

How Socialists Should Think About National Independence Struggles

Fashionable academic theorists have dismissed the Marxist approach to nationalism as outdated and inadequate. But it remains an indispensable guide to national independence movements — urging support for them when they represent a challenge to capitalist rule.



A Scottish independence rally in 2018 in Largs, Scotland. (Azerifactory / Wikimedia Commons)

The national question has dominated Scottish politics in recent years, and there is no prospect of that changing in the foreseeable future. Like Ireland, Catalonia, and the Basque Country, Scotland has become one of the West European countries where socialists must decide whether to accept the very existence of the state in its current territorial boundaries. Marxist theories of nationalism can be an invaluable guide to political action in this context.

The Marxist tradition may seem like a peculiar starting point for assessing the dilemmas of nationalism. In his influential work *The Break-Up of Britain*, Scottish writer Tom Nairn argued that “the theory of nationalism represents Marxism’s great historical failure.” For Benedict Anderson, who followed in Nairn’s footsteps with his classic study of nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, it was Marxism’s “uncomfortable anomaly.”

More broadly, a generation of radicals from the '68 generation developed a critique

of Marxism's failings, which they saw as doctrinaire internationalism, class reductionism, and a failure to grasp the emotional side of human nature that was geared to the construction of meaning. In later years, many of these critics would take these initial provocations further: materialists, according to the emerging cultural sociology, needed to abandon economic abstractions and make room for new modes of identity construction.

Crucially, this understanding framed nationalism itself as part of a progressive rainbow coalition involving other emerging identity-based social movements, such as feminism, environmentalism, and LGBTQ liberation. For example, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe adopted this approach in their reading of populism, which remains influential today.

Return to the Source

Recently, however, the consensus in these circles has shifted markedly. Its proponents now contrast the nation — which they regard as a site of crude majoritarianism, where marginal identities face attacks from an intolerant public — to the rainbow coalition. Marxist analysis, in this new context, finds itself attacked from the opposite direction. Increasingly, materialist accounts are charged with showing too much sympathy for nationalism, because they attempt to provide sociological explanations rather than moral censure.

In one widely feted book, *The Clamour of Nationalism*, Sivamohan Valluvan warns that “the real trouble lies in those instances where nationalist politics is read [by Marxists] as a misdirected anti-capitalist politics ripe for socialist capture.” If we make any effort to provide an objective account of the social foundations of, say, Brexit or Donald Trump — in other words, anything but an abstractly moral attack on the right wing — we can be accused of complicity with the worst excesses of those phenomena. Even pro-migration, anti-war nationalisms like that of Scotland frequently end up being condemned by the same standards, especially insofar as they have a working-class support base.

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In academia, as in activist circles, decontextualized quotations and the substitution of moralized categories for historical analysis have plagued efforts to understand the Marxist approach to nationalism. This point holds true for supporters as much as it does for critics of the materialist method. In view of these confusions, study of the original texts is a necessary starting point.

While Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels contributed only indirectly to an explicit theory of nationalism, an emerging body of scholarship has begun to reconstruct the basic contours of their intellectual, moral, and tactical approach to such questions. By the standards of contemporary morality, their example is far from blemish-free, but analytically it still makes for a much richer perspective than their critics from various

standpoints might allow.

Point of Departure

Politically, Marx and Engels's view of nationalism is certainly more nuanced than many appreciate. Consider, for instance, their most celebrated (and disparaged) statement of internationalism in the *Communist Manifesto*: "The working men [and women] have no country." This has become one of the best-known refrains of the socialist tradition; for some, analysis begins and ends with that sentence.

Yet the *Manifesto* goes on to add the following observation:

Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself the nation, it is so far, itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word.

The implication is that the process of converting the numerical dominance of the working class into political dominance will begin from a national framing. National politics may not be the final destination, but it does represent the point of departure.

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Nationality thus becomes a battleground for class politics. In Solomon Bloom's rendering of the point: "Every class had the tendency to picture the nation, and sometimes the whole species, in its own image. It then proceeded to worship that image. For each class there was a different 'fatherland.'"

Even Leon Trotsky, often depicted as an arch cosmopolitan, was dismissive of doctrinaire internationalism:

If, in your self-education study group, with the aid of the methods of Marxism, you have freed yourself from various national prejudices, that is, of course, a very good thing and a very big step forward in your personal development. But the task confronting the ruling party in this sphere is a more far-reaching one: we have to make it possible for the many millions of our people, who belong to different nationalities, to find through the medium of the State and other institutions led by the Party, practical living satisfaction for their national interests and requirements, and thereby enable them to get rid of national antagonisms and prejudices — all this not at the level of a Marxist study group but at the level of the historical experience of entire peoples.

We can discover similar ambiguities by examining their practical record as political activists. For all their undoubted influence in promoting internationalism, in practice Marx and Engels supported many national independence movements of all shapes and sizes and varying degrees of historical advancement. It would be misleading to draw simplistic moral lessons from this, as if the record of the Marxist founders offered unconditional license to any and all national projects. They did not base their

support for such movements on moral absolutes but rather on a tactical assessment of how to advance the interests of the working class and accelerate moves toward socialism.

Applying the Lever

Nineteenth-century nationalism, as much of the Left conceived it, was essentially concerned with breaking apart absolutist states and confused layers of feudal sovereignty so as to lay the foundations for the modern capitalist order. At this stage of development, nationalism had yet to gain its later connotation of “narrowness” — indeed, building nations was a process of expansion. As Eric Hobsbawm observed, “It seemed clear that small, and especially small and backward, nationalities had everything to gain by merging into greater nations, and making their contributions to humanity through these.”

From this perspective, nations needed to demonstrate “viability” — to achieve a certain threshold of size that would enable them to thrive. For this reason, Giuseppe Mazzini, the nineteenth century’s chief apostle of liberal nationalism, did not envisage independence for Ireland: he believed that its small population and backward economy meant it was simply not viable as a separate entity. In Mazzini’s conception, the map of Europe’s future nation-states was to be formed of large states that we would now call multinational.

At times, Marx and Engels supported nationalism for similar reasons, as a solvent of feudal and absolutist modes of sovereignty. Engels in particular became overzealous in his application of the “threshold” position. However, their support for Irish separatism and anti-colonial movements reveals an approach that transcended the cruder, teleological theories of progress adhered to by their liberal contemporaries.

As always, Marx and Engels based their judgements largely on the geopolitical consequences of a nationalist breakthrough. In these cases, they supported national movements not merely to “prepare the ground” for capitalism but also, where the capitalist social order had advanced, as a form of disruption to bourgeois rule.

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As their analysis evolved, they also paid growing attention to how peripheral nationalist movements might condition the class consciousness of workers in the metropolis. Marx thus saw Irish nationalism as engaged in breaking down the ties that bound the working class of England to their state:

For a long time, I believed it would be possible to overthrow the Irish regime by English working-class ascendancy. I always took this viewpoint in the *New York Tribune*. Deeper study has now convinced me of the opposite. The English working class will never accomplish anything before it has got rid of Ireland. The lever must be applied in Ireland. This is why the Irish question is so important for the social

movement in general.

We cannot overstate the importance of this point. In subsequent generations, Marxism would go on to shape the mass working-class parties of the early period of parliamentary democracy. However, the parties of the Second International vastly overemphasized the underlying resilience of their internationalist pieties.

Panicked by initial working-class enthusiasm for World War I, almost all of them ended up siding with their imperial states in recruiting cannon fodder for mechanized warfare. Just as mass working-class politics became the main strategic problem for the capitalist class, a central question for Marxism itself was how to address the lure of imperial chauvinism in larger states.

Consequentialism

A generation of social scientists have pored over the limitations of Marx and Engels's approach. Certainly, they never define an absolute moral foundation for deciding which nationalisms are good and which are bad. There is no recognition in their work of an abstract right of self-determination. Instead, their position on national conflicts was largely tactical and "consequentialist," based on an analysis of whether a particular side's victory would hasten the fall of reactionary powers or weaken the ideological power of a bourgeois state over its workers.

Their iconoclastic distrust of liberal moralizers would sometimes bleed into contrarian language. In discussing British rule over India, Marx lampooned the defense of preindustrial hierarchical society:

I share not the opinion of those who believe in a golden age of Hindostan. . . . England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindostan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution.

Here we see the potentially brutal rhetoric of a consequentialist position, which can sound like an endorsement of cruelty and plunder. Yet Marx went on to make the following remarks:

The Indians will not reap the fruits of the new elements of society scattered among them by the British bourgeoisie, till in Great Britain itself the now ruling classes shall have been supplanted by the industrial proletariat, or till the Indians themselves shall have grown strong enough to throw off the English yoke altogether.

While Marx was no purveyor of pious liberal concern, his tactical sense of the international situation led him to support anti-colonial national movements.

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influence.”

The weaknesses of the position held by Marx and Engels are also, in certain contexts, a strength. The omission of moralism in determining good and bad nationalisms can bring renewed attention to how claims of nationhood function in the struggle for class domination. As Erica Benner puts it, “National ideology appears in this context not as a fixed or monolithic mechanism of a single class’s ascendancy, but as a key doctrinal arena in struggles for political power.” Equally, the Marx–Engels approach focuses on the effects that independence movements have upon the truly international context, where states spar with one another for influence.

For all the criticisms leveled at Marx and Engels, in the particular case of Scotland, these remain the crucial strategic stakes for the Left. In a word, Scotland’s questions are tactical. What would be the impact of independence (compared with the alternative prospect of ongoing union) when it comes to the class consciousness of workers? What prospects are there for strengthening working-class influence — and weakening ruling-class dominance — in the national movements? And what impact would the breakup of Britain have on the international order of states?

Myths of Self-determination

For those in search of firmer grounds for assessing the moral claims of national independence movements, a common but often misleading starting point is the “right of nations to self-determination.” First coined in 1917 with the twin declarations of Woodrow Wilson and Vladimir Lenin, the principle of self-determination would become the central legitimating principle on both sides of Cold War geopolitics. Today it continues to provide the ethical justification for the international system of competing states. Many nations claim to trace their statehood to this right: there are now statues of Wilson (where statues of Lenin once stood) in Poland and Bulgaria, symbolizing the ethical claims of those peoples to national independence.

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Yet for all the term’s mystical aura and for all that it persists as a theoretical claim in the United Nations Charter, self-determination, as an abstract moral claim, is often unenforceable. Indeed, as Catalonia has discovered, the assertion of that right often has no authority at all, and transnational institutions with an ethical remit, such as the European Union, may actively collude in suppressing it. There are no instruments to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate claims, and there is no ultimate sovereign to decide — except, in practice, that of the United States, which thanks to its superiority of force usually settles the benefit of any doubt.

Most cases of the actualization of self-determination have thus been a product of the total collapse of transnational states and empire, from the disintegration of the Ottoman and Habsburg empires a century ago to the postcommunist breakup of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. Hence the peculiar status of Scotland and Catalonia, whose national movements press their claims today within nominally powerful and

even successful states. This all makes a mockery of the supposed Wilsonian right of self-determination, according to which powerful states (or the “international community”) ensure respect for the claims of would-be nations.

It is a founding hypocrisy, as clearly illustrated by the failure of the world system to provide justice for the Palestinians. Conversely, Israel’s foundation and subsequent expansion illustrate the real grounding of sovereignty: military victory against a colonial power and/or mentoring by the great powers. In other words, the “right” provides a moralizing gloss to the real basis of the system of states, which is founded on the successful prosecution and monopolization of violence, whether colonial or anti-colonial (or, in Israel’s case, both).

The principle thus serves as the mythological foundation for explaining why some states exist and others do not. Its moral force alone is rarely adequate to the task of state-making. The consequence of this, of course, is that there is little precedent for movements, like Scotland’s, that are not founded on a deeply felt sense of national oppression and where there is every expectation that independence will be achieved without a single shot being fired.

Claim of Right

Nonetheless, it would be wrong to reduce the concept of self-determination to its hypocrisies. Acknowledging that self-determination is effectively a myth does not abolish its role as a moral guide to left-wing strategy. Its mystical allure has real-world effects. Indeed, the myth was powerful enough that both Ho Chi Minh and Fidel Castro actively solicited the support of the United States, the country of Woodrow Wilson, for their claims of national freedom, and were — in good faith — shocked to discover that liberal America backed old-fashioned colonial reaction.

Equally, Lenin’s rendering of the right was not based on illusions about the state system. Rather, it was designed instead to guide the tactics of working-class movements and — in contrast with its function today — to challenge state power, both in relation to structures of coercion and consent internally and to the international system of states.

But Lenin’s formulation left numerous ambiguities. At some points, he seemed to imply that self-determination and independence were one and the same: “The self-determination of nations means the political separation of these nations from alien national bodies, and the formation of an independent national state.” This left the nation little choice in the matter.

Lenin’s loose formulation arguably does little to distinguish itself from the philosophically nationalist view that nations and states must correspond. The ambiguities in Lenin’s formulation have never been adequately resolved. For some, Scotland’s self-determination simply equates to independence; for others, it means that Scotland’s membership in the UK is based on consent, implying the possibility of

divorce but also the choice of ongoing union.

Such ambiguities allow for endless trickery in practice. Theoretically, even UK state managers have conceded the right of self-determination. During the general election of 1992, Conservative leader John Major asserted that “no nation can be held within a Union against its will.”

Shortly after the UK general election of 1997, when preparations for the Scottish and Welsh devolution referendums were under way, Labour politician Donald Dewar noted that “the only way [the Scots] could move to independence would be if people voted for independence. That is clearly their right.” However, as Michael Keating has noted, “successive British governments have recognized” that Scotland is a self-determining nation within the Union but “then tried to deny the consequences.”

In these cases, the question is less the principle itself — which has effectively become a monotonous platitude, superficially adhered to by all except when it has real-world consequences — than the details of its application. National movements like those in Scotland and Catalonia have few precedents for pursuing their claims. They must rely on assumptions of good faith from successor states (the remainder of the UK or Spain) and the always nebulously defined “international community.”

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Equally, expressions of solidarity from outside the nation will inevitably appeal to the principle of self-determination — Scotland’s right to choose its future — rather than explicitly “telling” Scotland to vote one way or another. Self-determination is thus a useful myth from many angles, and it serves many purposes.

Crucially, in Scotland itself the debate over the right to decide (whether through a referendum or by other means) serves to reproduce an ultimately conservative consensus under the guise of a dispute. One side insists it has numerous mandates to call a fresh referendum on independence but is powerless to enact them, while the other wields state power to impose what it regards as its own mandate, stemming from the result of the 2014 plebiscite. Proxy battles over procedures and prerogatives effectively shield questions about the nature of independence or of the British state from politics.

Rather often, talk of self-determination thus functions in the opposite sense to that intended in the Leninist tradition: far from radicalizing debates about state power and solidarity, it serves endlessly to defer them. Conversely, though, if Scotland were to achieve independence, it would radicalize debates about the state across Europe, establishing a precedent that would serve to galvanize movements in Catalonia, the Basque Country, Ireland, and elsewhere. This illustrates once again the point that Scotland stands on a knife-edge between the radical implications of independence and the conservative reproduction of nationalist governments under the devolved UK order.

Oppressors and Oppressed

The Leninist tradition made a second contribution to the national question in drawing a distinction between oppressed and oppressor nations. Even in countries where Marxism had a limited profile, these criteria have shaped debates on the Left about the comparative merits of nationalist movements. Scotland has not been immune to this: indeed, scholarly debates about Scottish history have often been colored by the sort of motivated reasoning necessary to force reality into these categories. The result, most frequently, has been the unnecessary misrepresentation of complex historical situations.

Insofar as the distinctions have any meaning, there should be no doubt that Scotland, as a central partner in the British Empire, was an oppressor nation. Much of early Scottish nationalism during that period concerned a demand for Scotland to enjoy equal sovereign status among plunderers. Equally, the almost total absence of Scottish nationalist sentiment until the 1960s may partly reflect the status that came with belonging to an empire, which was central to certain forms of Protestant identity that cut across class lines.

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It would be a mistake to assume that Scotland’s role in oppressive global systems ended there. It has become intellectually convenient to imagine that, with the rise of US empire, Britain entered a persistent decline into ever greater irrelevance. In truth, there was no consistent pattern.

British military technology and power experienced a revival after the initial shock of decolonization. Scots such as the quasifascist operator Colonel David Stirling, founder of the Special Air Service (SAS), played a central role in that revival. More recently, a whole gamut of Scottish New Labour figures have performed equally significant roles in advocating for US adventurism, including Gordon Brown, John Reid, and Jim Murphy. Insofar as the British state has been and continues to be an oppressor, Scots have more than played their part.

The real question is whether this is still relevant in adjudicating Scotland’s national question. Today no side of Scottish nationalism’s factional war claims that Scotland was historically oppressed. Alex Salmond, for example, gives the following analysis:

Scotland was never oppressed, or at least not all of Scotland. There were parts of Scotland [that] obviously had a rough time within the Union — the Highland Clearances. But Scotland wasn’t an oppressed nation. . . . It was a partner in Union as opposed to being colonized or planted [like Ireland] so it is a different history and different experience.

Nicola Sturgeon’s stance has been even more unequivocal than Salmond’s. Demonstrating that Scotland is not oppressed is hardly likely to preclude support for independence. Indeed, a central socialist motive for independence relates precisely to awareness of Scotland’s role as an oppressor with a disproportionate historical

role in both the British Empire and the contemporary nuclear strategy of US imperialism.

Independence may not prove to be a mortal blow to these institutions, but it would unambiguously damage the imperial foundations of a powerful and reactionary state, regardless of whether these are the conscious motives of nationalist leaders. By contrast, even Jeremy Corbyn, the extreme case of a dedicated pacifist taking the reins of the British Labour Party, was forced to accept the usual routines of British state power — NATO, nuclear weapons, and alliance with Israel. Undoubtedly, he would have been forced into yet more embarrassing climbdowns if he had ever assumed power.

Agency

Conversely, proving that Scotland is an oppressed “colony” would not necessarily demonstrate the case for independence. Indeed, in the 1970s it was relatively common to find socialists defending the Union precisely on the grounds that Scotland, being a colony, was too weak to stand alone.

In these accounts, Scotland was so severely oppressed that it lacked the basis for autonomy: under independence, its oil would inevitably become the plaything of the City of London and global capitalist forces. These traditions have persisted, particularly in neo-Stalinist accounts but also in a wider milieu surrounding Scotland’s Labour left and trade union bureaucracy, through networks such as the Red Paper Collective.

Rather than placing Scotland into any category of victimhood, the true tactical question should be that of agency. What relationship with state power gives the greatest chance for working-class and democratic forces to exert meaningful political choice against established interests?

Unionist critiques based on the “unity of the British working class” gloss over the fact that, for several decades, the repressive British state has effectively worn trade unionism down to a nub of service provision, while the party-political order has systematically disenfranchised working-class voters. In other words, it has reduced working-class political participation to no more than a consumer choice.

Scottish independence, by contrast, emerged from a political moment, the 2014 referendum, which was an organized revolt against the Thatcherite logic of “there is no alternative,” built on a demand to be treated as active citizens rather than passive consumers. Whether independence achieves these aims is an open matter. However, if we want to reverse decades of political reaction, we need to appreciate the scarcity of working-class agency and take it seriously wherever it emerges.

This is an extract from [Scotland After Britain](#), now available from Verso Books.