## WHY DO ANARCHISTS OPPOSE NATIONALISM?



**Anarchist Communist Group (ACG)** 

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Anarchists in the class struggle (or communist) tradition, such as the Anarchist Communist Group, do not see the world in terms of competing national peoples, but in terms of class. We do not see a world of nations in struggle, but of classes in struggle. The nation is a smokescreen, a fantasy which hides the struggle between classes which exists within and across them. Though there are no real nations, there are real classes with their own interests, and these classes must be differentiated. Consequently, there is no single 'people' within the 'nation', and there is no shared 'national interest' which unifies them.

Anarchist communists do not simply oppose nationalism because it is bound up in racism and parochial bigotry. It undoubtedly fosters these things, and mobilised them through history. Organizing against them is a key part of anarchist politics. But nationalism does not require them to function. Nationalism can be liberal, cosmopolitan and tolerant, defining the 'com-

mon interest' of 'the people' in ways which do not require a single 'race'. Even the most extreme nationalist ideologies, such as fascism, can co-exist with the acceptance of a multiracial society, as was the case with the Brazilian Integralist movement. Nationalism uses what works — it utilises whatever superficial attribute is effective to bind society together behind it. In some cases, it utilises crude racism, in other cases it is considerably more sophisticated. It manipulates what is in place to its own ends. In many western countries, official multiculturalism is a key part of civic policy and a corresponding multicultural nationalism has developed alongside it. The shared 'national culture' comes to be official multiculturalism itself, allowing for the integration of 'citizens' into the state without recourse to crude monoculturalism. The inclusive nationalism of the Scottish National Party is an exemplary illustration of this. However, even when the nationalist rhetoric of the capitalist state is of the most

open, tolerant and anti-racist kind, anarchists still oppose it.

This is because, at heart, nationalism is an ideology of class collaboration. It functions to create an imagined community of shared interests and in doing so seeks to hide the real, material interests of the classes which comprise the population. The 'national interest' is a weapon against the working class, and an attempt to rally the ruled behind the interests of their rulers. The ideological and sometimes physical mobilisation of the population on a mass scale in the name of some shared and central national trait have marked the wars of the Twentieth and Twenty-First centuries — the bloodbath in Iraq rationalised in the name of Western democratic culture and the strengthening of the domestic state in the name of defending the British or American traditions of freedom and democracy against Islamic terror are recent examples.

Ultimately, the anarchist opposition to nationalism follows a simple principle. The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. This is not just a slogan, but the reality of the world we live in. Class antagonism is an inherent part of capitalism, and will exist irrespective of whether intellectuals and political groups theorise about its existence or nonexistence. Class is not about your accent, your consumption habits, or whether your collar is blue or white. The working class — what is sometimes called the proletariat — is the dispossessed class, the class who have no capital, no control over the overall conditions of their lives and nothing to live off but their ability to work for a wage (or salary). They may well have a house and a car, but they still need to sell their ability to work to an employer in return for the money they need to live on. Their interests are specific, objective and material: to get more money from their employers for less work, and to get better living and working conditions. The interests of capital are directly opposed: to get more work out of us for less, and to cut corners and costs, in order to return a higher rate of profit and allow their money to become more money more quickly and efficiently. Class struggle is the competition between these interests. Even non-productive workplaces are shaped by these rules, as they are the fundamental principles of capitalist society. The interests of capital are expressed through those with power, who are likewise obliged to maintain these interests in order to keep their own power — owners of private capital, the bosses who make decisions on its behalf, and the state which is required to enshrine and defend private property and ownership rights.

The 'national interest' is simply the interest of capital within the country in question. It is the interest of the owners of society, who in turn can only express the fundamental needs of capital — accumulate or die. At home, its function is to domesticate those within a so-

ciety who can pose antagonism with it — the working class. This antagonism, which is inherent to capitalism, is one which anarchist communists see as being capable of moving beyond capitalism. We have to struggle in our interests to get the things we need as concessions from capital. This dynamic takes place regardless of whether elaborate theories are constructed around it. Workers in China or Bangladesh occupying factories and rioting against the forces of the state are not necessarily doing it because they have encountered revolutionary theory, but because the conditions of their lives mean they have to. Similarly, class solidarity exists not because people are charitable but because solidarity is in their interests. The capitalists have the state — the law, the courts and prisons. We only have each other. Individually we can achieve very little, but together we can cause disruption to the everyday functioning of capitalism, a powerful weapon. Of course, class struggles are rarely pure and unsullied

things, and they can be overlaid with bigotries and factional interests of various kinds. It is the job of revolutionary groups and anarchist communist organisation in the workplace to combat these tendencies, to contribute to the development of class consciousness and militancy and to complement the process by which divisions are challenged through joint struggle which takes place within struggles of significant magnitude.

The ruling class are fully aware of these issues, and are conscious in acting in their interests. Solidarity is the only thing we can hold over their heads, and for that reason the state takes great care to get us to act against our own interests. Nationalism is one of their greatest weapons in this regard, and has consequently served an important historical purpose. It lines us up behind our enemies, and demands we ignore our own interests as members of the working class in deference to those of the nation. It leads to the domestication of

the working class, leading working class people to identify themselves in and through the nation and to see solutions to the problems they face in terms of it. This is not terminal as we already know; circumstances can and do force people to act in their interests, and through this process ideas develop and change. To take a dramatic example from history, workers across the world marched off to war to butcher one another in 1914, only to take up arms against their masters in an international wave of strikes, mutinies, uprisings and revolutions from 1917 onwards.

Nonetheless, nationalism is a poison to be resisted tooth and nail. It is an ideology of domestication. It is a weapon against us. It is an organized parochialism, designed to split the working class — which as a position within the economic system is international — along national lines.

Ultimately, even if we lay aside our principled and

theoretical opposition to nationalism, the idea of any kind of meaningful national self-determination in the modern world is idealism. Nations cannot self-determine when subject to a world capitalist market, and those who frame their politics in terms of regaining national sovereignty against world capitalism, such as contemporary fascists and their fellow travellers, seek an unattainable golden age before modern capitalism. The modern world is an integrated one, one where international 'cooperation' and conflict cannot be readily separated, and which are expressed through international institutions and organisations like the UN, WTO, World Bank, EU, NATO, and so on. The nationalist fantasy is an empty one as much as it is a reactionary one. Anarchist communists recognize as much in their opposition. We will return to this point later.

Before we go further, it is necessary to pre-empt a common and fallacious 'criticism'. We do not stand for monoculture. We do not seek to see the rich diversity of human cultural expression standardied in an anarchist society. How could we? The natural mixing of culture stands against the fantasies of nationalists. National blocs are never impervious to cultural influence, and culture spreads and mingles with time. The idea of self-contained national cultures, which nationalists are partisans of, is a myth. Against this we pose the free interchange of cultural expression in a free, stateless communist society as a natural consequence of the struggle against the state and capitalism.

The anarchist communist opposition to nationalism must be vocal and clear. We do not fudge internationalism. Internationalism does not mean the cooperation of capitalist nations, or national working classes, but the fundamental critique of the idea of the nation and nationality.

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