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the earth is not flat: a review of 'against nationalism'

2010

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Against Nationalism is a pamphlet produced by the Anarchist Federation. The introduction explains that the document has its origins in arguments around the time of the winter 2008–09 war in Gaza, at which time AF argued for a 'no state' solution to the conflict.

The pamphlet scores a number of easy points against Trotskyist cheerleaders for movements such as Hezbollah and Hamas and details such groups' anti-working class credentials. However the far more interesting question posed by the pamphlet is the distinction between 'nationalism', 'resisting imperialism' and 'class politics'.

How did nation(alism)s come about?

"The nation is a smokescreen, a fantasy which hides the struggle between classes which exists within and across them. Though there are no real nations, there are real classes with their own interests, and these classes must be differentiated. Consequently, there is no single 'people' within the 'nation', and there is no shared 'national interest' which unifies them."

The pamphlet explains in some detail the consolidation of European nation states in line with the development of capitalism in the 16th to 19th centuries. Factors like the invention of the printing press and the establishment of a central state bureaucracy, added to the bourgeois-democratic ideas of popular sovereignty and citizenship, were the underpinning of the nation-state. Nation-states are not just an outgrowth of some common culture but a top-down project of galvanising the population behind the apparatus of the capitalist state. Many of the arguments here are similar to those in *Imagined Communities*.

Yet here *Against Nationalism* explains the development of nationalism wholly in terms of the development of European nation-states hundreds of years ago, even though its main polemical target is left-wing support for anti-imperialist nationalist movements. But the criteria explaining the consolidation of the French nation state tell us little about the formation of Palestinian nationhood, nor Irish nor Algerian, nor any nation subject to colonialism.

Of course, if you think that all nationalisms are the same then this would appear not to matter. But this merely divorces particular nationalisms from their historic roots and thus makes them impossible to understand, whether or not one thus attributes them progressive characteristics. This is a common failing of anarchist and Trotskyist schemas on the national question alike. But the earth is not flat, not all nation-states have the same basis for existence. For example, it is easy to think of many Third World nationalisms which emerged not from the

gradual development of an industrial bourgeoisie who wanted to strengthen the apparatus of state, but rather as a reaction to imperialist rule.

This also relates to how we relate to everyday nationalist assumptions. AF also point to the fact that although a social construct, this set-up is presumed to be a natural state of affairs, "Whenever we involve ourselves in everyday life, we find ourselves defined in national terms . . . The division of the world's population into distinct nations and its governance accordingly is a given, and seems as straightforward as anything occurring in nature."

This argument does not only reveal that allegiance to a particular nation-state is an example of alienation, where we are ruled by attachment to social constructs which are not natural. It also shows that the national question has a real impact in the real world and cannot just be sidestepped. It is not merely a capitalist 'smokescreen' external to the mass of people, but rather a real factor in most people's consciousness. Money is as much of a social construct as freedom from national oppression. So too is the whole idea of democratic 'rights'. But that does not mean we do not want more of all three.

The national question and nationalists

The very fact that imperialism and states exist and create a national question means that it is real and not a fantasy. Palestine has never been a united, independent nation-state. So that might make one think the idea of Palestinian nationhood is a fake. But the Palestinians do have a shared culture and identity, because they have lived the common experience of subjugation by the Israeli state, which they commonly want to stop, and their national cause has developed accordingly.

Attempts to dismiss the national question are also problematic insofar as they sustain Eurocentric illusions in our rulers' internationalism. *Against Nationalism* comments 'By the last decades of the Nineteenth Century, the idea that each 'people' had a moral right to their own nation-state was solidly established. The concerns about viability which defined earlier debates had disappeared. It was now a right of 'peoples', defined in whichever way, to a state of their own.'

This is an utterly mistaken view of the world as it was 100 years ago, and even today. At the end of the Nineteenth Century the majority of the world population were the subjects of colonial empires. The argument that these people could not govern themselves — and needed a civilising mission — was a commonly accepted justification for empire, not least among socialists such as Henry Hyndman and many leaders of Germany's SPD.

Even though Brown, Obama etc. no doubt consider themselves liberal internationalists, we hear echoes of the same attitude today — the endless occupation of Afghanistan and repeated US interventions in Haiti are also justified with the rhetoric of stopping contagion from 'failed states'. Not subjectively racist, not unwilling to co-operate with local elites, the leaders of the imperialist countries do nonetheless hold the assumption that certain states have the right to lord it over the world, and invade other countries, whereas others are irresponsible threats to the current world order, who ought to know their place.

True enough that freedom from the imperialist yoke may not bring peace. When the British left India there was a bloodbath. If the troops left Afghanistan, forces even worse than Hamid Karzai's government might take over. If the US troops had not intervened in Haiti after the recent earthquake the government would have collapsed entirely. But this is a self-fulfilling prophecy: imperialism has shaped the world in its own image, and has created a 'stability' based on imperial domination which if disrupted could have 'chaotic' consequences. *Against Nationalism* sidesteps this question, however. AF demand the troops leave Afghanistan yet also argue that national independence is pointless and will merely produce more warfare, asserting that nationalist forces are proto-states and thus bound to produce renewed oppression upon victory.

This is to ignore the distinction between a national cause — the struggle against national oppression and thus some limited extension of popular sovereignty — and a particular nationalist movement. Support for the Palestinians does not have to entail support for Hamas, even if it is Hamas who most ardently fight the Israeli state, and we must strongly oppose Hamas sexism, homophobia and hostility to strikes. The reverse is also true: nor do these actions on the part of Hamas somehow taint and render untouchable the Palestinian national movement, as Zionists who appeal to liberal public opinion would have us believe.

In this sense, conflating a particular nationalist grouping with all 'national' movements, AF in part mirror the mistake of groups like the SWP who cheerlead for Hezbollah. Such Trotskyist ideas are typified by Leon Trotsky's 1938 argument that in the hypothetical case of a war between fascist Brazil and 'democratic' Britain, he would support fascist Brazil, since the alternative was the British imposing 'their' fascism on Brazil in place of the existing dictator Vargas. But what he does not explain is why Brazilian communists should 'mediate' their opposition to the British via the existing state apparatus and a regime which would deny them any space for political action. This position has been mimicked repeatedly for decades, for example in some groups' support for the wars of Saddam Hussein and Argentina's General Galtieri.

Are all states imperialist?

One of the main themes of *Against Nationalism* is that there are not a few imperialist states, but rather that all nation states are imperialist. This does relate to one relevant point worth making, namely to combat the idea that there are 'good peoples' and 'bad peoples'. The pamphlet argues that the fundamental equivalence of all nation-states is because the interest of every state is to advance the interest of its 'own' capitalism.

"The state negotiates access for domestic companies to resources, investment, trading and expansion abroad. The success of this process brings profits flowing back into the country in question and by enriching its business and the 'national economy', the state secures the material basis of its own power: it increases its own resources, wealth and ability to project itself. It is therefore not simply a puppet of 'corporate interests', but is an interested party in its own right."

The Commune often argues that we should not advocate statist measures, or some sort of 'socialist' control of the state, since in reality the state works in the interests of the capitalist class as a whole. However, as I have argued in a previous piece on imperialism and populism in Latin America, the analysis underlying that position needs more definition.

To take an unambiguous, if not typical, example, in Colombia it is not really the case that the government and the state advance the general and long term interests of the Colombian capitalist class. A very small elite, dependent on alliance with multinational corporate interests own the vast majority of land and sell natural resources at below-market prices. They systematically underdevelop infrastructure. There are railway lines straight from the mines to the coast for the purpose of exports, but not much of a passenger train service. The US had a similar relation to Fulgencio Batista's Cuba in the 1950s, and that is why Fidel Castro could appeal to a 'national' sentiment even though Cuba already had formal political independence.

In such circumstances a government of state-capitalist development would totally undermine the existing elite by rendering inoperable its dependent alliance with US imperialism: that is why in return for its many favours its rule is protected by seven US military bases and huge funding for the paramilitary drive against the FARC rebels. There is a long history of coups within Latin American ruling classes, including recently in Venezuela and Bolivia, as the result of such tensions among the capitalist class.

The mere fact of international alliances or promoting 'ideology' does not make a state imperialist. Colombia is not imperialist but its rulers are little but proxies of US imperialism. Where is the Bolivian, or Congolese, or Afghan corporation

which gets cut-price privatised resources and controls foreign governments in the manner that American ones can? The reason is that the US state is massively more powerful than all others, indeed to the extent that they are the lynchpin of all international treaties and the only power that can act with total impunity and with no fear of meaningful sanctions.

This is, I repeat, not because there are 'good peoples' and 'bad peoples', but because of capitalist interests. But there is an established hierarchy of nation-states which orders the world capitalist system. The WTO, IMF, UN etc. all express the existing relations of dominance. It would not be somehow metaphysically 'better' for the US, EU and China to swap places in the ranks the preponderant powers, or to 'reverse the poles of national oppression'. But it is meaningless to oppose slogans such as support for the Palestinians or Haitians on the ground that they might somehow be elevated to the ranks of imperialist powers.

Gender, race and national oppressions

There are oppressions and divisions of labour which structure capitalism other than straightforwardly defined social class. These are facets of an alienated anti-human class society but are not simply binaries of class: for example, the division of labour and power in society to the disadvantage of women; the differing roles migrant workers as opposed to 'British-born' workers (as well as overt racism); homophobia and sexual repression.

There are different responses to such questions, but most left groups would consider their own to be one of 'class politics' rather than 'identity politics'. As opposed to merely rendering the ruling class more 'diverse' — more black people on company boards, more women MPs — they stress the importance of working-class unity across gender, national, racial etc. lines. Normally this would be coupled with some alternative approach to organising (collective, democratic, in unity with other workers) as opposed to liberal lobbyist organisations like the Fawcett Society.

Nonetheless, in spite of these different approaches to organising, fundamentally these struggles do not only affect workers, and go beyond the mere economic structures of class society. For example, a socialist feminism is not just 'equality with men', but one which challenges fundamentally the hierarchies and alienation in society, including those rooted in capitalism but also those within the working class and left organisations. It is much more than trade union militancy which happens to include women, as well as being far removed from radical feminism.

So too can the national question be defined in terms other than those of divisionism and bigotry. Communists do not have to simply tail nationalist militias

nor grant them sole ownership of the struggle over national oppression. For example, mass collective action rather than terrorism; effective direct action in the imperialist countries against wars and multinationals rather than liberal lobbying of MPs or peaceful protest marches; attempts on the part of the oppressed to appeal for solidarity from soldiers and civilians in the imperialist countries; and so on.

What are 'class politics'?

The slogan, as perpetrated by the likes of the Socialist Party (and in their own way, the ICC), that all workers should organise together irrespective of their gender, race and nationality, is an inadequate response to the question. Even if desirable, it is not incumbent on black workers to wait on unity with white workers before they can take action against racism. Just like 'Black and white, unite and fight', the idea of Palestinian and Israeli workers' unity is a fine ideal: but cynical deprecation of the existing Palestinian movement, and demanding of it that it wait forever on the support of the Israeli working class, is illusory. Workers in imperialist countries and underdeveloped ones cannot just unite around wage demands and common material interests: imperialism is a class question, and too much of the British labour movement is on the wrong side.

Against Nationalism asserts that "It is through mass struggle that consciousness develops. Under capitalism, 'pure' struggles rarely exist. It is through struggle in the defence of material working class interests, related to material demands — more pay, less hours, access to services, eventually against work and capitalism altogether — that the bonds of nationalism can be severed by posing the incompatibility of our needs with the needs of capitalism to stay profitable. The separate interests of classes become apparent in such struggles, and the ability to draw the conclusion that the capitalist system itself must be destroyed can and has spread like wildfire."

Thus underlying the pamphlet is the assumption that better living conditions and more welfare are 'class questions', and fighting for these is the way to develop consciousness of the need to overthrow capitalism. Nationalism (and presumably, gender oppression and racism . . .) melt away with the advent of militancy. This is very similar to the politics of the Socialist Party — everything is reduced to 'class politics'. Nowhere do AF advocate, for example, what kind of means the oppressed should use to combat imperialism itself, only abstractly advocating a struggle against capitalism.

This kind of attitude is wrong for three reasons. Firstly, there are plentiful examples of workers militant in the struggle for their own interests but sectional

and indifferent to other oppressions. Indeed, the dockers who marched in support of Enoch Powell in 1968 — which gets a mention in *Against Nationalism* — were very militant in the fight against their own bosses. There is a very long and deep history of protectionism, 'skilled-ism' and chauvinism in the British labour movement, and even more so in American trade unions. The Lindsay oil refinery strike's slogan 'British Jobs for British Workers' was not particularly new, even in the miners' strike there was much waffle about the British miners being best in the world.

Secondly, economic interests are neither the only concern of the working class nor the only way in which class exists. To again take the most obvious and extreme case in point, Israeli and Palestinian workers cannot unite and fight over workplace concerns: the disparity between them is huge, and most Israeli workers are pretty happy about that; they do not have common employers and most Palestinians are not employed as workers at all; and the single most important oppression in both countries, tying the Israeli workers' interests to those of the Israeli state and affecting everyday life in Palestine, is the Israeli state's merciless oppression of the Palestinians and theft of Palestinian land, water and resources. If your home is demolished, if your union is terrorised by US-backed paramilitaries, or you cannot have your children educated in your own language, then national oppression structures your whole existence. It is crude indeed to try and displace the movement against such attacks in favour of workplace organisation on 'class struggle' grounds.

Thirdly, obtaining a better position for the working class in capitalist society is not communistic as such. It may help build a movement or build people's confidence and solidarity such as to overthrow capitalism: that could result from a national struggle as much as one for higher wages and shorter hours. But AF simply have no strategy for national or anti-imperialist struggles. Ever-better working conditions and a bigger welfare state will not eventually 'open out' into a stateless, moneyless society either: in fact, the communist project is one which seeks to dissolve class relations and hierarchies in society, not merely advance a 'militant' workers' movement. Higher wages or more public services do not fundamentally challenge class society any more than other particular struggles nor necessarily prove the common interests of all workers.

Conclusion

Against Nationalism draws very broad lessons from a few specific cases, dismissing the importance of fighting national oppression on its own terms, but rather 'militarism, nationalism and war'. Rather than addressing the national question it

papers it over with vague references to proper class politics. Essentially, it lacks any solution to national oppression other than general advocacy of getting rid of capitalism.

But there can be a communist approach to the national question which neither supports elitist nationalist groups — who merely want their 'seat at the table', equality with other states — nor ignores the need to combat national oppression on its own terms.

It is quite possible to call for the independence of a country, and oppose the exploitation of its resources by multinationals, with a movement which does not ally with state-capitalist or Islamist national movements; which is based on mass collective action and not on suicide bombings or deals with this or that other power; which does not construct new relations of oppression or a new state apparatus. Fleetingly this was attempted in the Ukrainian revolution, both Hungarian revolutions and the Kurdish workers' councils of 1991, and today in the indigenous Minga movement in Colombia.

There is nothing about the idea of 'nationhood' which any more than gender or race binds a movement to bourgeois politics: that is merely part of the projects of certain forces arising in opposition to imperialism. Communists must not sideline or dismiss the national question in order to solely focus on 'class politics', but rather confront all such obstacles to a truly human society head-on.

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