

Rethinking the Nation

For a Critique of the Leninist Conception of the national question

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Recibido: 03/03/2026

Aceptado: 31/3/2026

Abstract

“Le principe de toute souveraineté réside essentiellement dans la nation. Nul corps, nul individu ne peut exercer d’autorité qui n’en émane expressément” ([Dec.], art. 3), the French revolutionaries wrote in 1789, in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. It was not the first time that the concept of *nation* had emerged in the course of history. In the 16th century, Bacquet referred to the community of French subjects as a *nation*, during the European Middle Ages, nations were both the guilds of merchants across the continent and the university student groups (Chabod, 2019, p. 188). Looking back even further into the past, the Romans identified distant and underdeveloped populations as *nationes* (Amselle, 1999), as opposed to the *populus*. However, those who gathered in the *National Assembly* in 1789 did not merely introduce a new political principle, but brought about a shift in its meaning. A shift that marked a theoretical and political break. The consequences of this re-semantization have lasted for over two centuries, sparking debates, controversies, reflections and alternative proposals. In this article, I will engage critically with the Leninist perspective, an essential heritage for wondering what alternative there might be to the *nation*.

Keywords: self-determination of nations, socialist revolution, class struggle.

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Repensando la Nación

Para una Crítica de la Concepción Leninista de la Cuestión Nacional

Resumen

“Le principe de toute souveraineté réside essentiellement dans la nation. Nul corps, nul individu ne peut exercer d’autorité qui n’en émane expressément” ([Déc.], art. 3). Así lo escribieron los revolucionarios franceses en 1789, en la Declaración de los Derechos del Hombre y del Ciudadano. No era la primera vez que el concepto de *nación* surgía a lo largo de la historia. En el siglo XVI, Bacquet se refirió a la comunidad de súbditos franceses como *nación*; durante la Edad Media europea, las naciones eran tanto los gremios de comerciantes como los grupos de estudiantes universitarios (Chabod, 2019, p. 188). Retrocediendo aún más en el tiempo, los romanos se referían a las poblaciones distantes y atrasadas como *nationes* (Amselle, 1999), en contraposición al *populus*. Sin embargo, quienes se reunieron en la Asamblea nacional en 1789 no sólo introdujeron un nuevo principio político, sino que provocaron un cambio en su significado. Un cambio que marcó una ruptura teórica y política. Las consecuencias de esta re-semantización han perdurado durante más de dos siglos, suscitando debates y controversias, reflexiones y propuestas alternativas. En este artículo abordaremos críticamente la posición leninista, una herencia esencial para preguntarnos qué alternativa podría haber a la *nación*.

Palabras clave: autodeterminación de las naciones, revolución socialista, lucha de clases.

Repensando a Nação

Para uma Crítica da Concepção Leninista da Questão Nacional

Resumo

“Le principe de toute souveraineté réside essentiellement dans la nation. Nul corps, nul individu ne peut exercer d’autorité qui n’en émane expressément” ([Déc.], art. 3). Assim escreveram os revolucionários franceses em 1789, na Declaração dos Direitos do Homem e do Cidadão. Não era a primeira vez que o conceito de *nação* surgia no curso da história. No século XVI, Bacquet referia-se à comunidade de súditos franceses como uma *nação*, e durante a Idade Média europeia, as nações englobavam tanto as corporações de mercadores por todo o continente quanto os grupos de estudantes universitários (Chabod, 2019, p. 188). Recuando ainda mais no passado, os romanos referiam-se a populações distantes e atrasadas como *nationes* (Amselle, 1999), em oposição ao *populus*. Contudo, aqueles que se reuniram na Assembleia Nacional em 1789 não introduziram apenas um novo princípio político, mas provocaram uma mudança

em seu significado. Uma mudança que marcou uma ruptura teórica e política. As consequências dessa resignificação perduram há mais de dois séculos, suscitando debates e controvérsias, reflexões e propostas alternativas. Neste artigo, analisaremos criticamente a posição leninista, um legado essencial para refletirmos sobre qual alternativa poderia existir para a *nação*.

Palavras-chave: autodeterminação das nações, revolução socialista, luta de classes.

Rethinking the Nation

For a Critique of the Leninist Conception of the national question

The right to establish an independent state

It took about a century for the labor movement to address the issue of nationhood systematically. A broad debate on the national question started developing at the turn of the 20th century. The political leaders of the Second International could only partially refer to the reflections of the founders of scientific socialism. Although Marx and Engels had commented on the issue of the struggle for national independence, their writings were mostly functional to the political struggle of the moment, rather than structured theoretical reflections. The internationalism as a matter of principle already enunciated at the end of the *Communist Manifesto*, “Workers of all countries, unite!” (Marx, Engels, 1999, p. 57), was accompanied by an assessment of the concrete political conditions in which the independence struggles took place. The contingency of their positions led the two political leaders to a substantial lack of stability in the slogans they launched over time and to an inconsistency of judgment in addressing different empirical contexts. For reasons of space, I cannot dwell here on a detailed analysis of the positions of the two authors. Suffice it to say that what emerges from their writings on the subject is a subordination of the national question to the more general problem of the global proletarian revolution. In short, where the struggle for independence was functional to the struggle for socialism (for example in Ireland or in Poland), and only in this sense was it progressive, then it had to be supported without hesitation (Marx and Engels, 1975). On the other hand, as in the case of the Balkans, whose independence would have strengthened the *gendarme of Europe*, the Tsarist Empire, the independence movement was to be attacked as an objective obstacle to the development of an internationalist class consciousness (Marx and Engels, 1975). Marx and Engels’ position was therefore inconsistent, providing no stable theoretical basis for the development of a coherent doctrine within the social-democratic parties.

It was Kautsky who was the first to address the issue systematically (Kautsky, 1974a, pp. 111–127; Kautsky, 1974b, pp. 128–142; Kautsky, 1974c, pp. 148–155), sparking the debate that raged between the two centuries and involved the most prominent international leaders: Otto Bauer, Rosa Luxemburg, and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, among the most notorious names. In this contribution, I would like to focus on the Leninist position, as it became, with the Bolshevik victory in 1917 and the doctrinal hardening carried out by Stalin in the 1920s and 1930s, the official dogma of the communist workers’ movement.

Lenin’s first opportunity to address the issue of nationhood came with the publication in 1903 of the “Manifesto of the Union of Armenian social democrats”. The Union was a political organization that emerged in the Caucasus and took a public stance on the issue of nation, aiming to bring together in a single organization all “local socialist elements and all workers belonging to different nationalities” (ibid.)

and affirming the need to “establish, in the future free Russia, a *federal* republic [emphasis by Lenin]” (Lenin, 1969a, p. 303). Even though they do not consider possible to include in the program the demand for political autonomy for the nationalities of the Caucasus (because of the multinational composition of the population and the absence of a geographical division between individual nations), claiming instead “only autonomy with regard to cultural life, that is, freedom of language, schools, education, etc.” (ibid.), they state that “in the future free Russia, we will recognize the right of all nations to self-determination, because we consider national freedom to be only one aspect of the freedom of citizens in general” (ibid.).

While considering the “Manifesto of the Union of Armenian social democrats” a step forward in the struggle for socialism in the Russian Empire, Lenin does not fail to point out the sites of disagreement. He recognized that the Union correctly indicate “the two fundamental principles to which all social democrats in Russia must adhere on the national question” (ibid.): political and civil freedom and full equality, and the right of self-determination for all nationalities. However, the demand for a *federal* republic [emphasis by Lenin], presupposing “autonomous and compact national political entities” (ibid.), cannot be included in the social-democratic program: “It is not the task of the proletariat to *advocate* [emphasis by Lenin] federalism and national autonomy; it is not the task of the proletariat to advance such demands, which inevitably boil down to the demand for the creation of an autonomous *class* state [emphasis by Lenin]” (ibid.). The formation of the plurinational empire is immediately the arena of proletarian conflict and must be maintained as such, although it is necessary to recognize the coercive nature of the relationship between Great Russians and national minorities. The fulfillment of the “negative duty (to fight and protest against violence)” (ibid., p. 305) cannot obscure the positive duty: “not the self-determination of peoples and nations, but of the *proletariat* of every nationality [emphasis by Lenin]” (ibid.). Therefore, in the social-democratic program, the struggle against national oppression must coincide with the “demand for the total equality of citizens (regardless of sex, language, religion, race, nationality, etc.) and their right to free democratic self-determination” (ibid.). Self-determination is clearly not expressed in a nationalistic sense but in a civil and political sense.

The same position, outlined in greater detail, is expressed in an article from the same year: “The National Question in Our Program” (Lenin, 1969b). Defending himself against attacks from the Polish Socialist Party, Lenin reiterates that the recognition of the right of nations to self-determination, does not imply support for every struggle for national self-determination. Since the struggle for national self-determination is essentially a bourgeois struggle, i.e. one specific to the bourgeois phase of the revolutionary process, the national question is always subordinate to the social question, to the struggle for socialism. Where the two perspectives coincide tactically is it possible and necessary to support the struggle for national independence. Otherwise, the national question must take a back seat to make room for the struggle of the entire proletariat to overcome the present state of affairs. In contrast, a staged idea of the historical process still shines through, according to which the bourgeois and socialist phases of the revolution follow one another without interpenetrating. Therefore the duty of the proletariat is to contingently support the progressive slogans launched

by the bourgeoisie, in order to bring the process of social transformation to maturity and completion. This notion of revolutionary temporality will be abandoned in the following decade, paving the way for a reconsideration of the problem of the self-determination of nations.

Lenin's interventions in 1903 were followed by ten years of silence, during which his position changed significantly and his conceptualization regarding the problem of people's self-determination took shape, becoming dogma in the following decades. Unlike what he had stated in 1903, Lenin argued into the "Resolutions of the 1913 Summer Meeting of the Central Committee of the Russian social-democratic Labour Party with Party Officials" (Lenin, 1966e) that "the paragraph of our program (on the self-determination of nations) *can only be interpreted* [our emphasis] in the sense of political self-determination, i.e. the right to secession and the establishment of an independent state" (Lenin, 1967, p. 220). Here Lenin not only emphasizes that "for Russian social-democracy, this point of the program [...] is *absolutely* necessary [emphasis by Lenin]" (ibid.), but also reverses the axiological relationship previously established between contingency and the necessity of the struggle for self-determination: "If social-democracy recognizes the right of self-determination for all nationalities, this does not mean that it renounces an autonomous assessment of the advisability, in each individual case, of the state separation of this or that nation" (ibid., p. 221).

This position does not mean abandoning the centrality of the struggle for socialism in the name of the struggle for independence:

first the national cause, then the proletarian cause, say the bourgeois nationalists [...]. The proletarian cause comes first, we say, because it not only secures the permanent and radical interests of labor and humanity, but also the interests of democracy, and without democracy an autonomous and independent Ukraine is unthinkable (Lenin, 1966a, p. 23).

However, if in 1903 the struggle for the self-determination of the proletariat coincided *tout court* with the construction of socialism and the overcoming of national divisions, now – in the awareness that the proletariat must also take on bourgeois slogans and not only proletarian ones – the right to self-determination of nations must be recognized as part of the socialist program. This proposition remains true with the exception of the specific cases where it hinders the struggle: "in the national question, the proletariat *opposes* the *pragmatism* of the bourgeoisie with a position of *principle* and always supports the bourgeoisie *only under certain conditions* [all emphasis by Lenin]" (Lenin, 1966b, p. 390). There is therefore no opposition between a bourgeois phase and a proletarian phase of the revolution, but rather the interpenetration of the two moments in a single process in which the workers' parties have the task of reconciling the tension between the 'historical' objectives of the bourgeoisie (the solution to the national question) and those of the proletariat (the unification of the subordinate classes beyond national affiliation).

Consequently, "Russian social democrats must, in all their propaganda, insist on the right of all nationalities to form a separate state or to freely choose the state

they wish to belong to” (Lenin, 1967, p. 220), keeping in mind that they must “*combine* the revolutionary struggle against capitalism with the revolutionary program and revolutionary tactics for *all* democratic demands: republic, militia, election of officials by the people, equal rights for women, self-determination of peoples, etc. [all emphasis by Lenin]” (Lenin, 1966c, p. 373) and showing that only the proletarian revolution and socialism will be able to fully realize these demands because “as long as capitalism exists, all these demands can only be realized exceptionally and always in an incomplete form” (ibid.). In other words, *democratic demands* must be used as a factor of revolutionary confrontation to widen existing contradictions and mature proletarian class consciousness:

The strengthening of national oppression during imperialism does not mean that social-democracy should renounce the ‘utopian’ struggle [...] for the freedom of separation of nations, but on the contrary, it means a wider use of the conflicts that arise in this area *too* as reasons for mass action, for revolutionary action against the bourgeoisie (Lenin, 1966d, p. 150).

The centrality assumed by the struggle for independence ended up relegating the question of national cultural autonomy to a subordinate position. While in 1903 the assessment on autonomy in cultural life was positive, from this writing onwards, Lenin systematically affirmed its “absolute contradiction with the internationalism of the class struggle of the proletariat”, the fact that such autonomy “facilitates the process of bringing the proletariat and the working masses closer to the sphere of influence of bourgeois nationalist ideas” and distracts them from the task of “democratic transformations of the state as a whole” (Lenin, 1967, p. 223), as far as possible in a society dominated by the capitalist mode of production. Therefore, “from the point of view of social-democracy, it is inadmissible to raise, either directly or indirectly, the slogan of *national culture* [emphasis by Lenin]” (ibid.). The issue is explored further deep in another article from the same year, in which Lenin explains the reasons for this rejection in more detail. Every national culture, he argues, expresses the culture of the ruling class in the nation. Social democrats, therefore, must identify the progressive “germs” (Lenin, 1966a, p. 17) present in ‘their own’ culture and bring them to maturity and unify them in an “international culture of democracy and the world workers’ movement” (ibid., p. 16). For this reason,

if a Ukrainian Marxist allows himself to be carried away by the *entirely legitimate and natural* [emphasis by Lenin] hatred of the Great Russian oppressors to such an extent that even a small part of this hatred falls on proletarian culture [...], this Marxist will thereby slip into the swamp of bourgeois nationalism. Similarly, the Great Russian Marxist will also slip into the swamp of nationalism, not only bourgeois but even Black Hundreds, if he forgets even for a moment the demand for complete legal equality for Ukrainians or their right to form an independent state (ibid., p. 24).

The contradiction between the right to national self-determination and proletarian internationalism is thus deepened and – at least apparently – resolved by making it the cornerstone of the struggle:

the proletarian must demand the freedom of political separation of the colonies and oppressed nations from ‘his’ nation [...] On the other hand, socialists of oppressed nations must particularly defend and implement the complete and unconditional unity, including organizational unity, of the workers of the oppressed nation with those of the dominant nation (Lenin, 1966d, p. 152).

This is a theoretically elegant solution, which is explicitly echoed in Stalin’s work, “Marxism and the National Question”. The systematic nature of the work highlights the limitations of Lenin’s approach, limitations that are obscured by the contingent and strikingly polemical nature of the latter’s interventions. Stalin writes that nations are “stable, historically formed communities of language, territory, economic life, and mental configuration, which is manifested in a common culture” (Stalin, 1974, pp. 52–3). Rejecting any attempt to characterize the nation in an ethnobiological sense, the author explicitly rejects the attribution of a common identity of race and lineage (ibid., p. 48). On the contrary, according to Stalin, national identity can only arise in the midst of historical development, a development guided by the bourgeoisie since its emergence at the end of the 18th century, and whose determining factors are at once economic, political, geographical, cultural, and even psychological (although the latter is defined rather generically as “common psychological configuration” (ibid., p. 52), without further specification). “Not every stable community”, writes Stalin, “constitutes a nation” (ibid., p. 48), and the existence of multi-national states proves this. Certain preconditions, certain common elements are necessary for a nation to be called such. Elements that cement the community into the national whole. In the previous quotation I mentioned them: language, territory, “internal economic ties” (ibid., p. 50) and “national character” (ibid., p. 52). As mentioned above, Stalin recognizes that the development of the nation is closely linked to the bourgeoisie’s seizure of power. It is an intimate, compelling connection that has its roots in the development of the capitalist mode of production: “the nation”, he writes, “is not only a historical category, but a historical category of a specific era, the era of ascendant capitalism” (ibid., p. 58). It is therefore the bourgeoisie that leads national movements, that makes the nation its banner, at least where it is able to complete the “process of liquidating feudalism” (ibid., p. 58). In the East, where economic development is lacking, the nation has been replaced by plurinational states, “states composed of several nationalities. Such are Austria–Hungary and Russia” (ibid., p. 59), whose national awakening and struggle, the awakening and struggle of the dominant nations and of the oppressed nations,

began and flared up not between entire nations, but between the ruling classes of the dominant and oppressed nations. Usually, the struggle is waged either by the petty bourgeoisie of the oppressed nation against the big bourgeoisie of the dominant nation (Czechs and Germans), or the agricultural bourgeoisie of the oppressed nation against the aristocracy of the dominant nation (the Ukrainians in Poland), or the entire ‘national’

bourgeoisie of the oppressed nations against the nobility that governs the dominant nation (Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Russia) (ibid., pp. 62-5).

In any case, “the bourgeoisie is the protagonist” (ibid., p. 65), first and foremost because his need for a homogeneous commercial space, “to secure its ‘own’ ‘national’ market” (ibid.). A need that acts as a material stimulus for the development of a national movement. This development is often hindered by the “semi-feudal, semi-bourgeois bureaucracy of the dominant nation with its method of ‘holding on and not letting go’” (ibid.), which, however, triggers the explosion of political struggle and the union under the banner of national independence of the entire oppressed people, both the bourgeoisie of the dominated nation and the proletariat.

Just as in Lenin, however, the recognition of the interclassist nature of the struggle does not lead Stalin to reject *toto coelo* the national struggle outright. Although the interest of the workers is to “unite all their comrades in a single international army” (ibid., p. 69), although i.e. the internationalist character of the proletariat, or rather, precisely because of this,

the social-democracy of all countries [must] proclaim the right of nations to self-determination. The right to self-determination, that is: only the nation itself has the right to decide its own destiny, no one has the right to *forcibly* interfere in the life of a nation, to *destroy* its schools and other institutions, to abolish its customs and traditions, to suppress its language, or to curtail its rights [all emphasis by Stalin] (ibid., pp. 69-70).

The right, but not the *duty* to self-determination, to which social-democracy will always prefer union (without any imposition: “no one can (has no right to!) intervene with violence in the life of a nation”, ibid., p. 114).

Ein Volk, Ein Land, Ein Stadt

Despite recognizing the historicity of nations, it is clear that the implicit thesis in Lenin’s and Stalin’s theses is that human beings tend spontaneously to create nations. Nations have their own course, they historically arise, seeing the bourgeoisie as the social subject that embodies national claims, but they are the inevitable result of the transformation of relations between individuals over time. This point of view absolutizes the concept of nation and, despite the attempt to analyze it, presupposes it as a given. This assumption is also implicit in Lenin, who is in fact more concerned with defining the correct political and programmatic relationship with the problem of nations than with proposing an alternative to the sense of national identity.

A reconstruction of the history of the nation allows us to look critically at this concept, not to weave a polemic more than a hundred years later, but to shed light on the problems underlying national identity and to raise the possibility of overcoming it.

I wrote at the beginning of this text that the concept of nation has an ancient history. The French revolutionaries did not limit themselves to “destroyed the feudal foundation, – to use Marx’s vivid terminology in “The Eighteenth Brumaire” – and cut off the feudal heads that had grown on it” (Marx, 1977, p. 46), thus liberating

the productive forces contained in the society of the *Ancien Régime*. Imbued with a strongly individualistic anthropology, expressed in the liberal worldview, they dissolved pre-existing social ties, whether corporate-professional, religious, familial, or arising within village communities. To a society enriched by intermediate bodies – as Montesquieu defined them (Montesquieu, 2005) – they opposed a pulverized society, whose atoms, the citizens, could finally enter into an individual relationship free of mediation. The hostility towards the articulation of civil society into particular ‘states and bodies, which subsumed the individual and mediated his relationship with the state, was not expressed solely on philosophical grounds. On June 14, 1791, Isaac René Guy Le Chapelier, founder of the Breton club and deputy of the Constituent Assembly, presented a law prohibiting all forms of professional or class associations:

Les citoyens d’un même état ou profession [...] ne pourront, lorsqu’ils se trouveront ensemble, se nommer ni président, ni secrétaires, ni syndics, tenir des registres, prendre des arrêtés ou délibérations, former des règlements sur leurs prétendus intérêts communs (Loi Le Chapelier, 17 june 1791).

The ban on defending *alleged common interests* lasted in France until 1864, and similar laws were passed in other countries throughout the 19th century.

But once the pre-existing social ties had been dissolved and replaced by an atomized society in which individuals related monadically to the state, the victorious bourgeoisie was faced with a difficult problem. How could a supportive and unified community be rebuilt in which every individual could identify? The nation, and secondarily the people, were the answer to this question. This should not be thought of as a conscious process. As Marc Bloch astutely notes in *Apologia for History*, “in order to give names to their actions, their beliefs, and the various aspects of their social life, men did not wait to see them become the object of disinterested research” (Bloch, 1998, p. 117). Quite simply, the protagonists of the Revolution found themselves with a word and a concept in their hands and took it, stretching and distorting it to better suit their ends and purposes: nation, people, and even citizen, which in retrospect seem to us today to be the theoretical cornerstones of the revolutionary enterprise, are among the terms that the revolutionaries readapted. Yet these words did have a history, and an analysis of the meanings they have taken on over time helps to shed light on the rupture wrought by the struggling bourgeoisie.

Hobsbawm writes:

in High and Low German the word *Volk* (people) clearly has some of the same associations today as the words derived from ‘*natio*’, but the interaction is complex. It is clear that in medieval Low German the term (*natie*), insofar as it is used – and one would guess from its Latin origin it would hardly be used except among the literate or those of royal, noble or gentle birth – does not yet have the connotation *Volk*, which it only begins to acquire in the sixteenth century. It means, as in medieval French, birth and descent group (*Geschlecht*) (2013, p. 16).

Natio and *Volk* were initially used to indicate the small community to which one belonged: the place of origin, of which one person was a native (and it is no coincidence that the terms ‘nation’ and ‘native’ share the same etymological root). It is only thanks to a gradual shift in their meaning that the community denoted by these words expands:

As elsewhere, [*natio*] develops in the direction of describing larger self-contained groups such as guilds or other corporations which require to be distinguished from others with whom they coexist: hence the ‘nations’ as a synonym for foreigner, as in Spanish, the ‘nations’ of foreign merchants (‘foreign communities, especially of traders, living in a city and enjoying privileges there’), the familiar ‘nations’ of students in ancient universities. Hence also the less familiar ‘a regiment from the nation of Luxemburg’ (ibid.).

At the time I am examining, between the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern age, the connection between state, nation, and people, which today seems natural, was still far from obvious:

Richelieu assured the savages of Canada that: “once they have been brought to the knowledge of the true faith and have professed it, they will be considered and regarded as natural Frenchmen and as such may come to live in France whenever they wish, and proceed to make purchases, make wills, enjoy the right of succession, accept donations and legacies on the same terms as true French subjects and natives, without having to provide any letter of declaration [of citizenship] or naturalization” (Chabod, 2019, pp. 188–189)

And still in 1740:

the encyclopedist Johann Heinrich Zedler in 1740 the nation, in its real and original meaning meant a united number of *Bürger* [...] who share a body of customs, mores and laws. From this it follows that it can have no territorial meaning, since members of different nations (divided by ‘differences in ways of life – *Lebensarten* – and customs’) can live together in the same province, even quite a small one (Hobsbawm, 2013, p. 17).

The English historian goes on to report that

for Zedler the word to describe the totality of the people of all ‘nations’ living within the same province or state is *Volck*. But, alas for terminological tidiness, in practice the term ‘Nation’ is often used in the same sense as ‘Volck’; and sometimes as a synonym for ‘estate’ of society (*Stand*, *ordo*) and sometimes for any other association or society (*Gesellschaft*, *societas*) (ibid.).

Nevertheless, the unification of political power and the formation of centralised states, with the consequent breakdown of both the religious universalism embodied by the Catholic Church and imperial political universalism, allowed for the gradual

identification of the community of subjects with the sovereign and, hence, with the territory governed by the latter. In northern, central, and western Europe, where religious unity had already been shattered by the Reformation in the early 17th century, intellectual and governing elites had initiated processes of:

formation of nations [in the contemporary sense of the term]. These included self-definitions and recognition of established names of kingdoms and genealogies of their peoples; the cultivation of memories, symbols, myths, and traditions in varying degrees; the growing territorialization of ethnic memories and popular attachments to territorial kingdoms and provinces; the creation of a public elite culture and its rudimentary dissemination to other strata; and the development of shared customs and standardized lawcodes across individual kingdoms and provinces. [...] These processes had already given rise to a certain degree of national identity and sentiment (Smith, 2008, p. 130).

It is precisely in this magma that the fracture wrought by the French revolutionaries fits in. Having rejected the divine right as a principle of government and – as mentioned above – having subverted the estate order, the state could become a bourgeois state. A state that unifies individual citizens, who from that moment on find their collective belonging in the political community. A community known as the people, an earthly, empirical concretization of the transcendent dimension represented by the state, to which must be paid a particular cult, the ‘civil religion’. This worship was necessary because the state appeared – and still appears today – to be the institution capable of embodying, above the social parties, the unity and indivisibility of the community to which it belongs: the one and indivisible nation. This completes the triad so common in the contemporary age: state–nation–people. A triad that is a true syllogism, in which the nation acts as a middle term between the abstract universality of the state and the empirical concreteness of the people.

The revolutionary and therefore political character of this triad can be appreciated in the content given to the concept of nation during the heroic phase of the construction of bourgeois society. Despite its etymology and past history, one did not become part of the nation by right of birth. One was not French because one was born to French parents or on French soil. The members of the nation were first and foremost united by the same political project:

From the popular–revolutionary point of view, it was not, in any fundamental sense, ethnicity, language and the like, though these could be indications of collective belonging also. As Pierre Vilar has pointed out, what characterized the nation–people as seen from below was precisely that it represented the common interest against particular interests, the common good against privilege (Hobsbawm, 2013, p. 20).

This civic and political content of nationalism allowed Thomas Paine to be elected without difficulty to the National Convention (and was still to be found eighty years later during the events of the socialist Paris Commune). Above all, it was content that showed the project–based and programmatic nature of national demands. The nation, in the contemporary sense of the word, was born as a political banner of struggle led

by an insurrectionary bourgeoisie that opposed the unity of citizens, i.e. of the subordinate classes, to the aristocratic particularism of the ancient world in the process of dissolution.

The victory of the revolutionary bourgeoisie and the establishment of the bourgeois state across the European continent changed the meaning of nation and national claims. In the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, the nation shed its role as a political banner raised against the old society and became instead the only possible place for individuals to live together. In a sense, the nation became naturalized, to the point that it was no longer possible to contest the existence of entities called nations. On the contrary, attempts were made to backdate their existence to past times, reinventing history to justify this backdating: the French resurrected Vercingetorix, reviving the contrast between a fictitious descent of the Third Estate from the Gauls and an equally invented descent of the First Estate from the Franks; the Germans rediscovered themselves as burly Germanic tribes; the Russian Jews felt closer to David than to Alexander III; and the Italians dreamed of a revival of the Roman Empire in the 20th century.

Not only that. By grounding the nation's legitimacy in the formal equality of its citizens, the bourgeoisie introduced an inevitable principle of discrimination against non-citizens. In other words, individuals are equal insofar as they belong to the community of citizens, which consequently opens the possibility of considering as unequal those who do not belong to that community – foreigners, the “others,” the “different”. As Étienne Balibar acutely notes in *Race, Nation, Class*:

It is not the modern state that is ‘egalitarian,’ but the modern national (and nationalist) state, with equality having as its internal and external limits the national community and as its essential content the acts that directly signify it (in particular universal suffrage and political ‘citizenship’). It is first and foremost an equality with regard to nationality (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991, p. 61).

Wallerstein underscores this point in the same collection of essays:

[the nation] allows for the legitimization of capitalism's hierarchical reality without offending the formal equality before the law [our emphasis], which is one of its political principles. [...] Ethnicization, or the notion of a people, resolves one of the fundamental contradictions of historical capitalism—its simultaneous drive toward theoretical equality and practical inequality [emphasis by Wallerstein] (1991, p. 94).

Once the nation has been naturalized, national identity is also naturalized, and with that, some form of nationalism could arise, whether based on the enjoyment of common civil and political rights (Renan's famous civic nationalism: the nation as an everyday plebiscite (Renan, 2019)), or based on the community of blood and soil dear to ethnobiological nationalists (the Nazi motto *Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer* consciously echoes Herder's essentialist and romantic triptych: *Ein Volk, ein Land, eine Sprache* (Anderson, 2006)). But, as both Benedict Anderson and Anthony D. Smith recognize, nationalism thus began to take on a para-religious dimension, as evidenced by the monuments erected to the Nation and the Fatherland:

Other cultures have erected cenotaphs, but in those tombs, the identity of the deceased was known, only the body was missing. Here [in the monuments celebrating the nation] no, filling the cenotaph would be sacrilegious: in that tomb, the absent body is the nation: in Rome, the Unknown Soldier is the Italian, in Paris, under the Arc de Triomphe, that void is filled with Frenchness (d'Eramo, 2018, p. XV).

Smith adds:

In seeking to replace traditional Christianity as the basis of community, republican nationalists embraced a deity every bit as exclusive and demanding as the God whom they sought to dethrone. In turning the nation itself into the sole object of worship and veneration, republican nationalism created a new secular religion, based on the sacred communion of the people and replete with its own symbols of honor and devotion – emblems, flags, coins, calendars, anthems, parades, oaths, lawcodes, ceremonies of remembrance and celebration, national academies, national museums and libraries, and all the paraphernalia of institutions and classifications that united the citizens and separated them from outsiders. As the Petition of Agitators put it in 1792: “The nation is the sole divinity whom it is permitted to worship” (Smith, 2008, p. 147).

The para-religious dimension of nationalism is well understood in light of the aforementioned secular cult of the state. If the state becomes a sort of *super partes* guardian deity of collective life and is given a religion, with its rituals, its festivals, its martyrs; if the state becomes the visible manifestation of the nation, which identifies itself with the state and becomes a subject in the full sense of the term, nationalism cannot be assimilated to a political current like any other. So much so that, as Anderson notes, “the cultural significance of such monuments becomes even clearer if one tries to imagine, say, a Tomb of the Unknown Marxist or a cenotaph for fallen Liberals” (Anderson, 2006, p. 10). In a certain sense, nationalism rises almost to the background, to a stage on which different political currents can take shape (or become contaminated), which in turn give the concept of nation a different interpretation, more or less contradictory with its own theoretical core: the nationalism of the Stalinist communist parties, for example, was in stark contradiction with the internationalism they claimed to represent, whereas fascism based its political proposal on an ethnobiological and racial nationalism.

This characteristic has posed and continues to pose many problems for those who want to overcome the current society, primarily the Marxist-inspired workers' movement. Assuming both peoples and nations as given elements, and claiming the right of nations to self-determination, i.e. the right to create an independent nation-state, it became impossible to produce forms of belonging that challenge and overcome the bourgeois forms of aggregation inherited from capitalist society. One people for each nation-state and one nation-state for each people, a legacy of the 19th-century bourgeois approach, could only produce a proliferation of small homelands, a fragmentation impossible to heal in the proclaimed unity of the working class throughout the world.

Despite Lenin's hopes, the Soviet experience itself proves this. Although the self-determination of nations was subordinated to internationalist solidarity, the outcome of the revolution was not a unitary state but a union of states. A union whose territorial limits coincided with the Red Army's ability to export the revolution at the point of a bayonet. Where they succeeded in defeating counter-revolutionary governments, as in the Republic of Bukhara where they defeated the emir's government, a Soviet Socialist Republic was established. Where the war was lost, as in Poland, the principle of self-determination was decided before it could be enforced by force of guns. The result was the fragmentation of both the state and the ruling party into as many national states and parties as there were Soviet socialist republics (Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Transcaucasian Communist Party, etc.). This diversity represented an objective centrifugal force, only partially balanced by the construction of a centralist power (a power that, starting in the 1940s, during World War II, revived Great Russian rhetoric to cement a sense of belonging to the Soviet state). The outcome is well known: the various communist parties became bastions of nationalism, and at the end of the 1980s, their leaders went to war to obtain ever greater space for maneuver, decision-making power, and privileges. With the irreversible crisis of the Soviet edifice in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall—an economic, political, social, and even environmental crisis, whose origins lie in the process of bureaucratization that affected both the party and the Soviet state in the aftermath of victory in the civil war— they definitively abandoned socialist and internationalist rhetoric, raising the banner of national independence and thus fragmenting the USSR into fifteen different states, sometimes even at open war with each other. Self-determination thus became the catalyst around which the contradictions shaking the Union condensed, clearly marking the limits of both that slogan and the realization of socialism in the USSR.

By way of a (problematic) conclusion

Today – though not only today – the nation seems to have returned as a central concept in political discourse. Unlike a century ago, however, the construction of nation-states no longer coincides with the overcoming of old pre-capitalist institutions (an overcoming that was at once the precondition and the outcome of the development of a native bourgeoisie, and from which the proletariat was supposed to wrest democratic slogans in order to realize them and at the same time transcend them within the socialist project). Today, and in part already at the beginning of the twentieth century, the national question presents itself rather on a distinctly ideological terrain: that of constructing a cross-class sense of belonging entirely functional to the affirmation of the imperialist interests of local bourgeoisies. These bourgeoisies mediate the movement of global capital within territories once subject to the direct rule of foreign states (the colonies), and subject the resources of certain regions of the world – including the labor power originating from those regions – to limitless exploitation.

This complex phenomenon, which in extreme synthesis is the world market in the now senescent phase of imperialism, can hardly be framed within the dyad oppressed nations–oppressing nations. The national question itself must instead be reconsidered within the clash among antagonistic imperialisms. Behind the right of

peoples to self-determination – a right that coincides with the right of that people's ruling classes, in regions of the world long since divided among foreign capitals, to carve out a place for themselves, albeit as second- or third-rate diners at the bourgeois banquet –, the class character of the national question emerges ever more clearly. What becomes necessary is for the subordinate class to recognize its own class unity beyond borders, while at the same time disavowing the unity of the people, the banner around which the ruling classes rally.

It thus becomes increasingly urgent to propose an alternative to national identity. But which one? What alternative can there be to the nation? A sense of belonging to humanity as a whole appears a response as generous and well-intentioned as it is impracticable, if only because of the abstract character of such a concept: humanity. Moreover, humanity as a whole would still experience specific forms of aggregation that could foster exclusivism, mutual suspicion, and even conflict. Little is gained in solving the problem if we oppose national identity with another identity equally prone to clashes and racisms.

It might seem, following Gellner when he writes that "What do exist are cultures, often subtly grouped, shading into each other, overlapping, intertwined" (Gellner, 1983, p. 49), that one could advocate a sense of cultural belonging. But how can we avoid the risk of hypostatizing this concept as well? There is no *single* homogeneous and ahistorical culture; rather, there are different cultures, more or less socially determined, each with its own evolution, mutual relations, intersections, hybridizations, and fusions. If we can broadly identify a common culture within a community or society (an Italian, French, German culture, etc.), we must acknowledge that it is the product of a process of construction, just like the nation – and indeed connected to it. The triad State–nation–people imposes the constitution of a culture of which the people are the custodians. The very existence, for example, of a national language (Italian in Italy, French in France, etc.) is not a natural fact, but the outcome of a political choice, one made possible in turn by the existence of a state apparatus capable of establishing compulsory schooling with a defined curriculum, a literary and artistic canon, and, among other things, precisely a language. It is the nation–state that creates the national language, not the other way around.

Yet this consideration seems to open up a possible way out of the impasse. If national identity is possible only on condition that there exists a state capable of constituting it, it becomes clear that the question of overcoming it cannot be addressed in isolation. Behind the problem of the nation immediately emerges the problem of the state, and thus of the social relations it visibly expresses. In other words, constructing a sense of belonging different from the national one cannot even be conceived outside a struggle to establish a different form of political and social organization, one that transcends the current bourgeois state (and capitalist relations of production) and reorganizes relations among individuals on radically different foundations.

It is therefore not merely a matter of counterposing another identity to national identity, but of rethinking the entire social edifice within which individuals exist, along with their economic, political, and thus also cultural and artistic relations. Rethinking the national question means immediately rethinking the question of the state and

the capitalist mode of production. It means imagining not only a different group of belonging, but a different society, a different humanity, a different idea of the world.

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