THE NATIONAL QUESTION IN SPAIN

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The national question in Spain and its position in today's left is still an unsettled issue full of eclecticism. Let us take Stalin's definition of the nation:

> 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.

Essentially, the nation is a historical entity to which corresponds a territory, a language, and a culture, that aggregates a human community. The nation as we understand it today is a product of the ideological struggle of liberalism against feudal and/or absolutist ideologies towards the end of the emergence of capitalism and its revolutionary rise. Therefore, the nation has a beginning, a history, and an end. To understand the peripheral nations within the Spanish state, one must first understand how the Spanish nation was formed.

The beginning of a Spanish nation can be traced to the *Nueva Planta* Decrees of the early 18th century, enacted by the Bourbon dynasty after winning the War of Succession against the Hapsburgs. The *Nueva Planta* Decrees essentially abolished the feudal structures that had united "Spain" through a union of kingdoms with different rights and duties, such as the Kingdom of Castile or the Kingdom of Aragon. By abolishing this structure, the power of the state was centralized in the crown of Castile, which now subsumed to itself all the territory previously belonging to the other kingdoms except that of Navarre. It is here, with the abolition of the majority of feudal institutions, when the process of Bourbon reformism and centralization begins, which will mark the path towards a Spanish nation, in a single state.

Commerce and the class associated with it came into contradiction with feudal legacies, such as the different local currencies and internal customs, aspects that one by one were flattened by the Bourbon reformist steamroller, a process that began to pick up speed and strength after the War of Independence and its bourgeois revolution

at the beginning of the 19th century, in which the Cadiz constitution of 1812 and the return to the throne of the absolutist Ferdinand VII gave liberalism strength, popularity and something to charge against. The constitution of 1812, curiously enough, was. and in some respects remains. the most liberal constitution ever written in Spain, granting freedoms to the bourgeoisie that they have never enjoyed again.

Almost the entirety of the 19th century was a great battle between the liberal impulse and the feudal reaction, one with many tugs-of-war, most notably the three Carlist Wars that culminated in the Bourbon Restoration after the failure of the First Republic in 1874. The return to power of the Bourbons in a country already more modernized and with a more established industry was the culmination of the superstructural formation of the Spanish state, settling almost definitively the debates on the form that this state should take. The decision for a parliamentary monarchy instead of a republic, and the decision for a more or less federal but not unitary state, was the unification of the Spanish bourgeoisie, although on rare occasions sectors of that bourgeoisie abandoned their support for those forms for various reasons.

Very broadly speaking, once we have seen the origin and development of the Spanish nation as an entity until its consolidation, we can understand Catalan nationalism much better, as well as Basque and Galician nationalism.

In these three cases at least, which are the strongest and most relevant within the mosaic of languages and cultures within the Spanish state, the contradictions between feudal institutions and the drive towards the liberalization of the economy, the violent and reformist transition towards capitalism, were what motivated some sectors of the bourgeoisie to demand more or less speed in that transition.

The bourgeoisie of Catalonia, one of the first places in Spain to consolidate an industry and railroad around the textile industry, favored

the implementation of free trade measures and a completely federal state, but within the national market.

The Basque bourgeoisie, belonging to a considerably industrialized region and in which feudal institutions were maintained for a longer period of time due to the preservation of the kingdom of Navarre during the first dismantling of feudalism, favored protectionism against the agricultural products from other countries such as France or England, and also favored the return or maintenance of the financial and economic privileges granted by the *fueros* during feudalism. The Basque bourgeoisie, however, had no problem using its industrial production to support the suppression of the wars for independence in Cuba, even going so far as to call for "Spanish unity".

The Galician bourgeoisie did not so much experience a takeover of its own power, as it did an integration of the feudal institutions and power already present in the capitalist economy, something that impoverished that class and in the long term slowed down the development of the region.

These discontents with the economic policy of the Spanish state forged the inter-bourgeois contradiction of those regions, fueled by the unequal development inherent to capitalism, an economic differentiation in addition to the linguistic and cultural one. The "*fuerismo*" in Euskadi, the "abandonment" in Galicia and the "oppression" in Catalonia were the rhetorical weapons taken by the national bourgeoisies, explaining the unequal development and the contradictions between feudalism and capitalism by means of those reasonings. These three bourgeoisies supported a reconfiguration of the state as it had been prior to the *Nueva Planta* Decrees, and generated a reactionary regionalism. The cultural programs that emerged in the 19th century with the aim of stimulating or rejuvenating the use of peripheral languages, "reviving" them, were in almost all cases financed by their respective bourgeoisies, even having symmetries between them. The *Renaixença* in Catalonia and

the *Rexurdimento* in Galicia were movements for the "recovery" of literature in their respective languages, financed by their bourgeoisies and which produced an ideological content referring to a lost and independent past that had to be recovered.

The Basque language did not enjoy this type of program like other languages because the work of standardizing its grammar and syntax continued well into the 20th century, due to the characteristics of the development of Basque as a language in a series of valleys and villages that produced a multitude of dialects and differences within the umbrella of Basque. This does not mean that Basque nationalism lacked an ideological impulse, Sabino Arana, the founder of the PNV, was also a writer and generally referred to a past that had to be recovered, including the foral privileges of feudalism.

The proletariat was not static at this time either, and the contradiction between the nation of labor and the nation of capital occurred simultaneously with the very creation of the nation of capital. The mining strike of 1890 was the first great exponent of the class struggle in Spain, around the time of the founding of the PSOE, being the second oldest socialist party in the world, after the German SPD.

The loss of the last really productive colonies, Cuba and the Philippines, in the disaster of 1898, forces the opening of the country to foreign capital, concentrated in Catalonia, Asturias and Vizcaya, stimulating in turn the development of Spanish finance capital, and the bourgeoisie, whether Spanish or peripheral, increased the exploitation of the revolutionary classes. Throughout the course of most of these years, the nationalist bourgeoisies did not come to question the very existence of the state, but simply demand a better position within it, either through privileges and protectionism, greater market freedom or a greater initiative for financing by the state. Another consequence of the disaster of '98 was that it allowed the bourgeoisie in general to take a very beneficial rhetorical and political position, that of victimhood and

the self-perception of Spain as a second-rate country or a failed state, a perception that is still very much alive today, despite belonging, already before 1898, to the upper-middle rank of the imperialist pyramid. However, the imperialist phase of capitalism as identified by Lenin at this time only ends up crystallizing in Spain by the beginning of the 20th century, once industrial capital is concentrated in the hands of a few families, along with financial capital.

The influence of this victimhood and inter-bourgeois antagonism permeated and continues to permeate the working class of the country. The perspective of Catalan nationalism of being oppressed and of rejecting all centralization of the state undoubtedly had a great influence on the triumph of anarcho-syndicalism, once the workers' movement fully arrived in Spain, and the ultra-reactionary tendency of Basque nationalism has produced ideologies such as the synthesis between communism and the vindication of the feudal privileges within the Carlist party that still exists.

Does all of this mean that the oppression of the peripheral nations, their prejudice in the development of Spanish capitalism and Spanish chauvinism, was an invention of the Catalan and Basque bourgeoisies? Of course not, and without a cultural and linguistic base from which to start from, without a real discontent among the working class to pull from, and without the financial effort to mold the recovery of literature around its ideological demands, the nationalist discourse would not have had the weight it has come to have. But it must be recognized that the nation as a concept and ideological justification is a product of the struggle between capitalism and the moribund feudalism of the 19th century, a way for national bourgeoisies disadvantaged by the uneven development inherent to capitalism to gain popular support for their demands for a better position in their state's capitalism and imperialist capitalism.

Spanish nationalism, which has enjoyed a state of its own, is also a product of the Spanish bourgeoisie, used to convince the working class of its demands, and which, following the logic of the nation-state, has implemented a suppression of these peripheral languages and nations, going so far as to attempt to eliminate them completely as was the case during Francoism. But neither is the Spanish nation inherently oppressive, nor are the Basque, Catalan, Galician and other nations inherently liberating or progressive. The current state of power distribution has been a simple product of which nation had the greater political, economic and demographic power in the period of its constitution as a nation. If, in any way, it had been the Catalan nation that had expanded over a majority of the peninsula and had begun to centralize the state around Barcelona instead of Madrid, similar dynamics would be replicated today between the nation that holds political power and those that do not.

Again, the nation is a capitalist entity that only belongs to the period of capitalist hegemony. If communists want a revolution that puts an end to it, the nation-state as a form of configuration of the machinery of domination of one class over another must also be done away with. However, this has not always been the position of communists in Spain.

When the PCE was founded as the Spanish section of the Communist International in 1921 (PCE-SEIC), one of the analyses transmitted to it by the International was that of the national question. After the VI Congress of the International, countries were classified into three categories. Those in which capitalism is fully developed, those in which it is semi-developed, and those in which it is not developed. Spain, in spite of being by then completely integrated in the upper ranks of the imperialist pyramid and carrying out imperialist campaigns in Morocco, was classified as a country in which capitalism was semi-developed, due to a bad analysis on the part of the PCE and a lack of information in the USSR. As a result of this, the imperialist dynamics between Spain and Morocco, the Sahara or Equatorial Guinea were equated with the

dynamics between Spain and Catalonia, Euskadi, etc. In a certain way, the International sinned of applying the template of the USSR, which came from a Czarist Russia in which the internal nations did suffer imperialist and colonial processes, to Spain. Again, it is not that the oppression suffered by the peripheral nations did not exist, but it belonged and belongs to a mechanism different from imperialism-colonialism.

This error, in a certain way, weakened the PCE and facilitated the coup d'état of 1936 and the civil war. Neither the Galician peasantry nor the Basque and Catalan bourgeoisie opposed the coup d'état, in contrast to the well-proletarianized and relevant pockets of the PCE and other similar parties and organizations. For the return to "democracy" and its legalization, the PCE fully accepted autonomism as the form it supports for the state, together with its thousand other reformist and Eurocommunist drifts. All of this means that, the PCE, as the greatest historical representative of the workers' struggle in Spain, has never made a proper analysis of the national question. Which brings us to the modern Marxist-Leninist position and the state of the national question on the Spanish left.

As I said before, the nation must be left where it belongs, in the revolutionary period of liberalism and to the various forms that capitalism has of fragmenting the nation of labor with the nation of capital. Starting from an internationalist basis, how can one support Catalan independence? Support the division of the proletariat into yet another state? To support the interests of a Catalan bourgeoisie that has been using the strategies of nationalism for more than a century to achieve a better position in the imperialist chain? I do not want the division of the proletariat in this country, not because of Spanish chauvinism, but as a matter of understanding that the reconfiguration of the borders between capitalist institutions will never do our class any favors, because it is not in the interest of the working class. Its interest is the union of all the proletarians of the world in a system

that is not based on the exploitation of man by man. However, we must start from the present situation, which is a situation of division of the proletariat more or less along national lines, divisions which cause in capitalism an unequal development, and that therefore cause different conditions relative to the rest of the world.

From all of the above, the first and most fundamental of the communist positions on the national question emerges: A revolution that is national in form, but international in content. From this also comes the second position: In all of Spain, to defend the ironclad unity of the working class against all nationalism that divides it, whether Spanish or otherwise. Without ignoring the real oppression suffered by the proletariat of the non-Spanish nations, and recognizing that culture itself does not have a capitalist character, the last, but not less important position is reached. The protection of linguistic and cultural rights is inseparable from the communist strategy and program.

Unfortunately, this is, by far, neither the only nor the most common position on the national question in Spain. It is more common for many on the left to embrace peripheral nationalism, making the same mistake that the PCE and the CI made 100 years ago, born of the same rearguardist impulse that leads some communists to embrace certain forms of reaction in order to reach out to more members of the working class. The *Frente Obrero*, for example, has decided that, if the working class is homophobic, transphobic and racist, they must be the most homophobic, the most transphobic and the most racist. The left that embraces nationalism follows the same exercise. If the working class in my region is nationalist and pro-independence, then we have to be the most nationalist and the most pro-independence.

This is what, for example, has happened in the newest organization in the Spanish communist movement, the *Movimiento Socialista*, and its infinitude of component sub-organizations. Since it has grown by incorporating entire associations, organizations, and movements all at

once, it is, at this time, the most eclectic of the entities in the Spanish communist movement. This has impeded it from taking any concrete stances, except for the national question. It decided to support any and all significant regionalist and separatist movements, an unsurprising decision given its roots in the *abertzale* left of the Basque Country. Subsequently, any remaining elements regarded as "chauvinist", including federalism, were kicked from the organization.

There are other, smaller, regionalist movements in Spain, almost as many as there are autonomous communities. These, for various reasons, never developed a distinct or strong enough bourgeoisie for their regionalist movements to acquire the political relevance that the Catalan and Basque nationalists did. The aims of these regionalist movements is more akin to that of Galicia's. Asturians predominantly feel Asturian first, and Spanish second, always as a part of the country, albeit a distinct one with its own language and history. The regionalists in Extremadura, on the other hand, feel an abandonment, and one of the most relevant demands is the construction of better railway and road connections, within the region and to other parts of the country. As a last example, Andalucia also isn't lacking in regionalist sentiment, and though it is usually more similar to Asturias', there is a noticeable, albeit small, number of those who call for independence.