

IMPERIALISM AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION: SOME ERRORS AND SOME THESES¹

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Opponents of Marxism have argued that one of historical materialism's greatest difficulties is represented by the national question, since the political forces corresponding to the issue do not appear amenable to class analysis. In fact there has been no failure to produce class analyses of the national question. The problem rather is that most of them have been wrong.

Part of the reason for this surfeit of errors has been the inherent difficulty of the question itself, which is in a real sense more refractory to materialism than other problems. The national question poses the relation of the proletariat to other social classes in a less immediately acute way than other political issues, making Marxism's absorption of non-Marxist political positions more probable. A second obvious reason, and one which has created particular difficulties in the contemporary third world, is that the post-colonial period finds no reflection in the work of Marx and Lenin. Marxists in neo-colonies have thus been obliged to rely on formulations more clearly designed for other periods and other situations, with the attendant danger of inappropriate transposition.

In the face of these difficulties it requires a considerable effort to insist that there is a clear - though not necessarily simple - Marxist view of the national question and its relation to imperialism, one moreover which is entirely applicable today in the third world. This paper is an attempt to clarify this view. It will proceed by first outlining some common errors concerning these problems, and then formulating a few preliminary theses in relation to them.

Some errors in the formulation of the national question:-

1. Lenin developed the Marxist position on the national question in relation to the slogan of "the right of nations to self-determination". The first and most evident error concerning this issue occurs when this slogan is interpreted as the postulation of a general moral principle, on a par with - for example - "freedom of speech". In this enunciation the "right" seems to

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pertain to nations as a species in the same way that the latter, in bourgeois ideology, pertains to "man". This type of formulation confuses Marxism with the espousal of certain fixed universal values, that is, mistakes it for a first-order ethics. Inseparable from this error is the immense expenditure of energy on formally defining the qualifications for this right, that is, what comprises a nation. Political analysis becomes then replaced by the evaluation of the claims of specific national groups (e.g., certain African peoples, Ulster Protestants, white South Africans, etc.) against such definitions. Such an approach is by no means new. It was introduced into Marxism in the first materialist effort to 'analyse the problem, that by Kautsky in 1887.² It also dominated the debate before the first world war between Otto Bauer and Stalin, part of whose quarrel concerned whether "community of territory" was an essential part of nationality.³

2. A second error commonly made with respect to this question is to confuse it with that of cultural subordination. The national question is quite different from this issue, which in any case is usually so diffusely formulated as to be devoid of meaning. Hence it cannot be resolved by "cultural autonomy", as the Austro-Marxists held. To identify national with cultural oppression is to endorse the bourgeois or petty-bourgeois "national" culture of the oppressed nation, and more practically to endorse the demands of these classes (and/or the clergy) for control of ideological apparatuses such as schooling.

3. Most remaining errors concerning the national question derive in one way or another from the tendency of economism.

This tendency is possibly the commonest form of deviation within Marxism, feeding from certain imprecisions in Marx and Engels' own work, and first defined by Lenin in relation to the politics of his Menshevik opponents in Russia. Economism was identified by Lenin as the basis of the failure of the Mensheviks to register the significance of a realm of political struggle relatively autonomous from the economy. For Lenin, it was only at the political instance of the social formation that the decisive questions of the revolution - for example, class alliances and seizure of state power - could be analysed and acted upon. In other words, it was in relation to his discovery of economism as a deviation that Lenin simultaneously discovered his contribution to Marxism-Leninism - a strategic conception of politics.

This conception was founded not simply on an opposition to the Menshevik glorification of trade union struggle, but a general rejection of conceiving Marxism as an economic determinism in which the productive forces are understood as the decisive element in historical development and the significance of social forces and changes are divined from their economic content alone. Instead Lenin reinstated the centrality of the class struggle in social change and insisted upon the necessary independence of a distinctly political realm of analysis.

Much of Lenin's argument was actually directed at the political, as opposed to the strictly theoretical implications of economism. These were simultaneously rightist and leftist in character. In the case of the Mensheviks, glorification of trade union struggle generated both reformist and spontaneist-syndicalist lines, both of which endorsed as natural the forms of working-class ideologies generated by the capitalist labour process. This rightism and leftism reappears in other forms of economism.

Economism ran like a thread through many of the political positions of all factions of the Second International and was to be found too in the Bolshevik party. Here its most obvious expression was the conviction shared by both Stalin and Trotsky that the essence of socialist construction consisted in the expansion of the state-owned productive forces. It was found no less in relation to the national question.

In "The Nascent Trend of Imperialist Economism" (1916) Lenin indicated some of its forms respecting this issue:

"... a new Economism is being born. Its reasoning (like that of the old Economism) is similarly based on two curvets: Right - we are against the "right to self-determination"... Left - we are opposed to... struggle for reforms and democracy as "contradictory to socialist revolution"..."(4)

The theoretical conditions of this deviation are indicated in Lenin's critique of Luxemburg and Kievsky, both of whom took the leftist curvet described. Just as economism attributed the political significance of specific social forces to their economic content, so Luxemburg and Kievsky analysed national movements, which were commonly led by the embryonic bourgeoisies of oppressed countries as no more or less than the expression of the class interest of this force. The national question was thus seen as a purely bourgeois one. Its meaning was derived, after

Kautsky and Stalin, from the efforts of rising bourgeoisies to establish "their own... home market... the market is the first school in which the bourgeoisie learns nationalism".⁵ As such the national question had no other meaning except advancing the class interest of oppressed bourgeois

This position has another aspect. Not only was the national question regarded as of importance exclusively to the bourgeoisie: its degree of realisability was held to depend on the nascent bourgeoisie's level of potential economic development. So in the period of capitalist free competition, the national question in western Europe could be solved, since there were no obstacles to national bourgeoisies establishing independent national markets. In the phase of monopoly capitalism on the other hand, this option was no longer open and the nature of the question was thereby transformed. The question, for the economists, became "unreal". In this way, the question was absorbed to an evolutionist conception of history, to which economism is usually tied. The national question in this view appeared at a precise moment (rise of nascent bourgeoisies), receded at another (crushing of same by imperialism) and finally disappeared entirely (socialist revolution).

Lenin remarked of such notions:-

"... one must have a schoolboy's conception of history... to see it as something in the shape of a straight line moving slowly and steadily upwards; first the turn of the liberal bourgeoisie... then of the revolutionary petty-bourgeoisie... and finally of the proletariat... one must be a virtuoso of philistinism to take this as a pattern for one's plan of action..."(6)

Lenin elaborated two forms of economist interpretation of the national question which followed from this framework. These will be described alongside another pair which were not yet evident in Lenin's day.

A. General opposition to the right of nations to self-determination:-

This "right" curvet of imperialist economism was first argued openly during the debates on the colonial question at the congresses of the Second International between 1900 and 1907 by Bernstein, van Kol, Jaures, MacDonald and others.⁷ Despite some differences, all shared the central economist principles that the age of imperialism restricted the ability of nascent bourgeoisies to establish national domination. For the right-ists this implied that independent states arising in these circumstances

would be condemned to economic and cultural backwardness. Therefore the proletariat of such zones had more to gain by retaining membership in the imperial system, where the strength of progressive forces was greater. Lenin clearly felt this position required no comment, since he provided none.

B. The view that national liberation movements are a diversion from socialism:-

This was the "left" curvet of imperialist economism and found spokesmen at one time or another throughout the genuinely revolutionary European left. Its principal advocate was Rosa Luxemburg.

Lenin argued against Luxemburg's contention that national questions were inherently bourgeois by distinguishing between the effect of national revolutions for the bourgeoisie and for other classes. It was from the viewpoint of their general effects that they should be examined. To Luxemburg's secondary argument that the alleged impossibility of independent bourgeois economic development closed the national question Lenin made two replies. Firstly he rejoined that the contention of impossibility was "fundamentally wrong"⁸ or at least "dubious"⁹. Secondly its truth was in any event not strictly to the point. The national question had no relation to that of economic dependency. The achievability of economic independence had no bearing upon the achievability - and importance - of political independence.

"Not only small states, but even Russia for example, is entirely dependent economically on the power of the rich bourgeois countries. Not only the miniature Balkan states, but even nineteenth-century America was economically a colony of Europe, as Marx pointed out in Capital... but this has nothing whatever to do with the question of national movements and the national state. For the question of political self-determination of nations and their independence in bourgeois society Rosa Luxemburg has substituted the question of their economic independence. All this is just as intelligent as if someone, in discussing the programmatic demand for the supremacy of parliament, were to expound the perfectly correct conviction that big capital dominates in a bourgeois country whatever the regime in it..."(10)

C. The view that the national question disappears under socialism:-

From 1918 onwards it became strikingly obvious that within the Bolshevik and other revolutionary parties a further economist curvet existed on the national question. The notion that it would disappear under socialism had already been anticipated by Luxemburg in the same breath as arguing its unachievability under capitalism. This conception, founded again on an estimation of it as a purely bourgeois issue, found a ready echo in post-revolutionary Russia, where it "fortuitously" coincided with the survival of greater-Russian chauvinism.

The principal advocate of this error was Stalin, who in 1913 had himself been an author of a generally economist interpretation of the question.¹¹ In January 1918 Stalin made a declaration which was to have lasting reverberations for the later policy of the USSR. In his report to the Third All-Russia Congress of Workers', Soldiers', and Peasants' Soviets, Stalin expressed the idea that the national question was no more than a cloak for the bourgeoisie's struggle for power both in the nineteenth-century west and in the contemporary Soviet Union. "This pointed to the necessity of interpreting the principle of self-determination as the right of self-determination... of the labouring masses of a given nation ..."¹² The meaning of Stalin's words was unmistakable. He used the formulation to oppose the formation of a distinct Ukrainian soviet government (welcomed by Lenin) later in 1918 and a distinct Georgian one in 1922-1923. In this policy his chief ally was none other than Kievsky, who quoted Stalin in his argument to the RCP(B)'s Eighth Congress in 1919 that self-determination was a "bourgeois slogan... uniting all counter-revolutionary forces... Once we unite economically... all this notorious self-determination is not worth one rotten egg".¹³ In 1922 when Lenin opposed this view and advocated free federation as opposed to compulsory autonomisation, Stalin called him a "national liberal".¹⁴ Lenin's position was based on the conviction that national oppression did not automatically disappear with the vanquishing of the bourgeoisie and that the question did not therefore take on a reactionary significance:-

"It is necessary that there should be extreme discretion, and that the utmost consideration should be paid to the survival of national sentiments among the working masses of nations which have been deprived of equal rights. Only by such a policy will it be possible to

create conditions for the realisation of a durable and amicable union between the diverse national elements of the international proletariat... "15

The theoretical differences lying behind this dispute were identical to those already described: on the one hand, the national question's irrevocable tie to purely economic significance (itself limited in a specific way). On the other, the national question's relative independence from economic meanings, constraints and conditions for its appearance, realisation and disappearance.

D. The view that in the present period the national question could only be resolved as a component part or stage of the socialist revolution.

This position enjoys a currency today which seems to belie any claim that it is an error. It is inscribed in the programmes of such a wide variety of anti-imperialist forces that it has acquired the resilience of a truth. Further, it seems to be lent authority by Mao Tse Tung's theory of the 'New Democratic Revolution'. Nevertheless it relies upon the same conceptual framework as the other currents of the imperialist approach to the national question.

Allow this issue to be approached first through an examination of a particularly extreme formulation of this view, that by the Irish Marxist and revolutionary martyr, James Connolly. Connolly wrote in 1887:-

"If you remove the English army tomorrow and hoist the green flag over Dublin Castle, unless you set about the organisation of a Socialist Republic your efforts will be in vain... Nationalism without socialism - without a reorganisation of society - is only national recreancy..."(16)

Here is a mixture of Leninist and non-Leninist views. The Leninist view, formulated in relation to the Russian revolution of 1905, that working-class leadership of the bourgeois revolution is both possible and desirable is assumed. However this sits alongside a second view: that there can be no true national revolution in the absence of this leadership.

While appearing to depart from economism, this position actually shares with it the equation of nationalism with capitalist economic relations

and the notion that a failure to establish an independent set of such relations (again considered inevitable in the Irish case) was equivalent to a failure to establish national liberation. It shares a belief in other words in the meaninglessness of strictly political independence and thereby in a further typical leftist economist error, that political struggles cannot be progressive or revolutionary without in themselves settling the question of capitalism versus socialism. The difference between the mistakes of Luxemburg and Connolly is that whereas this reasoning led the former to reject all national struggles as diversions, it led Connolly to argue they could only be properly fought or "completed" as socialist revolutions.

For Connolly the necessity for national liberation movements to be of a new type (at least under proletarian leadership, at best explicitly socialist) followed from the alleged crushing effect of imperialism on embryonic bourgeoisies. A second argument leading to the same conclusion may be found in the work of Stalin and Mao.

Simultaneous with proclaiming the eclipse of the national question in Russia, Stalin announced that the achievement there of socialism had a further irreversible effect.

This great event meant there could no longer be bourgeois-democratic national revolutions, since the latter had been absorbed into the struggle for world socialism:

"The October Revolution, having put an end to the old, bourgeois movement for national emancipation, inaugurated an era of a new socialist movement of the workers and peasants of the oppressed nationalities, directed against all oppression - including therefore national oppression against the power of the bourgeoisie, their own and foreign, and against imperialism in general..."(17)

The October Revolution had ushered in a new era in which the bourgeoisie, including the embryonic bourgeoisies of colonial countries, were obliged to take sides in favour of imperialism, thus forcing the national revolutions in these countries to be anti-imperialist and to this extent fall under non-bourgeois leadership.

This position was also adopted by Mao, quoting Stalin, in his article "On New Democracy" (1940). Mao argues that as a result of the founding of a socialist state in the USSR the democratic revolution becomes:-

"Part of the proletarian-socialist world revolution... In this era, any revolution in a colony or semi-colony that is directed against imperialism, i. e. against the international bourgeoisie or international capitalism... comes within the new category... Such revolutionary colonies and semi-colonies can no longer be regarded as allies of the counter-revolutionary front of world capitalism, they have become allies of the revolutionary front of world socialism... (their revolutions) belong to a new type of revolution led by the proletariat..."(18)

Instead of the crushing effect of imperialism, the "new dawn" creates a new category of national revolutions.

In Stalin's original formulation, this view can be seen to have a definite relation to events in the USSR in 1918 and after. In the first place, the conception has a definite relation to the leftist view of "war communism", which saw it in the fields both of economic policy and foreign policy as the advent of international socialism. The "end of bourgeois democratic revolutions" can in this sense be seen as part of a general misplaced confidence in the end of bourgeois economy and democracy on a world scale. A less obvious aspect of the position is its relation to the upsurge of national democratic sentiments within the old Russian territorial state. Stalin's formulation had the "advantage" of providing a further disqualification of legitimacy for these sentiments.

A word must also be said on Mao's advocacy of this position. The remarkable aspect of "On New Democracy" is that despite his repetition of Stalin's statement Mao both explicitly includes the national bourgeoisie within the revolutionary forces and provides ample local reasons for proletarian leadership of the national revolution (principally "the flabbiness of the bourgeoisie, with its proneness to conciliation, and the strength of the proletariat"¹⁹) which are themselves sufficient to justify it without recourse to general laws. Reference to the latter may be seen as a sign of Mao's real politik in relation to contemporary CPSU-CCP relations (Soviet neutrality vis-a-vis Japan, plus the critical examination of the CCP by the Comintern Presidium, January to March 1940²⁰).

Before examining the question of the relation of this conception to economism, compare it briefly to Lenin's own formulation of the relation between 1917 and the national question. The relevant texts, "Preliminary Draft Theses on the National and Colonial Questions" and the consequent

"Report of the Commission on the National and Colonial Questions" of the second Comintern congress (1920), start from a definition of the principal aspect of the contemporary world situation as "the struggle waged by a small group of imperialist nations against the Soviet movement and the Soviet states headed by Soviet Russia".²¹ Secondly aspects of the conjuncture included the drawing in of a number of colonial peoples into politics and the subordination by the Treaty of Versailles of two formerly imperialist powers, Germany and Austria. The principal contradiction was between imperialism and nascent proletarian revolution. In this context, revolutionary national democratic movements acquired an anti-imperialist significance and it became necessary to pay close attention to effecting an alliance between national-colonial movements and communist ones.

Nowhere is the statement made that a bourgeois democratic settlement of specific national questions has become impossible. On the contrary the continued existence of such movements despite their declining revolutionary tendency is fully acknowledged. The leadership by the proletariat of revolutionary national democratic struggles is posed as an objective to be achieved, not a historical necessity. The objective: the weakening of imperialism as an international force. The role of the October Revolution in this analysis is to strengthen the importance of the dominant contradiction and to make possible a progressive resolution of it. It has no powers to regulate the outcome of secondary contradictions in the sense of closing off certain avenues of historical development and necessitating others.

The question can now be asked: from what in the October Revolution did Stalin believe this power to emanate? Stalin presents the major achievements of 1917 as "the abolition of the omnipotence of the landlords and kulaks and the handing over of the land for the use of the labouring masses of the countryside (plus) the expropriation of the mills and factories and their transfer to control by the workers".²² In Stalin's view this was equivalent to the creation of a "workers state", i. e. a state embodying socialist economic relations. It is to this notion of an absolute transformation that the absolute power of the revolution corresponds. Stalin establishes the "impossibility" of further bourgeois-democratic solutions to the national question through establishing the determinative priority

of the creation of socialist relations. This once-and-for-all act irretrievably places a barrier between the bourgeoisie and change, a break which is held to persist independent of any given national or international balance of political forces.

Economism's appearance can be perceived here in a form remarkable for its radicalism. Political struggles are defined as possible or impossible not by virtue of whether the class forces leading them retain the possibility of realising their economic objectives under specific conditions (as is argued by Luxemburg and Connolly) but as a consequence of whether these class forces are compatible with the state of evolution of global productive relations. In other words, the political capacity of particular classes is still defined not by reference to concrete political situations but instead by their place within an evolutionarily-defined and established hierarchy of modes of production.²³

Some errors in the formulation of the question of imperialism:-

1. The errors discussed here refer to those respecting the status of imperialism in relation to politics, rather than purely in relation to political economy. These partly parallel those concerning the national question, and none so obviously as that of moralism, which is found in equal measure in the treatment of both.

Whereas moralism concerning the national question elevated the rights of nations to self-determination into an absolute principle, so moralism in relation to imperialism reduces this stage of capitalist development to a general policy of misanthropic persecution by some (largely European) peoples of other (largely non-European) ones.

This view was in the past advanced by European Marxists as part of an argument that the consequent colonialism could thereby be revoked by a political act of will. Plekhanov for example believed imperialism to be "a bad habit of a certain nation"²⁴ while Kautsky believed that colonial aggression could be dropped in favour of regulated peaceful competition. Lenin ridiculed these views and in his criticism of Kautsky emphasised the connection between this perspective and a "one-sided, i.e. arbitrary singling out of only the national question"²⁵ as the essence of imperialism. This he observed was "a more subtle and disguised (and therefore more dangerous) advocacy of conciliation with imperialism, because a fight

against the policy of the trusts and banks that does not affect (their) economic basis... is bourgeois reformism".²⁶

A similar view, with similar consequences, may today be found in the neo-colonies. Here some attribute certain consequences of the entirely impersonal operation of monopoly capitalism to the explicit scheming of specific individuals. It is of course true that individuals are personally responsible for choosing certain political tactics on behalf of imperialism (e.g. Nixon and Kissinger's "five Hiroshimas" in Cambodia). On the other hand, the economic consequences of its articulation with other modes of production, which may be equally devastating (e.g., the desertification of the Sahel) are not "tactical choices". To argue in this way is to lend imperialism anthropomorphic qualities and to imply that imperialism could decide to behave in a more humanitarian way or that if its leaders were changed it may adopt less oppressive designs.

2. This error is closely associated with another - the equation of imperialism with foreign influence. Concomitantly, anti-imperialism becomes identified with opposition to foreign influence, etc. This error has two varieties. Firstly it may involve submerging the specificity of the imperialist form of colonialism within a notion of colonialism in general. Secondly and more commonly it may involve failing to distinguish between the genuinely reactionary and actually progressive effects of the domination of a territory by international monopoly capitalism.

Little need be said concerning these errors, which fall under the heading of nationalism. Consider only the most obvious consequences, namely the elevation of the non-foreign, i.e. native, to the status of political and cultural purity, superiority and exclusivity. In many neo-colonies this means elevation of the culturally feudal and prefeudal in preference to the relatively progressive and democratic. Think for example of the designation of Marxism as a "foreign ideology" in so many post-colonial states. Think too of the other side of this tendency - the preservation of monopoly capitalism in these countries wherever it is able to acquire a formally local legal status, that is where it has either incorporated local capital into its operations or has entered into joint ownership or management agency agreements with local state capitalism.

Imperialism knows no national boundaries not because it is a vehicle of external control but because it is a stage in the development of a mode of production (and its superstructure) whose conditions of existence are non-geographical. There are no national proprietors of imperialism, a fact which is reflected by the possibility of defining anti-imperialism scientifically only in terms of specific class struggles.

3. A third error associated with the presentation of the question of imperialism is that of essentialism. This error involves the notion that imperialism and thereby also anti-imperialism inhere in certain definite forms of oppression and opposition respectively. In other words, that wherever, and only wherever a certain form of oppression occurs, it can be deduced that it is imperialism which is at stake. This is to attribute to imperialism certain fixed forms of political expression which wherever they are uncovered will reveal the hand of imperialism as their essence.

Despite the fact imperialism is unique as a stage of development in the capitalist mode of production it nevertheless shares a number of characteristics (including certain forms of oppression) with other moments of this mode of production. This means that differentiating the presence of imperialism is a problem requiring concrete investigation of cases. More seriously this mistake involves a claim that imperialism can be reduced to a check list or register of cut and dried economic, political or ideological covariants. While there are defining features of imperialism's political economy ("parasitism and decay"²⁷), the struggle for sources and ("violence of raw materials"²⁸) imperialism as a political force is a phenomenon whose particular identities depend at least partly upon particular conjunctures. Just as the effects of imperialism cannot be defined in advance of any specific analysis so too the presence of imperialism as a component of its contradiction with anti-imperialism cannot be defined independently of the general structure of contradictions comprising the conjuncture.

Four theses concerning the Marxist view of the national question

1. There are no Marxist general moral principles in relation to the national question

The most striking difference between Lenin's writings and those of others on this question is the virtually complete absence from his work

of any attempt to develop or begin from global affirmations of the "rights of nations" or its corollary, the abstract definition of nations, nationalities or nationalisms 'qualifying' for this right. Without explicitly condemning the essays of Kautsky and Stalin, Lenin nevertheless remarked of his own work:-

"In my writings on the national question I have already said that an abstract presentation of the question of nationalism in general is of no use at all... the fundamental interest of proletarian solidarity and consequently of the proletarian class struggle requires that we never adopt a formal attitude to the national question".²⁹

This refusal does not signify an agnosticism. On the contrary it is expressed as a prerequisite for a scientific view. According to Lenin constructing general definitions of nationalism and deriving a general political position from them was an offence against concrete analysis.

In his writing, Lenin distinguished four varieties of the national question: its classical nineteenth-century western European form, its early twentieth-century eastern European form, its form in the Soviet Union after 1917 and its form in colonial countries between the founding of the Comintern and his death. With each of these was associated with different balances of forces, different sets of contradictions, different conjunctures and different strategies and tactics for the proletariat. Each category moreover included the possibility of reactionary nationalism to which no support could be extended.

In this he was doing no more than repeat the position of Marx and Engels, whose first discussion of nationalism (Ireland in the 1840s) was negative. The latter specifically opposed O'Connell's repeal movement as "obsolete rubbish", "fermenting junk" and "a pretext for obtaining posts... and making profitable business transactions".³⁰ It represented no more than a disguise for British Whigism. Under O'Connell's leadership the Irish working-class would lose more than it would gain by breaking the union with England.³¹

Marx and Engels did not subscribe to any general moral principle either on Irish national self-determination or on national self-determination generally. As Lenin was to point out, they opposed also the national aspirations of the Czechs and south Slavs:-

"Marx and Engels... drew a clear and definite distinction between 'whole reactionary nations' serving as Russian outposts in Europe, and 'revolutionary nations', namely the Germans, Poles and Magyars. This is a fact. And it was indicated at the time with incontrovertible truth: in 1848 the revolutionary nations fought for liberty, whose principal enemy was Tsarism, whereas the Czechs, etc., were in fact reactionary nations and outposts of Tsarism..."³²

2. The national question is a political question referring to foreign rule

The only general principle which may be deduced from the work of Marx, Engels and Lenin on the national question is that it always stands for or corresponds to some other question, requiring independent evaluation.

However, there are some common guidelines these authors provide. In the first place, national questions are political, not ideological (cf. cultural autonomy) or economic (cf. economic independence). The O'Connell movement stood for the political question of the fate of the British Whig party, while the Czech national movement stood for the political question of Tsarist autocracy.

When Marx and Engels eventually came to support Irish self-determination in the 1860s it was on the grounds of its changed political significance. Marx's revised position was that the Irish independence and social questions had become inseparable between 1848 and 1867 and might now conceivably be the spark for renewed revolutionary developments in England, which had meanwhile faltered. The English aristocracy and bourgeoisie had a common interest in turning Ireland into pasture land to supply England with meat and wool at the cheapest prices. Even more important, anti-Irish racialism was the secret of the impotence of the English working-class. Yet this whole reactionary sequence had a weak link in that the landed aristocracy were vulnerable in Ireland where the land and national questions interacted in a mutually reinforcing way. To support Irish self-determination was therefore to lend weight to the revolution in Britain.³³

It must be stressed that what is meant is political in the normal narrow sense. All that these empirical questions share in common is the issue of foreign rule, that is of political independence (for better or worse). Nowhere is the national question approached as if it concerned

the presence or domination of foreign capital in distinction to political colonialism. Marx, Engels and Lenin repeatedly pointed out that the former was simply an aspect of economic relations under capitalism (including competitive capitalism) and irrelevant to the object of national-democratic reforms.

3. Resolving specific national questions is possible without resolving the overthrow of imperialism.

Reference has already been made to the economist character of formulations stressing the inevitability of the "passing over into socialism" of national democratic revolutions under non-proletarian leadership.

There are certain empirical problems too in asserting the closure of the bourgeois-democratic national question. Very soon after Stalin's pronouncement of 1918 the Kemalist movement succeeded in liberating Turkey and the sternly bourgeois government of the Cumann-na Gaedhael party was formed in newly independent Ireland. In neither case did the struggle pass over to socialism or even proletarian leadership. The conclusion of both world wars saw a spate of national liberations, some of which had incipient socialist implications, but most of which did not. The late 1940s saw the foundation of an independent Israeli state under bourgeois leadership and also the beginning of British colonial disengagement in favour of national bourgeois leaderships in India and Pakistan. In the 1950s and 1960s this tendency increased, with most African states achieving independence under petty-bourgeois leadership. In almost no case was the "overthrow of imperialism", let alone the passing over to socialism, on the agenda. On the other hand, almost none of these states could be regarded as the effect of a "systematic deception" by the imperialist bourgeoisie, and almost all their formations involved a class struggle supported by the masses.

Two attitudes are possible in these circumstances. The first is to admit that these events are historical facts. The "new democratic revolution" has not been the norm of national liberation (outside of eastern Asia). A series of new non-proletarian states have emerged with political independence, at least of an extent which allows a choice of international allies. To this extent they have experienced national revolutions which while changing the political relation of forces with respect of imperialism have not resolved its overthrow. According to this attitude a new series

of class struggles are now appropriate, and to this extent the problem of imperialism requires the design of a fresh strategy.

The other attitude is to deny that national political independence has been achieved in these countries, to insist instead that such independence is illusory and that the national democratic revolution remains "incomplete". Since this formulation is often inter-exchanged without comment with the notion that the "new democratic revolution" is incomplete, it seems as if it is believed that "incompletion" will always be the case this side of socialism.

The consequences of this second attitude are opportunistic and reactionary. Since the national revolution is incomplete, the class struggle necessarily continues to take a national form. This corresponds exactly to the political line of many post-colonial local ruling classes, which they use to subjugate the masses. The political declarations of this position by members of this class are sometimes actually even invoked as "support" for this view. The concrete class struggles to which implementation of this position would correspond are not specified, since of course none exist. Since it is argued that in most such countries there is not even an explicitly comprador indigeneous class, and since the colonial state has been abolished, "patriots" and "revolutionaries" conveniently find there is no class struggle to fight (except against those who claim there is). Presumably should they be really determined to struggle they have no alternative but to migrate to hunt down imperialism.

It has to be admitted that in its effort to legislate the course of national revolutions as a whole, "On New Democracy" was mistaken. With some notable exceptions (southern Africa, etc.) these revolutions are passed. Even before this was the case, Lenin wrote that the "special task" of the proletariat in backward countries was "the struggle against the bourgeois-democratic movements within their own nations".³⁴ This was within the context of a temporary alliance. The conditions for maintaining this have long gone, leaving the "special task" all the more pressing.

4. The national question is part of the broader question of democracy.

In-so-far as it fell into a definite group of questions for Marx and Lenin, the national question was a species of that of democracy. It was so in a double sense. On the one hand, the struggle within an oppressor

nation to remove national oppression was a democratic one. On the other, it was a condition of full democracy in the oppressed nation that the oppression be broken.

The struggle within the oppressor state was democratic in that it attacked the privileges of the dominant national group on egalitarian grounds, counterposed the "international culture of democracy" to the reactionary cultures of dominant groups, and created the conditions for peaceful relations between national groups. The progressive effects which would follow within the oppressed nation itself amounted to achieving an aspect of full political democracy.

"The national question in most western countries... was settled long ago... Rosa Luxemburg has lost sight of the most important thing - the difference between countries where bourgeois-democratic reforms have long been completed, and those where they have not..."

"Engels... did not make the mistake some Marxists make in dealing with the right of nations to self-determination when they argue that it is impossible under capitalism and superfluous under socialism. This seemingly clever but actually incorrect statement might be made in regard of any democratic institution..."(35)

Lenin was clearer on few things than the desirability from the proletarian viewpoint of "democratic institutions", not because he conceived them as an obstacle it was necessary to clear on the way to socialism, but because socialism was inconceivable without democracy, and because democracy created the best conditions for the transition to socialism.

"... in a democratic republic no less than in a monarchy, the state remains a machine for the oppression of one class by another (but this) by no means signifies that the form of oppression makes no difference for the proletariat... a wider, freer, more open form of class struggle and class oppression greatly assists the proletariat in its struggle".³⁶ Lenin later added a further reason. In "Reply to P. Kievsky" he wrote that democracy not only simplifies class antagonisms but also acts as a school in which the suppressed classes attain an at least partial participation in state affairs, increasing their political capacity as a class.³⁷

As will be seen, Lenin of course later argued that the national question could have other significances, principally that of anti-imperialism. But

this significance was additional rather than alternative to democracy. Lenin made this clear in his references to anti-imperialist movements as being generally bourgeois-democratic in objectives, whatever their leadership. It is clearer still in two other arguments. The first of these was that the anti-imperialist struggle should be simultaneously anti-feudal and anti-clerical.³⁸ The second was that non-proletarian liberation movements should only be supported where they practice democracy in relation to the proletariat, "when their exponents do not hinder our work of organising and educating in a revolutionary spirit the peasantry and the masses of the exploited".³⁹

In this respect the opportunism of stressing only the national aspect of the democratic revolution is underlined. In-so-far as the bourgeois-democratic revolution has been attained in most post-colonial states it is only in its national aspect. Local ruling classes, both independently and as part of the imperialist ruling-class have almost everywhere sought to confine the democratic revolution to this aspect and as a general rule have destroyed such political freedoms as were achieved in the struggle against colonialism. The list of nationally liberated countries where a communist party is tolerated is a very short one. Partly this simply indicates the weakness of local ruling-classes. Partly also it indicates their generally reactionary character. It is ironic to note that frequently the only use to which some Marxists put remaining political freedoms is to defend their "patriotic" leaders against criticism.

Three theses on the question of imperialism.

1. Imperialism is a special stage in the development of the capitalist mode of production and its superstructure.

This thesis has to be repeated not to indicate a general fidelity to the position of Lenin, but because of the frequency with which the moralism already described is encountered. Two central features of imperialism were stressed by Lenin and Bukharin. The first was that under imperialism colonialism is given the new basis described. This revolutionises colonial policy (and the foreign policy of the great powers). In the past colonies had been acquired for speculative plunder, "reasons of state" etc., but not in a systematic fashion, nor in the context of intense competition, nor even necessarily by force. The essence of the new colonialism was its comprehensiveness, which conferred upon each colony the status of a link

in a chain and generated international conflicts over whose chain each should be part of. The chains of Lenin's day were not yet those of an international division of labour, but of an international carving up of the globe. Economic changes made it possible and perhaps necessary to secure an advantageous political position, which in turn meant the seizure of new territories and the strengthening of control over others. Imperialism and the form of colonialism associated with it were therefore highly specific historical categories tied to the period of finance capital. Neither was anticipated by earlier strategies of conquest (Macedonian, Roman, Napoleonic, etc.).⁴⁰

The second major feature - irreducibility to policy - has already been discussed. These features found expression in a number of social, political and ideological conditions and effects - the reorganisation of capitalism as a world economy, centralisation and concentration of production, a change in the relation of banking to industrial capital resulting in the formation of finance capital, the formation of a labour aristocracy, etc.

It should be added nevertheless that there are part of the theory of imperialism which require development and elaboration, and in relation to which recent efforts to develop the theory are at best preliminary. The most obvious of these lacuna concern the precise relation of imperialism to social classes in the neo-colonies, a subject which had little importance in Lenin's own day. One aspect of this problem - the status of local ruling classes - is the subject of the debate on the post-colonial state. Another, the relation between imperialism and remaining independent peasantries, is still in the infancy of its investigation. The view that regards these problems as solved by Lenin's sixty-year old "popular presentation" should actually be added to the list of errors concerning imperialism, since it acts as an obstacle to its understanding.

2. The anti-imperialist content of specific struggles is conferred not by the policies of the forces claiming to be engaged in them but by the position they occupy in relation to specific international conjunctures.

No question is one of imperialism as such, and no anti-imperialist force is anti-imperialist as such. The political status of specific questions and forces is determined not by their "obvious" characteristics or the claims they make for themselves, but by their content in relation to a broadly-conceived balance of forces.

Consider for example Lenin's analysis of the Irish Easter Rising of 1916 in which, Lenin argued, imperialism versus anti-imperialism became the principal division in Irish society.

In "The Discussion of Self-Determination Summed-up" Lenin argued that in some respects (the international situation of nascent social revolution) national revolts of this kind were of only secondary significance and to this extent not centrally anti-imperialist. On the other hand, as the struggle between the big powers spread to new battlegrounds, national revolts acquired a serious disruptive potential for imperialism. In this situation, popular nationalist struggle took on an anti-imperialist significance. Lenin clarified this proposition in referring to the Belgian national resistance during the First World War.

"... the dialectics of history are such that small nations, powerless as independent factors in the struggle against imperialism, play a part as one of the ferments, one of the bacilli, which help the real anti-imperialist force, the socialist proletariat, to make its appearance on the scene..."(41)

What applied to Belgium applied also to Ireland.

"... we must support every revolt against our chief enemy, the bourgeoisie of the big states, provided it is not the revolt of a reactionary class... It is precisely in the 'era of imperialism', which is the era of nascent revolution, that the proletariat will today give especially vigorous support to any revolt of the annexed regions so that tomorrow, or simultaneously, it may attack the bourgeoisie of the great power that is weakened by revolt"(42)

Lenin applied a similar argument to the circumstances under which national liberation movements in backward countries acquired a potential anti-imperialist status in 1920.

Nothing could be further from these views than a formalistic assessment of conflicts based on the nominal standing of the parties involved. The "imperialist" and "anti-imperialist" content ascribed to particular forces and conflicts depends on an assessment of the relation of political forces at the international strategic level and on a calculation of the circumstances under which imperialism's conditions of existence may be overturned. In Lenin's work this is accompanied by an appreciation of the tactical and strategic means through which such broader struggles might unfold.

This interpretation is confirmed by the significance Lenin attributed to the fight between Kautskyism and Leninism between 1914 and 1917. The opposition between the Kautskyist and Leninist trends in the working-class movement was not simply a struggle for influence between a more and less radical position. Internationally and strategically it too epitomised a conflict between imperialism and anti-imperialism. Kautskyism had an imperialist significance since temporarily it acquired the status of the main obstacle to the militant proletariat's struggle.

All this implies that the designation of forces as imperialist or anti-imperialist is something which can never simply be asserted: it must be demonstrated, and a general concrete political analysis is implied as a condition of such demonstrations.

Since Lenin made a number of modifications to his assessment of the political significance of national liberation movements in the first twenty years of this century, and given the fact that a large number of former colonies have achieved independence on the basis of mass struggles, it seems inherently improbable that the same significance can be attached to struggles in these same countries which retain these same objectives today. The weak links in the chain of imperialist domination have to be established afresh in the context of a re-examination of the principal and secondary contradictions of this stage of capitalist development, and the possible permutations of their relationships.

3. Struggles other than national struggles can be anti-imperialist - possibly more anti-imperialist than national struggles.

It has already been seen that Lenin successively regarded the European proletariat's revolutionary struggle of the First World War period and the efforts to eradicate Kautskyism as anti-imperialist. This alone is sufficient to show anti-imperialism never inheres in national struggles alone.

If it is the case that the anti-imperialist status of a specific struggle is determined conjuncturally then this implies that it is just as probable today that such struggles will revolve around questions other than the national question. This is not to say that these struggles will simply be those of labour on a world scale against capital on a world scale. On the contrary, the reduction of imperialism's contradictions to a single formula, whatever its content, is mistaken. Still it can be said that there are a

number of issues to which any characterisation of the present international conjuncture would have to examine.

Amongst these is the whole question of democracy both in the advanced countries and the neo-colonies. Amongst them also is the related issue of the political effects of the specific forms of oppression suffered by the proletariat and peasantry of the third world. Amongst them too is the need to dissect the populism on whose basis most regimes ultimately serving imperialism in the neo-colonies sustain their support.

These are all political questions requiring political comprehension. Neither their significance nor that of any other political question can be read off from even the most exhaustive list of imperialism's general characteristics, such as have been recently produced. These efforts are harmful since they tend to suggest that less general analysis is superfluous. Actually the reverse is the case. The definition of the strategy and tactics of anti-imperialist struggle today is above all the site of a problem which is as much conceptual as practical.

NOTES:-

1. Adapted from a paper originally presented to a History Department seminar, University of Dar es Salaam, 30 August 1979. References to Marx and Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao are to the most easily accessible editions of their work. The collaboration of P. Bew and H. Patterson in the development of a number of the paper's positions is acknowledged.
2. K. Kautsky "Die Moderne Nationalität" Neue Zeit V (1887).
3. For an account of this debate see H. B. Davis Nationalism and Socialism (London, 1973) pp. 149-165.
4. V.I. Lenin Collected Works (Moscow, 1964) Vol. 23 p. 13.
5. J.V. Stalin "Marxism and the National Question" Selected Works in One Volume (Davis, California, 1971) p. 58.
6. Lenin, "The Revolutionary-Democratic Dictatorship of the Proletariat and the Peasantry" (1905) Collected Works Vol. 8 p. 299.
7. G.D.H. Cole The Second International (London, 1956) Part I. pp. 70-71.
8. Lenin "A Caricature of Marxism and Imperialist Economism" (1916) Collected Works Vol. 23 p. 40.
9. Lenin "The Nascent Trend of Imperialist Economism" (1916) Collected Works Vol. 23 p. 17.

10. Lenin "The Right of Nations to Self-Determination" (1914) Collected Works Vol. 20 p. 399.
11. This is not to say that all of "Marxism and National Question" is economist. Part of it, for example the section on Bauer, anticipates Lenin's position.
12. Stalin Works (Moscow, 1953) Vol. 4 pp. 32-33.
13. Quoted in E.H. Carr The Bolshevik Revolution (London, 1953) Vol. 1 p. 274.
14. Quoted in M. Lewin Lenin's Last Struggle (London, 1969) p. 51-53.
15. Resolution framed by Lenin and adopted at the 8th Congress of the RCP (B) March 1919, quoted in C. Bettelheim Class Struggles in the USSR: First Period 1917-1923 (London, 1976) p. 420-421.
16. J. Connolly Socialism and Nationalism (ed D. Ryan) (Dublin, 1948) p. 25.
17. Stalin "The October Revolution and the National Question" Selected Works pp. 103, 105.
18. Mao Tse-tung Selected Works (Peking, 1974) Vol. 2 pp. 343-344.
19. Ibid., p. 356.
20. A.I. Sobolov et al Outline History of the Communist International (Moscow, 1971) p. 468.
21. Lenin, Collected Works Vol. 31 p. 242.
22. "The October Revolution and the National Question" op. cit., p. 101.
23. It can be noted that Stalin's view that the Soviet Union was a workers' state, while common to most of the RCP(B) during the war communism period, was later rejected by Lenin in the course of his struggle against Trotsky and Bukharin for the necessity of independent trade unions. In turn this reflected differing orientations to the question of the struggle for socialist construction (Lenin: transformation of bourgeois social relations, Stalin and Trotsky: economic development). The workers' state thesis nevertheless became part of the official CPSU and Comintern lines after Lenin's death, finding a particularly strong expression at the 6th Comintern Congress of 1928. It is no accident that the latter also saw the adoption of a resolution describing the effects in the colonial world of the building of socialism in the USSR as revolutionary, and another expressing the view that "the national bourgeoisie has not the significance of a force in the struggle against imperialism" (Sobolov et al op. cit. pp. 284-286).
24. "Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism" (1916) Collected Works Vol. 22 p. 228.
25. Ibid., p. 268.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 270-271.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 276.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 299-300.
29. Lenin "The Question of Nationalities or Autonomisation" (1922). Selected Works in Three Volumes (Moscow, 1970) Vol. 3 pp. 595-696 (This article does not appear in the Collected Works).
30. F. Engels "Letters from London" (1843) and "Fergus O'Connor and the Irish People" (1848) in Marx and Engels on Ireland (London, 1973) pp. 34-35, 50.
31. For the most explicit statement of this position see the letter of the Association Democratique of Brussels to the Fraternal Democrats in London, 13 February 1848, signed by Marx and others. Marx and Engels Collected Works Vol. 6 (London, 1976) pp. 540-543.
32. Lenin "The Discussion on Self-Determination Summed-up" Collected Works Vol. 22 pp. 340-341.
33. Marx to Meyer and Vogt, 9 April 1870, in Marx and Engels on Ireland op. cit., p. 294.
34. Lenin "Preliminary Draft Theses on the National and Colonial Questions" (1920) Collected Works Vol. 31 p. 150.
35. Lenin "The Right of Nations to Self-Determination" Collected Works Vol. 20 p. 405 "The State and Revolution" Collected Works Vol. 25 p. 452.
36. "The State and Revolution" op. cit., p. 454.
37. Collected Works Vol. 23 pp. 22-27.
38. "Preliminary Draft Theses" Collected Works Vol. 31, p. 149.
39. Lenin "Report of the Commission on the National and Colonial Questions" (1920) Collected Works Vol. 31, p. 241-242.
40. cf. N. Bukharin Imperialism and World Economy (1913) (London, 1972) p. 114.
41. Lenin "The Discussion of Self-Determination Summed-up" Collected Works Vol. 22 p. 357.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 333.