

Austro-Marxism and the National Question

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“Nin’s work on the national question has been unjustly neglected, not least by those who consider they uphold the Marxist tradition. For example, Michael Löwy’s book, *Fatherland or Mother Earth?* makes only one reference to Nin, while it enthuses over Bauer’s ideas which Nin refutes so effectively. It must be rare to find contemporary nonsense demolished in a work written nearly seventy years ago.”

WE CONSIDER special attention should be paid to the positions of the Austrian Social Democrats, of Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg, and most of all to that of the Russian Bolsheviks, which takes first place because of its great theoretical importance and practical consequences.

Let’s begin with the Austrian School.

Before the imperialist war, in Austro-Hungary more than in any other country, no political tendency could ignore the national problem. That monstrous multi-national state or variegated “mosaic of nations” was a compendium of oppression, so the national problem continually erupted, with extreme complexity and violence.

The workers’ movement, which exists, not outside time and space, but in specific social and political circumstances, cannot ignore national oppression. It must adopt a position on it if it is not to be condemned to isolation and impotence. The national question is constantly present and is reflected inside the workers’ movement in the form of specific political and organisational problems, in Russian and Austrian Social Democracy and in countries such as ours, where the national question remains unresolved.

The problem preoccupied the Austrian workers’ movement and provoked passionate discussion both in its press and at its congresses. The first attempts to provide social democracy with a worked out theory of the national problem originated in Austro-Hungary: that is not to say that the

“theoreticians” were successful. On the contrary those endeavours, like the workers’ movement itself, were strongly influenced by bourgeois nationalism, despite reiterated affirmations of commitment to class struggle and proletarian internationalism.

That had serious consequences for the workers’ movement.

The first mistake was made in 1897, when the Social Democratic party at its Vienna conference decided to transform itself into a federation of national parties. That error led to the heightening of national antagonisms between workers and finally, in 1910, to an organisational split which created an independent Czech party.

The mistake made by those who, starting from the fact that revolutionary Marxism upholds the right of all peoples to independence, argue that the practical consequence of that should be the creation of independent national parties or a federation of organisations with extensive political and administrative autonomy, cannot be sufficiently emphasised. Solidarity between workers of the diverse nations within the same State should be paramount. Class solidarity is better than national solidarity. The workers’ policy on nationalities has nothing in common with the bourgeois one. For the working class, the problem of oppressed nationalities is one aspect of the democratic revolution, and will be solved only by the common action of the workers of all

nationalities in the State, which is why we need a united, centralised party for all workers within that State.

Behind a purely verbal facade of internationalism, nationalist prejudice, which was endemic in the policy of Austrian social democracy, led during the war to catastrophe for the workers' movement in the countries within the Hapsburg empire. International solidarity was replaced by hatred, as social democracy directly served bourgeois interests. Once again, apparently minor deviations led quickly to capitulation and betrayal.

Karl Renner and Otto Bauer are the two main Austrian theoreticians of the national question. The first, as we all know, played an important part in the early years of the republic and collaborated actively with the bourgeoisie to halt the revolutionary wave. The second remains the leading theoretician of "Austro-Marxism", a kind of left-wing socialism, more dangerous for its apparent revolutionary content than open reformism, and is one of the main culprits of the awful policy of the "lesser evil" which led the Austrian proletariat to defeat.

Renner examined the national problem not as a Marxist but as a statesman. The conclusion he came to "with the help of jurisprudence and law" – his own words – is a judicial one.

According to this pedantic and laboured theorist, with the incorporation of the proletariat into Austrian political life the national question ceased to be one of power and became a question of ... culture. A nationality should be considered as a legal person, with the corresponding rights. Therefore, just as each organism has specific organs for specific functions – according to the laws of evolution – a people, as an organic unit, also needs special organs for each function. The authority of the "Crown Territories", as Galicia, Bohemia etc were known in the former Hapsburg empire, did not now imply the autonomy of the nationalities, as those areas were not nationally homogenous. From this general theory Renner foresaw a dual organisation of the State: one organisation for national-cultural purposes, based on a "personal" principle, and one based on technical principles based purely on territorial criteria. Expressed more clearly and concisely: there should be national autonomy, whether the members of a national group had a territory of their own or not, or were a majority or minority in a given area.

Let us examine the reasoning of our "statesman" to justify his position regarding the fundamentals of his theory.

Our theoretician maintains that it is wrong to adopt the formula: "each nation should have its own State." State and Nation are two distinct

categories: each has distinct functions. The State is a purely judicial entity which rules over a distinct territory. The nation is a community of culture, which does not require a territory to carry out its functions.

"State law expresses the will of the dominant group. Those, mainly material, interests are common to all the dominant groups in the nations, and as all material exists in a defined space, it can be realised only in a given territory. Therefore, we cannot envisage a State which does not rule a specific territory exclusively. The State's territorial development depends on the material interests of the dominant groups within it. State and state power are inseparable: one cannot exist without the other. Within this territory nations mix and become intermingled according to their material interests."

Therefore, it is wrong to demand that a nationality should have the right to form a State, because: "The right to territory and to material culture do not belong to the sphere of national life." It is consequently necessary to create a system of independent organisations: the nation is a "personal association". The complexity of present day economic relationships and the ease of communications encourage constant migration within multi-national States, with the result that those who leave their native land are considered foreigners and receive worse legal treatment. "No nation can be confined to pre-determined limits." Therefore the principle of nationalities is fundamentally anti-national.

According to Renner, a solution will be found through a "personal", not a territorial principle. "Nations should organise, not according to territorial units but as associations of persons, not as States but as peoples...." "Naturally, as a people cannot exist without territory, the local population must be able to influence the administration. If that is organised on the basis of the personal principle, a territorial organisation will be a useful coordinator which will allow nationalities to be identified and help isolated people to join the relevant group." The Nation State is adequate in situations where there are few internal national conflicts, but if applied in Austria it would cause problems and ultimately break up the State. Everything will be for the best, as in the best possible world, if the territorial principle is replaced by the panacea of a complicated system of "judicial" and "cultural" institutions.

People of the same nationality, living in a given area within the State, outside their own territory, will form a "national Community", that is a "Corporation with its own public and private law, with capital and the power to make laws and raise taxes". A given number of communities,

linked territorially and culturally will form a district with similar corporate rights. "Those districts combined constitute the nation, that is a legal person in public and private law."

We will spare our readers the luxuriant and nebulous discussion on the administrative structure of the "legal person". We have said enough to give an idea of Renner's theory of nationality.

The opportunist nature of the theory is obvious. Its author, a kind of lawyer for a reformed Austro-Hungary, had to convince the Hapsburgs of the need for a fairer national policy if the Empire was to be preserved. His solution presupposes the survival of the Empire and its ruling groups. In any case, the viewpoint is that of an aspiring "statesman", not that of a revolutionary Marxist. Renner's aspirations were fully satisfied after the 1918 revolution, while the movements of national emancipation were a powerful factor in breaking up the empire which the future Chancellor was so intent on preserving.

The difference between Bauer's and Renner's conceptions is purely verbal. While the first is expressed in purely judicial terms, the second wraps his petit bourgeois concepts in Marxist terminology. However, both abandon the method of scientific socialism for that of abstract law. In any case, the "philosophy of the national question" created by Bauer is more Kantian than Marxist.

Austro-Marxism's main theoretician, like Renner, rejects the territorial principle and agrees with him in advocating the "personal" principle.

According to that principle, as we have seen, nations will be formed not as territorial associations, but as purely "personal" ones and will be territorial only in the limited sense that "their activities will not extend beyond the State borders". "Within the State, power will not be held by the Czechs in one area and by Germans in another: all nationalities, wherever they may live, will form associations to administer their national affairs independently. Two or more nationalities living in the same locality, not interfering with each other, will peacefully develop their forms of government and organise their cultural institutions, in the same way that Protestants, Catholics and Hebrews in the same locality administer their religious affairs."

Each adult citizen will have the right to decide which nation he belongs to. The State should have no say on it. As for the organisation of nations as "legal public corporations" within the State, Bauer's recipe agrees with Renner's. The purpose of these corporations is the satisfaction of cultural needs by the provision of schools, libraries, theatres, museums, popular universities, and legal assistance to citizens where necessary.

Bauer's "personal" and "cultural" autonomy solves the problem with an admirable simplicity, removing all dangers at a stroke. The hornets' nest of multi-national States is magically transformed into a happy Arcadia, free from hatred, rivalries and conflicts. "Each Nation", according to our theoretician, "will be able to satisfy its cultural needs from its own resources. No nation will have to mount a struggle for power within the State to meet those needs. The personal principle will be the best way to defend national interests. The legal protection of national minorities will be guaranteed." He goes on: "With the institution of the personal principle, oppression of national minorities will be completely impossible. Besides, the more culturally advanced nations will continue to attract and assimilate the most progressive elements of less cultured peoples. In some regions, as mixed marriages and economic and friendly relations become closer, national majorities will absorb national minorities into their cultural community. However, these cultural victories will be brought about solely through the social and cultural superiority of certain nations, not as a result of privilege. Peaceful emulation, not violent conquest!"

The Austro-Marxist conceptions see national rights as being guaranteed by State power. But who will guarantee the nations' protection from the State? Who will be able to respond if one day the State destroys national rights, using the power which it should employ to defend them? Bauer's answer to these objections shows the fundamental inconsistency of his profound "philosophy". His answer is so legalistic that it does not take into account the fundamental factor for a Marxist: the relationship of real forces in history, the fact that in capitalist society legal institutions are always based on coercion, so that what counts are not legally recognised rights but the power which supports them, and above all that the national question is not legal but revolutionary, and is closely tied to class struggle. "In order to grant autonomy to nations", says our Kantian-Marxist theoretician, "the State becomes independent from them. The State grants the peoples their national rights, which will be guaranteed for ever, and cannot be snatched away, because by destroying national autonomy the State would destroy itself." (!!!)

Bauer completely accepts the structure of the new multi-national State foreseen by Renner. However, he emphasises its purely cultural character. What a squalid, false conception of the question which considers it merely a matter of cultural development! Even that is seen in very limited terms: for Bauer, the national problem will be resolved when people of a given nationality who move to find work will be provided with legal

assistance and schools for their children.

In spite of this obvious stupidity – leaving aside the more substantial errors of the Austro-Marxist theory on nationality – Bauer thinks it is a marvellous panacea which will resolve one of the sharpest problems capitalist society faces. “The new structure of the multi-national State”, he declares in the conclusion to one of his most important works, “which bases national autonomy on the State’s democratic structure, and guarantees minority rights through the national principle, represents the complete incarnation of national autonomy, the only measure which can satisfy the cultural needs of the working class. By creating psychological and legal conditions for class struggle for the workers of all nations, this structure constitutes an instrument of the national-evolutionary politics of the working class; this has the objective of making the whole people part of the nation.”

Obviously, the Austrian school’s position deviates from Marxism. In ignoring class, Renner and Bauer produce an utterly false concept of the nation.

For the Austrian school, the nation is formed

by a historical community of destiny. On that interpretation, the link between workers and employers of a nation is closer than that between workers of different nations linked by class interests, because they are united by the famous “historic destiny”.

The attitude of Austrian Social Democracy on the national question was a capitulation to bourgeois nationalism. The slogan “Workers of the World Unite!” is replaced by: “Nations divide!”

By adopting a policy opposed to the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian empire, Renner, Bauer, and the rest of the party were objectively defending the interests of the Austro-German bourgeoisie. As we have seen, they tried to show that the division of Austria into national territories would not resolve the problem, and proclaimed there was no need for unity of nation and territory. That is the origin of the famous formula of cultural autonomy, which in practice means workers’ division and the avoidance of a genuine revolutionary solution. As Plekhanov said, it represented “the adaptation of socialism to nationalism”, leaving political power in the hands of the State of the dominant imperial nation. ■

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