

Nation in contemporary marxist theory

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In spite of an initial rejection of the concept of nation in the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels positively integrated this reality in their revolutionary thought. In the first half of the XXth century and after the Second World War, the Communists fight in colonies against oppressors was carried out in the name of national interest and of nation.

This phase during which nation was very and positively important seems to be behind us. For 30 years, the capitalist system has been actively globalised, entering a new period of imperialism. While the production forces are developing without any respect to borders, capitalist economy of every country is more and more open to international flows. In the same time, unions and political revolutionary movements, nationally organized, are facing a lot of difficulties to mobilize people against capital forces. In this context, the question is raised to know if nation is always a necessary level of revolutionary struggle or if it has to be given up.

An approach of nation

It is necessary to define the terms used, that of nation particularly, because, as mentioned by Hobsbawm, its concept is very unprecise [Hobsbawm (1992)]. Let me try, at least, to tell you what nation means to me. I don't plan to develop a theory of nation but only to indicate its main economic features through the economic angle [Berthaud, Gerbier, Peyral (2004)], [Delaunay (2005)]. Hereafter are eight points, in reference to the theory of Marx, which summarize this approach, of course partial but connected, I hope, with the framework of the contemporary Marxist thought [Balibar et Wallerstein (1988)].

1) Nation is *a social form* allowing a certain type of *concrete movement* of the capitalist structure and its contradictions.

2) Historically built under the control and direction of Capital, starting from pre-existent forms of the State, nation *combined*, on a territory and within a technical framework, *a production and consumption activity* made by a population divided into classes.

3) Therefore, nation which is, in its principle, crossed by conflicts and class fights, was originally placed under the direction of bourgeoisie, and unified through *the State* and capitalist ideology, law or police constraint.

4) If it is true that capitalism has been globalised since several centuries, nation can be considered, however, as an historical period of spatial rooting of production, consumption and technologies. Production and consumption functions were differently implemented in the world by bourgeoisies, autonomous within nations. Making profitable the domination that they exerted on the State, these classes used the force represented by “their” nation to consolidate their power and strength, and to develop among them the competition of capital.

5) Nation is, first of all, a capitalist social form. However, exploited classes, without being able to eliminate the domination of Capital, were able, by their fights, to get some important economical and political rights, while improving their positions in individual and collective consumption.

6) Consequently, instead of interpreting nation only as a tool in the hands of capitalists, it can be considered today as a social form potentially appropriable by the most dominated classes and the middle class wage-earners, because of their fights. Its sociological and political multifunctionality allows to interpret the embezzlements of its use. But it makes also possible to understand that it can be the social ground for *a collective and democratic good* creation

8) In its contemporary meaning, nation can be regarded as a *mix of commercial and non-commercial activities*. These two categories of activities contribute to make the concerned society a nation.

Is nation over ?

Nation was integrated in the Marxist thought due to the national fights in

Central Europe and Ireland, as the writings of Engels and Marx can testify, respectively in the years 1848-49 and 1867. But one century and a half later, the problems where nation is concerned seem to have completely changed. As Woods and Grant say, the Nation State would have ceased to have a progressist role [Woods and Grant (2000)]. Here are three examples of this theoretical position in the Marxist field.

The first one is rooted in the economic analysis of globalisation [Burbach and Robinson (1999)]. For these authors, developed countries have entered the fourth phase of the globalisation process, started at the time of the Great discoveries. We retain the following aspects of their argumentation: 1) Globalisation would differ from internationalisation because of the plants dispersion all around the world. 2) Multinational and transnational firms would be more and more owned by people and firms coming from different countries. 3) The process of globalisation would not relate only to the "First World", but also to the "Third World". 4) The State apparatus, machine in the hands of the capitalist class, would be always active, but as a local branch of a global capitalist State, of which international institutions and regular meetings of the governments of the largest and powerful countries are the preparation. 5) A world capitalist class would be appearing. 6) The nature of the official hegemony of the previous period would be modified. 7) The traditional classes of the developed countries would have to fight in connection with new social movements such as women, gays, ethnic minorities, environment defence, and more generally, the huge category of poor people. On all these points, a similar argumentation is developed in Robinson (2004).

The second illustration of the thesis here exposed is that of the Marxist autonomist Negri, whose work on the Empire, written in collaboration with Hardt, has known a very broad diffusion. By some aspects, the issues defended by these authors resemble those just presented. But they differ from them by the place of science and knowledge in capitalist production. They consider that modern production is dematerialised. The national implementation of productions would belong to the past, when capital was made of physical machines. Capitalists of any

origins would join and form the leading classes of the Empire. In counterpoint is “multitude”, which would replace the social classes of the industrial society and be the new antagonistic force against ruling classes. Within this globalised framework, the Nations-States would not have any more real consistency. At the time of the debate which proceeded in France, concerning the referendum on the European constitution (May 2005), Negri supported this project. He invited to vote in its favour under the argument that Europe could be a place of opposition to the Empire. According to Negri, it wouldn’t have been politically convenient to support these “ *nations full of shit, which are going to disappear* ” [Cannavo (2006)].

A third example, more ideological than theoretical, is provided by the intervention of Elisabeth Gauthier, at the social Forum of Mumbai (India, 2004). Mrs. Gauthier is member of the National Committee of the French Communist Party and director of the Espaces Marx–Transform association (France). In her speech, Mrs Gauthier quotes the concept of Empire used by Negri, and she considers that: “*the neoliberal offensive leads to the erosion of public structures... the Nation-States are mined on the two sides*” [*L’Humanité* (2004)].

In conclusion of this part, I hope I showed the existence, within the Marxist contemporary thought, of a new relationship to the concept of nation. Today, nation would be over. New social forces would be to mobilize to face the capitalist class, in the process of globalisation.

Nation wouldn’t be over ?

Although the position just exposed is probably dominant in Marxist thought (and in communist practice), especially in Western Europe and North America, a contrary position has defenders. Here are five major arguments illustrating this position.

a) *Underdeveloped countries have to behave as nations in the globalisation process.* It is a common place to say that nations have reached very different levels of development. Indeed, nations, which are in contact through their economy and

mentality are very different according to their productive and cultural systems. If capitalist globalisation is positively considered and received by underdeveloped countries, these countries could not integrate consequences of the globalisation process without the intervention of their State. In these countries, State is *a developing State*, to take the terms of Mr. Castells. In this case, two factors at least are combined which lead to the existence of differentiated nations : a) the weight of traditions among the concerned populations, b) the defensive and organising role of the State, in these countries, relative to globalised capitalism.

It is clear that, in the process of globalisation, underdeveloped nations have not the same democratic structures as the wealthiest nations. In particular, the role and the place of individuals are different. But these differences attest the existence of national reality and not its destruction. To a certain extent, we can say that nations are a renewed consequence of globalisation.

b) There are similar phenomena in developed countries. We can observe, in developed countries, whose economic systems are crossed by capitalist globalisation, that capital forces are opposed to the national fact. But, in the same time, they defend such or such capitalist fraction in the name of “economic nationalism”. Their hostility to national reality is driven against Social State, which is a component of modern nations.

On the contrary, in the privatisation and dispossession process of their economic rights by ruling classe, it is understandable that wage earners consider that nation has to be defended and preserved.. In spite of the ideology of "capitalist modernity", there still remain Marxists for whom the national combat is not a defensive action of a neo-luddist type. Capitalist globalisation is not this technical, political and socially wonderfull process which the capitalists claim it is.

c) What occurs today is mainly the globalisation of capital and not the globalisation of labour. Of course, there are population going from one country to another, from one continent to another. But although these movements became

more extensive after 1945, entries in the most developed countries, according to Maddison, reached 32 million people between 1974 and 1998 [Maddison (2001)]. What accounts for approximately 5% of the total population of North America and Western Europe in 1998.

If it is considered, according to these figures, that the national labor markets remain relatively closed, although they are influenced by capital globalisation, the result is that nation is identified *with the labour factor* whereas globalisation would come from the dynamics *of the capital factor*. Labour market, and the exploitation process, would be the nation basis. New categories of workers, those in particular immigrated, should be fully associated to the traditional fights. But they would take place here on a national basis.

d) *Nation is defined by a territory and by its contents*. This is why, taking account of this duality, we indicated nation as a social form, which can be changed territorially and which is not a rigid historical being, with a particular territory and only one. It results, in conformity with the theory of Marx, that *the borders of a nation can move* in connection with the contemporary productive evolutions, *without a necessary modification of its content*, except more democracy.

d) *It appears necessary to consider that Men are spatial animals*. By quoting this idea developed by David McNally, we have to underline that economic theory in general, and Marxist theory in particular, have neglected the spatial dimension of social phenomena [McNally (1996)]. Undoubtedly, capital forces spatialised their actions to ensure the development of industrial capitalism. But popular classes could enter this way and imposed the recognition of their existence insofar as men, whatever their social position, are still spatial animals. They are not only political animals. As such, they are defined by a reference in space. Territory is a burrow. Nation will be an essential social reality as long as the human groups will not have given more abstract content to this fundamental need for a burrow.

The various fractions of globalised capitalism continue to feel the need for similar "base camps", to carry out between them the economic and political inevitable combats. Those which, within the framework of the Marxist theory,

develop the idea that globalisation of the economic and political world would be uniform, too quickly cross the obstacles with their theorization. It is not enough to state, as Burbach and Robinson do, that the current States are branches of a vast World State. It should be necessary to take all the facts into account.

Conclusion

To interpret the position occupied by the nation concept in contemporary Marxist theory, we tried to clarify the three following points.

1) During last decades, this position was completely re-examined and differently thought than it was before the 1980's, because of capitalist globalisation. Nation is still a concept strongly discussed within the Marxist area but on a renewed basis relative to industrial society.

2) Beyond that debate a triple interrogation takes place: 1) Are the traditional ruling national classes forming a global capitalist class? 2) Is a global exploited class able to fight against that renewed global capitalist class? 3) Are these classes made up of the same stuff than within the national framework? For the Marxists for whom nation would be over, the vaguest part of their analysis relates to these antagonistic forces of the capital, as gays, ethnics, women, etc. On the other hand, for the Marxists adopting the contrary position, traditional social classes are always the active elements of national social life. Their relationships on a worldwide scale must take place according to already explored forms of proletarian internationalism, in connection with renewed forces.

3) This debate rests on two distinct interpretations of the capitalist system evolution. On one hand, contemporary globalisation of capital would involve a qualitative change of the social relations and of their contradictions. On the other hand, globalisation would not mean that the social relationships would have changed in their nature. Like developed Meiksins (1997), capitalism is always capitalism. It is within the national framework and on international basis that the fight would have to be continued. The fact, for a Marxist, to recognize nation as a reality does not mean that this reality is stuck to a rigid model.

But the debate is far from being closed. There are a lot of new aspects to study

and clarify concerning the concept of nation, especially in undeveloped countries.

March 2006

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