a working class, while it acts as an accomplice in the oppression of other nationalities, will be incapable of freeing itself from its own oppression, as much social as well as political. The more successful a working class movement is in fighting oppression, chauvinism and injustice in all its forms the stronger it will be in its fight against its real enemy, the capitalist system of production for profit and all the absurdities and injustices that arise from it.

The practical struggle against oppression and injustice in all its forms is the vital human life-force that objectively points to the elimination of the conditions which produce oppression and prejudice in the first place

– it is the beginning of all political wisdom – and we are thus obliged to recognise the struggle against the denial of national rights and freedoms as a supremely progressive force.

### **3. Revolutionary socialists support the right of self-determination – the right freely to form an independent state – for nations: for *all* nations, without conditions and without qualifications.**

We support the right of self-determination of nations. But it is important to be clear about what this means, and does not mean.

We believe that self-determination means the right of a national group to form an independent state if it wishes. This position is unequivocal and unconditional. We do not limit its application only to national peoples that we 'like'. Self-determination, the right to form an independent state, applies to all nations, without favour or exception.

We do not place artificial barriers in the way of national self-determination. We do not subordinate the rights of one nation to that of another. To say, for example, that the right to self-determination of nation *A* should be denied it because it would infringe the right of self-determination of nation *B* would be to say that the very existence of nation *B* already infringes the right of self-determination of nation *A*. But national self-determination, contrary to popular misunderstanding, does not mean 'the right to do whatever you want': it does not mean the right to oppress other nations, to rob, to steal and to plunder. It simply means the right to constitute a politically independent state. No more, and no less. The failure to understand this is what lies behind that sectarianism towards the national question that so frequently leads to a practical accommodation to big nation chauvinism.

Nor do we put artificial barriers in the way of nationhood. A nation exists not by virtue of its fulfilment of 'objective' criteria, but only if the members of the nation believe that they constitute one. Nations, as I have argued, properly understood only exist in the form of national consciousness and national movements, and the existence of a nation at the level of consciousness is the only sufficient factor proving its existence. We thus reject the Hegelian notion of nations with and without history as much as we reject the reactionary idea of revolutionary and non-revolutionary nations.

Neither do we subordinate the right of national self-determination to the 'greater goal' of socialist revolution. For us there is no contradiction between the two propositions. Nor do we subordinate the goal of national liberation to that of socialism. We are not nationalists, true, but that does not mean that we are *anti*-national. A movement for socialism that does not promise the elimination of national oppression is not worthy of the name; a theory of socialism that is obviated by the promise of national liberation is a contradiction in terms. Socialism does not presuppose the *elimination* of the national, it suggests its *transcendence*, and this transcendence will follow the path of a natural flowering of all national culture the like of which we have never seen, or it will not happen at all.

### **4. The task of the elimination of national oppression is the task of the socialist revolution: not only will there be no genuine national liberation without socialist revolution, there will be no socialist revolution without national liberation.**

The only force that is capable of winning and guaranteeing national self-determination and the elimination of national oppression is that which has most interest in winning and guaranteeing it, and this means the working class on a global scale. Capitalism is not interested in national liberation: where it supports the rights of national groups it does so for short-term, cynical and opportunistic reasons, and moreover maintains the very system which itself breeds the conditions in which chauvinism is nurtured. Although the solution of the national

question and national questions was suggested by the ascendant bourgeoisie of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europe, it has time and again proved itself incapable of realising the promise of its own historical mission. That task now passes to the working class. If the working class is unable to realise the task of national liberation then national liberation will be truly unrealisable; and, by the same token, if the working class is unable to see that national liberation is its responsibility then it too will fail.

But this does not mean that we raise the political character of national movements as a *precondition* for supporting just demands. In general, it is not miraculously revealed as transparently obvious to the nationally oppressed that the path to their liberation lies through the gate of socialist revolution. Indeed, were this so, then the very need for revolutionary socialism would be obviated: we are not ‘economists’ when it comes to the national question for exactly the same reasons that we are not in relation to the social.

But in addition to this perennial question makes itself felt another, more contingent, for history weighs heavy upon us, and the record of the twentieth-century socialist movement – of both social-democratic and ‘Stalinist’ vintage – has not been a proud one in relation to the sphere of the national. So if, as a consequence, fighters for national liberation and freedom are inclined to look first to the false promises of imperialism and not to us for assistance then we have to understand the reasons behind this, and redouble our efforts to convince the doubters of their error and our sincerity. And revolutionary socialism will win the confidence of the suffering and oppressed peoples of this world not through fine words but through its actions: ‘In the beginning was the deed ... the proof of the pudding is in the eating’, Engels reminds us, and it is through our concrete practice that we will convince of our commitment to national liberation.

## 5. For Self-Government!

The essence of revolutionary politics is the art of the practical, the art of the concrete. One day, it will be the soviets that decide national questions, as they will decide all others. But to argue that it will be the ‘socialism’ of the future that will resolve today’s problems is the old maximum programme of pre-World War One social-democracy: the task that faces us is to raise our position on the national question practically in the here and now.

For us, the key demand is for national self-determination, the right freely to form an independent state. But if, on the one hand, self-determination is frequently and incorrectly over-invested with content, and taken to mean ‘the right to do whatever you want’, it is often also under-invested and taken to be synonymous with devolution of governmental functions, regional ‘autonomy’, and the like. But what self-determination amounts to in practice is *state independence*, the right of a people freely to determine *for themselves* their relation with other states. Simple devolution of powers to a national region alone does not constitute the right of self-determination for the fundamental question is ‘who decides?’, and if the oppressor state retains a veto over the devolved powers then the extent of the latter is immaterial, for, whatever else this may be called, it is not *self-determination*.

By the same token, this ‘state independence’ is precisely a *political* independence. ‘Economic independence’ remains the utopian fantasy it always has been: ‘socialism in one country’ remains as much an unrealisable contradiction in terms that capitalism in one country has also proved itself to be. This means that the argument of ‘national viability’ is an irrelevance in this terrain, for what is at stake is not the social but the *political* independence of a given people. For this reason Lenin was to repeat, in the debates within the Bolsheviks with the current he labelled the ‘imperialist economists’, i.e. those who precisely raised the utopian impossibility of ‘economic independence’ as a barrier to the demand for national self-determination, that self-determination pertained solely to the sphere of political democracy.

Neither do we necessarily advocate national ‘separation’. We do not favour a myriad world of small states: our programme is one of federation and the drawing together of peoples. But the world we envisage will be one in which union between peoples is voluntary: in which the right to say yes and no to the union is sacrosanct.

Now, while it is true that, realistically, in the present conjuncture genuine national self-determination along these lines will only be realisable through the means of constituent congresses of workers' soviets, to raise this demand in this form outside of an immediate revolutionary crisis would be mere propagandism, since it could have no popular resonance. For this reason we advance the slogan of 'Self-Government!' The content we give this slogan is that it has to be the people concerned themselves who make the decisions, without veto, regarding their self-determination. Pedagogically, where devolved sub-national parliamentary bodies exist this slogan can be adapted along the lines of 'For a Parliament that Decides its Own Powers'.

But although we understand that this side of the socialist revolution national oppression will not be eliminated, we do not seek to impose this view on those fighting such oppression. All we demand is consistency and sincerity in their struggle: for we believe that consistency and sincerity in the struggle against national oppression will count a thousand-fold more than the all too familiar fake and scholastic internationalism of big nation chauvinism.

The rest will be down to history.

León

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