

## Nationalism, Class Conflict and Social Transformation in the Twentieth Century

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**Abstract:** The rise of nationalism in the 20th century is a manifestation of struggles for national liberation and self-determination in countries and regions of the Third World dominated by colonialism and imperialism. Today, with the internalization of capital and imperialist domination across the globe, nationalism has become a worldwide phenomenon, spreading to every corner of the world. This study examines the nature and development of nationalism and national movements and provides an analysis of the class basis of these phenomena within the framework of the relationship between class, nation and state-an analysis that situates nationalism and national movements within the context of class relations and class struggles. After an overview of the emergence of nationalism and national movements in the 20th century, we provide a general discussion on the class nature of nationalism and conclude with case studies of contemporary national movements focusing on their class nature. We argue that the class nature of the society being built in the aftermath of a national struggle is very much a reflection of the class nature of the national movement in question and that a class analysis approach to the phenomenon of the nationalism can provide us a better understanding of the nature of class struggle and social transformations in post-liberation societies in the Third World.

**Key words:** Nationalism, class structure, social forces, imperialism, self-determination

### INTRODUCTION

In the 20th century, nationalism and national movements have emerged across much of the world as rallying points in the context of the struggle against European colonialism and imperialism. National struggles against foreign domination in Asia, Africa and the Middle East, for example, has taken the form of anti-colonial or anti-imperialist liberation struggles-as in India and China in the 1940s, in Algeria and Cuba in the 1950s and in much of Sub-Saharan Africa in the 1960s. In these and other countries and regions of the Third World subjected to external domination, the yearning for national independence and self-determination has taken the form of political struggles to establish sovereign nation states with jurisdiction over a national territory based on self rule.

National movements have developed in a variety of settings in the Third World-ranging from secular political struggles for a homeland (as in Palestine), to regional and cultural autonomy and self-rule across several states (as in Kurdistan), to struggles to end racism and national oppression (as in South Africa).

A multiple of national, political, cultural and religious conflicts in the context of larger regional military confrontations have surfaced even in generally tolerant modernizing secular states, such as Lebanon, where the resurgence of national, ethnic and fundamentalist religious movements have led to social strife and civil war.

Elsewhere, in the advanced capitalist countries, movements of previously colonized peoples and territories such as Puerto Rico and of oppressed groups and nationalities (as in Northern Ireland, the Basque country and Quebec) have emerged and developed during the twentieth century, especially, during the past several decades.

In the former socialist countries, especially in the former Soviet Union, nationalist movements have sprung up in the Baltics, the Transcaucasus and Central Asia, as they have in Eastern Europe, particularly in former Yugoslavia, where civil war between the Serbs, the Croates and the Bosnians had torn down that country. In China on the other hand, the conflicts in Tibet and Xinjiang have given way to peaceful relations between the Han majority and more than 55 minority nationalities which live in various autonomous regions and provinces throughout the country.

### THE CLASS NATURE OF NATIONALISM AND NATIONAL MOVEMENTS

Nationalism and National movements are phenomena that cannot be studied in isolation, that is, without taking into account the social and class structure of a society in which these movements arise. A class analysis of such movements, therefore, is imperative for a better understanding of the dynamics of social change.

Class conflicts and class struggles are manifestations of social and political divisions in society that are at base a reflection of relations of production (Szymanski, 1994). The specific nature of production relations (that is, class relations) come to inform the nature and content of the political struggles which at the international level take the form of national struggles. Thus, while exploitative relations between the contending classes within a national boundary takes the form of an internal class struggle, a similar relationship at the international level manifests itself in the form of a national struggle--a struggle which, in essence, is the national experience of an international struggle (Odeh, 2006).

Some key substantive questions which lie at the heart of the phenomenon of nationalism must now be briefly raised to sort out the class nature of a variety of national movements and struggles for national self-determinations. While all national movements possess characteristics that are historically specific, the central question that must be raised as theoretically applicable to all such struggles for national liberation is the necessity of a class analysis approach to the study of nationalism.

In his book, "Class Structure", "nationalism", writes Szymanski (1994) is the ideology that members of a nation, people, ethnic group, or racial minority have more in common with each other than the various constituent classes of the group have with other people in similar class positions". Moreover, nationalism dictates that because of their group, people or racial minority should work together economically and politically to advance their collective interest against other nations, races, ethnic groups, or peoples (even against those who are in the same classes).

Szymanski goes on to point out that "Nationalism is the advocacy of ethnic or national solidarity and action over class consciousness that argues solidarity should occur and political alliances be formed primarily along class lines (even against the relatively privileged groups within one's subordinate ethnic group). Nationalism and class consciousness are, thus, alternative strategies of political action for gaining improvement in one's life. In fact, Szymanski concludes, "nationalism is a product of class forces. Although different kinds of nationalism differ qualitatively in their effects, all serve some classes within a given racial or ethnic group as opposed to others". The adoption of a class analysis approach to the study of nationalism, therefore, would entail an analysis of the class base of a particular national movement, the balance of class forces within it and class forces leading the movement. On this basis, one could determine the nature and future course of development of a national movement and whether a given movement is progressive or

reactionary. Once the class character of a liberation movement and its leadership is thus determined, a political differentiation of various types of national movements can be ascertained, which in turn would provide us with clues to the social-political character of the movement in question.

An understanding of the class nature of a given national movement may also inform us of the nature of the class forces that movement is struggling against, hence the nature and forms of the class struggle: the class content of the anti-imperialist liberation struggle transforms the national struggle into a class struggle which is fought out at the national and international levels; this struggle, which appears in the form of a national struggle, is in essence, a struggle for state power (Blaut, 2004).

If national struggle is class struggle, that is, one very important form of the struggle for state power, then, a number of questions arise which are central to an understanding of nationalism and a national movement: which classes make use of it, in which historical epochs and for which purposes?" Thus, in this way, we can expect a relationship between the class character of a national movement, its political goals and the nature and direction of the post-independence state following a successful national struggle.

### **NATIONALISM, CLASS STRUGGLE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION**

There a variety of national movement that are led by a single or a number of class (es). Thus, a national movements led by the national or petty bourgeoisie can, for example, be characterized as "bourgeois nationalism" which, when it is effectively used against imperialism, sets the stage for the building of a national capitalist state. An anti-imperialist national movement led by the working class in alliance with the peasantry, on the other hand, can, upon waging a successful national liberation struggle, begin building a popular socialist state (Szymanski, 2001).

While Third World anti-imperialist national liberation struggles aim for national self-determination through the establishment of an independent nation-state, the process is quite different in the advanced-capitalist imperial centers of Europe and North America, where the struggles waged by national minorities against the central state tend to be demands for limited autonomy, self-rule, or similar such status within the boundaries of the larger federal structure--demands which fall short of full national independence and statehood.

In yet other instances, when the national question is raised within the context of a socialist state, we find an entirely different dynamic at work. In some cases, we find an entirely different dynamic at work. In some cases, the nationalities' question and nationalities' policy may be framed within the context of national integration, which at the same time recognizes cultural diversity and allows regional autonomy to various ethnic and nationality groups, as in China. In other cases, some national groups may come to play a disproportionately dominant role, where the center fails to deal with national antagonism inherited from an earlier period, which in time may give rise to the disintegration of the central state along national lines, as in the former Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia.

However, while long suppressed national aspirations under an otherwise seemingly cooperative federated state may give rise to national movements that appear to be above class, it is important to stress that, here too, an analysis of the class nature of national movements and their nationalist ideology is imperative for a clear understanding of the dynamics of these movements.

In other instances, a coalition of class forces that mobilizes a variety of social classes through cross-class alliances aimed at capturing state power. If it lacks a clearly articulated social position result in the transformation of society in an ambiguous direction, such that in the absence of a clear and resolute action against existing social, political and economic institutions of society, the new order may soon lose its dynamism and its dynamism can become incorporated into the structures of existing social arrangements. Given the strength of imperialism in its domination of the world political economy and control over national class structures, it is also important to recognize the force brought to bear by imperialism in shaping the nature and direction of such movements which have an immense impact on the balance of class at the global level.

The critical factor that distinguishes the nature and dynamics of contemporary forms of nationalism and national movements, then, is the class character of these movements and their class leadership. It is within this context of social-political developments in the struggle against state and social-economic structures of society that we begin to delineate the nature of the ongoing class struggles and social transformations effected by movements for national liberation.

#### **CASE STUDIES OF NATIONAL MOVEMENTS**

Among the most prominent of contemporary national movements are the Palestinians, Kurdish, Basque and

Quebecois. We briefly examine the origins and development of these movements for an understanding of their class nature and political ideology.

**The Palestinian national movement:** In Palestine, popular opposition to Zionist colonization emerged before the arrival of Britain to the region and became intensified by British military occupation of the territory in the early twentieth century (Sameer, 1994). These two factors constituted the impetus to Palestinian nationalism. As Palestinian opposition became increasingly intense, the British pursued an imperial policy which led to the Great Palestinian Revolt and then the disarming of the Palestinian people. The subsequent decline of traditional Palestinian political institutions cleared the way for the Palestinian national movement.

In the post-World War II period, Zionist war plans were successfully executed against the disarmed Palestinian community, leading to the diaspora. As Palestinian political activity began to re-emerge within Israel and especially in the diaspora, a number of trends, including Pan-Arabism and pragmatic nationalism, arose (Sayigh, 1999). Finally, the overarching Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was founded in 1964. However, these various tendencies did not become effectively coordinated until after the June 1967 War.

Since 1967, the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza has sought to subjugate the Palestinians, the great majority of whom are workers and peasants. Israel has dominated and controlled the Palestinian population through force-exercised by the military and para-military groups-and through its political, economic, legal and social institutions. But the Palestinians have been far from submissive; their nationalist movement has been deepening and maturing, as workers and peasants turn into revolutionaries (Sameer, 1994).

The political mobilization of the Palestinian diaspora in the 1960s had a direct impact on the Palestinian population in the Occupied Territories after the June 1967 war and this gave rise to popular resistance in Gaza and the West Bank. This was followed by the invasion of Lebanon in 1982 in pursuit of the PLO and the Palestinian national movement. All of this came together and found its expression in massive Palestinian unrest in the region.

Finally, in December 1987, the Occupied Territories exploded in the uprising known as the Intifada, which represents the coming to full maturity of the Palestinian national movement (Sayigh, 1999). The various political tendencies and factions within the PLO are a reflection of the class forces that exist in Palestinian society. However, given the current state of the Palestinian national movement, the class forces that the movement is based on

have effected a popular political alliance to achieve their stated national goal of liberation and independence.

The future of the movement and the new society that it will eventually build will be the outcome of how these class forces struggle and which class (es) will emerge as the leading force to chart the course of social development in the period ahead.

**The Kurdish national movement:** In Kurdistan, the Kurdish people have been struggling for independence since the early part of the century. The Kurds, situated within the Ottoman Empire, became fragmented with the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire in the end of the First World War (Gerard, 1991).

Dispersed across several states in the Middle East (mainly in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria), the Kurds primarily, a peasant population, have been waging a national struggle in these countries, especially in Turkey and Iraq, where they are most heavily concentrated (Abdul, 1995).

The origin of the Kurdish national movement goes back to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the incorporation of Kurdistan into several newly-formed colonial states under the control of British imperialism (Gerard, 1991). Kurdish resistance against the new Turkish state began as early as the 1920s, but this movement was brutally crushed by the central government. In Iraq Kurdistan, the national movement came into being in the 1930s and scored a number of victories through its alliance with various progressive organizations, such as the Communist Party of Iraq (CPI). But, by the 1970s, all the gains secured through decades of struggle were wiped out by the heavy hand of the repressive Iraqi state.

The fate of the Kurdish nationalists were the same in Syria and Iran as well. After the crushing of the Mahabad Republic in Iran in the 1940s, the Kurdish nationalist movement in Iran was effectively destroyed by the Shah's regime. The Kurdish nationalists did not fare well under Al-Asad regime in Syria, either; they were relegated to second-class citizenship like their counterparts across the border in Turkey and suffered mass repression for their separatist political activities.

Among the Kurdish political organizations which have been active throughout Kurdistan during the past two decades, the Workers' Party of Kurdistan (PKK) has been the leading force controlling the Turkish state in the most recent period of nationalist upsurge among the Kurds in Turkey (Abdul, 1995). As in the case of the PLO leading the Palestinian resistance through armed struggle beginning in the mid 1960s, the PKK's actions directed against the repressive Turkish state since the early 1980s has served as a catalyst to mobilize the Kurdish national

movement and renew its demands for national self-determination. With developments across the border in Iraq in the aftermath of the Gulf War in 1991 and the crushing defeat suffered by the Kurds there in hands of Saddam Hussain's regime, the future course of the Kurdish national movement and their struggle for self-rule is far from certain. But, like the Palestinian cause which is now after decades of struggle beginning to bare fruit, the current visibility of the Kurds and their heroic resistance against their oppressors in Kurdistan is gaining growing attention in the world community and may in the not too distant future lead to the establishment of a national homeland for the Kurds.

As in other cases of nationalism and movements for national self-determination, the Kurdish movement too will undergo internal struggles over leadership and the political direction that it will take. These struggles will likewise be the result of class struggles that are lodged in the social structure of Kurdish society. The direction that the movement will take thus depends on the political parameters of the movement and the new society that is now being built.

**The Basque national movement:** In the Basque Country, the Basque people have been struggling for over hundred years. The Basque national movement during this century, especially since the Spanish Civil War has fought the various forms of subordination of the Basque people by Spain and the Spanish state (Clark, 1989).

Recent Basque nationalism has developed as a reaction to the Francoist state--a repressive fascist state that tried to crush the Basque national movement through its military and police force. With the formation of numerous national political organizations during the Franco years such as the Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV), the Basque national movement experienced a resurgence of national consciousness, resisting the domination of Spain over Basque society. Later, in the late 1950s, Euskadi ta Askatasuna (ETA) and other radical organizations were formed which took up armed struggle against the central state.

Although ETA's violent confrontations with the Spanish national government led to its exile in France in the 1960s, it facilitated the consolidation of a political strategy for ETA and its supporters to declare a revolutionary war on the Spanish state. The armed struggle taken up by ETA to expose the oppressive nature of the occupying state led to the radicalization of the masses and of the mainstream Basque political organizations which increasingly took on a more persistent nationalist stance, resulting in numerous cross-party national alliances during this period. As the

opposition against it grew and became more determined, the Spanish state adopted increasingly repressive measures to contain and suppress the Basque national movement (Berberoglu, 1997).

In the 1970s, new political organizations sprang up once again and developed a unified approach through a new socialist coalition, the Patriotic Socialist Coordinating Council (KAS). This resurgence of nationalist activity intensified after the death of Franco in 1975 and the varied forms of struggle taken up by the movement over the past decade has contributed to the overall success of the national struggle to press forward with its demand for autonomy from the central state.

**The Quebecois national movement:** The origin of French-speaking communities in North America goes back to the colonization of today's Quebec and adjoining territories by France in the seventeenth century. After New France was conquered by England in 1760, this region became a British Colony until the late 19th century (Blant, 2006). Although various forms of resistance against British rule emerged in the years immediately following colonization, the first nationalist movement in Quebec did not develop into a mass movement until the early nineteenth century (Ryerson, 1988). Encouraged by the Constitutional Act of 1791, which divided what would come to be called the Province of Quebec into two distinct colonies-Lower Canada (present-day Quebec) and Upper Canada (present-day Ontario)-the francophone nationalist forces waged a struggle to gain autonomy and independence, leading to the ensuing rebellions of 1837-38. The rebellions were defeated and Britain imposed the unification of Upper and Lower Canada into a Union under the domination of an anglophone majority in 1840 (Ryerson, 1988).

By the late 19th century, Canada became an independent nation and thus inherited the divisions created by the legacy of French and British colonialism. The national question thus became an inherent problem for the Canadian state throughout the twentieth century.

During the course of the 20th century, the Quebecois national movement went through various stages in its development as a mass movement failed to articulate the needs and aspirations of the Quebecois masses and thus failed to develop a mass base to challenge the government to obtain autonomy from the central state. This situation continued until the middle of this century, when new forces began to emerge in the 1960s.

The origins of the modern Quebecois national movement can be traced to the establishment of the Welfare state in Quebec at the beginning of the 1960s. The acceleration of the development of capitalism after

the Second World War and the subsequent establishment of the welfare state in the 1960s imposed an important reorganization of relations between the different social forces within Quebec society and thus created a new type of national movement. This dual phenomena provoked the marginalization of the Catholic church and the traditional dominant classes. The rise of the new petty bourgeoisie and of new Quebec capitalism, as well as the political coalescing of the working class, created a new type of national movement that was much more aggressive in the sovereignty of Quebec.

After a weakening of the movement during the 1980s, however, which suffered a defeat in the referendum on sovereignty for Quebec in 1980, there has been a resurgence of nationalism among grass-roots organization in Quebec. Although they were likewise unable to secure a victory through the 1992 referendum that called for a new Constitution to recognize sovereignty for Quebec, these rank-and-file forces are determined to help advance the struggles of the Quebecois people to gain their independence and achieve self-rule in the future.

## CONCLUSION

The diverse settings in which struggles for autonomy, self-determination and national liberation take place, as in the case of the Palestinian, Kurdish, Basque and Quebecois struggles, necessitate a careful analysis of the relationship between class, nation and state-phenomena that are central to our understanding of the class nature and dynamics of nationalism and national movements. It is thus within the framework of an understanding of the relationship between these phenomena that we find the social relevance of nationalism and national movements as manifested in different spatial, temporal and political contexts.

The important question that needs to be addressed within this analysis of struggles for national liberation is the centrality of class in defining the nature and direction of various movements in such struggles. The class base of a particular movement, the class nature of its leading organizations and leadership and the balance of class forces within the political coalition that defines the movement are key to an understanding of the nature, strategy and success of a national movement, as well as the type of society it will attempt to build and defend once it comes to power. The class nature of the society that is being built in the aftermath of a national struggle is thus very much a reflection of the class nature of the national movement that is fighting to gain its liberation.

Viewed in this way, one would be better positioned to comprehend the class structure and class struggles in

post-liberation societies that have resulted from struggles for national liberation-struggles that are organically linked to the class nature of developments in this process of social transformation.

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