

Cultural Marxism: an alternative history

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Nulle Terre Sans Seigneur

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Cultural Marxism emerged from the failure of fin-de-siecle and interwar Orthodox Marxism to properly grapple with the national question, and with the failure of historical materialism to deal with psychological motives of economic classes. The work of French and Italian Marxist revisionists in the making of proto-fascist ideology is well known, but a similar process evolved in the rigidly leftist side as well. Orthodox Marxism had increasingly become a rote and vulgarized system of keywords to be applied in order to confirm a predetermined consensus. Words like “imperialism” and “bourgeoisie” had gone on to mean just about anything, with the absence of a well-defined Marxist theory of the state contributing to this state of affairs. Eduard Bernstein and the social-democratic reformists had accepted social liberalism in everything but name. The antibourgeois character of Marxism never had a very strong psychological foundation to begin with. The Junker’s existence is threatened by the burgher in a way that the proletarian’s isn’t. No surprise the prole would want to emulate his “class enemy,” the burgher, especially since there were no hereditary restrictions to accomplishing this, and as it became easier with increasing consumerization and expansion of credit.

The Frankfurt School were not the key culprits behind Cultural Marxism, except insofar as they served as prime examples of the general humanist shift in Western Marxism after the Western disillusionment with Stalinism. This tendency, however, begins with the German Marxist Karl Korsch’s calls for a return to Hegel and phenomenology in the 1920s, marking the start of Marxism becoming ever more an intellectual hobby of academics rather than an intellectual framework for revolutionary praxis. So too with Gyorgy Lukacs revisiting dialectics, and thus introducing Marxist-humanist preoccupations with “rationalization,” (influenced by Weber) “ascribed consciousness” and most famously “reification” — an idea that would become one of the ultimate ancestors of the modern academic preoccupation with social constructionism. Later on we get Marcuse’s more explicitly Freudian themes of “repression” and “sublimation.” The concept of “alienation” is shifted from the economic connotations of commodification of labor-power (an artifact of the division of labor more generally) into one of psychological malaise, the “external objectification of human objectivity” as Korsch dubbed it. Even Louis Althusser, who was supposedly the architect of a materialist reaction against Marxist humanism, ended up strengthening humanism through his concept of “ideological state apparatuses,” becoming a corollary to Gramsci’s “cultural hegemony” and hence an impetus for Marxist critiques of what was once considered superstructural and not basic.

I have previously written about the [American student radical movement of the 1930s](#), with its themes of racial equality, anti-fascism and New Deal collaborationism (like being bailed out of permit violations under FDR’s orders by a New Deal aide nicknamed “Tommy the Cork” —

true story), as anticipating the New Left three decades later.

One also cannot ignore the general technocratic atmosphere of postwar Keynesian social democracy, with its ethos intoxicating many former radicals. The Labor Party in Britain eventually abandoned its former commitment to nationalization of the “commanding heights,” in favor of promoting the embourgeoisement of the proletariat instead. In 1956, Anthony Crosland published a book entitled *The Future of Socialism* where he explicitly condoned this shift, stating quite dramatically that:

We need not only higher exports and old-age pensions, but more open-air cafes, brighter and gayer streets at night, later closing hours for public houses, more local repertory theatres, better and more hospitable hoteliers and restaurateurs, brighter and cleaner eating houses, more riverside cafes... better design for furniture and pottery and women's clothes...

If I had to select one paragraph to demonstrate “Cultural Marxism” as most people use it in the sense of “Why did the left stop caring about DA WURKURZ?!” that would be it.

However, the humanist transition did not occur spontaneously. There are five episodes in the history of Marxist thought that I believe are illustrative in having prefigured this. All of them have to do with Marxism's relationship to nationalism. 1) Marx and Engels' own views on the national question; 2) Lenin, Stalin, Kautsky, Luxemburg and the Orthodox Marxist debates on the subject; 3) the fin-de-siecle French Marxism led by Jules Guesde, and their response to the emergence of both French integralist nationalism and the intensification of coolie labor inflows; 4) the widespread adoption of nationalism by Marxist-Leninist states — Bulgaria, Romania, Russia, etc.; 5) the CPUSA's flirtations with black nationalism in the 1930s.

Friedrich Engels considered Pan-Slavism to be reactionary, and instead thought that the Austrian Slavs would eventually be assimilated into German and Hungarian mores. Hence my jokingly calling him a Habsburg imperialist. “In history nothing is achieved without violence and implacable ruthlessness, and if Alexander, Caesar, and Napoleon had been capable of being moved by the same sort of appeal as that which pan-Slavism now makes on behalf of its ruined clients, what would have become of history,” he wrote.

More specifically, Engels drew a distinction between “historic” and “non-historic” nations. The former had centuries of economic development and consolidation behind them, and hence were progressive, whereas the latter were the romantic appeals of newly educated bourgeois representatives of what had until then been marginal vassal nations. Advocating their causes was retrograde for the achievement of socialism.

On the other hand, it is an error to consider Engels an anti-nationalist, exactly. In an 1882 letter to Karl Kautsky, he says that “It is historically impossible for a great people even to discuss internal problems of any kind seriously, as long as it lacks national independence. Before 1859, there was no question of socialism in Italy; even the number of Republicans was

small, although they formed the most active element. Only after 1861 the Republicans increased in influence and later transferred their best elements to the Socialists. The same was true in Germany. Lassalle was at the point of giving up his work as a failure, when he had the fortune of being shot. Only when in the year 1866 the greater Prussian unity of petty Germany had been actually decided, the Lassallean, as well as the so-called Eisenach parties assumed some importance. And only after 1870 when the Bonapartist appetite of intervention had been removed definitively the thing got really going.”

More succinctly, that an international movement of the proletariat is possible only among independent nations. Engels in particular strongly endorsed Polish and Irish nationalism, saying that not only did they have the right, but the *duty* to be nationalistic before they became internationalists. More importantly, Polish independence was necessary to act as a bulwark against Russian tsarist expansion. In this sense, Engels and Pilsudski were of the exact same conviction.

In an 1870 letter to two Americans, Karl Marx voiced his support for Irish independence. The reason being that England, as the “metropolis of capital,” was ripe for revolution like no other country. However, the working class was divided by ethnic antagonisms between English and Irish, and so the means of hastening revolution was to make Ireland independent.

Decades later, Lenin would support Marx’s opinion by writing that “if the Irish and English proletariat had not accepted Marx’s policy and had not made the secession of Ireland their slogan, this would have been the worst sort of opportunism, a neglect of their duties as democrats and socialists, and a concession to English reaction and the English bourgeoisie.”

Hence, we already see the role of ethnicity as a material factor in class consciousness. “English” reaction. Furthermore, Irish independence was now elevated to a duty as part of being a democrat and socialist in general, i.e. it is not mere bourgeois chauvinism.

By 1920, the 2nd World Congress of the Comintern would elevate this to a communist orthodoxy. Though distancing itself from “petty-bourgeois nationalism,” it advocated a united front of communist-led national liberation movements allied to Soviet Russia: “The international political situation has now placed the dictatorship of the proletariat on the order of the day, and all the events in international politics are concentrated inevitably around one single central point, around the struggle of the international bourgeoisie against the Russian Soviet Republic. The latter rallies around itself, on the one hand, the soviet movements of the vanguard of the working class in every country and, on the other hand, all the national liberation movements of the colonies and the oppressed nationalities who have been convinced by bitter experience that for them there is no salvation outside an alliance with the revolutionary proletariat and the victory of soviet power over world imperialism.”

In effect, this position was similar to that of Bukharin, who five years earlier rejected the slogan of “national self-determination” because he considered it both insufficiently emancipatory and “utopian.” “It is therefore impossible to struggle against the enslavement

of nations other than through a struggle against imperialism. Ergo a struggle against imperialism; ergo a struggle against finance capital; ergo a struggle against capitalism in general.”

The opposition to “self-determination” as a positively enumerated right concealed the revolutionary-nationalist implications of backing anti-colonial movements en masse.

Rosa Luxemburg, for example, is frequently held to have been a dogmatic anti-nationalist. This doesn’t seem quite right. On one hand, Luxemburg did hold views similar to Engels, in that she regarded the ambitions of national independence for many peripheral nations to be a reversion to kleinstaaterei that would stall socialist revolution.

Rather, she opposed using “rights-talk,” regarding it as a bourgeois fiction: “If we recognize the right of each nation to self-determination, it is obviously a logical conclusion that we must condemn every attempt to place one nation over another, or for one nation to force upon another any form of national existence. However, the duty of the class party of the proletariat to protest and resist national oppression arises not from any special “right of nations,” just as, for example, its striving for the social and political equality of sexes does not at all result from any special “rights of women” which the movement of bourgeois emancipationists refers to. This duty arises solely from the general opposition to the class regime and to every form of social inequality and social domination, in a word, from the basic position of socialism.” (*The National Question*, 1909).

Yet this “basic position of socialism” would clearly have to emphasize some inequalities over others depending on historical and economic circumstances, and in practice the nation-state would prove the most durable rallying cry.

Luxemburg herself published a pamphlet in 1900 entitled “In Defense of Nationality,” a vigorous incitement for Poles to rise up against Prussianization: “Your hair stands up when you think about these attempts, your fist clenches out of desperation, that such things have been happening in broad daylight before the eyes of all Europe and the entire civilized world for decades, and none of the elites speak out, no one pushes back the Germanizing power; the Hakatists [colonization society members] laugh at our weakness and quietly continue their work of uprooting Polish identity, as if they were doing the world’s most honorable and righteous work. So it is a crime to speak your own language, which you imbibed with your mother’s milk; so it is a crime to belong to a people, into which you were born! Truly, it is about time for the Polish people to shake off its lifelessness, to express its indignation, to rise and fight against Germanization. In which way this fight shall be led, in which way the defense of Polish nationality will be achieved most effectively – these are questions which it pays to consider seriously.”

Here is Luxemburg the Polish nationalist. Note she does not advocate a nation-state, but rather “national cultural autonomy,” a view compatible both with believing in the importance of ethnic identity while rejecting national self-determination as a bourgeois fraud to mask

class exploitation, a view to be shared later by the Austromarxist school of Otto Bauer and Karl Renner, one not too dissimilar from a diaspora model of nationhood. Nevertheless, this is a clear example of the use of nationalist rhetoric to recruit people into a socialist party (Chapter 3).

Now Lenin ends up explicitly backing national self-determination, as in early 1916 when he writes that “the proletariat cannot but fight against the forcible retention of the oppressed nations within the boundaries of a given state, and this is exactly what the struggle for the right of self-determination means. The proletariat must demand the right of political secession for the colonies and for the nations that “its own” nation oppresses.” He explicitly equates national self-determination as a prerequisite for proletarian internationalism.

However it was Stalin who developed the seminal Marxist-Leninist theory of the nation in *Marxism and the National Question* (1913), where he defines a nation as 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 rejected the Austromarxist idea of cultural-national autonomy, seeing it as incompatible with the historical tendency for capitalism to dissolve cultural ties by displacing laborers. Furthermore, Bauer was an explicit national socialist, saying that “socialism not only does not obliterate national differences but reinforces and develops them by bringing culture to the masses and making the national idea the property of everyone,” which was something that Stalin found distasteful.

Hence, he favored self-determination for larger nations and regional autonomy for smaller, peripheral nations. Stalin believed regional autonomy would accelerate class divisions while healing ethnic tensions by giving minorities rights to build their own schools and disseminate their own language.

In 1924, Stalin would reiterate this analysis in Chapter 6 of *The Foundations of Leninism*. In it, he devised ten strategic points for national liberation movements, going as far as to say that the world is divided into two camps: the camp of a handful of civilised nations, which possess finance capital and exploit the vast majority of the population of the globe; and the camp of the oppressed and exploited peoples in the colonies and dependent countries, which constitute the majority. Here we have a much clearer oppressor-oppressed dichotomy, and a predecessor to dependency theory. Moreover, it’s a very common style of argument for populists of all stripes.

Returning to Bauer’s aforementioned idea of socialism reinforcing nationalism by making the national idea the property of everyone, Karl Kautsky, dubbed the “pope” of Marxism at one point, agreed about this in his 1907 essay *Nationality and Internationality*. Specifically, he referred to this statement of Bauer’s as a marvellous idea: “These may be called evolutionist politics, because not only do they not simply prevent the further development of the national

character, but also because they make the whole people into the nation and wants to do so. **This is not only about the development of the nation, but making the entire people into the nation.”**

Since communism aims at a classless society, promoting nationalism to destroy crowns and estates was an obvious and logical strategy for the time. This necessarily involved the development of native literary vernaculars, poetry, song, novels, newspapers, theater, etc.

Robert Stuart documents the history of the French Workers’ Party (POF), founded by Jules Guesde and Paul Lafargue, in his monograph *Marxism and National Identity*.

The POF, in its editorials, was tempted to embrace organicist protectionism and nativism when politically useful, even if not quite in line with Marxian economics and its Ricardian foundations, as when complaining of “‘patriotic’ bosses who don’t show the slightest repugnance when profiting from foreign goods at the expense of the products of their own country.” (p.55)

Or when it rattled against the yellow peril: “No taxes, abundant manpower at low prices, lots of raw material, and steam engines! Tomorrow, China will inundate Europe with its inordinately cheap products.” (They sure were prescient on that!) Also, communism was the only way to keep the gooks out: “We have no time to lose, and there is no other barrier that can stop the Chinese or Japanese coolie except the communist and collectivist civilization that will not accept [the Asian’s] low-cost labor, and will repel him back to Asia.” (p.99)

Coolie and migrant laborers were “a jealous and hostile mob which, . . . having lived off us and spied on us, will return arms-in-hand.” (p.58) There was also a tendency to neo-Jacobinism, with Paul Lafargue declaring that “France has been and still is one of those nations that initiates and guides human development: she cannot herself develop and change without exercising an international influence... The socialists will once again place France at the head of the European peoples. She will once again become the nation that awakens the world with her ideas and her social struggles.” (p.76)

The POF was further alarmed by immigrant fecundity, not entirely without justification, but again as a mostly opportunistic gambit upon realizing that class consciousness wasn’t working: “The French nationality is on its way to being suffocated under the pressure of ultraprolific Italians and Germans. And in order to save ourselves from tomorrow’s inevitable invasion, all that our ‘ultrapatriotic’ economists can imagine is to have us invaded today by introducing into our factories, into our shops, even into our public service, the largest possible number of trans-Vosgiens and trans-Alpins. Prussianize ourselves! Such is the apex of their science. Thanks, idiots!” (p.85)

Virtually all Marxist-Leninist states were explicitly nationalistic in both their domestic and foreign policy considerations. The pragmatic reasoning behind this was very simple. The promise of “human emancipation” being the bunk it is, any philosophy founded on the

principle of a workers' state could lead to nothing else but the workers becoming the fixed capital of the bureaucracy, who now had to figure out how to maximally reduce slack capacity in order to fulfill the five-year plans. "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need," accordingly was transformed into "From each according to his ability, to each according to his labor input," which then became "He who does not work shall not eat," and ultimately into "You shall toil ceaselessly without the expectation of any return, for only that is *selfless*, only that is *communist*. Expecting things in return is bourgeois greed!"

Now the USSR, following Lenin's philosophy, issued the Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia and proceeded to forge new national states for the many Asiatic, Turkic and peripheral peoples of the former Russian Empire through two processes: *razmezhevanie* (demarcation/delimitation) and *korenizatsiya* (nativization).

Unsurprisingly, this led to the newly consciousness-raised ethnic minorities engaging in dreaded "petit-bourgeois nationalism." So the project had to be scaled down, and ended up being replaced with Soviet socialist patriotism by the 1930s. In 1934, Pravda was blurting: "For our fatherland! This call fans the flame of heroism, the flame of creative initiative in pursuits and all fields of our rich life. For our fatherland! This call arouses millions of workers and alerts them in the defense of their great country. The defense of the fatherland is the supreme law of life. And he who raises his hand against his country, he who betrays his country should be destroyed."

It is this component that leads many deracinated fools today to engage in defenses of Bolshevism. Nonetheless, the results speak for themselves: out-of-wedlock births are off the charts.

Definitive treatments of the Bulgarian and Romanian cases, respectively, are Yannis Syglikos' *Nationalism from the Left: The Bulgarian Communist Party During the Second World War and the Early Post-War Years* (2011), and Katherine Verdery's *National Ideology Under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania* (1991). Agrarianism was still dominant and proletarianization modest in those nations, again making nationalism attractive. Less than 30% of the BCP's membership was working class, and there's only so much you can play the altruist until it gets boring. "Traditionalist" was used as a pejorative word in Ceaucescu's Romania against political opponents (Verdery, p.162), making such "right-wing" defenses of it as Bretonescu's all the more hilarious.

I've mentioned the CPUSA's relationship to black nationalism before, but it is worth reiterating.

In 1928 and 1930, two resolutions were passed by the Comintern on the Negro Question. In both of them, the idea of the American negroes as a separate nation with the right to self-determine and with a mission to specifically fight for social as opposed to simply economic

rights, was affirmed. Even further, the Comintern resolution accepted the Negro Question as part of a broader “World Problem” of the struggle of negroes against capitalist imperialism worldwide. Texts reproduced here.

The commitment to black self-determination is restated in a CPUSA organizational manual from 1935, following the Comintern resolution on said issue.

In 1948, Haywood’s book *Negro Liberation* (see Ch VII, “The Negro Nation”) would set the foundation for black nationalism, and for the modern contradictory school of left-wing identity politics where race is simultaneously held to be of paramount importance and dismissed as a groundless social construct all the same. Haywood does not conceive of the Negro Question as primarily economic, but following the Comintern 20 years earlier, a national question. To be sure, it follows the Marxist-Leninist analysis of nationality pioneered by Stalin in 1913. But it went beyond in actively treating black culture as an autonomous element rather than a mere superstructure to a capitalist base, and specifically argued that self-government and democratic institutions were the proximate goal of the black struggle, and not proletarian class dictatorship as a more standard Leninist would say.

Quite fascinatingly, the veteran Marxist-Leninist M.J. Olgin, in his well-known at the time pamphlet “Why Communism?” (1933), Ch 5 exhorts white workers to back a negro state in America: “We say to the white workers: to prove your sincerity about Negro freedom you must fight for the self-determination of the Negroes in the Black Belt. By this we mean the right of the Negroes, if they choose to do so, to establish their own State in that territory of the South where they form the majority of the population. The Negroes are a nation like any other nation and they are entitled to their own State.”

Elsewhere, Olgin declared (as quoted by Anthony Dawahare) that “Humanity is not split into races but into oppressors and oppressed,” another unambiguous use of this dichotomy.

The CPUSA during the Popular Front period was especially prone to hijacking patriotism, as with the infamous slogan “Communism is the Americanism of the twentieth century.” Earl Browder in 1936 when he published *What is Communism?* laid claim to the “revolutionary nationalist” heritage of the American Revolution, appealing to labor protectionism, and taking up the mantle of Patrick Henry, Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson. So too did the black communist leader James Ford cave in to calls for “[uniting] more than ever for the defense of our glorious past” in 1938 during this period of party discipline.

The CPUSA’s endorsement of black nationalism was probably the most dramatic example of a Marxist party coming close to elevating ethnic rather than class consciousness to an orthodoxy.

Things like Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* on reciprocal bases of national culture and the fight for freedom become intelligible. So too, Paulo Freire’s “pedagogy of the oppressed,” and the non-economistic “Africa for the Africans” anti-colonial insurgent ideology of an

Amilcar Cabral in Portuguese Guinea.

From Marxism and the national question we get the diluted oppressor-oppressed dichotomy, Afro-Marxism, adventuristic anti-colonial activism and ultimately postcolonialism and *negritude*. From the concurrent return to Young Hegelian idealism and away from dogmatic historical materialism, all of the myriad of ideas in critical theory. The intersection of the two is Cultural Marxism, which balkanizes into radical feminism, critical race theory, and so forth.