

# LENIN AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION. BEYOND ESSENTIALISM AND CONSTRUCTIONISM \*

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.5209/NOMA.53536>

**Abstract.-** Lenin's analysis of the 'national question' shows numerous virtualities from a theoretical and political perspective. We are going to examine some of the theoretical conceptions which seem to underlie his view on the national question. In our opinion, these conceptions are a commendable work since they represent an alternative to the dilemma of essentialism and constructivism through which the social contemporary thinking has often fluctuated. Whereas essentialism tends to consider the national fact as a reality by nature and since time immemorial, constructionist approaches like those of Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner have insisted on its relatively recent political construction nature. Despite its unquestionable merits, this approach has often fallen into an excessively artificial perspective. According to it, the fabrication of any national identity would be possible with the appropriate skills to do so. Somehow, while essentialism refers to a metaphysical and substantivist, anti-dialectical approach, constructivism is very reminiscent of the old subjective idealism which believed that reality could be recreated by the individuals with almost complete liberty. For that reason, an approach like that of Lenin which conceives the national question as a long-term historical fact, and only politically manipulable to a very limited extent, could be of great use for materialist theoretical approaches. Some thinkers such as Maxime Rondinson and Pierre Vilar have shown this up.

**Key words:** *Lenin, nation, essentialism, constructivism*

## I. Some central aspects of Lenin's thought

Dealing with Lenin's thought represents an extraordinary and stimulating challenge. It entails a double exercise: an exercise of transgression that faces the majority opinion which has condemned it to exaggerated and caricature-like extremes, but it also faces those who are so bent on canonizing it no matter what it takes. Anyone who wishes to come up with a positive interpretation, not hagiographic, critical but constructive, must make a tireless effort to define himself. The aim is to confront these two opposite attitudes, especially the former, as it is the predominant tendency nowadays. Beyond this first difficulty, the idea of meeting this thought brings a profoundly enriching experience because it puts us in touch with very unusual ways of reasoning. Through the good and the bad, Lenin was a very unusual thinker. His work is vertebrated by a practical concern and more specifically, political. Not many people took the slogan of unity between theory and practice as seriously as he did. He would always theorize in time to practice. His theoretical interventions used to be motivated by the ups and downs of the political juncture and also by the

mishaps of the fractional fights in which he was involved. The external events would motivate his intellectual work a good deal. Thus, he found himself diametrically opposed to any attitude purely theoretical or any taste for theory as a whole; like something which represents a purpose in itself, an ivory tower in which to shut oneself up. He was also isolated from any kind of ideological opportunism. When this opportunism prevails, all theoretical positions are reduced to mere justifications, to a pure auxiliary argument (cf. Castien Maestro, 2003). This serves to other opinions which are adopted by other different and in general, less noble reasons and mostly linked to immediate interests like those derived from changeable alliances between cliques within the same organization. Lenin, on the contrary, took theory very seriously, his own and his opponents'. He would not face it as a mere wrapper of underlying interests establishing a merely casual relation with it, and because of this, something easy to reject. He would analyze it carefully instead by locating its internal contradictions and highlighting the deepest implications of any assertion allegedly taken as trivial. He knew his way around between the most specific and the most abstract levels of reality. All these implications which were often unknown even for the supporters of the examined theory, could also bring the clue for connections between the examined opinion and certain general interests which are linked to a specific class position. Lenin wrote thousands of pages of brief but sound exercises of this kind. That makes him a master of ideological analysis and for that reason, a worthy figure of a much bigger attention on the part of contemporary social sciences.

This search for a less immediate implication could develop 'forward' and 'backwards'. It could lie in the research on those basics which underlie any theory but also in the development of that theory to an extent that allows to reach unexpected conclusions which couldn't have been foreseen initially. It was about establishing the precedents and the consistent elements at the same time. Such an approach turned out to be an obvious debtor of Hegel and Feuerbach as well as Marx, of course. It took its dynamic conception about the thinking process from the former. Any intellectual construction was internally contradictory and could be developed in different directions depending on how those contradictions were being resolved; that would result in a break from any strict determinism. It was also necessary to get over any kind of unilateralism and accept the possibility of incorporating different partial perspectives, going from antithesis to synthesis (Lefebvre, 1974; Lenin, 1972; Marcuse, 1971). Nevertheless, the recognition of this relative flexibility would not mean a comparison among all the possible evolutionary directions. Some of them were more feasible to happen than others on the grounds of their greater consistency with the nucleus of the posing. This nucleus was what Feuerbach (1984) called 'its truth' and also 'its secret'. Its internal development was crucial. The rest of it would form some sort of deck made up of appearances which revealed in a veiled way - showing and concealing at the same time - what was happening within the central nucleus. Thus, the development of this intellectual entirety could be culminating in exactly the opposite of what its first appearances seemed to point out. The potential of a similar analysis model seem to be undeniable. However, these authors suffered from a clear idealistic bias as they conceived the thought process as a process only activated in an endogenous

way. As against this, Marx's essential contribution was linking this process to the practical activity, that is, linking the becoming of intellectual activity with the rest of the human being's activity. From then on, the explanation of any intellectual process would not lie exclusively in itself. Nor was it feasible to expect that this intellectual development should be exclusively the result of its internal logic. It was now possible to consider the fact that an improbable development tendency could finally end up prevailing in accordance with certain practical demands. In a similar way, any another supposedly more viable potential development could not be happening if there were no favorable conditions.

Lenin took those different contributions as a starting point and developed his own approach. One of its main characteristics was what we may call its 'micro' nature. He not only tackled the big features of any theoretical approach but also dealt with its more trivial details to which he connected the more important questions by using a machine of intermediary concepts. Secondly, he added an ideological exercise of analysis within the framework of a broader political practice. Lenin dedicated himself to his analysis in the course of the controversies which he often held. The objects of his attention were neither foreign nor far from his own practical experience, nothing like dealing with the myths of an old and disappeared civilization. They were, on the contrary, both of his opponents and supporters' declarations and writings, including his own. This radical proximity between the subject and its object involved a complete break from any contemplative attitude in relation with the reality he dealt with. We should not be surprised at the fact that his several works came up in the course of controversies which were not only theoretical but also linked to political problems of great implication. This was the case of two of his more theoretical works: *The development of capitalism in Russia (s/d .a)* and *Materialism and empirio-criticism* (1974). The former tried to prove the fact that capitalist development had broken the old rural commune in Russia and created deep class divisions within it. Due to this reason and contrary to the populists' opinion, it was illusory to expect that this commune could be used as a foundation for a future socialism or hoping for the peasants to act in a united way and thus leading the revolution. As for the latter, his purpose lied in fighting any attempt of lessening the materialist nature of marxism by means of its combination of sceptical philosophies. These are often embedded in a noteworthy tolerance towards the most unblemished dogmatism along with a strong and subjective idealism. The religious one is a good example of this, and it is also in line with a pronounced political conservatism. The relevance of these theoretical contributions in relation to the present postmodernism is obvious as well as its utility in the light of a critique of modern rural and indigenist populism. Thus, Lenin did not merely practiced ideological analysis. Nor did he settle for clarifying the basic guidelines of any posing or locating its sociological basics as it is characteristic in this kind of analysis. On the contrary, he put the strictly ideological analysis into a broader framework, in which he could contribute to a more ambitious purpose of clarifying its adjustment level to reality, its internal coherence and its utility from a practical perspective. Thus, he exerted *criticism* in a global sense and at the same time in a deconstructive

and constructive way, something that was outlined by Marx and from which he gave such complete examples like *Misery of Philosophy* (1974).

Even so, this more pragmatic attitude must not be idealized. It showed both positive and negative aspects. As for the former, he certainly brought a greater concern about certain aspects of reality which ought to be not only *interesting* from a theoretical point of view but also *vital* in more practical terms. Hence the eagerness to grasp the fundamental aspects of the object of his investigation as well as avoiding to have anything to do with any erudite game which in such circumstances would be just a hindrance. Here it is one of the reasons that explains the peculiarities of Lenin's literary style, straightforward, dynamic, with no additions, full of powerful metaphors but sometimes also careless and rough. But these blunders towards stylistic roughness were just the most visible face of a dangerous tendency towards the simplification of certain fundamental problems. Controversy is a genre which has got its own rules. Sometimes it gives rise to enriching debates that helps the parts involved to develop their own arguments better and perhaps to elaborate a conciliatory synthesis together. On the other hand, it may often fuel the simplification of all positions, manichaeism and the systematic defamatory of the opponent even in rude ways. Lenin, as everybody knows, often fell into this type of misconduct and took unfair advantage of the argument of authority, something that diminished his ideological analyses noticeably. Another interesting characteristic of leninist analyses, and which he used very much in his treatment of the national question, lies in his insistence on the potential multifunctionality of the numerous ideological components. As a consequence of being susceptible of developing themselves in different directions, it is possible to use these elements according to different purposes and political aims depending on the objective conditions. Not only could they be fitted into opposite arguments but also their own internal contradictions would encourage their subsequent development in different directions. This is the reason of the advisability of trying to avoid any reductionist perspective about the examined elements as well as banishing everything that could have been quite profitable for being considered as something harmful or useless.

But this tight coordination between thought and practice also had other effects apart from the ones mentioned above. It provided the practical activity with a distinctive theoretical depth in the sense of connecting closely its several steps with a carefully elaborated theory. The political practice was, to a large extent, liberated from its submission to an intuitive and unconscious thought and also transferred to a different and more sophisticated and above all, more conscious thought. It was about getting over the distance between a theoretical thought and an abstract one, away from practice and for that reason inclined to fabricate constructions as sophisticated and coherent as dissociated from reality, with all the risk involved in dogmatism (Lukács, 1985: 37-79). Also a daily thought concerned with the solution of everyday urgencies, but for that reason, rough and simple-minded (Castien Maestro, 2003: 163-172; Heller, 1977; Lukács 1967). This is something that in the end, would stand in the way of the development of a more transformative practical activity instead of just adaptative. All in all, it was possible to build bridges between both ways of

thinking and lighting with it a new type of thought tendentially able to have some of the virtues of the other two, separately, but at the same time rejecting some of their respective lacks. The same thing happened with practice. In a way, a more conscious practice ought to replace, partially at least, the more unconscious and mechanical one. Just as Mao Ze Dong expressed in a very graphical way and echoing this last approach, it would be necessary to go 'from thought to practice and from practice to thought' (Mao, 1976: 66-86), in a real endless spiral. A really articulated thought with practice must have, nonetheless, some peculiar characteristics. It has to be a flexible thought, in line with the aforementioned dynamic conception of reality. It must show itself equally as a thought which is aware of the radical distance among its products, and a reality which overwhelms them completely. In doing so, it proceeds by means of consecutive approximations to elaborate determinations which aspire to be gradually more precise, instead of dreaming with establishing the absolute truth once and for all (Lefebvre, 1974; Lefebvre y Guterman, 1964; Lenin, 1972 y 1974; Lukács, 1985). But the articulation with practice is used in all these cases as an incentive, an encouragement to develop a complex thought. It is thus, in contrast to that fashionable pragmatism that expects to reduce all theoretical questions to their more immediate practical applications, turning this articulation into a pretext of a comfortable intellectual impoverishment.

However, in certain situations this Lenin's concern for the practical implications of any posing might culminate in a sharp reductionism. Only those aspects of reality which proved to be more interesting for practical questions were taken into account. The rest was put aside. This whole thing meant to fall into a short-range pragmatism and that outstanding intellectual success would mean nothing. Furthermore, it was also easy to digress towards an ideological approach in which the relation between thought and practice was much more immediate and more loaded, emotionally speaking. One of the particular signs of this broader process lies in what has become a very regrettable and common practice within the left which has its roots in the leninist thought. We are talking about the legitimation of fractional disputes, explicable phenomenon according to power dynamics within organizations like the result of theoretical disputes which refer to several class-conscious interests. The same thing happens when any scientific or artistic position is linked to alleged class leanings. All that has been used very often as a pretext to justify fierce political persecutions in many occasions. It only represents a coarse caricature of good ideological analyses whose methodology we are trying to unravel here; but that goes without saying. Its foundation lies in ignorance, deliberate or not, of the existence of levels of thought unequally linked to practice, different types of practice and practical interests apart from those fixed by a simplified theory about social classes; theory which is sometimes conceived, on the other hand, in a very reductive manner. This ignorance also refers to an unavoidable relative autonomy of all these levels of analysis. No matter how coarse this caricature might seem, it has been quite popular. Even Lenin himself fell into it sometimes; his summary trials about the religious phenomenon (Lenin, 1976 187-190) or his ingenuous theory about the post-revolutionary State (Lenin, 1986) are a good case in point. It is therefore necessary, not only remember the requirements of an analysis which make justice to the complexity of a situation by reclaiming

dialectical analysis against some of its consummate masters' mistakes. We must also provide ourselves with more precise definitions in order to avoid those ulterior uses which rest upon the uncertainty of certain basic concepts.

## II. A complex conception about the national question

These brief observations about the style of Lenin's thought will now help us to get a better understanding of his different positions about the so-called national question. Following the general tendency of his thought, Lenin elaborated a point of view in the course of fierce debates about strategic questions outside the framework of quiet academic discussions. This modality of intellectual work had, of course, its own inherent advantages and difficulties. Sometimes, due to demands of this controversial genre, he oversimplified the problems he was facing and focused on the political strategy questions. His substantive issues are dimly revealed. However, in many other cases he rose from these particular discussions and went towards problems of deep theoretical significance. This was due not only to his own intellectual height but also to the debates he was involved in; intellectual height which was the result of that environmental wealth in which Lenin and his speakers performed, along with the complexity of the national question itself. Lenin's reflection on this phenomenon spread over for more than two decades and covered different subjects such as European imperialism, the crisis of Czarist, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, Norwegian independence, Irish independence movement, and the different national problems which the new Soviet power had to deal with. All these events fueled intensive debates in the field of the international Marxist thought, whose trend was very diverse. As members of an internationalist movement aimed at the overthrow of capitalism by the working class at world level, the national question was considered to be of secondary importance by many of them. They even saw it as something negative, an archaism condemned to disappear as a consequence of the development of an economy and society gradually more internationalized. Also, this question was seen as a false problem which distracted workers' attention away from their true aims and often placed them under a bourgeois direction to the detriment of those who should be their true leaders. Different attitudes towards the national phenomenon expressed all this complexity. Sometimes, it gave rise to certain indifference towards this phenomenon which could be rejected by means of few summary sentences. Others were well aware of the real significance involved and whether they liked it or not, it was necessary to analyze the question in depth, due to strategic and practical reasons and others of a more theoretical nature.

This one was Lenin's attitude, as we'll see further on. It was not only about the fact that nationalism could not be denied, not even in a sense of 'must be' or just 'be', in the name of an abstract internationalism as a dream for the future. The national question was important in itself and also because it held very complex relations with social protest movements in which Marxism, of course, was very interested. After all, the socialist and workers' movement along with the nationalist movements rose up and developed at the same time and the same people were involved in many of them. It was crucial to answer

questions; questions about the role these nationalist movements could play in the framework of class struggle and how they should be considered depending on every specific case, that is, as allies or as enemies. But along with these problems some others emerged although less immediate and related to the national question and capitalist development. Its possibilities of conciliation with democracy and the requirements to guarantee a good coexistence among people of different nations within the same society and the same State. And also, the relations between national diversity and universal human culture still under construction.

All these questions were being considered within an extraordinary and complex context from a strictly national perspective, although all of them are. Something that may add more difficulties to this particular situation was what we could call a peculiar superposition among pre-national empires, nation-states more or less settled, and new colonial empires. It was therefore possible to outline a useful tripartite division, just like Lenin did. We could thus find, firstly, the nation-states of Western Europe in which the correspondence between the limits of the State and those of the nation is quite approximate. In this case, the national question would be overcome with the end of the unification wars of the nineteenth century. At this point, Lenin was too simplistic as he did not pay enough attention to the problems which were already developing in these States and that would develop to a greater extent. Let's think about the Scottish, Basque, Catalan, Flemish and Corsican conflicts. Even so, the truth is that all these problems were and are of minor importance if compared with the current ones in the other two types of States.

The former spread out to Eastern Europe, divided by then into two empires, the czarist and the Austro-Hungarian. If we add the Ottoman empire we would go deep into the East. The three of them were old States, formed by a long aggregation process of territories and populations to an original nucleus by means of military conquest or voluntary agreements such as marital alliances and the combination of both procedures. These three empires had what we currently call multiethnic nature, in the sense of being formed by an enormous variety of populations which are cultural and linguistically different. These populations sometimes showed a separate identity; this authorizes us to see them as ethnic groups or nationalities (cf. Rodinson, 1975). Some of them could be considered as nations since their differentiated identity joined in the aspiration of having a State (cf. Gellner, 1989). It was something that some of them would do soon after, having conquered the territories of the Balkans for some decades by the time Lenin wrote. Of course, all that ethnic and national plurality did not result in an equal treatment on the part of the authorities that ruled all those populations. We could distribute them within a hierarchy in accordance with certain criteria instead. First of all, we have to take its own power into account in terms of number, wealth and political influences. But also its degree of correspondence with the ideal model of human being established by the official ideology in each and everyone of them. Thus, the members of religious minorities were obviously degraded, something to be expected in openly confessional States. But those people whose language and culture were different from the hegemonic ethnic group were also in a sorry state. Such

hegemony may come from its role as the original nucleus on which the empire was built. It arose perhaps from the greater links between this hegemony and the ruling elites of the empire or it is based on the fact that the official and administrative languages had been formed from its vernacular language (cf. Anderson, 1993 102-122). Thus, without being national States, these empires were not mere ethnic groups confederations equally placed. They were *ethnically designed*, something that would result in a potential source of conflicts.

This social unrest increased in time at the mercy of two processes closely linked to the capitalist development. The first of them was going to be, of course, the political centralization, favoured by the rise of resources that helped to build a much more powerful state machine firmly dedicated to control towns and territories. At the same time, the increase of economic links made much more necessary the establishment of a uniform legislation and a power which was able to make it be respected. This political action along with the increase of contacts as a consequence of those economic links, tended to favour a progressive linguistic and cultural unification. But this centralization also began to create more problems. Frictions rose between the authorities and the outlying towns which managed to preserve their characteristic peculiarities thanks to the laxity of the State organization which they belonged to. Now, the centralized State intensified its demands in relation to those populations which were not too loyal to it. Thus, their discontent started to grow at the same time as their conscience of the differences in relation with the model of human being proposed by that State did. In conclusion, linguistic and cultural homogeneity were needed more than ever but this would often give rise to a reaction against those who were subjects of such homogenisation. This controversy could be increased by the influence of the aforementioned second process. Without its participation, the resistance of outlying populations to be standardised by ruling ethnic groups, could have been seen as it is seen nowadays: as a simple rearguard fight, a desperate attempt of being against the ineluctable course of progress.

The intervention of this second process counteracted, nonetheless, the weight of that argument which is still so frequent nowadays. Using Lenin's words, thanks to the capitalist development many nationalities were 'waking life up' (Lenin s/d.b). The metaphor turns out to be absolutely true. It refers to a probable activation and development of some identities and cultures which would previously be outlined; like some sort of germs that in good circumstances could reach an ulterior phase of development. The cause of this change lied in the increase of all kinds of contacts among the members of the already existing ethnic conglomerations. The development of these exchanges would favour the achievement of a greater homogenisation since it would also fuel the fact of becoming aware of the existence of these similarities within each conglomeration. Thus, the constitution of administrative units which grouped the members of those conglomerations will be more necessary. Also, a minimum correspondence between the surroundings of these populations and those of these economic regions now under construction will be needed. In short, we could say that facing the general process of homogenisation in which the

different and already existing ethnic conglomerations would have to be dissolved into the heart of a broader nation, each of these conglomerations would tend to turn into a nationality or nation opposed to the rest. Thus, the capitalist modernisation would be creating two opposite processes, a centripetal one and a centrifugal one. This represents a brilliant illustration of that dialectical conception of reality which is so important in Lenin's thought. The fact that one or another prevailed could be explained partly as the result of their respective speeds. Perhaps the economic and cultural centralisation would go faster in the level of economic and cultural regions or maybe the state centralisation as a whole might come earlier. In the first case, a recreation and affirmation of the particularity would take place, in the second case the opposite process would occur. Nevertheless, this particularity which is now boosted would not stop being global, regarding the existing localisms within each ethnic conglomeration. It also must be said that a faster progress of the differentiation in the realm of the objective, would make those affected by it to be more aware of what separates them from the members of other conglomerations. Greater contacts of all kinds would multiply the opportunities to observe such differences, as well as generating several difficult situations like, for instance, the rivalry in order to get different business and professional niches. Finally, the capitalist modernisation was also increasing the economic resources in the hands of individuals and groups. Thanks to them, any action of cultural recreation like for example, the foundation of newspapers written in a particular language or the establishment of cultural associations, will be now much easier to launch. This would also favour the centrifugal tendency.

As we can appreciate, the Lenin's analysis developed here cherished an extraordinary wealth. Especially, the dialectics outlined between what we called centripetal and centrifugal processes and its simultaneous promotion of uniformity and difference, advanced by Engels (2009; 111-112), turns out to be very useful to understand the current dynamics of globalization. However, the leninist analysis would not stop here. Along with the nation-states and the multiethnic Empires, it also dealt with the new colonial empires that by the time were spreading to large parts of Africa, Asia and Oceania. Despite the huge diversity of the situations that took place in its heart, what most accurately characterized this colonial world was the extreme alterity between the main body of the population and the power of the metropolis. The distance between hegemonic ethnic groups and the ruling classes on the one hand, and the populations which felt more or less left out, (like in the case of the old empires), became much more intense. However, on the contrary of what was happening in those traditional States, a large part of the native and subjected populations and, precisely because of their 'primitivism', had not waken national life up yet. That is why the conflicts could not be as sharp as they were in the old empires, at least broadly speaking. In this recently colonised world, the formation of large offended coalitions was not an easy task given the primacy of local identities. It would also be unlikely to experiment that national offense as intensely as before since it did not exist a developed national conscience which determined the demand of being governed by people from that very nation. Nevertheless, in a short time, when Lenin was still alive and shortly after his early death, the situation would change radically. That change would mean a brilliant

confirmation of his conception of capitalist development as a powerful activator of the national conscience. That's what happened not only in those countries whose conscience was not quite developed, but also in the old consolidated nation-states which had lived the emergence of the 'peripheral' nationalisms, questioned by the official national identities. Not for nothing, Lenin was a pioneer in the analysis of imperialism and national liberation movements (Anderson, 1995: 123-147 and 2010: 128-138). In fact, both analyses were closely linked. In line with the general trend of his thought and taken by a multiple strategic motivation, Lenin reflected on imperialism. He did so to understand the roots of the world war and the domestication of social democracy as a consequence of the emergence of a 'working-class aristocracy' subsidised by the colonial profits. But also to find new breaches in the worldwide capitalist system by means of the promotion of anticolonialist movements.

There was, in short, a whole range of heterogeneous situations. That heterogeneity was dictated by the lack of contemporaneity among these different situations. All of them respond to different phases of the historical development; an unequal and combined historical development, as Trotsky said (1972: 9). There was a huge distance between the modern nation-states of Western Europe and the recently colonised populations with no national conscience. But it was not only about the coexistence among so different social forms. The progressive internationalisation of economy and social life as a whole had this unavoidable consequence: the progressive interpenetration among all those different social forms. As a result, perhaps the backward societies had no intention of repeating all the aspects of the trajectory of those advanced societies. Thus, the emergence of the national conscience, a movement towards an international identity and cultural unification and another movement towards the development of particularities within each State, were all taking place at the same time. The old empires were destroyed because of this development of particularist nationalisms inside them, unable to build a national identity and culture which could represent the different populations. The new colonial empires could not turn themselves into extensions of colonial nation-states either, due to the development of new nationalisms that subjected people embraced. However, many of the new States which came from the disintegration of old or new empires did not succeed in becoming true nation-states and it is not very likely that they are ever going to succeed. This is how it has been. First of all, because of the deep internal heterogeneity which they used to show and also because of the few decades they had in comparison with the centuries that the old nations of Western Europe enjoyed. We could say that if the new nationalisms were quick in homogenizing its population they could succeed. This is exactly what many movements have done when embraced enthusiastically all sort of slaughters and ethnic cleansing. But those terrible actions not always bring the expected results, not only because of the victims' resistance but also because of the aforementioned tendencies which act in the opposite direction. The paradox lies in the fact that these new States, resulting from the preponderance of those factors which helped to disarticulate the States, were now trying to recreate their own nations. They did so in opposition to those same factors which helped them to arise and prosper at the

time. Their struggle became more difficult as those same centrifugal factors only got stronger since then. We will try to complete Lenin's analyses in order to understand better the reasons that lie behind this question.

What we currently call globalization increases, with no doubt, the cultural homogeneity in a worldwide perspective. It means the creation of a global culture that in spite of being quite leaned towards the western side, it is now shared in different degrees by the immense majority of mankind. Nevertheless, this homogenisation has a deceptively paradoxical consequence: the promotion of differentiation. On the one hand, shared cultural homogeneity makes easier the recreation of the peculiarities in certain contexts without affecting the social space which has been built. On the other hand, it is going to be easier to highlight the differences on this homogeneity background. In fact, that is how ethnic and national identities work in our modern world. They generally operate with a handful of features along with the language such as rituals and other elements from their popular culture. These are conveniently folklorized or with certain historical events conveniently reconstructed which is a result of a genuine 'invention of tradition' (cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2012). Whatever the specific way in which it takes place, the truth is that all this creative process promotes a recreation of particularism. This stands in the way of the consolidation of solid national identities and forces to reshuffle them, making them more compatible with the growing internal diversity but also with the global homogeneity (cf. Castien Maestro, 2009: 204-206). That may force not only to reshuffle those identities but also to resizing them by divesting them of a large part of the centrality they enjoyed through the generations; that does not entail its disappearance. We could then speak about a relative *denationalization* of the world (cf. Castien Maestro, 2013). Accepting this possibility involves the acceptance of a flexible vision of all different identities. They are no longer seen as something given or natural, but just as something which has been built up. Not as something haphazardly constructed but as the result of complex and far-reaching social processes whose transformation is difficult. We are talking about the need to overcome both essentialism and extreme constructionism. We will discuss this question further on.

It is also important to point out that many of these standardisation or differentiation processes have a coercive aspect. Ruling elites often impose certain identity and cultural models on the rest of the population. Practices such as the prohibition of speaking certain languages or the compulsory teaching and use of others, are seen as means towards that end. The russification policies launched by czarist authorities and diligently denounced by Lenin, provide a good example. However, he does not seem to pay much attention to other coercive practices which are less explicit but tremendously effective like, for example, those based on wealth differences. By virtue of such differences, those who hold greater economic resources can promote, on equal terms, their own cultural models. This will increase their availability and therefore, the possibility of being imitated. In the same way, the wealthiest groups are more likely to have a greater social prestige at their disposal and therefore, a greater tendency to be imitated. All this implies a certain coercion,

although less brutal than that derived from explicit imposition and prohibition. However, Lenin focused on direct repression, that he resolutely opposed. Nevertheless, he seemed to ignore the indirect repression as he asserted that those populations that speak two different languages and must cooperate with each other, would just end up using the language that comes in handy (Lenin, s/d. b). At this point Lenin showed ingenuousness typical of a liberal attitude, only attentive to direct repression. Attitude which is not characteristic of someone like him, imbued with the marxist tradition and its capacity of detecting relationships of domination under relationships which are deceptively based on agreement and consensus. Since this indirect repression is also perceived by those who suffer its effects, the resistance against it increases too. This resistance will also increase the difficulties for homogenisation to be achieved.

It seems like the late nationalisation processes which are being currently undertaken, face major difficulties. On the other hand, the human cost of nationalisation processes as well as other similar processes of identity standardisation have turned out to be terribly heavy. If identity standardisation has historically emerged as a necessary agent for the construction of broader and more integrated societies, it has certainly been an onerous one. Although some philosophies have excused this as a necessary evil, it has to be asked if it is necessary to keep paying such a high cost or trying to combine, to a great extent, those shared and necessary broad identities and cultures with a greater respect towards other cultures and identities which are more particular. In other words, we must ask ourselves if it is possible to develop more flexible and less repressive forms of social integration. Forms which are not based on an identity standardisation of coercive nature. Lenin seemed to have pointed in that direction. He always stood up for the necessity of preserve and develop languages and cultures against any compulsory standardisation. This defence included non european populations too, something very unusual at the time. Thus, different cultural traditions were considered as something valuable and decent of being preserved and developed; alphabets for oral languages were created as well as promoting literature and press written in different local languages. He was also opposed any coercive merger within a broader culture, something that in his opinion would only provoke resistance among the affected people. Beyond that, he also promoted an explicit recognition of differentiated ethnic and national identities including the concomitant right to secede. But that right to cultural particularity must come along with a necessary articulation among all the different particular cultures within a broader culture. In a similar way, the right of having a separate political organisation must be combined with a deep political and economic cooperation among these different units. Of course, this cooperation would need of a certain cultural and identity homogeneity, especially by means of languages of communication spoken by most of the inhabitants. There would be no need to impose one of them and get rid of the others. In this regard he praised the case of Switzerland, a very united country with four languages, where many citizens learned their fellow countrymen's languages and spoke to them in those same languages as a deference act (Lenin s/d. b). That is how a more flexible conception of social integration and cultural and identity cohesion was outlined;

the most general and the most particular could coexist and articulate themselves, each of them at its level but in mutual and reciprocal articulation.

There could be a sort of prudent nationalism compatible with internationalism (Castien Maestro, 2013). But this prudent nationalism, as we can call it, ought to be thoroughly distinguished from what it was always condemned as chauvinism. The latter could be understood as an extreme nationalism characterised by a non critical admiration for anything of their own, and a similar disdain towards anything foreign. It is based on an extremely primitive thought model based on manichaeic dichotomies. The practical orientations which are deduced from that conception are equally simplistic. It is about supporting unconditionally the group one belongs to, while attacking everything that proves to be opposed to it. Such conduct makes the possibility of a fruitful cooperation among different national units something very difficult to happen in any field. Nor does it enable a consistent appropriation of the contributions of the rest of the nationalities and nations.

The development of more flexible identities and forms of social integration seems, at least, desirable not only according to the costs linked to its more rigid versions but also according to the benefit of preserving an important identity and cultural diversity. This is something more appreciated nowadays than in Lenin's times. The defence of this diversity may be carried out by means of different methods. One of them is based on models taken from biology which relate diversity to creativity and therefore, to a bigger adaptive capacity to a changeable environment (cf. Lévi-Strauss, 1979: 326-336). Although this argument may be sometimes a little rough and all the rage nowadays, it shows a real virtuality of variety, like the possibility of a bigger adaptive versatility. However, it may cause some problems to some extent. The first of them lies in the fact that a large part of which is been generated or preserved may lack any versatility of this kind. The continuation of this biological simile would make it disappear. Human life illustrates this conclusion: those cultural forms which due to different reasons, lose their charm or utility for those who made use of them, tend to disappear. This ascertainment conflicts with those extreme relativistic approaches which place all cultural forms at the same level. If this relativism is accepted, we would have to regret the loss of those cultural forms that disappear and it would be necessary to preserve them whatever the cost. This is what is being done to some extent. Thus, the 'darwinian' tolerance towards the extinction of less capable cultural forms, alternates with a tendency to preserve some of them, even if they only survive as folklorized forms. This is what is also done in the biological field when certain species are protected from extinction.

A similar perspective very widespread today, that turns diversity into an active agent, seems to be fully compatible with a marxist perspective although not any kind of marxism. It ought to be a specific perspective separate from the evolutionism of the nineteenth-century, according to which the whole mankind must follow the same evolutionary trajectory on the base of an idealized version of that experienced by western societies. This perspective must be based on an evaluation of the particular but not as an end in itself, but as a particular way

towards the universal. The deep compatibility between this point of view and marxism is not only derived from a bidirectional articulation between the specific and the abstract, something characteristic of dialectical thought. It also comes from the possibility of setting it in the concept of 'generic being' developed by Marx in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1970). According to this conception, human essence is not just something given, innate, and then developed under favorable conditions. It is already an external reality outside the human body, a result of the collective practical activity done by all generations throughout history. This product is objectified in tools, institutions, social relations, languages and cultural codes from which every individual will only be able to take a small fraction. Consequently, this human patrimony will be delivered among all individuals but we could also say that among all communities, including ethnic and national communities. Each one of them will preserve and develop a global part of the human cultural patrimony as well as some particular aspects of the human essence, contributing to the enrichment of it as a whole. If this is true, it is because the different aspects of the universal human culture are so complex in their immense majority that their appropriation, if somewhat partial, constitutes a task capable of taking up the whole individual existence. The facile cosmopolitanism culminates in superficial dilettantism and therefore, certain particularist feeling and privileged attachment to what is ours within some limits, may be very profitable for mankind as a whole. (cf. Castien Maestro, 2007: 142)

Lenin himself seems to be a good example of this attitude. He was passionately imbued with the Russian cultural tradition, both high and popular culture, but this passion did not lock him in his own tradition. On the contrary, it led him to a radical opening-up to other cultural traditions. The consolidation of being imbued with his own tradition would not operate as a pretext to shut himself off. It was like a springboard that favoured the openness to the other, an openness which is not understood as a mere disposition to absorb anything foreign just to fill up the gap, but to provoke an interaction between the fullness of the self and other foreign valuable things. Thus, this defence of the value of the particular must not be mistaken for a worship to it. Culture is not an end in itself, it is a system of objectifications that may promote the development of human essence but may also hinder it radically, turning it into a new source of alienation. All this brings a perspective on the culture that we could call pragmatic or instrumental. At the same time, no culture is monolithic. Like any other reality, it is a unity of opposites which enables its development in different directions. From this dialectical conception, this contradictory character and evolutionary potentialities may be seen in different ways. But Lenin, whose theoretical reflection was subjugated to the strategic needs, was only interested in them when related to class struggle. As he once said in quite an explicit way, any culture consists of elements that are subject to a reactionary or revolutionary development as well as being subject to serve the interests of certain social groups. That is why revolutionaries' duty is seen as a fight to promote their progressive development (Lenin, s/d. b). This is what Lenin did in his effort to establish a cultural and specifically Russian way towards marxism, recovering some contributions of authors such as Herzen and Chernishevsky (Lenin, 1976; 59-65). Against any essentialism, no culture was completely conservative or progressive. The favorable elements to one or other tendency

could be more or less powerful in certain moments. Anyway, the possibility of develop others, relegated to second place in that situation, was always there. All these cultures, developed in a progressive way, must articulate with each other in order to avoid a mankind fragmentation, risk that threatens some multiculturalists conceptions. Against unification by means of coercive standardisation and simplification, it is possible to conceive another way that makes justice to the complexity of what it is aspiring to articulate. It is necessary to elaborate an identity and cultural synthesis; this synthesis must be complex enough in order to enable people with different identities and cultural backgrounds to identify with them without sacrificing their own patrimony. Of course, this is not an easy task.

### III. Flexible political strategies

This last idea takes us from the perspective of an abstract theorizing to the political strategies developed in certain contexts. As we have been trying to prove, Lenin had a very complex conception about the national question; a conception that combined its recognition and esteem with an orientation resolutely internationalist and a determined opposition to any kind of chauvinism. Such an attitude makes it possible to subordinate the national interests, or supposedly national, to human interests in a more general perspective. The criticism of colonialism and the defence of oppressed people in the name of universal democratic values was due to a conception of that kind. But Lenin accomplished this orientation, shared by many democrats and humanists of his time, when he promoted *revolutionary defeatism* politics in 1905 and 1914. He called for the military defeat of the czarist Russia, not only because its expansionism was reprehensible but also because that defeat could open a way to the revolution; a revolution that would benefit both russian people and humanity as a whole, as it finally happened. This stance entails differentiating between the interests of the ruling classes and those from the oppressed. The more confronted they were, the more absurd would be talking about a shared national interest. The alleged official national interest would not be more than a deceptive wrapping of particular interests of one social class. This constitutes an especially illustrative example of that ideological alienation that Lenin used to detect in such a clever way. Just as this revolutionary defeatism turned out to be completely coherent in relation to Lenin's theoretical and strategic conceptions, the same thing can be said about his attitude about self-determination. This was a right to be defended as a basic democratic principle depending on the acceptance and development of the basic principles of democracy on the part of the socialist movement. It was also a right in accordance with his own conception of the national question. Furthermore, this right was in line with his conception of the national question. In defence of this right, Lenin had to argue with those socialists who saw the national question, and therefore self-determination, as something totally anachronistic in the framework of a rampant internationalisation process. He proved that national demands were still making sense not only in the case of the colonies and the

old empires, but also in the advanced countries of Western Europe such as Norway and Ireland (Lenin, s/d.c). Besides this, the right to self-determination may turn into a powerful weapon at the service of socialist aims. Firstly, it could be used to win the nationally oppressed people's affection along with its capacity to destabilise the great capitalist powers. Not only was the fact that by the time he was writing, the great colonial empires were already dealing with the first nationalist movements of their subjugated populations. As was expected, these nationalisms would just strengthen and multiply themselves while capitalist development was awakening this aspiration among those who were indifferent about it. Thus, it seemed like the fight for national liberation in the peripheries, the colonies and the strictly socialist fight in the middle may converge. The historical importance of this strategic proposal doesn't need to be explained.

But this fight could not have just a mere destructive dimension, only focused on the weakening or the overthrow of imperialist powers. It was necessary to provide it with a constructive aspect, establishing the need of replacing the previous oppressive political structures with it. It was at this point where Lenin's attitude reached, in our opinion, a more dialectical nature. While he insisted on the recognition of the right to secede, he also believed that in the case of having to decide about holding a referendum, there would be many situations in which the most appropriate thing to do would be to vote against that secession. If according to him, Russian workers must defend the Ukrainian's right to secede, at the same time they should try to convince them of the advisability of remaining within the State. This State should be a guarantee for their autonomous national existence and would also reject any compulsory homogenisation. The reasons in favour of this unionist attitude were heavy. The first of them lied in the fact that an economic coordination would be easier as well as having a much improved defense against foreign aggressions after the revolution. But in a more general sense, the dismemberment of the already established States was a contingency which called for a prudent strategy. The more consolidated those States were, from the perspective of their internal economic articulation and their identity and cultural cohesion, the higher the costs of a future fragmentation would be. Particularly since there would be many more 'mestizos', more people who could have interests linked to both sides of the future and still imaginary border. This is what happened in the nation-states of Western Europe. However, it was feasible to think about the possibility of preserve to a large extent, the unitary structures of the old empires after the desired social transformation. This is what finally happened in Russia. Contrary to Austro-hungarian and Ottoman empires which did not survive the Great War, the old czar's dominions transmuted in the Soviet Union. A new state construction where a more global and ideological nationalism, linked to a specific political project, placed itself on top of the recognition of a variety of nations and nationalities. Despite the final failure of this experience, it must be said that it had at least two important positive aspects. The first of them consisted in the early development of numerous identities and cultures, oppressed and marginalised back then. The second one was to assure a reasonable coexistence for decades in the heart of a extremely heterogeneous population.

Nevertheless, the situation could be much more complicated. Under certain circumstances, a fight against a genuine national oppression could have negative effects on class struggle at the international level or in other words, could operate in a counterrevolutionary way. But this was something that was not taken into account. It could have been at all possible the fact that a peripheral nationalist movement had faced a State in which a progressive movement had already seized power. It would also be possible that the latter could handle the situation by recognising the national rights of the population which had been oppressed back then. This would be a way of gaining their confidence in order to implement its transforming aims, but this policy was not always successful. After all, the survival of chauvinist habits in the dominant nation was something quite probable. Thus, all those generous proposals that were promoted could be reduced to a number of highflown declarations able to hide the continuation of oppression. Even if that were not the case, it was easy that the oppressed population, frequently more backward from a socioeconomic perspective, were reluctant to the new measures taken by the new revolutionary power. They could then decide to group together to fight them under the aegis of their traditional leaders as well as considering the possibility of making alliances with enemy imperialist powers. Taking this contingency as a starting point, Marx and Engels seemed to be very opposed to the nationalism of the oppressed Slavic populations and were rightly afraid of the fact that its triumph could strengthen the czarist Russia: the gendarme of the right wing Europe (Nin, 1977; 53-66). This is what also happened during the soviet revolution, especially in the Caucasus and Central Asia regions. Lenin's opinion, in accordance with all his thought, supported the need to sacrifice the recognition of the national right in the interests of the revolutionary cause. Even to the point of ordering the invasion of the independent Georgia in 1922, which was acting as a base of british imperialism to destabilise the soviet dominions (Carr, 1977; 366-368). Decisions of this kind could be justified according to objective difficulties. The circumstances demanded acting without any further consideration and forced to put back, temporarily at least, the recognition of those democratic rights that were enthusiastically promoted.

From this point of view, the policy adopted had not differed substantially from other authoritarian measures also taken by Lenin like the prohibition of the opposition political parties and the progressive repeal of internal democracy within soviet organisms. The problem with all these policies was, as everybody knows, their tendency to consolidate themselves as irreversible facts up to the point of being ideologically legitimised not just as painful temporary deviations but also as an ideal situation. This is a mistake that even Lenin himself made, but especially his successors. This is a posteriori operation of legitimation, a conversion of necessity in virtue, which has only been possible by means of a drastic simplification of those questions at stake. The existence of a variety of autonomous realities articulated by complex systems of mediation between them to subject everything to a single aim, is no longer taken into account. That is something that has resulted in stressed utilitarianism, oportunism and machiavellianism. Lenin's disposition of forgetting about the demands of dialectical thought while grasping only those immediate aspects of reality from a

tactical point of view, would meet here one of its more perfect signs. In a case like this, which is not Lenin's but it certainly is some of his successors' like Stalin (1977), any nationalist demand would be supported or condemned. All this depending on whether they circumstantially favoured those allegedly revolutionary political aims, or not. We hold, on the contrary, that the national question is autonomous enough to be examined individually and formulate on the basis of this analysis, those precise opinions, keeping a relative independence regarding these other political aims. It is necessary, therefore, to provide ourselves with a more elaborated criteria in order to determine which population may be defined as a nation or as a differentiated nationality. It also needs to be determined whether it is suffering a national oppression or not, and if so, to what extent and under which specific modalities it is suffering from it. This is a task which still remains to be done.

A second question, related to the aforementioned subject but not so important in Lenin's times, is the development of the nationalist demands within the allegedly more consolidated nation-states like some of the countries in Western Europe. The Irish case, subject he wrote so much about, seems to differ from these new situations regarding its openly half colonial aspect. That is why we will not make any extrapolations about it. It is therefore appropriate to deal with this question in depth in order to avoid mistakes which, in our opinion, have been made by many left wing movements. They apply a very simplified version of Lenin's analysis in quite a mechanical way. According to them, all these current nationalist movements could be put on a level with the nationalist movements in the old colonies. They would also be fighting against a situation of national oppression and even political domination and economic exploitation, like in the colonial case. But things are usually much more complex. National oppression involves the persecution of some cultural and identity forms. Such policies may be reprehensible in principle from a democratic point of view. However, the existence of a nationalist movement does not necessarily mean that the concerned population is suffering that national oppression, at least not in its more extrem degrees. Recognising the right of this population to self-determination as well as condemning the rejection of having this right, does not mean that we should recognise that this population is suffering other forms of national oppression. Whether they suffer it or not is something that must be established by means of the aforementioned minimum objective criteria and that still must be developed to a large extent. All that means that the complaints of the nationalist movement under consideration about the national oppression must not be necessarily accepted. Its degree of plausibility must be established on the basis of a more objective facts. Besides this national oppression, there are many other reasons to support the development of a nationalist movement. For instance, the legitimate eagerness of seizing an autonomous political framework in which recreate more comfortably one's own culture and national identity or as it is also frequent, the existence of pejorative prejudices towards other members of the nation. This fact would in principle be reprehensible for being considered as a chauvinist sign.

Either way, the existence or non-existence of this national oppression is something that has to be analytically separated from political domination and

economic exploitation. It is not something equivalent to the deprivation of political rights, including the right to self-government. On the contrary, the formal equality in the eyes of the law turns out to be quite compatible with that national oppression. It is also possible that a large number of the population nationally oppressed manage to make some progress even on the political scale, in return for giving up any idiosyncratic sign. The case of Kurdish people in Turkey seems to be a good example (cf. Lewis, 2002). Nevertheless, it is quite probable that national oppression, especially when reaching a relative intensity, ought to articulate itself with a minimum of political oppression. The State may be particularly tough on the members of this population, broadly speaking, in order to block any movement that ends up culminating in a nationalist demand. Precisely because of the fear of it, any possibility of self-government social and political climbing of the members of that population may be blocked. All this may happen and may not happen; that is why snap amalgams should be avoided. The same thing applies in the case of economic exploitation. Besides the 'normal' capitalist exploitation, the members of a certain town and also the inhabitants of a certain territory, may be victims of a differential economic exploitation. This exploitation is usually based on mechanisms such as the unbalance between what has been given in taxes and what has been received in public investments, the plundering of resources, the reduction of labour rights or the possibility of becoming a captive market. This is the situation that colonial populations have traditionally suffered. However, this is not necessarily followed by the existence of some degree of national or political oppression. It is perfectly possible that those States which practice forced assimilation policies try to win the loyalty of those citizens on whom they apply these policies. This means that not only will this part of the population suffer a differential exploitation but also will benefit from the opposite situation. We do not mean that these people cannot rightly or wrongly consider the possibility of independence. The fact that claiming independence is based on an economic claim does not necessarily involve the existence of a differential economic exploitation. Nor does it mean that the latter is equivalent in intensity to the one which is characteristic in the colonial situations throughout history. By virtue of the aforementioned issue, it seems quite clear that it is not possible to assimilate any situation in which exists a nationalist demand to the colonial-like situation. Operating this way means to give up any serious analysis about the specific situations in order to settle for a mere formalist application of prefabricated models. On the contrary, we aspire to be up to the reality of the situations. It is then necessary, as it has been aforesaid, to have a number of criteria. This will allow us to differentiate among different modalities and different types of national oppression, political domination and economic exploitation and several forms in which the different variations of these three phenomena can manage to combine with each other. Only that way, the possibility of getting rid of mere applications of abstract preconceptions may be feasible. On the basis of all this criteria would be much more probable to establish political strategies appropriate to each specific situation. In the meantime, the most sensible thing to do is being prudent and respect the autonomy of the national questions regarding to other political questions, starting with class struggle.

The existence of ethnic and national differences does not always lead to secession or even a bigger political autonomy. The reason lies in the fact that there is often no minimum correspondence between the distribution of populations and the distribution of territories. Those ethnic and nationally differentiated populations are not concentrated enough in order to constitute themselves as differentiated States. The merger of these populations into separate States is not absolutely impossible but it is going to entail some formidable and dramatic population displacements which will hardly ever be possible to undertake. The concentration of a large part of Jewish people in Palestine represents the extreme example of this kind of practice. The immense human suffering that all this has caused for decades is a good testimony of the dangers that these policies may provoke. It seems like the coexistence among very different people within the same State is going to be an inevitable result, especially in this time of large-scale international migrations. This heterogeneity clashes to a large extent with the own ideal of nationalist ideology (cf. Castien Maestro, 2003: 209-213) regarding a homogeneous population. The conflicts which are taking place in many countries around the world as a consequence of this, are very well known by everybody. When the possibility of secession is rejected along with the possibility of forced homogenisation, it is absolutely necessary to think about other possible way out. At this point, contemporary reflection has quite enough to learn from some old posings and among them, some of the points of view held by Lenin. That is what happens with the discussions about the proposal of cultural autonomy, originally formulated by some eminent representatives of the so-called austromarxism like Otto Bauer. The challenge that these theorists must face not only did lie in the immense ethnic plurality of the Austro-hungarian Empire, but also in the growing of a peculiar mixture of nationalities as a consequence of the rampant economic modernisation. Many cities became ethnically diverse. All this caused several conflicts and most importantly, triggered protests within the weakest groups due to the danger of a cultural and identity assimilation. The solution proposed by Bauer and others was based on the idea of giving cultural autonomy to those communities within the territory which was shared with others. Especially because territorial autonomy could not resolve in principle, the problem among those intermingled populations. In that way, each community must own the right to administer its own cultural issues separately and have its own separate schools. This thesis was also adopted by the Jewish Bund within the Russian Empire (Nin, 1977: 79-94).

Lenin's criticism about this idea, and also subsequently developed by Stalin (1977: 63-75), basically stressed the danger of ghettoisation which was attached to it. It may intensify the cultural and identity differences as well as making the limits among groups even clearer in such a way that the opposition among them worsened even more. At the same time, these reinforced identities and clearer limits might increase competitiveness and rivalry among them. In the context of this intensified rivalry and as it was expected, each community would regroup themselves around their leaders. These leaders generally belonged to the most powerful and conservative sectors but also the best organised, like the clergy from different religions. Likewise, they run the risk of essentialising people by placing them on a level with abstract models which maybe did not

correspond to what they really were. Perhaps most of them did not feel like they were represented by their conservative community leaders but they were probably pushed to turn to them as their representatives. In a similar way, those who had been more assimilated by other cultures due to relocations or intermarriages, did not fit into those promoted cultural models (Lenin, s/d.b). It is obvious that all this argument acquires today a renovated relevance in the context of debates about multiculturalism and communalism. The problem which, as a last resort, is always posed by these policies is the threat to turn society into a lax confederation with regard to minorities that shut themselves off in spite of sharing the same geographical space. They also seem to favour immobilism. The cultural elements that exist in a given moment can easily materialise themselves in realities quite static since the moment they receive an added social relevance as an identity highlighter mechanism (cf. Castien Maestro, 2003: 62-72). This happens in defiance of the rest of social and cultural evolution whose development may be hindered by them. They may finally not be the effective obstacles they seem to be and may also turn into a sort of indicator of stratum membership and getting more and more separated from the real conditions of human existence. Something similar happened with strata in the Ancien Régime, progressively transformed into empty shells (Lukács, 1985: 134-141; Tocqueville, 1989:14-29). In this case they would be a nuisance for social life and of course, a source of conflicts of great variety. What it really makes all this posing characteristic is its excessive and unilateral focus on the particular compared to the general. Once again, it is necessary to get a more balanced attitude that highlights those unifying elements. An attitude that, for example, does not send children to separate schools but giving, in the context of a unified school, the possibility of learning languages and cultures to those who are interested in doing so; learning their own language but maybe their classmates' too.

#### **IV. Beyond essentialism and constructionism**

The previous analyses have shown the fruitfulness of Lenin's dialectical conception about the national question. Despite the criticisms of some of his specific attitudes, we think that it is perfectly clear the capacity of this conception to get over the unilateral nature approaches, in both theory and practice. Against those who basically denied the existence of the national fact or expected its disappearance as a consequence of the capitalist development, he insisted on demonstrating that the existence of this national fact obeyed to very deep motives. He also pointed out the fact that modernisation weakens and reinforces it at the same time. But also against those who saw the national fact as a quasi-eternal reality and absolutely central, he argued that the nation was a recent historical product; the result of more or less deciding causes which may disappear in time apart from having a changeable influence depending on societies and historical moments. The same way, he faced those who insisted on denouncing or ignoring any national demand and those who turned the issue into the core of their political action. This desire to get over unilateralism, as well as elaborating conciliatory synthesis, culminated in an outlined attempt of

developing a general theory about the historical conditions of national identities. These Lenin's ideas were subsequently developed by Stalin (1977) and constitute today the most usable part of his theoretical and political work, deeply reprehensible in many other aspects. Some important authors such as Maxime Rodinson (1975), Pierre Vilar (1998) and Samir Amin (1979) continued working along the same lines. Their aim has been to build up a theory about the national question in accordance with the basic principles of marxism. In order to achieve such aim they have tried to link the ethnic or national identity phenomena with economic structures dynamics. The goal of this posing has been to attempt to deabsolutise the national fact by linking it with other resorts generally considered as more deciding. Equally, he has paved the way to its consideration as a historical phenomenon, changeable through the years and maybe disappearing in the future. In contrast, his work has got a certain theoretical roughness. The economic structures have tended to be defined in too generic and abstract ways. Concomitantly, the cultural and identity facts have not been properly analysed but just relating some of their aspects to the economic structures which determine them. They have not been conveniently reconstructed, theoretically speaking, up to the point of becoming reconstructed specific objects (cf. Kosik, 1988: 1-36). This has sometimes created a sort of combination between some theoretical preconceptions too abstract about the general socio-economic dynamics and pre-theoretical and hazy notions about the cultural, identity and national aspects. The result has been, if the worst comes to the worst, a combination between an extreme economism and a unilinear evolutionism along with an essentialist perspective about culture and nation (cf. Roy, 1998: 111-113).

Despite these occasional lacks, these ideas seem to work in an extraordinary promising direction in connection with some current debates. There is a possibility of developing an intermediate way between what we can call essentialist and constructionist posings. We briefly spoke about this in section II. According to the former, the national collectives would own a long history; its cultural features and its identity conscience would go back many years. In a similar way, its culture may be homogeneous, nearly monolithic, something that could be expressed in a modal personality which is common to the majority of the members. As everybody knows, this kind of attitude may lead to caricature-like excesses so it is not worth dwelling on it. Its non historical feature is also obvious; it postulates static realities practically immune to change. It projects on the past the idealised image of the present. Thus, this explains a multitude of past events on the basis of interests and national rivalries which maybe did not exist in the particular historical moment they refer to. Also on the basis of supposed cultural elements if not psychological, that might not be present in those times either. The incompatibility between that idea and marxism is clear as well as the contribution of the latter, along with other schools of thought, to its criticism and refutation. Constructionism has gradually emerged as an alternative to this traditional essentialism. In one way, it has been defined as the perfect opposite of the latter. It has insisted on the invention character, relatively recent, of many cultural practices which had been considered as very old traditions. It has also highlighted the plasticity and heterogeneity of culture, the imperfect simultaneousness between the limits

among ethnic and national groups on the one hand, and the cultural areas on the other hand; similarly, it has emphasised the historically original character of the current national identities. In short, against the ancestralism of the essentialists, the modern nature of the national has been stressed; this character faces naturalist perspectives which consider cultural and identity factors as something that exists on its own. Much emphasis has been placed on its generic nature of social construction, but also and more specifically, on its conscious and deliberate invention nature. In contrast to essentialism, a similar point of view seems to have a lot in common with marxist attitudes. The inclusion of several of its more important promoters such as Eric Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson in this approach proves that. This correspondence is clear in several aspects. To start with, it has proceeded to unmask many ideological fantasies that were covering up reality. At the same time, the insistence on the role of conscious inventions with regard to the appearance of traditions paves the way to its connections with different social interests including class interests in its strictest sense. All that, along with the aforementioned general historical perspective determines a clear correspondence with marxism. But being all this true, so it is the fact that this point of view has often culminated in extreme and unilateral positions. Firstly, we should ask ourselves why some artificial constructions are able to become rooted in such an effective way among those populations which constitute their target. We could claim the sociological need of these constructions in response to that objection. This would be the line of argument developed by Ernest Gellner (1989). According to him, modern industrial societies are more integrated than their historical predecessors. Consequently, they require of broader and more inclusive identities like the case of national identities which have been built up according to that aim. But the fact that these broader identities are sociologically functional is not the same as being subjectively acceptable for their intended audience. We could say by simplifying the issue, that this subjective acceptability depends on two factors. The first of them lies in the existence of a functionality not only from a macrosociological perspective, that is, the society understood as a whole but also from a much more micro sociological perspective: the perspective of the concerned people's interests. These new identities should help them to better solve their daily problems. In fact, this is something that happens quite often, when the national and ethnic identities allow the individual to establish relations with people who are different to himself regarding its residence, life style or profession. This provides the individual with a sort of a safe-conduct which will allow him to run around free within a broadened common social space. The second element that we have to take into account lies in the fact that those conciliatory identities must be minimally attractive and recognizable. In order to achieve this attractiveness is necessary that these identities show a positive image of the collectivity, something very frequent in the case of nationalist conceptions. Its recognisable nature depends on the fact that the new identity syntheses use a number of already existing cultural elements. Human beings have a limited creativity, and as decades of cognitive research have taught us, they tend to reproduce their old diagrams over and over again and manage to integrate the most recent facts into them. That is why the new cultural and identity synthesis must use old cultural features and even previous identity ascriptions to a large

extent. In connection with this, it is quite notable the Geertz's conception about 'paramount identities', like the most traditional and deeply rooted identities but not fully adapted to the limits of the new States in which their bearers are now integrated (cf. Geertz, 1987: 219-262).

Anyway, we need not think that the fabrication of new identities and cultures, no matter how daring or clever they may be, is going to be a game in which everything is fair. And it is not so, simply because it is necessary to build up attractive and inclusive identities and also because these identities or some of the contents which they refer to, must be less familiar for their intended audience. Obviously, it seems sensible to suppose that, on equal terms, the more familiar one of these syntheses is, the easier its collective acceptance will be. By the same token, the historical research would not have to devote itself to reveal the recent and somehow artificial nature of many identities and cultural traditions. This is an indispensable task as important as showing what has been preserved from the past. It is not only about dwelling on the rifts but also on the continuities. Not only stressing those qualitative changes but also what the new stage preserves from the previous phase even if it has been conveniently remodeled. At this point, Lenin's theoretical contribution may also be very useful. As previously mentioned, the dialectical thought which he tried to renovate is notable for trying to get over a unilateral perspective, integrating different partial views into a more comprehensive synthesis. This general statement also applies to any possible and rigid opposition between continuity and change or in a more general sense, between similarity or difference (cf. Séve, 1974: 34-37). From this we see the necessity of integration. In this specific case we could say that essentialism insists unilaterally on continuity whereas constructionism insists on change. For that reason both of them are partly right and partly wrong. The conciliation between these two approaches is easier as one realises that certain elements survive, what means continuity, but in doing so they also modify their position in the heart of that broader structure which they belong to as well as their function in it. These positional and functional changes often involve a remodeling of the element itself whose particularities will be altered to some extent. Thus, a folk dance which has been turned par excellence into a national symbol may have its origins in some sort of reworking of old peasant dances on the part of nineteenth-century artists. It may have been stylised in order to adapt it to the tastes of the urban and educated audience, thus acquiring a number of new functions. But even so, many of its original features have been retained. It was not possible to reshape it at will. Another imaginary example which had been more appropriate according to Lenin could be the following: a number of old popular stories which illustrate certain social conflicts are now reworked in order to stress those conflicts, thus passing on a much clearer revolutionary message. As Lenin himself remembered, all culture harbours in a simultaneous way, revolutionary and reactionary elements. This allows a development in opposite directions.

This unilaterality in the approaches is not the only lack that Lenin's contribution may help to mitigate when it comes to analyse the national fact. The essentialist approaches tend to conceive the cultural facts as something built up in the course of a long period of time by means of a concatenation of a number of

individual actions whose results were not expected. They are then focused on those social processes which we could brand 'automatic' 'natural' and 'unconscious'. Constructionism, on the contrary, has collected its bigger success when it showed the role of the most conscious political engineering. Given that both kind of processes happen together in social life, it is necessary to take both of them into consideration. A posing of marxist basis which was willing to develop Lenin's suggestions must do some corrections in connection with these two approaches. With regard to essentialism, it would insist on the fact that the unconscious process, not the only one found there, should be a process whose objective dynamics can be unravel by means of the analysis of its constituent elements. This avoids to see it as a vague and undefined movement, nearly mystical, as it has been done so often. Regarding constructionism, the creative activity of the subjects should be placed within the social frame in which it takes place; this social frame conditions it, stimulates it and channels it. Only that way it is possible to believe that the danger of falling into a new version of subjective idealism can be exorcised. This subjective idealism is characterised by the reduction of objective reality to just a product of the activity of the subject who watches it. The world is therefore, built by itself. In any case, another world different from the observer's subjective construction may exist but only under the shape of an elusive thing-in-itself. The most sophisticated modalities of this attitude give up their initial solipsism, in which reality is the philosopher's creation as an isolated individual. They replace it with other of collectivist nature in which reality is the result of cooperation among different individuals, what turns it into a 'social construction'. Similarly, they transcend their own confinement in the act of thinking in order to include the practical activity and thus, they acquire a resolutely more realistic and materialistic nature. The philosophical subjective idealism becomes sociological subjective idealism. However, it seems like it's been acted in the vacuum many times and it is often thought that anything can be created. Environmental hindrances are not taking into account and neither is the fact that many of our creations come to be a reworking of the materials that we already have at our disposal. Against the lacks of all this subjectivism and in the fields of thought and practice, it is advisable to recover some of the elements of the criticism that Lenin addressed to himself in *Materialism and empirio-criticism* (1974). This is a work which has not been valued as it deserves. Against the excessive stress in the subject creativity by subjective idealists, stress which culminates in a comfortable relativism, Lenin and his concept of 'reflection' (neither mechanical nor automatic) insists on the dependence of our intellectual elaborations with regard to an objective and materialist reality. They are elaborated from this external reality and due to reasons of practical survival, a large part of them and only when elaborated according to certain procedures, tend to get a correspondence with that partial, approximate and provisional but in short, effective. Thus, the criticism to certain excesses on the part of constructionism may be placed within a much broader theoretical frame.

Other criticism that can be made to these constructionist ideas is related to their excessive insistence in the modernity of the national fact. The nation, as it is understood today, is a modern fact that entails one element of rupture but also of continuity with the traditional world. This approach goes back to the idea

which has been outlined before in relation with the pre-modern past. National identities are partly built on the basis of previous identity and cultural elements. Apart from this, if culture and national identity make sense in the frame of a broader and more integrated society like for example, modern societies, it has to be remembered that some traditional societies have shown notable levels of cohesion in certain historical moments. As a result, part of their populations have developed what we can call proto national identity. A good example of this was the Chinese Empire, at the mercy of a centralisation which was brought by a powerful hydraulic agriculture (Amin, 1979: 143). In the Arab case and just as it's been asserted by Samir Amin (1976: 11-30), the urban oligarchies linked to each other through a thick commercial net, developed a common identity and culture too. It was a proto nation limited in the fundamental aspects to the highest strata of society, whereas the majority of the population was characterised by an ethnic and a much more emphasised religious particularism. In short, the rupture introduced by modernisation has not been equally stressed everywhere. Sometimes, modern nationalism shows a remarkable continuity with the past. For that reason, working in the elaboration of necessary criteria is important in order to distinguish between national identities with a greater or lesser foundation in previous realities. Therefore, on equal, more or less viable and less "artificial" conditions. In all that, it seems advisable to keep profiting from Lenin's legacy in a critical and creative way.

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