ON THE NATIONAL QUESTION

A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture (Stalin, 1913).

This definition of the nation can be distinguished from that of the state insofar as the nation describes a group of people whereas the state describes an institution. The state is an instrument through which control is exercised, laws enforced and order maintained in the interests of whomever is in control. Institutions making up the state include the police, the military, the judicial system, the prisons, the state curriculum among others. As the state as an instrument is used to control a group of people, we can infer that a nation is found within a state or within states.

In the modern world, the term nation-state has been used to refer to sovereign territories and the groups of people within them. But what exactly is a nation-state? Are all sovereign territories of the world nation-states?

The modern capitalist system is designed to place people under the hegemony of the capitalist class. What this means is that absolutely every human being everywhere must be drawn into the wage system, either as a wage worker or an owner of capital; an employer. To achieve this, it became necessary to place every territory of the world under the hegemony of the state as an instrument of control, where this institution had not hitherto existed. The state is, therefore, by no means a power forced on society from without; just as little is it ‘the reality of the ethical idea’, ‘the image and reality of reason’, as Hegel maintains. Rather, it is a product of society at a certain stage of development; it is the admission that this society has become entangled in an insoluble contradiction with itself, that it has split into irreconcilable antagonisms which it is powerless to dispel. But in order that these antagonisms, these classes with conflicting economic interests, might not consume themselves and society in fruitless struggle, it became necessary to have a power, seemingly standing above society, that would alleviate the conflict and keep it within the bounds of ‘order’; and this power, arisen out of society but placing itself above it, and alienating itself more and more from it, is the state. (Engels, 1884)

By definition, therefore, a nation-state is a state within which a nation, or nations, reside, that enjoys full sovereignty in the interests of its ruling class.

Historical Origin and Development

What is the origin of the nation and the nation-state? How did it come to be that all territories of the world were organised into nation-states?

The answer to this question goes hand in hand with the advent of capitalism in the world. With the growing obsolescence of the feudal system in parts of the world, particularly Western Europe, there followed a strong wave of nationalist fervour with the intention of smashing the ‘divine power’ of monarchs and feudal lords and instituting democratic republics to drive society forward. The wage system, or capitalism, could not thrive in a society that placed the resources of the country under the control of feudal lords; it required a society that had reorganised the ownership of its resources in a manner that would create a vast pool of wage labourers. The creation of this group of wage labourers would involve their ‘freedom’ from their feudal lords, and their compulsion to seek employment in the developing industrial centres in order to make a living. The primary factor in this sudden change, or revolution, in the societal make up was the advancement of the productive forces in the economy. In other words, humanity had developed better tools of producing its means of
livelihood, and this required a readjustment of the way society was organised. Voila – the industrial revolution ushered in the capitalist system.

The advent of capitalism went hand in hand with the growth of nationalism, properly defined as the tendency of people to identify themselves in accordance with their language, territory, economic life, psychological make-up and culture. Capitalism, as opposed to feudalism and the other preceding systems, saw the reorganisation of people into republics as opposed to kingdoms and chiefdoms, with well-functioning legislative bodies, constitutions and other components of the state apparatus.

A fundamental feature of capitalism, therefore, is the tendency to organise people into nation-states. This tendency is unique to capitalism as a mode of production.

The main reason for the institution of the nation-state upon the people of the world by capitalism is for the sake of its nourishment as a mode of production. Capitalism is a system which creates two sharply opposing classes; the capitalist class, or the bourgeoisie, who own capital, or the means of production, and the working class, or the proletariat, who live only as long as they find work, and who find work only as long as their labour increases capital. For the sake of maintaining this state of affairs, in which the bourgeoisie has complete hegemony over the working class, it is necessary that a stable community of people, bound together by a fairly common way of life, historical background and language, are brought together in a territory administered by a legislative body and a set of laws in the interests of the bourgeoisie. Through this, the bourgeoisie is assured of a group of people to dominate and exploit economically and a territorial jurisdiction within which to operate with sovereignty.

**National Oppression**

History does not develop in a straight line, and the development of capitalism, as proven the world over, did not take an identical route in every corner of the world. Furthermore, the thrusting of people into nation-states, and the advent of nationalist fervour, did not take a similar trajectory in all parts of the world. Territories containing various nationalities hitherto administered by monarchs at times found themselves engulfed in bourgeois-democratic revolutions leading to the establishment of nation-states under the hegemony of particular nationalities. In particular, territories which still bore remnants of the obsolete feudal system, such as the Russian Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which had under their control various nationalities ‘conquered’ in the interest of their ruling monarchs and feudal lords, produced oppressor nationalities and oppressed nationalities. Oppressor nationalities, within any particular territory, are those whose ruling classes enjoy hegemony over the oppressed nationalities.

To put it simply, if the nature of the capitalist system is to organise people into nation-states in the interests of the capitalist class, the presence of oppressor and oppressed nationalities presents a skewed arrangement in which the capitalist class of the oppressor nationality enjoys hegemony over the capitalist class of the oppressed nationality. In other words, the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nationality has been stripped off its ‘right’ to dominate the working class of its own nationality; this ‘privilege’ being the preserve of the bourgeoisie of the oppressor nationality.

For the working class, national oppression is a double tragedy not only because it involves more severe repression by the oppressor nationality unto the oppressed nationality but also because it clouds the judgement of the working class regarding the precise nature of oppression and with whom to unite in the struggle for liberation.
Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that the oppression of nationalities by other nationalities is a characteristic feature of this unequal system, and that the working class must organise against this in their quest for total freedom.

A very vivid example of national oppression as exhibited by the capitalist system would be the colonization of Africa, Asia and the Americas by the capitalist powers of Western Europe, as well as the ongoing occupation of Palestine by the Zionists, Western Sahara by Morocco, Puerto Rico by the United States of America and West Papua by Indonesia.

**Struggle for National Liberation**

What is the precise nature of the struggle for liberation from national oppression by the oppressed nationalities?

The experience of the national liberation struggles against national oppression in general and colonialism in particular gives us some important lessons regarding the development and nature of the struggle against national oppression. Foremost, the struggle had to be organised under the banner of a mass movement against foreign hegemony in the political, economic and social life of the country. Further, due to the inability of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie of the oppressed nationalities to wage a decisive struggle against the bourgeoisie of the oppressor nationality, the responsibility to wage a serious struggle against national oppression fell into the hands of the working class of the oppressed nationality.

What, though, leads to this inability of the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nationality to wage a serious struggle against the bourgeoisie of the oppressor nationality? What tasks must be fulfilled in this national liberation struggle?

The conditions that permit an oppressor nationality to dominate other nationalities involve the inability of the ruling classes of the oppressed nationalities to defend their ‘sovereignty’ over their territories and their people. The fundamental reason why the bourgeoisie of oppressed nationalities become unable to wage a serious struggle against the bourgeoisie of oppressor nationalities is due to their economic and political limitations. They simply lack the financial muscle to elbow out the oppressor nationalities. They lack the military might to fight off invader nationalities and defend their ‘spheres of influence’. They lack the international connections necessary to protect their sovereignty.

This state of affairs renders the bourgeoisie of oppressed nationalities too weak to struggle. Rendered impotent, they are forced to compromise with the oppressor nationalities to retain their power, and serve as their puppets. This means, however, that the tasks of national liberation remain unfulfilled within the oppressed nationalities. This means that, in addition to total political domination by the oppressor nationalities, the oppressed nationalities have to endure cultural hegemony and economic exploitation. Their countries remain appendages of foreign domination. In contemporary context, this state of affairs is known as imperialism.

The incapacitation of the bourgeoisie to struggle means that the tasks of national liberation have to be fulfilled by the working class. This means that, as the working classes in the oppressed nationalities struggle against exploitation and oppression by their own capitalist classes, they struggle against the hegemony of the oppressor nationalities. This means that, as the working classes of the oppressed nationalities struggle to establish workers’ republics, they must at the same time smash the cultural hegemony of the oppressor nationalities and do away with all forms of imperialist control. This means that the proletariat of the oppressed nationalities are faced with the
responsibility of fulfilling the tasks of the national-democratic revolution while at the same time
carrying through the tasks of the proletarian revolution.

References

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