

National Self-Determination, Internationalism, and Libertarian Socialism

Once more on the subject of national liberation

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Contents

“The only issue which counts is the emancipation of the international working class. Everything else, such as national oppression, is a distraction from the class struggle.”	3
“National liberation/self-determination is the same as nationalism, which we, as inter- nationalists, reject.”	4
“Anarchists never supported national self-determination.”	5
“National Self-Determination was Raised by Lenin”	6
“But it’s a state!”	7

There are few subjects of greater disagreement among libertarian socialists than “national liberation” and “national self-determination.” By “libertarian socialists” I include anarchists of all sorts, also libertarian-autonomous Marxists and others with similar politics. By “national liberation/self-determination,” I mean the idea that some nations are oppressed and deserve to be liberated from that oppression, and to be able to decide for themselves what social, economic, and political systems they wish to live under.

This is a major issue in the world today. In the Middle East, the Kurds and the Palestinians are denied their own independent political existence. Meanwhile the U.S. and other imperialist states are waging war on a number of oppressed countries. The U.S. state owns Puerto Rico (but treats Puerto Ricans, who are U.S. citizens, as colonial subjects). There may be a nuclear war between the U.S. state and impoverished nation of North Korea. The Russian imperialist state denies independence to the Chechens and has attacked Ukraine and other eastern European countries. China rules the Tibetans and the Uigars, and claims Taiwan. There are calls for national independence in Catalonia, from Spain, and in Scotland, from the U.K. I am just touching on a few of the many places where national issues have arisen. Not that they are all the same but there is a common topic which needs to be addressed. (Wars between two oppressor, imperialist, powers—such as the U.S.A. vs. Russia—do not involve issues of national self-determination. Both sides should be opposed by anti-imperialists.)

It has always seemed obvious to me, at least in principle, that we who believe in freedom should support national liberation/self-determination as a democratic demand. I have written this several times (Price 2011; 2006; 2005). Yet many, perhaps most, anarchists and libertarian Marxists disagree. (At one time, posters on the Libcom site urged the anarchist group of which I was a member to expel me because of my support for national liberation.) What are their arguments?

“The only issue which counts is the emancipation of the international working class. Everything else, such as national oppression, is a distraction from the class struggle.”

Taken literally, this pure-and-simple class perspective is a minority viewpoint today. It is held only by wooden workerists, by primitive Marxists and syndicalists. Most anarchists and Marxists recognize that other oppressions than class exploitation are real and important. Women are oppressed by sexism; African-Americans and other People of Color by white supremacy; LGBT people by homophobia; immigrants by nativism; and so on; not to mention the reality of issues such as global warming and war. Recognizing these systems of oppression does not prevent recognizing the importance of capitalist exploitation of the working class. These forms of oppression overlap with and interact with class exploitation. For example, most people in oppressed nations are working class, peasants, or other poor people. The very fact that these issues are used to prop up capitalism (in many ways, besides being “distractions”) means that they need to be taken on (in turn, capitalism also props up these oppressive systems). Supporting these struggles strengthens the fight against capitalism and the capitalist state.

Oddly enough, there are radicals who do support the struggle against racism, sexism, homophobia, nativism, etc., etc., but do not support struggles against national oppression. Some even

oppose imperialism by the big powers but will not support the anti-imperialist efforts of oppressed nations. Unlike the pure-and-simple workerists, such radicals are.... inconsistent.

“National liberation/self-determination is the same as nationalism, which we, as internationalists, reject.”

National oppression is an objective reality—for Palestinians, for example. It leads to the question of how to oppose it, what is the program which can lead to national liberation and self-determination. One such program is “nationalism.” But it is not the only possible program, and is not synonymous with “national liberation.”

“Nationalism” can be defined in various ways. A common understanding is to use nationalism to mean people’s love for their country, their culture, their contributions to world civilization, and their history of popular resistance to oppression (domestic and foreign). This is not a program for opposing domination, but rather a love for their land and people. I see nothing to criticize in this, but that is not what is controversial.

As a program, “nationalism” means seeing the particular oppressed nation as a unitary bloc. It ignores the differences between the ruling class and the workers and peasants, the exploiters and the exploited. Essentially it accepts the leadership of the rulers or would-be rulers (these may be rich capitalists but also might be bureaucrats, déclassé intellectuals, military officers, or similar would-be new bosses). It denies differences between men and women, religious groupings, or majority and minority nationalities and ethnic groups—rejecting the special concerns of oppressed subgroups within the nation. Its aim is to win an independent national state of its own, and to establish some type of capitalist economy—perhaps as a program of state socialism, which actually results in state capitalism. (I am only discussing the program of nationalism in an oppressed nation, not in an imperialist state where it serves to justify imperialism.)

By now, most of the countries of the world have won their formal independence. They have their own states with their own flags, postage stamps, money, and uniforms for their own military and police. But they remain economically dominated by the international market. They remain politically dominated by the international power system. They are vulnerable to being invaded at any time. Both the world economy and world politics are dominated by the big imperialist powers, first among which is still the United States—that is, the U.S. ruling class and its state. (This is not the U.S. working people, who have little to no control over their economy or their state’s international policies).

In short, nationalism has not been a very good solution to the poverty, oppression, exploitation, and suffering of the people of the world. But its very failure—the continuation of national oppression despite formal independence—results in a tendency for people to look for answers, including a revival of nationalism.

However, there are other programs which offer to solve the problems of oppressed nations. For example, Islamic salifism (miscalled “fundamentalism”) is an international movement, completely reactionary. It opposes Western imperialist domination of Muslim-majority countries, not by appeals to nationalism but by distorted religious programs, aiming for a “caliphate.”

Anarchists and other libertarian socialists propose a different solution to national oppression. Our program is for an international revolution of the working class, allied with all other oppressed and exploited people, against the capitalist ruling class, its states, and all systems of

oppression. It would replace capitalist and authoritarian institutions with self-managed, cooperative, free associations of the people. Such a revolution will likely start in a few countries, but it will have to spread to the whole world. This alone would make it possible to end all forms of national oppression, as well as all other forms of oppression, exploitation, and domination.

From this standpoint, anarchists and others can participate in national struggles against imperialist domination. We recognize the legitimacy of such struggles and are in solidarity with the oppressed people. But we do not agree with or support those leaders who advocate nationalist (or jihadist) programs. We seek to win the working people of these nations to our revolutionary internationalist program.

This is the same approach we can use in any struggle. For example, we must support the movement for women's liberation. We oppose male supremacy (patriarchy) and support women's fight against it. But we do not agree with or support the liberal, pro-capitalist, versions of feminism raised by the bourgeois leadership of the women's movement. We try to win women and their male allies over to our revolutionary perspective.

By "winning over" women or nationally oppressed people, I do not mean that we should just unveil our program as if we knew all the answers—Ta-da! Persuading people of our viewpoint includes listening to them and learning from them, in dialogue. It includes having them develop the ideas in their own way, relevant to their own situation.

“Anarchists never supported national self-determination.”

Some anarchists are ignorant of the fact that anarchists have supported national liberation as a principle. And anarchists have taken part in national liberation struggles.

Michael Bakunin asserted his *“strong sympathy for any national uprising against any form of oppression...every people [have the right] to be itself...no one is entitled to impose its customs, its languages, and its laws.”* (quoted in van der Walt & Schmidt 2009; 309)

Iain McKay writes, *“Kropotkin was a supporter of national liberation struggles...Anarchists, Kropotkin argued, should work inside national liberation movements in order to...turn them into human liberation struggles—from all forms of oppression, economic, political, social and national...the creation of...a free federation of free peoples no longer divided by classes or hierarchies.”* (my emphasis; 2014; 45–47)

Peter Kropotkin wrote, *“True internationalism will never be attained except by the independence of each nationality, little or large.... If we say no government of man by man, how can [we] permit the government of conquered nationalities by the conquering nationalities?”* (quoted in McKay 2014; 45–46)

Errico Malatesta was an influential Italian anarchist who had been a comrade of Bakunin and Kropotkin. He wrote, *“We are internationalists...so we extend our homeland to the whole world...and seek well-being, freedom, and autonomy for every individual and group...Now that today's Italy invades another country [Libya—WP]...it is the Arabs' revolt against the Italian tyrant that is noble and holy...We hope that the Italian people...will force a withdrawal from Africa upon its government: if not, we hope that the Arabs may succeed in driving it out.”* (In Turcato 2014; 357) This did not imply agreement with the politics of the Arabs' leadership.

During the wars which followed the Russian revolution, Nester Makhno and other anarchists organized a military resistance in Ukraine. Their forces opposed the capitalists and landlords,

integrating these class issues with a Ukrainian war against German, Polish, and Russian invaders. Similarly, during World War II, Korean anarchists organized a military resistance to the Japanese invaders.

After World War II there was a national liberation war waged by Algerian rebels against the French empire. French anarchists gave concrete aid, and various forms of support, to the Algerian forces. As an anarchist “public intellectual”, Daniel Guerin expressed his solidarity with the Algerian people in insurrection. He was for the Algerian organizations when they fought against the French state—which is not the same as endorsing their nationalist politics, which he did not. (Price 2013) (For the record of anarchists’ attitudes towards the Vietnam war and more recent wars between imperialist powers and oppressed nations, see Price 2006; 2005.)

“National Self-Determination was Raised by Lenin”

Some anarchists point out that national self-determination was supported by Vladimir Lenin, the founder of the totalitarian Soviet Union and the “Communist” movement. (Some even claim, ignorantly, that Lenin invented the concept.) This is supposed to discredit the slogan.

Calls for national liberation and self-determination are at least as old as the formation of nations and nation-states in the 18th century. They have been made by many people, then and now. For example, during World War I, the liberal U.S. president, Woodrow Wilson, made national self-determination part of his “14 Points,” which he raised (hypocritically) as supposed “war aims” for the imperialist Allies.

With the aim of getting his party into state power, Lenin followed a certain strategy. He rejected a focus only on bread-and-butter trade union issues, such as better wages, shorter hours, etc. This was called “economism.” He also rejected just raising the eventual—and abstract—goal of socialism. Instead, he wanted his party to win support by also championing the democratic demands of every oppressed and discriminated-against group. He wanted his party to use its newspaper and other outlets to support big groups such as peasants, women, and nations enslaved by the Czarist empire. But also to champion abused army draftees, censored writers, minority religious sects, and so on. Championing the democratic rights of all these groups (including oppressed nations), he believed, would counterpose his revolutionary socialist program to that of the liberals, reformists, and nationalists. It would build popular support and prepare his party to rule.

Let me be clear. **The problem with Lenin was not his support for democratic demands! Lenin could hardly be criticized for being too much for democracy and freedom!** The demand for national liberation/self-determination is part of the democratic program. This is not where anarchists should disagree with Lenin.

The problem with Lenin was that his support for democratic demands was instrumental—used in fact only to get his party into power and to establish its authoritarian rule. Support for peasants was meant to lead them to eventually—voluntarily—merge their lands into collectivized state farms. Support for national rights was meant to persuade workers from oppressed nations that they could trust the workers from the oppressor nations—and eventually lead to voluntary merger into larger, centralized, states—which he said. (I am not getting into how Lenin violated these democratic promises—including national self-determination—once in power.)

Revolutionary anarchists are internationalists. We are also decentralists and pluralists. We value small cultures and multiple societies—not as stepping stones to an eventually unified and centralized world state, but as good in themselves. To quote again McKay’s summary of Kropotkin’s perspective, our goal is “*a free federation of free peoples no longer divided by classes or hierarchies.*” This is where anarchists must reject Lenin’s approach to national liberation.

“But it’s a state!”

Does support for national self-determination mean support for new, national, states? No. It means that revolutionary libertarian socialists are in solidarity with the people (mostly workers, peasants, and the poor) of the oppressed nation. The nation’s people themselves may believe (in their majority) that the only solution to their foreign oppression is to form a new state of their own. Anarchists do not agree with this popular view. But we believe in freedom, if we believe in anything. We must defend their right to decide for themselves what they want—even if we think that they are making a mistake. That is how people learn.

Between the imperialist state which rules the country and the oppressed people, we are not neutral. We should not become neutral if we think that the people are accepting a mistaken program. We must be in solidarity with them in their struggles, even as we seek to persuade them that only anarchist internationalism can really solve their problems. We must not endorse their leaderships; we are political opponents of their nationalist leaders. But we want the imperialists to lose and the people to win.

When workers decide to form a union, they usually join a business union with its pro-capitalist bureaucratic leadership. Nevertheless, anarchists are never neutral between the bosses and the workers. We must support the workers’ freedom to choose whichever union they want (while trying to persuade them of the need for union democracy and militancy and revolutionary opposition to the union bureaucracy). This is the same principle as our attitude toward national self-determination.

As Lucien van der Walt summarizes, “*One anarchist and syndicalist approach...was to participate in national liberation struggles, in order to shape them, win the battle of ideas, displace nationalism with a politics of national liberation through class struggle, and push national liberation struggles in a revolutionary direction.*” (van der Walt & Schmidt; 2009; 310–311) That means, in a revolutionary, internationalist, libertarian socialist, direction. That is the approach I am arguing for.

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