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Nationalism or Freedom?

Jon Bekken

2001

Writing in the most recent Arsenal, a well-produced "magazine of anarchist strategy and culture," Mike Staudenmaier devotes one of the leading articles to a critique of ASR's "extensive and influential writings opposing nationalism and advocating working-class internationalist revolution." (Unfortunately, he cannot be troubled to cite any of them, perhaps recognizing that his muddled argument could not stand up to any anarchist writings on the subject.)

According to Staudenmaier, we follow the "people, not nations" analysis he attributes to Rudolf Rocker, "combin[ing] the sort of economic reductionism that is often the hallmark of syndicalism with careful analysis of the harsh experiences of the Cuban revolution." Our color-blind position that "working people have no country" was revolutionary a century ago, he continues, but today is a manifestation of white supremacy responsible for the overwhelmingly white membership of "one of the best-recruiting and most steadily growing segments North American anarchism."

Citing our criticism of Chomsky's suggestion that in this era of globalization, the nation-state can serve as a mechanism for popular self-defense (and strangely arguing that the Brazilian nation-state, which routinely murders homeless children on the street,

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aids and abets transnational corporations in despoiling Brazil's abundant natural resources, and forces landless peasants into debt peonage, is less repressive than the IMF), Staudenmaier says we fail to acknowledge the substantial divisions within global economic classes posed by racial and national identities. These divisions, he argues, create the possibility of "meaningful cross-class alliances ... difficult to assimilate into a syndicalist world view." (13)

In a typically confused passage he then conflates race, culture and nation, and claims that syndicalists say that the struggle for racial justice must be put off until after the anti-capitalist revolution (which, Staudenmaier suggests, is exactly backward). Conceding that syndicalists are "sincerely anti-racist," he argues that we "underestimate the importance of cultural identity to people's lives and to social struggles," thereby leading revolutionaries into a dead-end.

After some muted criticisms of anarcho-nationalist tendencies, which have led many who consider (or once considered) themselves anarchists into backing a variety of Marxist-Leninist groupings (a significant fraction of the now-dissolved Love & Rage Federation recently joined the Maoist Freedom Road Socialist Organization) for ignoring class struggle, the author turns from setting up his straw men to putting forward his own perspective:

"Where ASR offers the false dichotomy between people and nations, the ABCF upholds a similarly questionable opposition between 'oppressor nationalism' ... and 'nationalism of the oppressed' ...[But] in both cases, the social experience at a grassroots level is the same - cultural identity rooted in geography, language and assorted historical intangibles, producing a broad-based love and prioritization of a community of communities." (15) Staudenmaier rejects this attempt to separate what he sees as inextricably intertwined positive and negative aspects of national identity. Instead he champions what he admits is an ad hoc analysis, skeptical of national liberation struggles while supporting them, "recit[ing] rhetoric about class struggle" while working with radicals of all

class backgrounds (he apparently believes there are significant numbers of the employing class to be found in the anarchists' ranks, something I have never observed), and calling upon activists to embrace the contradictions.

Anarchist support for the EZLN (the Zapatistas) is offered as an example "of this promising new anarchist response to nationalism," (16) citing Marcos' embrace of "the nation" in a typically incoherent quote. But for Staudenmaier the Zapatistas embody an anti-statist nationalism, apparently because they have recognized that they are in no position to seize state power and so instead negotiate with the state and pressure it to change its policies. Unwilling to embrace nationalism fully, Staudenmaier instead urges us to "participate in and/or lend support to anti-colonial struggles in a principled and critical way ... Anarchists must become involved in a critical way in what Marcos calls the 'reconstruction' of the nation, which can only happen if we avoid the twin pitfalls of knee-jerk anti-nationalism and uncritical acquiescence to national liberation. By balancing the competing claims of race and class, we can develop a new anarchist understanding of nations and nationalism." (17)

I apologize if this summary seems incoherent; while I have endeavored to distill a coherent argument from seven pages of confusion, this is at best a difficult task. I undertake this thankless task only because Staudenmaier is quite mistaken when he describes our writings on this question as "influential." In fact, most North American anarchists today embrace the muddled thinking he advocates, with devastating results. In upholding the traditional anarchist opposition to nationalism (although our recent writings on the subject have hardly been extensive, and have tended to discuss the Middle East far more than Cuba), we have waged a difficult and usually lonely struggle for fundamental anarchist principles.

Staudenmaier's argument relies upon an almost total exclusion of evidence, allowing patently false claims such as that syndicalists argue that the struggle for racial justice must be postponed

until after The Revolution to stand cheek by jowl with highly questionable characterizations of various nation-states and nationalist movements. Failing to critically engage the one example of "progressive" nationalism he discusses (the Zapatistas), he leaves readers with no concrete sense of what this "new anarchist understanding" might look like in actual practice, or why we might consider it to be in any way anarchist.

Staudenmaier is unable even to keep his core concept clear. He offers two definitions of nationalism: a common language and shared geography (11) and cultural identity rooted in geography, language and historical intangibles (15). These definitions are quite useless in understanding actually existing nationalism. In the Balkans, for example, the allegedly intractable nationalisms there (we leave aside the high levels of intermarriage and other such inconvenient facts) have nothing whatever to do with language (Serbian and Croatian are the same language, only the script in which they are written differs) or geography (the populations are completely intermingled, thus the necessity for "ethnic cleansing"). This confusion is not entirely his fault. The "nation" is an essentially mythic concept, its signifiers chosen arbitrarily by ideologues seeking to unite followers against the "other" or to conceal real conflicting interests behind a facade of national unity.

As Mikhail Bakunin (whose understanding of nationalism was far more complex than Staudenmaier's), noted: "There is nothing more absurd and at the same time more harmful, more deadly, for the people than to uphold the fictitious principle of nationalism as the ideal of all the people's aspirations. Nationality is not a universal human principle; it is a historic, local fact. ... We should place human, universal justice above all national interests." While consistently defending the principle of self-determination, Bakunin (whose political activity began in pan-Slavism) came to see nationalism (and its corollary, patriotism) as a manifestation of backwardness. "The less developed a civilization is, and the less complex the

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Even many Marxists are at long last recognizing the folly of their long detour into nationalism. In a recent essay, George Kateb describes nationalism (and its close cousin, patriotism) as "a grave moral error" arising out of "a state of mental confusion." Noting that the nation is an amalgam "of a few actual and many imaginary ingredients," he notes that patriotism, in its essence, "is a readiness to die and to kill for an abstraction ... for what is largely a figment of the imagination." (907) Necessarily constructed to exclude the vast majority of humanity from its imagined community, patriotism - the celebration of the nation armed-needs external enemies. "Patriotism is on a permanent moral holiday, and once it is made dynamic, it invariably becomes criminal." (914) But not only does nationalism define itself in opposition to the whole of humanity, Kateb argues, it also requires that the individual surrender her moral authority and individuality, abandoning her own dignity and individuality to embrace submersion into an ideology of hatred, a life of criminality. Quoting Thoreau, he concludes that only those who surrender their "self-respect, and sacrifice the greater to the less" can be patriotic. "They love the soil which makes their graves, but have no sympathy with the spirit which may still animate their clay. Patriotism is a maggot in their heads."

As Rudolf Rocker noted, "the change of human groups into nations, that is, State peoples, has not opened out a new outlook... It is today one of the most dangerous hindrances to social liberation." (202) Peoples with common history, language and cultural backgrounds evolved over long periods of living together in free (and sometimes not so free) social alliances. No anarchist would propose that such communities should be forced to dissolve themselves into some invented social identity. But this is precisely what nationalism, the political theology of the state, attempts. "Nations" are in no sense natural communities; they stand in stark opposition to human autonomy, to the right of self-organization and self-determination, and to the principles of mutual aid and solidarity upon which our very survival depends.

basis of its social life, the stronger the manifestation of natural patriotism."

Bakunin also termed nationalism a "natural fact" that had to be reckoned with. Indeed, nationalism does exist, in precisely the same sense that dementia does. There are many people in the world who hear God giving them orders - sometimes cruel, sometimes bizarre, sometimes quite humane - or who see hallucinations. While these unfortunates insist upon the reality of their visions, we know better. Such things simply do not exist, for all that thousands of our fellow humans act upon them. But the mental disorder that sparks these delusions quite certainly exists. Sometimes it is relatively harmless and can perhaps be ignored, though I tend to believe symptoms should be responded to before the disease gets worse. Sometimes the derangement is quite serious, and must be confronted forcefully.

In precisely the same way, we can say that nationalism exists, even though there is no useful sense in which "nations" can be said to exist, except as an artificial construct imposed by states, churches and other powers to suit their own interests.

Nations are in fact inventions of relatively recent origin. Five hundred years ago, the language we now know as "French" was a family of loosely related regional tongues that were not mutually intelligible. The "Italian" nation was invented in the 1800s, and a significant fraction of the Italian right now seems determined to uninvent it. In Chicago, in the early 1900s, there was a prolonged struggle over the national identity of the people now known as Ukrainian immigrants, with competing networks of institutions seeking to construct national identities as Poles, Ruthenians, Little Russians, Russians, and Ukrainians. With the defeat of the claimants in the diaspora, the Ruthenian nation vanished without a trace, aside from some old buildings where it was engraved into the stone. Similarly, there was heated debate within the Polish community over whether Jews, atheists, socialists, and members of the Polish National Alliance could be considered members of the

Polish nation. Such debates had little to do with language or culture, rather they represented efforts by competing leaderships to establish dominance and to exclude those who subscribed to competing identities from inclusion in the fold of "the people."

But Staudenmaier's confusion does not end with his definition of nationalism. Throughout his essay, he treats the concepts of "nation" and "race" as if they were synonyms. There are, of course, important similarities between the two concepts: Both lack any basis in the real, material world, but are instead ideological constructs invented to justify oppression and domination. Although their boundaries are porous, subject to constant reinterpretation and redefinition (as are all arbitrary categorization schemes), many people have internalized these constructs, making them part of their own self-identification. Both are poisonous, pernicious ideologies; there is no crime too heinous to be "justified" under the cloak of race or nation. And, of course, both are manifested in social arrangements that reflect not only relations of power (which have their own historic weight), but have also implanted themselves in the consciousness even of those sincerely committed to the cause of human emancipation.

But despite these similarities, there are also important distinctions between race and nation. While no one can define either with any precision, given their wholly mythic character, race certainly does not involve questions of geography or language - the only two generally agreed-upon markers of nationality. (That nation is not in fact defined in any way by these markers is a different question.)

There are certainly people who have historically been - and continue to be - oppressed in particular ways, justified in part by alleged differences in skin color and/or physical build. (Such differences have relatively little explanatory power; in the 1790s there was a debate in this country over whether Germans were "white" or "black"; in the 1800s the same question was raised about the Irish; in the early 1900s Finns were widely considered an "Asiatic" people by specialists in racial categorization. Physical characteristics

are purely incidental to such arguments, which are fundamentally about power and domination.) This history of oppression manifests itself in many ways, from the jobs workers are able to obtain, to the schools their children are enrolled in, to the accumulated resources they have at their disposal to see them through hard times or enable them to secure a viable economic foothold, to their likelihood of being shot by police. Syndicalists have always recognized the importance of racial oppression, fighting against discrimination on the job and in the broader society, demanding equal access to jobs, and putting our bodies on the line in the struggle for racial justice. "Race" has been used both to divide the working class and to subject one segment of our class to particularly brutal oppression and exploitation, and as such it can not be ignored. But its manifestation is radically different than that of "nation," and to treat them as interchangeable is a dangerous confusion.

It is particularly dangerous when Staudenmaier swings between race and nation, arguing that anarchists should build cross-class alliances - an anarchist version of the Popular Front which has sucked so many radicals into pallid reformism. While there is a certain logic to cross-class alliances for those who seek state power above all else, there is absolutely no reason why anarchists should be making common cause with our exploiters. It is not only wrong in principle, it not only feeds illusions among our fellow workers, but it is tactically stupid to boot.

As we noted earlier this year, "The right of a people to self-determination is a long-standing anarchist principle. Nationalism, however, is a fraud whereby would-be rulers 'self-determine' to impose their vision of nationhood on an entire community. Nationalism is an ideology of separation, of hatred for the 'other.' It is a creed of violence and war and oppression. And it has absolutely nothing to offer the world's oppressed. What is necessary is to develop human solidarity, the instincts of mutual aid that enable us to survive and which have fueled all human progress..."