



The “natural boundaries of nations” and imperialism

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**3rd Historical Materialism Athens Conference
24-27 April, 2025**

Nationalisms and nations

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- * A turning point in the history of capitalist social formations was the emergence of nationalism as a *national politicisation of the masses*, in most European countries in the mid-19th century, in the wake of the American and French Revolutions.
- * Nationalism creates the nation and profoundly rearranges the way in which populations (exploited social classes) are subjected to capitalist power relations.
- * Nationalism is the demand of the masses for a state of “their own”. The emergence of modern nations is thus associated with unprecedented institutional and state-related changes: Institutions of representation and novel ways of integrating populations into the state, political parties, constitutional order (or the prospect of it), the emergence of the *nation-state*.
- * This new form of subordination of the exploited classes to the capitalist state appears as an assertion of freedom and equality.

On the beginnings of nation building

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* The appearance of the ‘forefathers’ of nationalism, that is, of the first circles of nationalist intellectuals, ‘brotherhoods’, publications, secret societies, does not constitute proof of an already achieved national politicisation of the population. The semblance of speech and action of all these entities constitutes one of many preconditions for the final configuration of a nation.

* One can speak of the emergence of a nation when the rural population, who constituted the vast majority of the inhabitants of the European regions, was integrated into the processes of national politicisation. With a few earlier exceptions (France 1789, Greece 1821 ...), European nations emerged in the second half of the 19th century.

* “What were the international politics of the years from 1848 to the 1870s about? [...] [I]t was about the creation of a Europe of nation states [...]. Whatever else it was, 1848, the ‘springtime of peoples’, was clearly also, and in international terms primarily, an assertion of nationality, or rather of rival nationalities” (E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital* 1848–1875: 103).

The nation as totalitarianism against “aliens”

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* The formation of a nation is inherently linked to the tendency to homogenise the “interior” of the state (“national”) territory, and to subject it as a *unified whole* to the rules and norms of the (new) state sovereignty and class power.

* “The time when the democratization of politics made it essential to ... attach all to nation and flag, was also the time when popular nationalist, or at all events xenophobic sentiments and those of national superiority preached by the new pseudo-science of racism, became easier to mobilize” (E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism from 1780 to the Present*: 91).

* “The capitalist State marks out the frontiers when it constitutes what is within (the people-nation) by homogenizing the before and the after of the content of this enclosure. National unity or the modern unity thereby becomes *historicity of a territory and territorialization of a history* – in short, a territorial national tradition concretized in the nation-State; the markings of a territory become indicators of history that are written into the State [...] genocide is the elimination of what become ‘foreign bodies’ of the national history and territory: it expels them beyond space and time.” (N. Poulantas, *State, Power, Socialism*: 114-15).

The right to secession of oppressed nations

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* National oppression in a capitalist social formation justifies the demands of oppressed nations to secede from a multinational state. The right of nations to an independent state raises the question of the “natural boundaries” of a nation.

* “The modern state arose as a realization of the aspiration of nations for unity. The national idea, which found a natural limit in the constitution of a state based upon the nation, because it recognized the right of all nations to independent existence as states, and hence regarded the frontiers of the state as being determined by the natural boundaries of the nation” (R. Hilferding, *Finance Capital*: 335).

* However, the very idea of the existence of “natural boundaries of the nation” is questionable:

* “Hungary, whose struggle for national independence was so much admired in its time [...] when examined from the viewpoint of nationality, this struggle was nothing more than an attempt to assure class rule of the Magyar minority over a country of nine nationalities, with the Magyars oppressing the other nationalities. [...] Hungarians 5,000,000; Romanians 2,300,000; Germans 1,500,000; Croats 900,000; Serbs 830,000; Ruthenians 443,000” (R. Luxemburg *The National Question*, 1909).

The “natural boundaries” of nations: Example 1

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* The territory claimed as the “natural boundaries of the nation” by each separate system of capitalist power (nation-state) tends to expand where it does not meet with sufficient resistance (imposing ethnic homogenisation by force and ‘education’); alternatively it clashes with the ‘natural boundaries’ of neighbouring nations. The following historical examples illustrate the issue:

* The German anthem adopted after the World War I was originally coined in 1841 as the *Song of the Germans* by the Prussian Prof. Hoffmann von Fallersleben (1798-1874), an early proponent of the then developing German nationalism, and delineated the “natural boundaries” of the German nation as follows:

* “Germany, Germany above all, / above all in the world, / When, for protection and defence, / it always stands together brotherly, / *from the Mass to the Neman, / from the Etsch to the Baltic!* / Germany, Germany above all...

* In other words, from 1841, Germany’s “natural boundaries” included territories beyond even those of the German Empire (the Second Reich, 1871-1918): a significant part of France, Belgium, Italy and the whole of Luxembourg. The belief in the existence of these or similar German national “natural boundaries” was later articulated as the “German Lebensraum”. As an aggressive nationalist ideology it mobilised large masses of the German population on the side of the state during the two world wars.

The “natural boundaries” of nations: Example 2

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* The French Revolution, which brought to the fore nationalism as the claim of the popular masses on the state and the extension of its borders to the supposed natural boundaries of the nation, was also the cradle of an expansionism that eventually led to the Napoleonic Wars. As Peter Sahlins explains:

* “Both Lazare Carnot, who urged the Convention to ‘reunite’ Monaco, Schomberg, and other ‘neighboring communes’, and Danton, who argued in favor of annexing Belgium, used the trope of France’s natural and historical frontiers. [...] The Prussian-born but Paris-based banker and revolutionary, Anacharsis Cloots, had published in 1785 the *Wishes of a Gallophile*, arguing that ‘the Rhine river is the natural boundary [limite naturelle] of the Gauls’, and, during 1792, he became an outspoken advocate of the program to annex. In November 1792, it was an idea whose time had come” (P. Sahlins 1951, “Natural Frontiers revisited”: 1445).

The “natural boundaries” of nations: Example 3

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* The Greek Revolution of 1821, which gave birth to the modern Greek state, was planned and initiated by a secret society, the Friendly Society (*Philiki Etaireia*), founded in Odessa on 14 September 1814. On 24 February 1821, the leader of the Society, A. Ypsilantis, issued a proclamation declaring the Greek Revolution in Moldavia (Romania):

* “Behold, after so many centuries of woe, the phoenix of Hellas is again spreading its wings in splendour and summons under this shadow her true and obeisant progeny! [...] Morea, Epirus, Thessaly, *Serbia, Bulgaria*, the Islands of the Archipelago, *in a few words the whole of Hellas* took up arms, with a view to shake off the onerous yoke of the Barbarians” (emphasis added).

* The whole of Balkans (but also Asia Minor) were thus considered to be the “natural boundaries” of Greece (Hellas), i.e. of the Greek nation. A “Grand Idea” (and state policy) that remained active for a century.

Nationalism, imperialism, war

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- * Imperialism as the expansionist tendencies and practices of each and every capitalist social formation, emerges from the structures of the capitalist mode of production. The historical form these tendencies take in a given social formation depends on how the international correlation of forces is incorporated into the internal balance of class forces.
- * The nation (nationalism) has not only changed the capitalist state and the framework in which the imperialist tendencies inherent in capitalism develop. It has also changed warfare, making possible the formation of huge national armies on the one hand and soldiers willing to sacrifice their lives for the “fatherland” on the other.
- * “The modern warfare is the necessary product of the French Revolution. Its precondition is the social and political emancipation of *the bourgeoisie and small peasants*. [...] [T]he degree of wealth and education connected with this stage of social development is equally required in order to provide the material [...] and to give the soldier himself the required degree of intelligence” (F. Engels, 1851, *MECW*, vol. 10: 550).

V.I. Lenin and the right of nations to self-determination

10 * Lenin was fully aware of the nature and dynamics of nations. That is why he made the struggle against the dominant nationalism, that of the dominant national group within an empire, a key criterion. He supported the right of nations to self-determination from the standpoint of opposition to bourgeois power:

* Once a population has been constituted into a nation, into a “national unity” of capitalists and proletarians, it is a question of breaking this unity, of sharpening the class struggle, of overthrowing the class power of the capitalists. But if it is an oppressed nation, the precondition for such a perspective is the end of the “national struggle for independence”, the creation of the longed-for nation-state.

* “In the question of the self-determination of nations, as in every other question, we are interested, first and foremost, in the self-determination of the proletariat within a given nation”.

*“In any case the hired worker will be an object of exploitation. Successful struggle against exploitation requires that the proletariat be free of nationalism, and be absolutely neutral, so to speak, in the fight for supremacy that is going on among the bourgeoisie of the various nations” (Lenin, ‘The Right of Nations to Self-Determination’, May 1914, *CW*, Vol. 20: 428, 424).

The imperialist chain

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- * The idea that imperialist capitalism becomes a global system predominated the revolutionary wing of the Social Democracy during World War I and led to political positions that disputed the right of nations to self-determination.
- * Lenin came out against this strategy, which led him finally to a break with the theory of global capitalism. He formulated the concept of the *imperialist chain* as an *international* economic and political space linking together the different (national) aggregate-social-capitals and capitalist social formations.
- * A particular social formation depends on the way in which the “external” situation (the international interconnectedness of the different capitalist social formations) *over-determines* but also *constrains* the evolution of the internal class correlations.

Imperialism and class struggle

* The international conjuncture is incorporated in a complex way as a secondary contradiction within a social formation, in the sense that it does not have priority over class struggle. Lenin gives a characteristic example:

* “The West-European bourgeoisie had always been opposed to revolution. [...]. But things turned out differently. The imperialist war split the European bourgeoisie, and this created a situation where the Anglo-French capitalists, for imperialist reasons, became supporters of a Russian revolution. [...] The revolution has thus gained an unexpected ally. As a result, the revolution has turned out to be different from what anyone expected” (Lenin, April 1917, *CW*, vol. 24: 141).

* Imperialist strategies will never radically draw into question the global flows of commodities and capital, i.e., the capitalist nature of the international economic sphere. The unequal links in the imperialist chain have in common a certain shared strategic interest: *reproduction of the capitalist system of domination*. However great the sharpening of the geopolitical or economic conflicts (e.g. war), they will never on their own go so far as to reverse this constant.

Nationalism and imperialism

13 * The nation is “the people of a state”, i.e., is related to the interior of a state territory, as demand for political rights, and yet for national “clarity” and “purity” as well, and to its exterior, as imperialist demand for the expansion of state (“national”) influence and often for a “correction” of its borders.

* As a nation state exists in order to express the “will of the nation”, class differences are obscured.

* A theory of imperialism, if based on Marx’s theory of capitalism, must refer to the expansionist tendencies (economic, political and ideological) inherent in every system of capitalist power (in every capitalist social formation), giving special interest to the question of nationalism and national conflict.