

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article348>



Review

# Revolutionary internationalism and the national question

- IV Online magazine - 2002 - IV344 - October 2002 -

Publication date: Friday 11 October 2002

---

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

---

**Michael Löwy has made important contributions to Marxist thought for more than three decades. Portions of his previous writings have been gathered into the seven essays on nationalism and internationalism that make up this slim volume, produced as part of an innovative series by the International Institute for Research and Education in Amsterdam.**

[[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/33\\_Review\\_book\\_cover.jpg](https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/33_Review_book_cover.jpg)]

Löwy's approach to Marxism has always been open, vibrant, creative. Whether or not one always agrees with his interpretations, one finds that they always connect both with the rich intellectual traditions of the socialist and communist movements and with the urgent, fluid realities of our time. They can help to deepen and advance the thinking of scholars and activists alike.

The collection is doubly important because it relates to the interrelated traumas facing us now: the lethal ethnic and national conflicts that have torn certain regions in Eastern Europe, Asia, and the Middle East; and the 'globalisation' fostered by profit-maximizing multi-national corporations, brutally undermining the integrity of nations, cultures, the ecology of the planet, and the human condition. The book also relates to some of the most hopeful realities – the national liberation struggles that continue to define much of the revolutionary experience of our time, and the 'new internationalism' associated with the resistance to imperialist globalisation and the struggle for global justice.

## What the volume offers

In the essay "Marx and Engels Cosmopolites", Löwy examines the evolving internationalism of Marx and Engels. In the pre-1848 period there was a strong tendency toward an anti-nationalist perspective in their thinking, blended with a revolutionary internationalist notion of a world without frontiers. But "after the 1848 revolution, during which the national question revealed itself to Marx and Engels in all its virulence and complexity, the two authors of the Communist Manifesto abandoned the cosmopolitan problematic of their early writings while retaining its internationalism" (p 14).

The essay "Marx and Engels Eurocentrists?" responds to a critique of Marxism by Ephraim Nimni. Nimni sees Marxism as a deterministic doctrine that views European development – from slave societies, to feudalism, to capitalist progress – as showing the way forward for all humanity, providing the basis for the inevitable realization of socialism. Related to this is the notion that for them, European domination of "backward" areas was progressive because it would help them modernize. Löwy shows that traces of this outlook can be found in some of the writings of Marx and Engels. But by the 1850s they were – on the basis of further experience – developing a very different orientation. Löwy concludes: "Marx thus formulated two concepts which would become the basis for Lenin's theory of national self-determination: (i) the nation that oppresses another cannot be free (Engels considered it a 'misfortune' for a people to rule over another); and (ii) the liberation of an oppressed nation is a premise for the socialist revolution in the dominant nation itself." He sees this as "an irreplaceable compass for those who believe in internationalism" (p 28).

"The Marxist Debate on Self Determination" is an excerpt from the classic essay that Löwy wrote in the 1970s, "Marxists and the National Question". The ideas of Luxemburg, Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin are aptly summarized, compared and contrasted. Löwy argues that Lenin pioneered the development of "a coherent, revolutionary strategy for the workers' movement, based on the fundamental slogan of national self-determination" (p 30), based on an understanding of "the dialectical relationship between internationalism and the right of national self-determination".

He understood, first, that only the freedom to secede makes possible free and voluntary union, association, cooperation and, in the long term, fusion between nations; second, that only the recognition by the workers' movement in the oppressor nation of the right of the oppressed nation to self-determination can help to eliminate the hostility and suspicion of the oppressed and unite the proletariat of both nations in the international struggle against the bourgeoisie.

Similarly, Lenin grasped the dialectical relationship between national-democratic struggles and the socialist revolution, and showed that the popular masses (not just the proletariat, but also the peasantry and petty bourgeoisie) of the oppressed nation were allies of the conscious proletariat: a proletariat whose task it would be to lead the struggle of this "disparate, discordant and heterogeneous mass ... against capitalism and the bourgeois state" (p 40).

Perhaps the most controversial piece in this book is "The Nation as a Common Fate: Otto Bauer Today". Bauer, a sophisticated leader in the left wing of the Austrian Social-Democratic Party, was more than once the target of sharp criticisms – especially on the national question – by Lenin, Trotsky, and other revolutionaries. Eyebrows and questions will be raised whenever anyone identifying with the Leninist-Trotskyist tradition asserts, as Löwy does, that Bauer made "contributions of great value, even indispensable ones" (p 45). Löwy poses an important question (p 46): "While the democratic right to self-determination is indispensable, how can it be applied to territories where nations are thoroughly intermixed without setting off battles, massacres and 'ethnic cleansing'?" (p 46) He suggests the relevance of Bauer's 1907 proposal in the Austro-Hungarian Empire "to grant all its nationalities (Hungarians, Germans, Czechs, Slovaks, Croats, etc.) 'national-cultural autonomy': it would have given each national community the chance to organize itself as a legal public corporation, granted a certain degree of cultural, administrative and legal authority" (p 45).

*Nationalism and Internationalism* is rich in ideas. Among these is the necessity of solidarity between the working classes of the more developed and less developed capitalist countries. He cites Trotsky: "If we take Britain and India as polarized varieties of the capitalist type, then we are obliged to say that the internationalism of the British and the Indian proletariats does not at all rest on an identity of conditions, tasks and methods, but on their indivisible interdependence" (p 55). Another point Löwy emphasizes is that while "socialist internationalism is opposed to nationalist ideology, this does not at all mean that it rejects nations' historical and cultural traditions".

He elaborates: "In the same way that internationalist movements in each country have to speak the national language, they have also to speak the language of national history and culture; particularly, of course, when this culture is being oppressed. As Lenin acknowledged, each culture and each national history contains democratic, progressive, revolutionary elements which have to be incorporated by the socialist culture of the labour movement, and reactionary, chauvinistic and obscurantist elements which have to be uncompromisingly fought. Internationalists' task is to fuse the historical and cultural heritage of the world socialist movement with the culture and the tradition of their people, in its radical and subversive dimension - often deformed by bourgeois ideology or hidden and buried by the official culture of the ruling classes. In the same way as Marxists must take into consideration, in their revolutionary struggle, the decisive importance of their social formation, in their ideological struggle they cannot ignore the national peculiarity of their own culture and history" (pp 60-61).

The final two essays, 'Why Nationalism?' and 'Twenty-first-century Internationalism' are both informed by the conviction that "it is from the fusion between the international socialist, democratic and anti-imperialist tradition of the labour movement (still very much alive among revolutionaries of various tendencies such as radical trade unionists and left socialists) and the new universalist culture of social movements like ecology, feminism, anti-racism and Third World solidarity that the internationalism of tomorrow will rise" (p 80).

# The Marxist method

There are different kinds of Marxism, some of which are closer to the critical method employed by Marx as he attempted to develop a scientific socialism. The late Isaac Deutscher, in his book *Stalin, A Political Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967, p 118), shrewdly differentiated the method of Lenin from that of many other Russian Bolsheviks in the years before 1917:

“They accepted certain basic formulÃ¡ of Marxist philosophy, handed down to them by the popularisers of the doctrine, as a matter of intellectual and political convenience. These formulÃ¡ seemed to offer wonderful clues. The semi-intelligentsia, from whom socialism recruited some of its middle cadres, enjoyed Marxism as a mental labour-saving device, easy to handle and fabulously effective. It was enough to press a knob here and make short work of one idea, and a knob there to dispose of another. The user of labour-saving gadgets rarely reflects upon the difficult research that preceded their invention. Nor does he reflect upon the disinterested and seemingly unpractical research that will one day make his gadget obsolete. The users of the intellectual gadgets of Marxism, perhaps not unnaturally, treated their possession in the same narrowly utilitarian fashion. Unlike many of his followers, Lenin was the critical student in the laboratory of thought. In the end, he always turned his findings to some political use; and his findings never shook him in his Marxist convictions. But while he was engaged in research, he pursued it with an open and disinterested mind.”

The Portugese revolution of 1974-75 was the greatest testing ground for European theorists since the post-war period.

[[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/34\\_Portuguese\\_debates.jpg](https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/34_Portuguese_debates.jpg)]

The Portugese revolution of 1974-75 was the greatest testing ground for European theorists since the post-war period

The approach that Deutscher embraces is the creative and critical Marxism of Lenin. More common in the ranks of the Bolsheviks (and the other Russian socialist currents) was the more dogmatic and deterministic approach that placed greater stress on “objective” economic and political factors.

For example, a second-rank organizer and agitator in the Bolshevik party, Joseph Stalin (before his political degeneration as a bureaucratic and murderous tyrant), played a central role in helping to develop the organization's official position in *Marxism and the National Question*. This was the title of the 1913 pamphlet that Stalin wrote, in consultation with other comrades, including Lenin. According to Stalin, “a nation is not merely a historical category but a historical category belonging to a definite epoch, the epoch of rising capitalism”. The Bolshevik pamphleteer offered an objective checklist for what a nation really is: “A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up, manifested in a common culture.”

For many years the pamphlet was seen as a key statement of the Bolshevik position. Yet even with Lenin's support, Stalin's work could not transcend the less dialectical and less creative approach separating him from Lenin. Within two years, Lenin found it necessary to stretch Bolshevik thinking on nationalism beyond the boundaries mapped by his theoretically limited comrade.

This brings us to a polemical review of Löwy's book written by Doug Lorimer, a prominent member of a small but important Australian group, the Democratic Socialist Party, in the journal *Links*, under the title “Marxism or Bauerite Nationalism?”.

## Polemic and reality

According to Lorimer's polemic, "Löwy explicitly rejects Marxism's scientific, materialist theory of the nation in favour of the subjectivist (idealist) theory of nations as "imagined communities (Benedict Anderson) or cultural creations (Eric Hobsbawm),' a theory which is widely fashionable among intellectuals". Löwy's stress on the centrality of the consciousness of an oppressed people in determining whether or not they are a nation is the thing that Lorimer finds inconsistent with what he terms "Marxism's scientific, materialist theory of the nation", and the example of Marxism that Lorimer embraces is Stalin's "Marxism and the National Question".

Yet there is a profound difference between Stalin's 1913 formula and Lenin's more dynamic and vibrant formulations in his writings of 1914-1916, when at the same time he was revitalizing his Marxism (in ways that Stalin never could) through an immersion in the dialectical writings of Hegel. Lenin, like Löwy, grasped the dialectical truth that the objective and subjective merge in the consciousness and the struggles of the working class and oppressed peoples. The nationalism of an oppressed people struggling for its liberation is qualitatively different from the nationalism of those engaged in oppressing another people – revolutionaries must always support the former against the latter. This was beyond the framework of Stalin's more 'objective' approach - and it was inconsistent with the policies advanced by Stalin in the Soviet regime of the early 1920s (when he and the ailing Lenin clashed so sharply on national question inside the new federation of Soviet Republics).

Basing himself precisely on the dialectical method of Lenin and Marx, Trotsky took this further in the late 1930s as - in discussions with CLR James - he sought to understand the reality of the African-American experience and struggle. Putting his finger on the interplay between the African and African-American experience, he commented: "The Negroes are a race, not a nation. Nations grow out of racial material under definite conditions. The Negroes of Africa are not yet a nation, but they are in the process of forming a nation. ... We of course do not obligate the Negroes [in the United States] to become a nation; whether they are is a question of their consciousness, that is, what they desire and what they strive for." He added: "In any case the suppression of the Negroes pushes them toward a political and national unity." (See *Leon Trotsky on Black Nationalism and Self-Determination*, ed. by George Breitman (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1978), p 24.)

## New challenges

The realities have always been more complex than the theories, and they have evolved in ways that continue to challenge revolutionary Marxists and serious activists.

The classical Bolshevik definition that sees peoplehood as the basis for nationhood seems not to fit all of the complexities of modern nationalism. The modern nation-state that evolved in the era of bourgeois-democratic revolutions of the late 18th and 19th centuries emphasized citizenship as opposed to ethnicity as the basis of nationalism – with an emphasis on equal rights within the nation for each citizen, regardless of one's race or ethnicity or national origin. Indeed, factoring the notions of race or ethnicity into the concepts of nation and citizenship, was the stock-in-trade of reactionary intellectual currents in Europe.

Especially for a country such as the United States of America - which the poet Walt Whitman perceptively proclaimed as "a nation of nations" - the national reality was always, and increasingly, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-racial. There was also considerable oppression – sometimes taking the form of a bigoted "nativism" and sometimes manifesting itself as an elitist and largely compulsory 'assimilationism' to a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) norm. This was, however, far from the 'prison house of nations' that was the Russian Empire Lenin and the Bolsheviks were struggling to overturn.

## Revolutionary internationalism and the national question

---

In fact, one suspects that the context of the multi-national Austro-Hungarian empire may also have been not exactly the same as the Russian historical formation. For someone living in a 'nation of nations' such as the United States, Otto Bauer's Marxist efforts to harmonize a multi-cultural reality within the framework of a nation-state should not – simply because they diverge from Bolshevik 'orthodoxy' – be shrugged off. In fact, with the process of 'globalisation' introducing rich and complex multi-cultural and multi-ethnic dynamics within the populations of an increasing number of nations, it is certainly worth giving consideration to those efforts, regardless of whether one ends up embracing the policies proposed by Bauer.

Globalisation poses other challenges for Marxists grappling with 'the national question' in the 21st century. The ongoing restructuring of the global political-economy being carried out by multi-national corporations, multi-lateral trade agreements, and such extra-national institutions as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, raise questions about the future of the nation-state. Given this, how will those involved in the labour movements of various countries, and in the global justice movement, find ways to harmonize their tactics, strategies, and goals with the complex dialectic of nationalism/internationalism?

Michael Lowy's thoughtful, readable, challenging book does not contain all the answers. But it provides intellectual resources – information about the past, ideas about how that relates to the present, a fine example of how to utilize the dialectical method – that can help us meet these challenges.