**Nationalism and the Class Struggle**

The understanding of the character of nationalism was outlined by Anton Pannekoek in his article ‘Class Struggle and Nation’ (Marxist Internet Archive) In order to understand this article in a satisfactory manner it is necessary to try and indicate whether it is able to outline a satisfactory understanding of the connection between the role and influence of nationalism and its effect on the development and character of the class struggle. Thus does nationalism only result in the undermining of the importance of class consciousness and so weaken the connection between the importance of internationalism and the striving for world revolution because of the view that the role of the nation is more importance than the generation of a common struggle for socialism consisting of the important connection of the people of several nations. It could be suggested that the response to the first world war was an indication that the workers of Europe despite a history of common opposition to the domination of capital still considered that the interests of nation were more important than those of class. However, this development cannot be considered to be a result of the any possible limitations of the theory of Marxism and socialism and instead was because of the increasing opportunist character of the role of the socialist parties and the trade union leaderships. In this manner the rejection of internationalism by the important organisations of the working class in their reaction to the onset of the first world war was the basis of the opportunism expressed and so was not the outcome of any limitations in theory. Certainly the reaction of Lenin, Trotsky and Luxemburg to the development of the first world war was principled and was based on the perspective of the promotion of the importance of international proletarian revolution and adamant opposition to the aims of the victory of any of the countries involved in the conflict. Thus, the problem was that of opportunism and the rejection of principles rather than any inherent limitations in Marxist theory on the issue of the nationalism and the national question.

But the problem of the approach of Luxemburg and Lenin on the national question was that it was based on the understanding that capitalism as imperialism had created the importance of the national question because of the subordination of oppressed areas within the context of the domination of the more powerful powers. This may indicate the significance of national self-determination, or autonomy, but it did not elaborate in any systematic manner the approach that should be adopted in terms of the interests of the working class in international terms. In other words what was the attitude the working class of oppressor and oppressed nations should adopt in relation to the national question? But it can be argued that Pannekoek’s article provides an important starting point in terms of answering this question. He is aware that the reality of the international situation is explained in terms of the unequal levels of social and economic power between nations and that this aspect is important in terms of defining the views of Marxists and the working class. His approach is internationalist, but he does not deny the importance of the necessity to try and establish a principled position in relation to the national question. On the one hand he is aware that the dynamics of national separation or autonomy may be historically justified but that these aspects may also result in divisions within the international working class. Hence it is necessary to develop an approach that is based on the promotion of the realisation of national aspirations in a manner that does not undermine the strengthening of the possibility of international unity of the workers. In contrast it could be argued that Lenin neglected this aspect of the subject, whilst Luxemburg did not sufficiently recognise the importance of the national question. Hence an important issue is to establish whether the aspects of one-sidedness of Lenin and Luxemburg are overcome by the analysis of Pannekoek. However, it has to be understood that this article is written in 1912, or before the outbreak of the first world war which indicated the increasing importance of national issues. Therefore, we have to establish whether the article of Pannekoek expressed a valid basis to develop the international unity of the working class in the struggle against imperialism. In this context does the views outlined contribute to the possible strengthening of the approach of internationalism as opposed to the reactionary role of national chauvinism?

Pannekoek outlines the difference between the bourgeois and socialist conceptions of the nation in the following manner: “The bourgeois conception sees in the diversity of nations natural differences among men; nations are groupings constituted by the community of race, of origin and language. But it also believes that it can, by means of coercive political measures, oppress nations in one place and extend its domain at the expense of other nations somewhere else. Social democracy considers nations to be human groups which have formed units as a consequence of their shared history. Historical development has produced nations within its limits and in its own way; it also produces change in the meaning and essence of the nation with the passage of time and changing economic conditions. It is only on the basis of economic conditions that one can understand the history and development of the nation and the national principle.”(chapter one page 2) Hence Marxists do not necessarily oppose the role of nations, but what they do understand is that the character of the nation under the capitalist system can be reactionary because of the generation of exploitation and the possible connection with the role of imperialism and the domination of oppressed nations by the more powerful nation. In contrast it is being assumed that the character of the nation under socialism will have a different character because of the more emancipatory principles that express the aims of this system. In this context it should be against the aspirations of socialism for any one nation to try and oppress other nations and instead genuine national liberation will be realised within the context of any multi-national state. A socialist state that we previously based on a system of imperialism would strive to liberate its oppressed nations and instead create a situation in which genuine equality was created between the different nationalities of any given social formation. Pannekoek supports the views of Bauer that the nation despite the complications caused by the inequalities of capitalism has a shared history that expresses a community of fate. It has a transmitted culture, common heritage and a collective understanding that it is a nation: “But every human organization which comprises an enduring unity, inherited from generation to generation, constitutes a community of character engendered by a community of fate.”(p2) But this shared cultural context of the people of the nation does not obscure the importance of class differences, and it is instead the political basis on which these differences are expressed and articulated. However, the national basis of the generation of the role of the working class does not mean that its ideology should be that of uncritical support for the role of the nation. If this approach was to be adopted it would mean that the working class had accommodated to the class interests of the capitalists. Instead the workers should develop an internationalist position of the solidarity of all nations and on that basis develop the struggle for an alternative socialist approach. Nor does a common language of different nations indicate an identity of interest. Instead the most authentic identity of nations is based on the development of the common struggle of the workers in order to create a genuine expression of shared interests between the different nations. In what seems a contradictory manner it is the very transcendence of the importance of the ideology of nationalism in terms of the role of socialist internationalism which can establish the basis to develop principled political relations between nations in equitable terms. Thus, Marxism is not against the historic significance of nations, but it aspires to overcome the various limitations which create a situation of inequality between nations. In this context the common heritage of nations is not being rejected, but instead what is problematical is the exploitation of nations by the ruling class of a more powerful nation. Only the international class struggle can establish the basis of genuine political and economic relations based on equality and the end of all forms of national oppression. However, the problem with this formulation is that it does not seem to provide criteria by which to evaluate the demand for national self-determination. It is Lenin who outlines the importance of this aim in the era of imperialism. But the approach of Pannekoek is not necessarily opposed to the demand for national self-determination. Instead he indicates the apparent fact that the nation is of historical importance as a community of fate and so the important role of nations has to be related to the objectives of socialism.

The point being made is that the character of the nation is the outcome of the development of capitalism. It is the creation of the realisation of the capitalist economy which is based on the development of a national economy and market and as a result is the basis of the relations of production. This means that the character of society based on the insularity of the importance of peasant agriculture is overcome and replaced by this more generalised form of production in which the role of the national economy is based on the importance of international trade and distribution. This means that the peasant is transformed into a worker with a national based approach: “From the moment that he is dragged into the gears of capitalism and established in other conditions – he becomes a bourgeois or a worker, the peasant begins to depend on the world market and makes contact with the rest of the world – from that moment he has new interests, the indestructible character of the old particularism is lost. He is integrated into the modern nation, he becomes a member of a much more extensive community of fate, a nation in the modern sense.”(The peasant nation p 2) Hence the formation of the nation does not mean an opposition to the importance of internationalism. Instead there is a connection between these two aspects. The role of the nation is defined by the international character of the relations of the world economy. This means that the worker is connected to the world economy in terms of the fact that his/her production is often based on a relation to international trade, and in this manner the worker is connected to the interests of the workers of other countries. The result of this situation is that the workers of many countries have common interests when contrasted to the role of the capitalists of their given country. But this does not mean that demise of the importance of the nation for the workers but instead they should become the dominant force in the nation in order to establish it as a genuine community of fate which is based on the realisation of their interests instead of those of the capitalist. If the forces of capital are dominant over labour then this means that the nation is defined in terms of the realisation of their interests, and so the apparent character of the nation seems to have no relation to the interests of labour. But this is a deceptive situation which is caused by the temporary balance of class forces which seem to uphold the domination of capital over labour. The point is that it is a political task for labour to aspire to become the most important social force within the nation. In this manner it will transform the nation from being the expression of the aims of capital into becoming the realisation of the interests of the workers.

The domination of capital over labour does not express a regressive situation because the previous role of the importance of the peasantry within the economy was based on a regressive situation in which the character of society was based on the limitations of the role of locality and region. This was a backward expression of the most limited and antiquated type of economy. From this understanding Bauer is insistent that the development of a modern nation is connected to capitalism which has a unified economy and state. The situation of the importance of regions and local dialects is replaced with the development of a modern national language, and the connected development of a common type of expression. In other words, the development of a modern economy generates the realisation of a genuine community of fate in which the people of the nation have shared aspirations and social relations. This situation is expressed with the role of a common type of economy and unifying language. Thus, the implication of these developments is that the working class has the ability to be able to aspire to become the most dominant social force within the nation. This perspective does not mean that the importance of internationalism has been undermined because a crucial aspect in the ability of the working class to become the most dominant social force is based on the unity and connection of the role of the working class of different nations. However, the initial social cohesion of the working class is provided by its stable and important role within the nation. This means that the workers of a given nation are able to act in an effective manner in order to challenge the capitalists to become the most important social force within society. This perspective does not mean that the aims of the working class are defined by national limitations in terms of the role of the nation being the expression of the ultimate aspirations of the workers in terms of a connection of the nation with the aim of socialism. Instead the nation forms the context in which the attempt to realise socialism must be primarily expressed in its initial aspects of the character of the form in which the process of class struggle occurs. But the ultimate aim of this national form of class struggle is the development of the possibility of the attainment of what would be an international expression of the objective of socialism. Hence the importance of the nation is not the justification of the ideology of nationalism, or the acceptance of the subordination of the working class to the national bourgeoisie. Instead the nation is merely the form in which the international content of the class struggle occurs. The objective of the working class is to become the primary class within the nation state, but this does not mean that the ideology of nationalism is also accepted because of this aspect. The process of acceptance of nationalism would actually mean the subordination of the working class to the national bourgeoisie. Hence the ideology of the struggle of the workers is based on the principles of internationalism, and the rejection of the nationalist justification of the nation which is provided by the bourgeoisie.

But the problem with the approach of Pannekoek is that he does sometimes seem to define the nation as an expression of the role of what it means to be human, and so in that manner this understanding could imply that nation is something inherent to the very ontology of the character of social reality. He comments: “In man, nationality is indeed part of his nature, but primarily of his mental nature. Inherited physical traits eventually allow the various peoples to be distinguished from one another, this does not serve to separate them, nor even less so, does it make them enter into conflict with one another, Peoples distinguish themselves as communities of culture, a culture transmitted by a common language; in a nations culture, which can be defined as mental in nature, is inscribed the whole history of its life. National character is not composed of physical traits, but of the totality of its customs, its concepts and its forms of thought over time. If one wishes to grasp the essence of a nation, it is above all necessary to get a clear view of how man’s mental aspect is constituted under the influence of his living conditions.”(Tradition and the Human Mind p1) This comment seems to suggest that the role of the nation could be an inherent aspect of the character of human nature and activity. This could imply that the importance of nation is primary when compared to the role of class. The result of this understanding could be to unintentionally imply that nation is primary in relation to the character of class, and the result of this understanding could be the justification of nationalism, which results in the subordination of the working class to the capitalists. But obviously this conclusion is not the intention of Bauer, and instead he only wants to outline the historical origins and role of the nation. In this manner the workers are influenced by the importance of national development, but this is only the form in which the international aspirations of the workers are originated and established. Hence the primary aspect of what Pannekoek seems to be suggesting is that the role of the nation has become the inherent context for the generation of the role of class struggle, and so this aspect cannot be ignored and instead its importance has to be establish in terms of perspectives. The point being made is that capitalism has created the historical role of the nation and so this is the form in which the class struggle occurs and the issue of success in this regard is defined in national terms. But the ultimate objective of this form of struggle is the realisation of the success of the process of international revolution, and so the role of the nation is still the form of a greater and broader content and context. But the issue of the national form of the class struggle cannot be denied because of any adherence to a dogmatic view that considers the antagonism of the workers and capitalists to only have an international character. This seems to be an important point being made by Pannekoek because it suggests that a national expression of the character of the role of the class struggle is very important and has to be established in any strategy of the process of change within the attempt by the workers to establish socialism. Ultimately this seems to a major point being argued, but there are possibility nationalist influences in this approach. However, this apparent problem is recognised in terms of the understanding that the role of the class struggle has to be decisive when considering the importance of the nation and nationalism. It is the importance of the political activity of the working class that has to be the basis for the evaluation of the significance of nationality, and this issue is tackled by Pannekoek in the second chapter of his article entitled: ‘The Nation and the Proletariat’.

The starting point of the approach of Pannekoek is that the antagonism of the relations of capital and labour result in a different and opposed conception of the role of the nation by the capitalists and workers: “The German workers of the empire who belong to the German nation judge almost everything that happens in Germany in a different and opposed way to that of the bourgeoisie. All the other classes rejoice together over anything that contributes to the greatness and the foreign reach of their national state, while the proletariat combats every measure which leads to such results. The bourgeois classes speak of war against other states in order to increase their own power, whilst the proletariat thinks of a way to prevent war or discovers an occasion for its own liberation in the defeat of its own government.”(CH 2 p3) If anything this comment exaggerates the possibility for the workers and capitalists to develop opposed and contrasting conceptions of the role of the nation. Hence the conclusion of Pannekoek could be considered to be the expression of a dogmatic view of the progressive polarisation created by the class struggle: “This is why one cannot speak of the nation as an entity except prior to the full unfolding within it of the class struggle, since it is only in that case that the working class will follow in the footsteps of the bourgeoisie. The class antagonism between the bourgeoise and the proletariat results in the progressive disappearance of their national community of fate and of character. The constitutive forces of the nation must be separately examined in each of the two classes.” (p3) This implies that there is no uniform conception of the role of the nation because of the importance of the situation of antagonism between the two major class forces. But such an understanding would seem to deny the role of the influence of ideology which means that the proletariat can accept the plausibility of the bourgeois conception of the character of the national community. Indeed, it is because of the influence of what is a dominant understanding of the role of the nation which results in the proletariat supporting the various political policies of the bourgeois parties. It is true that the antagonistic character of the relations between the workers and capitalists should result in contrasting conceptions of the role of the nation, but this possibility is often undermined by the influence of the bourgeois understanding of the character of nationality. The result of this situation is that the working class can often support the policies of the capitalist political parties as an expression of the interests of the nation. Therefore, it is an important task of the revolutionary organisations to develop mass support for a conception of the nation which is opposed to the bourgeois standpoint. But this means that the distinct socialist understanding of the character of the nation has to be connected to the importance of internationalism and the necessity to develop generalised working-class activity in opposition to the role of the capitalist nation state. Hence the understanding of an alternative conception of the nation that is in the interests of the working class is connected to the perspective of the intensification of the class struggle and the aspiration to overcome the bourgeois domination of the nation state. But this possibility is undermined if there is a situation in which the working class accommodates to the bourgeois conception of the nation and its definition of the national interest. Hence Pannekoek is right to contend that there is not a common conception of a community of fate in relation to the logical results of the class struggle. There can only be opposed bourgeois and proletarian conceptions of the role of the nation. But this means that the working class has to reject an accommodation to nationalism and instead adopt an internationalist understanding that has an emphasis on the importance of the development of unity of the workers of different nations. This is because the major task of the workers is to carry out the process of world revolution, and in this context the importance of national considerations is entirely secondary. This understanding does not deny the national aspects of the class struggle, but they are secondary to a strategy of international development of world revolution.

The point being made is that the emphasis of the approach of Pannekoek is that the question of the connection of the relationship between nation and internationalism should be understood as being complementary in terms of the fact that the nation has to be the empirical basis of the development of the class struggle and so in that manner assumes international proportions. The very aspect of success of the workers against the forces of capital means that they have to assume the importance of establishing victory in national terms and so become the basis of the dominating aspect of the character of the nation state. This must mean that the workers if they are to achieve victory in the class struggle have to promote a strategy that can enhance the possibility of victory in national terms. Only in that manner can the prospect of the success of the international revolution be advanced. However, Pannekoek seems to ignore the issue as to whether this means that the workers should adopt a progressive form of nationalist ideology, and instead in an ambiguous manner maintains that what is at issue is the role of the workers as a national community of fate. Hence the class struggle has a national context, but this does not seem to be connected to any political and ideological aspects. Hence the aspect of the relation of the national to the role of the class struggle is not outlined in ideological terms. Instead the conception of the importance of the workers acting as a national community of fate is considered to be satisfactory in its ambiguous interpretation and understanding. But this omission is unsatisfactory because the very approach of Pannekoek seems to imply that the task of the workers is to connect its aspirations to the importance of the nation, or the aim of establishing domination over the nation state. In this manner the views of the proletariat in revolutionary terms would seem to be about establishing an alternative and more emancipatory conception of the role of the nation than that provided by the bourgeoisie. Pannekoek indicates that the only principled approach for workers is to reject all forms of national exclusivism and the ideology of chauvinism and to instead adopt a perspective as to how the workers should support a conception of the aspiration of an international community of association, and so reject all forms of national exclusivism but what does this mean in terms of the role of the nation in relation to the task of the realisation of socialism? Pannekoek seems to deny any progressive role for the nation in relation to the tasks of the class struggle and instead comments that: “It is, then, inaccurate to say that the workers are, by means of their struggle gaining access to a “national community of culture”. It is the politics of the proletariat, the international politics of the class struggle which is endangering a new international and socialist culture in the proletariat.”(chapter two, the community of culture p4) Hence we seem to have a contradiction between an emphasis on the understanding of the character of the proletariat as a national community of fate on the one hand and the only progressive aspect of its consciousness as an international class force on the other. This tension does not seem to be resolved although the emphasis seems to be on the rejection of any accommodation to nationalism because of its reactionary implications. But what does this apparent view suggest about the role of the working class as a national community of fate? This question is not answered in a satisfactory manner.

However Pannekoek in an indirect manner does try to provide some form of answer to these questions because he considers that the issue of the role of the working class as a community of fate is expressed by the working class opposing the bourgeoisie in order to uphold and maintain its class interests. But he also has to accept that this struggle will acquire a national character in that for example French workers will oppose the antagonistic interests of the French capitalists. However, Pannekoek tries to reject the importance of the nation in this context because he considers that the logic of this struggle is not the struggle for supremacy over the nation but is instead defined by the importance of the state: “It is not the nation, but the state which determines for the proletariat the borders of the community of fate constituted by the parliamentary political struggle.”(Chapter two, the community of class struggle p3) But the point is that the character of the state is not differentiated from the importance of the nation. In some context the issue of achieving supremacy over the state also means becoming the most important political force within the nation, and so the objectives of revolutionary struggle by the working class is connected to obtaining supremacy within the nation. Only in this manner can hege4mony over the state also be realised. Hence the proletariat must have national objectives because only in this manner can its aims of overcoming the domination of the bourgeoise be realised. This does not mean acceptance of an ideology of nationalism because the issue of achieving hegemony within the nation is connected to the attainment of supreme state power, and in that manner the prospect of the advance of international revolution is enhanced. Empirically Pannekoek has to accept this point because whilst formally advocating the importance of the working class acquiring state power, he also has to acknowledge that this aspect is connected to the development of political victory in national terms: “One could say that this common liberation struggle against a common enemy is the most important experience in the entire history of the life of the proletariat from its first awakening until its victory. This makes the working class of the same state, rather than the same nation the community of fate. Only in Western Europe, where state and nation more or less coincide, does the struggle waged on the terrain of the nation state for political hegemony give rise to the communities of fate which coincide with nations.”(p4) The problem with this conception is that the actual expression of the class struggle in national terms is not recognised in a consistent manner and instead this aspect is defined in the dogmatic manner of what occurs in terms of the role of the politics of the state. But the actual national connection of the character of capitalism means that the aspect of politics is both an expression of what occurs in terms of both the role of the state and the nation. But whilst the nation is the form of the process of the class struggle if it is to acquire a principled and emancipatory possibility then it is necessary that what is occurring at the level of the nation should start to acquire international dimensions and aims. This means that the national class struggle becomes an aspect of the potential for world socialist revolution. Such a standpoint is justifiable because the issue of the possibility to overcome the domination of the forces of capital is connected to the development of the success of the struggle of the working class against the defenders of the present system. It is not possible to establish the enduring success of an isolated revolutionary regime that is still dominated by the forces of capitalism. In this context only the internationalist perspective of Pannekoek is both feasible and principled.

However, does this internationalist conception of the process of revolutionary change mean that nations should become antiquated under socialism? Pannekoek seems to suggest that this is what would happen. The increasing success of socialism means the demise of the role of nations: “National differences totally lose the economic roots which today gave them such extraordinary vigour. The socialist mode of production does not develop oppositions of interest between nations, as in the case of the bourgeois mode of production. The economic unit is neither the state nor the nation but the world……it is an organisation of world production in one unit and the common affair of all humanity…..All partially manage their own affairs and all depend on the whole, as parts of the whole.” (The Nation in the state of the future p2-3) But the role of the nation is not necessarily exclusively of an economic character. It is also an expression of the historical cultural traditions of a given people that does express the conception of a community of fate. In other words, the major problem with the approach of Pannekoek is that he poses a choice between of considering the role of the nation as eternal or else of a temporary character and limited to the era of capitalism. But in actuality the issue depends on the fluctuations of the class struggle. The possibility of success in the class struggle will create the conditions for the demise of the nation and its replacement by the international community of socialism, but if this development is postponed by the continuation of capitalism and the delay in the advance of socialism this would mean that the nation continues to have an importance in terms of the manner in which the revolutionary regime is consolidated in the situation of the domination of what is global capitalism. Pannekoek is right to suggest that Bauer is being dogmatic when he contends that the role of the nation is a permanent aspect of historical development, but this does not mean that the opposite view that socialism automatically ends the role of the nation is the alternative possibility. Instead the role of the nation depends on developments within the class struggle. If the revolutionary regime remains isolated because of the lack of success of the international attempt to achieve proletarian revolution, then the role of the nation will be indispensable in order to uphold the continuation of the socialist regime that has been established in a single country. Only the success of the process of international revolution will enable this situation to be transformed into the formation of an international type of socialist society. Furthermore, the role of the nation will still be retained in this situation in terms of the importance of autonomy of what has become regions of the international socialist society. In this sense what has been national traditions and customs will still be important but recognised in terms of this international context. There will still be distinct customs and traditions even though the political structure of the socialist society is defined in global terms. But until this development occurs the role of the nation state is important because this would represent the basis to advance the aim of world socialist revolution because of the contribution to this aim that would be made by what are an increasing collection of socialist states. Only the success of the process of world socialist revolution would create the conditions for the ending of the role of the nation in progressive terms.

But the problem with the approach of Pannekoek is that because he generally considers the role of the nation as reactionary, he seems to consider that it is reactionary to support the aim of national self-determination even when the nation is oppressed by a more dominant one. This stance is defined in terms of the view that the importance of the nation is reactionary when compared to the contrasting aims of the class struggle. This point may be valid but this does not mean that all aspirations of a national character are inherently reactionary, such as the demand for national self-determination. Pannekoek contends that the demands of a national character are generally reactionary when compared to the interests of the development of the class struggle, but this point cannot be upheld in a rigid manner. This is because the immediate character of the class struggle is about establishing the power of the working class in national terms. This is an inevitable aspect of political developments because the process of international class struggle is uneven. Such an approach only become reactionary when it becomes the justification of the rejection of the aim of international socialism because of an opportunist priority given to the attempt to realise socialism within the given country. The point is that the attempt to realise socialism in national terms is of importance because of its very connection to the development of the struggle for the success of world revolution. However, Pannekoek is right to suggest that the national aspect of the class struggle should not result in the process of accommodation to any form of national chauvinism. The point is that Pannekoek concerns are valid to the extent that he is opposed to any tendency towards the justification of separatism in a multi-national country like the Austrian empire before 1914, but his approach becomes dogmatic and rigid if it becomes the justification to reject any national development of the class struggle in different circumstances, as in relation to distinct nation states. In other words, Pannekoek is right to maintain that it is necessary to oppose the ideology of nationalism within the working class because of its reactionary character but this does not mean that all forms of struggle in national terms are also problematical. Instead national class struggles may be progressive because that is also the very basis by which the promotion of the aspiration for world revolution is advanced. Thus, Pannekoek is right to be concerned to oppose all types of nationalist ideology as being reactionary, but this does not mean that the attempt to establish success of the proletarian revolution is problematical. Instead this could be the only manner in which the aim of international socialism is initially advanced. The attainment of a proletarian nation state becomes the basis to advance the progress of international revolution.