

The Left and the National Question in the WW I

(Jan. 2014)

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1913/crnq/4.htm#v20pp72-033>

Slide 1

Let me make two preliminary remarks :

I am an Austrian and Marxist - to the extent "Austro-Marxist ". But the situation is more complicated: there is infact a tradition that through Hans Kelsen's famous seminar on state law at the University of Vienna connects the Austro-Marxism Otto Bauer's embossing with a generation of socialist intellectuals that, after the defeat of the Social Democrats in 1934 formed the core of communist intellectuals. After the occupation of Austria by Germany in 1938, they elaborated the idea of an independent Austrian nation – in political confrontation with their spiritual fathers Otto Bauer and Karl Renner – however implicitly based on their theory of nationalities; a theoretical position from which they moreover developed in emigration the idea of an autonomous socialism, what made them to Euro-Communists "avant la letter" in the early 60s. So we can say that Austrian communism in his best aspects, on one hand is a legitimate heir of Austro-Marxism, and as it fell back towards Soviet dogmatism in the 70ies, on the other hand turned over most of his history as not able to make this heritage fruitful.

Slide 2

The second observation relates to the current relevance of the Austro-Marxist nationality theory

Four Approaches (at least) in the Left towards European Integration are roughly discernible:

1. EU is an agent of multinational capital and German or US-American domination. Left parties should oppose membership or campaign for withdrawal from membership.
2. Instead of doing this which would mean turning back the clock we must move forward towards a root and branch restructuring of the EU, i.e. challenging the logic inherent in the Single Act, the Maastricht Treaty, the CAP, the operation of the ECB etc.

3. The nation state cannot any longer deliver the traditional goals of the Left. **The strategic key for the Left should rather ly in providing the EU with the mechanism it needs to become an agent of social and political change in Europe.**

and

4. The building of a United States of Europe becomes the primary project of the Left. A "historic compromise" between "pro-European" forces of centre Left and centre Right is urged.

What this discussion implicitly demonstrates is that the future of the European Union as a multi- and supranational structure is far from certain, and that to the same extent the national aspect of European history is far from over.

In the 1990ies, within a short time two monographs on nation and nationalism appeared, which are still worth reading today: Étienne Balibar's and Immanuel Wallerstein's *Race, Nation, Class*.

Ambiguous Identities and Hobsbawm's Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality.

Balibar's analysis¹ reflected the post-structural zeitgeist, for which the debate on national identity primarily had to result in the deconstruction of the myths connected with it.

In Contrast, Hobsbawm, the British historian with old Austrian roots, deemed it appropriate to recall at the beginning of his study *"the important and under-appreciated debates among the Marxists of the Second International on what they called the 'national question'" involving "the best minds of the international socialist movement – and they could boast some of the most brilliant thinkers – (who) tackled this problem: Kautsky and Luxemburg, Otto Bauer and Lenin, to name only a few".*²

Rosa Luxemburg's first confrontation with the national question occurred under the particular circumstances in which Polish Social Democracy was constituted in the 1870s. In her view, once socialist parties entered the field of national politics, that is, once they positioned themselves in relation to the existing state structures, and they advocated universal suffrage and, once it is won, availed themselves of it for their political struggle, they would inevitably take a position on the national question.

Slide 3 Lenin

How slippery the "national" terrain is for the left, can be appreciated from the errors made: Rosa Luxemburg's denial of the possibility of a Polish national state deduced from an economic analysis, Lenin who still in the spring of 1914 assumed that there *was "a striving on the part of the Hungarians and then of the Czechs, not for separation from Austria, but, on the contrary, for the preservation of Austria's integrity"*,³ and Otto Bauer whose keen analysis of the nationalities question did not prevent him of the most fatal mistakes when ever trying to politically apply it.⁴

In 1903 Rosa Luxemburg wrote referring to specific Polish conditions: *"The socialist struggle must be a mass struggle of the proletariat, which aims, "from the political point of view," at the "democratisation of the institutions of the state".*⁵ In principle what is involved is a strategy that has, first, to *"accept, as the starting point for political action, (...) the existing historical and governmental*

¹ Balibar, "The Nation Form: History and Ideology" in Balibar and Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class. Ambiguous Identities*, p. 86 ff.

² Ibid., p. 12.

³ Lenin, *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, section 3.

⁴ In the preface to the 1924 second edition of his book on nationalities policy, thus already after the collapse of the dual monarchy, Bauer wrote: "History has brushed aside the political programme for the solution of the Austro-Hungarian nationalities problem, which I advocated in 1907" (Bauer, *Die Nationalitätenfrage und die Sozialdemokratie*, p. xi). In 1918 Otto Bauer, as Foreign Minister, espoused the Anschluss with Germany of the just founded Republic of Austria under the slogan of "self-determination", which proved impossible due to the veto of the victorious powers of the First World War. In 1938, after the violently imposed Anschluss of Austria to Germany, he argued from his exile in Paris: "Austrian socialism cannot have a reactionary stance but must have a revolutionary one vis-à-vis the fait accompli of Austria's annexation to the Third Reich". The battle cry "cannot be the reactionary slogan of the restoration of Austrian independence but only the revolutionary one of the all-German revolution" (Bauer, "Nach der Annexion" in *Der Sozialistische Kampf*, No. 1 (June 2, 1938), quoted in: Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstands, *Österreicher im Exil Frankreich 1938 - 1945*, p. 10). Unfortunately, no time was left for Bauer subsequently to correct this mistake, as he died in exile on July 4, 1938 – "of a broken heart", as his biographer Otto Leichter wrote.

⁵ Luxemburg, "Dem Andenken des 'Proletariat'", p. 318; "In Memory of the Proletarian Party", [find published English translation].

situation as a given condition”, and which, second, aims, “as the goal of this political action”, at “the democratising of the given political conditions”.⁶

“Social Democracy”, she writes further, “sought the solution of the Polish question ... in the social relations of Poland itself. It discovered that the Polish question was already solved by Poland’s capitalist development, indeed in a *negative* sense, in that Poland, by way of the capitalist relations of production and exchange, has become firmly tied to Russia, and its ruling classes, for whom belonging to Russia is a condition of life, and who have become solid buttresses of foreign rule in Poland. The endeavour to recreate Poland as a class state through the power of the proletariat proves therefore not to be *superfluous*, but rather *unfeasible, utopian*”.⁷

In practice Otto Bauer agreed with this appreciation, but not in theory; however both of them were mistaken although for different reasons. Rosa because she wanted monocausally to deduce the possibility of Poland’s national development from its apparent economic trend, Bauer on his part because he mainly assessed it from the perspective of the reconstruction of Austria into a modern Central European multinational state, which he favoured.

Slide 4 Three variants

Now what about Lenin?

Very much has already been written on the Lenin-Luxemburg-polemic. A decisive factor in the sharpness with which it was carried out after 1907 must have been Rosa Luxemburg’s disillusion that the Bolsheviks, whose positions she had supported in most party struggles, had on their part refused to extend solidarity to her, and moreover had even thwarted her policies in that they made the right to state secession from foreign national bodies the core of the Bolsheviks’ nationalities programme.⁸

Hammered out classically by Lenin: “*We must inevitably reach the conclusion that the self-determination of nations means the political separation of these nations from alien national bodies and the formation of an independent national state*”.

Luxemburg objected this, and the issue remained theoretically controversial. However Luxemburg was mistaken politically. She failed to recognise the actual elasticity of the nationalities policy espoused by Lenin – even as regards Poland. Quite in contrast to the way she understood him, Lenin in no way made himself into an unconditional advocate of every kind of national independence effort. “*We are fighting*”, he wrote, “*on the ground of a definite state; we unite the workers of all nations living in this state; we cannot vouch for any particular path of national development, for we are marching to our class goal along all possible paths*”.⁹ More skilfully than Luxemburg, he here takes account of the contingency of national questions: “*Whether the Ukraine, for example, is*

⁶ Luxemburg, “Dem Andenken des ‘Proletariat’”, p. 319; “In Memory of the Proletarian Party”, [find published English translation] .

⁷ Rosa Luxemburg, “Der Sozialismus in Polen”, p. 89 [no English translation]

⁸ Ibid., section one: “... we must inevitably reach the conclusion that the self-determination of nations means the political separation of these nations from alien national bodies, and the formation of an independent national state”.

⁹ Lenin, *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, section four.

destined to form an independent state is a matter that will be determined by a thousand unpredictable factors".¹⁰

Allow me to translate: With or without national self-determination, the party would carry out that policy which brings it nearer to its programmatic goal, socialist revolution, or which, after a successful revolution, allows it to consolidate power. However, at the same time this opened the way to a cynical, purely power-political relation to the "national question", which was to characterise the later policies of the prevailing Bolsheviks and which culminated in Stalin.

One word on Stalin's definition: *A historically established community based on the commonality of language, territory, economic life and which reveals himself in the community of cultural nature*¹¹

Slide 5 Austrian Hungary

In the second half of the 19th century, when the nation-state principle of state building began its apparently inexorable triumph, three multiethnic states of the traditional kind – Turkey, Russia and Austria-Hungary, stuck as relics. The Austrian part of the Dual Monarchy, however, had belatedly but energetically set out on the path of a capitalist development. This, along with the thereby precipitated national awakening of a number of formerly "*non-historical nations*",¹² (Engels) which now began to press their political and cultural claims, as well as the upsurge of a modern, multinational labour movement, collided with the old state structure.

Slide 6 Languages in A-H

The contradictions arose not just from the coexistence of 8 – including the Jews – 9 nationalities only in the Austrian half of the Empire, which for it was quite difficult to find a formula. But not only the state in its entirety, also his components the "*crown lands*" ("Kronländer") reflected, instead of the national composition of the populations, in reality the centuries-long history of dynastic acquisitions and conquests of the house of Habsburg and were of a multinational character.

Austria's Social Democracy founded in 1888 had been represented in the Parliament ("Reichsrat") since 1897, where the national contradictions flared up as under a burning lens. In accordance with classical Marxism it recognized nationalism as a displaced appearance of class contradictions, and it did not content itself by denouncing this but aimed at a democratic program of national conviviality.

In 1899 in its congress in Brno, the party concluded a nationalities programme, which in the following period became a point of reference for the national-political debates among European Socialists.

Slide 6 National Program

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ *Marxismus und Nationale Frage* (1913)

¹² In reference to the concept – originating with Friedrich Engels in an article on the Austrian nationalities policy – of "non-historical nations" Bauer considers the following clarification necessary: The expression "does not mean that such nations have never had a history, ... nor that such nations, as Friedrich Engels still believed in 1848, are not even capable of historical life, could not achieve a historical life – since this idea has been definitively disproven by the history of the 19th century. Rather, we characterise these nations as being "non-historical" only because their national culture in that age in which only the ruling classes were the bearers of such a culture, knows no history, no further development" (Bauer, *The Question of Nationalities and Social Democracy*, p. 190 f: [English translation]). The fundamental error which Bauer sees in the article by Engels is the notion "that the nations which have no history can also not hope for a future" (ibid., p. 272 [English translation]).

Its famous five points are:

- Austria has to be reformed into a democratic federal state of nationalities.
- In the place of historic crown lands, nationally demarcated self-administrative bodies should be formed whose legislation and administration are managed by national chambers elected on the basis of general, equal and direct suffrage.
- All the self-governing bodies of one and the same nation together make up a nationally unified association, which takes care of its national concerns in a completely autonomous way.
- The right of national minorities will be guaranteed by a single law passed by the Imperial Parliament.¹³
- Social Democrats recognise no national privilege and therefore reject the demand for a state language; the extent to which an intermediary language is needed will be determined by the Imperial Parliament.

However, in his book he does also give a social-scientific definition of the concept of “nation”, which one can definitely designate as a left counter-position to Stalin’s later definition of nation. Bauer writes: “The nation can thus be defined not as a *community of character* based on a homogenous fate but as the *community of character growing out of a community of fate* (...) Thus the nation is no longer a frozen thing for us but a process of becoming, determined in its nature by the conditions under which people struggle to support their lives and preserve the species (...) Thus the emergence of the nation, the particularity of each nation, is conditioned by the *mode of labour* of human beings, by the *instruments of labour* which they use, by the *forces of production* which they command, by the *relations* which exists between them as they participate in production. To grasp the emergence of the nation as *a part of the struggle of humanity with nature* – this is the great task for whose solution Karl Marx’s historical method has empowered us” (Ibid. p. 113 and p. 120f. ; [\[find published English translation\]](#)).

¹³ This point represents a compromise formula typical for Austrian Social Democracy. Since the party congress could not reach consensus, the decision on the rights of minorities was to be taken later by a law to be passed by the Imperial Parliament. Otto Bauer’s conception went beyond this party compromise: “Despite this the party cannot do without a minorities programme, as it is precisely the national minorities that are the continuous object of the fiercest national struggles. We think we have shown that the working class cannot answer this question other than with the demand to constitute the minorities as public-legal bodies on the basis of the personality principle” (ibid., p. 530; [\[find published English translation\]](#)). An interesting detail is the fact that both Rosa Luxemburg and V.I. Lenin refer to this point in their polemics and bend the relevant passage in the Brno Programme to fit their own point of view. Rosa Luxemburg maintains that the Programme provides for a special right “for the protection of national minorities in the newly formed national territories” (Luxemburg, *Nationalitätenfrage und Autonomie*, p. 223), while Lenin interprets the same passage as a purely “territorialist programme” “one that created no national groups ‘that do not take account of the territory in which the members of the nation dwell’” (Lenin, “Critical Remarks on the National Question”, *Collected Works*, vol. 20, pp. [\[??\]](#)).

Although Luxemburg and Bauer agreed politically in many aspects their theoretical background differed as already mentioned. While Rosa Luxemburg believed in a “complete disappearance first of the languages of smaller nations” and “the final subsumption of the whole of cultured humanity in one language and nationality”,¹⁴ which she basically endorsed, Otto Bauer understood a goal of socialism to be enabling the mass of the people to appropriate the national culture.

The now easily recognised exaggerated character of Luxemburg’s position also obscures the essentially political aspect the controversy between her and Otto Bauer on the one side and Lenin on the other. Luxemburg touches on it when she emphasises as the decisive advantage of the Austrian Social Democratic programme that it decided the nationalities question “with the help of a precisely established state-political plan”.¹⁵ Notwithstanding some objectionable details it represents, she felt, “an example of the practical solution of difficulties by the party of the proletariat”.¹⁶

In fact, the Brno Programme had made the Austrian labour movement into the only relevant political force in Austria with a coherent concept regarding the two most urgent questions of state policy: the constitutional and nationalities questions. Precisely because they called for the adequate “form of coexistence of nations within the given state framework”¹⁷ involving the transformation of Austria into a democratic federal state of nationalities, they staked their claim to take over the leadership of this state in a democratic way.

However, this is a claim that the Russian Socialists did not at all want to assert. Their first goal was the revolutionary surmounting of czarism. Only through this would it have been possible, as they realistically supposed, to acquire the degree of democratic freedom that was a precondition of a politics such as the Austrian or German Social Democrats could practice.

In other words: While for the Bolsheviks the national question provided an instrument for demolishing the state which they unconditionally combated, the Austrian Social Democrats understood it as a challenge with which they wanted to demonstrate their capacity for leading the state. This reflected the concrete political starting points to which fundamental difference also Antonio Gramsci pointed two decades later in the *Prison Notebooks*: between the “East”, in which “the state [was] everything and civil society primordial and gelatinous, and the “West” in which “there was a proper relation between state and civil society”.¹⁸ From Russia’s specific conditions Lenin deduced the need to “smash the state”. By contrast, Otto Bauer aims at a transformation of the state, which after 1918 forms the content of the Austro-Marxist experiment whose leader he was. The nationalities policy and the controversy around “autonomy” and “self-determination” point to the subsequent strategic debate which was linked to Gramsci’s conceptions of “war of position and war of manoeuvre”, in which the revolutionary part of the labour movement at first oriented itself to the Eastern European, specifically Russian experience, and sought, as it turned out, in vain to apply it in the West.

In this context it is interesting to come back to Bauer’s special conception of nationalities policy, which has become known as “national-cultural autonomy” which is widely assumed that what is involved in this is the creation of territorial self-administration for diverse nationals living in one

¹⁴ Luxemburg, *Nationalitätenfrage und Autonomie*, p. 248.

¹⁵ Luxemburg, *Nationalitätenfrage und Autonomie*, p. 222.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

¹⁷ Bauer, *The Question of Nationalities and Social Democracy*, p. 505;

¹⁸ Gramsci, *Gefängnishefte*, Heft 7, § 16, p. 874.

state, that is, the domestic “constitution of the nation as a territorial authority”.¹⁹ However to the *territorial principle*, the Austro-Marxists, specifically Karl Renner and Otto Bauer, contrasted a *personality principle*, which constitutes “the nation not as a territorial authority” but as a “pure association of persons”²⁰ through which as he wrote “power should not be assigned to the Germans in this territory and the Czechs in another, rather the nations, wherever they live, should be consolidated into an entity, which independently administers its national affairs. Very often in the same city two or more nations should be able to construct their national self-administrations, without one disturbing the other, and establish national educational institutions – in the same way that in one city Catholics, Protestants and Jews.”

Otto Bauer’s approach was primarily conceived to solve the problem of the convoluted constellation of nationalities in the Danube Monarchy, however he writes that the “socialist nationalities principle” contained in “national autonomy” also could yield the blueprint of a “new kind of social structure”, a “state of states’ in which the single national communities are incorporated”.²¹ Thus the “United States of Europe” would be the “final goal of a movement on which the nations have embarked and which through forces that have already become visible will be greatly hastened”.²²

Clearly, Lenin, with his initially unconditional recognition of the “right of self-determination of nations”, better grasped the historical moment than Luxemburg and Bauer. Whether he was right in a long-run historical sense, however, may be doubted.

Otto Bauer’s conception, apparently obsolete after the break-up of the Austria-Hungarian empire, influenced the European debate in various ways and until today. It formed the basis for the theory of the Austrian nation, as it has been elaborated by Alfred Klahr, it influenced the constitution of the multinational Yugoslav state and some of its principles can be found even in the European Charter of Minority Rights, adopted in 1992 by the Council of Europe.

In today’s Europe the issue still is of a breath taking actuality. I hold that it is time that it is necessary that the Left subjects itself to the difficult exercise of putting forward a democratic and contemporary programme for the coexistence of nations and nationalities, of old and new minorities, in Europe, an effort which is synonymous with a program of a renewal of European integration. In the limited context treated, the intention was to show how remarkable and rich the intellectual heritage of the Left in this respect actually is. We should not expect it to deliver recipes for the solution of today’s and future problems. However, what it can help to do is to sharpen our political “sense of the possibilities”.

¹⁹ Bauer, *The Question of Nationalities and Social Democracy*, p. 324.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 353.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 519.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 520.