

## Analysis on the “Difficult Dialogue between Marxism and Nationalism”: Re-evaluating Marxist Classical Writers’ Statements on Nationalism

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### Abstract

Both Marxism and Nationalism are listed among the most influential strains of thought in modern times. Scholars have long held that the dialogue between Marxism and Nationalism is difficult in their ideological collision. Therefore, Marxist classical writers’ statements on Nationalism had been frequently evaded, neglected, ridiculed or even criticized by some western scholars. In spite of their marked variations, the idea collisions of Marxism and Nationalism have historical origins and a basis in reality. By highlighting the macroscopic nature of historical materialism and distinguishing “two kinds of Nationalism”, Marxist classical writers’ statements on Nationalism not only introduced the “Long-period Theory” and “Mega Theory” backgrounds of “Human Liberation”, but analyzed the “dual nature” of Nationalism from the standpoint of the proletariat. The interaction between internationalism and Nationalism had been reflected in the scientific socialist practices from “workers without homeland” to “how to sing the song of homeland”. Marxism and Nationalism have multidimensional intersections rather than a so called “difficult dialogue”. Thus, it is highly necessary to analyze and counter-criticize the “criticism” on the allegedly “difficult dialogue between Marxism and Nationalism”.

**Key words:** Marxism classical writers; Nationalism; difficult dialogue between Marxism and Nationalism; criticism

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# การวิเคราะห์ความแตกต่างระหว่างแนวคิด มาร์กซิสต์และแนวคิดชาตินิยม: บททวนข้อคิดเห็นของนักเขียนลัทธิมาร์กซ์ที่มีต่อ แนวคิดชาตินิยม

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## บทคัดย่อ

แนวคิดของลัทธิมาร์กและลัทธิชาตินิยมได้รับการยอมรับว่าเป็นแนวคิดที่ทรงอิทธิพลอย่างสูงในโลกยุคใหม่ ในมุมมองของนักวิชาการที่ผ่านมาลงความเห็นว่าลัทธิทั้งสองนำเสนอแนวความคิดที่แตกต่างและขัดแย้งกัน ดังนั้นข้อคิดเห็นของกลุ่มนักเขียนลัทธิมาร์กต่อทฤษฎีชาตินิยมจึงถูกเพิกเฉย ไม่ได้รับการให้ความสำคัญ และอาจถึงขั้นถูกวิพากษ์วิจารณ์จากนักวิชาการในโลกตะวันตก กระนั้นก็ตาม ท่ามกลางทัศนที่แตกต่างกัน แนวคิดมาร์กและชาตินิยมกลับมีจุดร่วมบางประการในประวัติศาสตร์การก่อกำเนิดและพื้นฐานการสร้างแนวคิด นักวิชาการกลุ่มลัทธิมาร์กซิสต์ได้จำแนกลัทธิชาตินิยมออกเป็นสองกลุ่ม ซึ่งนำไปสู่ทฤษฎีพื้นฐานสำคัญในการอธิบายแนวคิดเสรีนิยม และเป็นการวิเคราะห์สองข้อสังเกตของลัทธิชาตินิยมจากมุมมองของชนชั้นกรรมาชีพ ด้วยเหตุนี้ จึงกล่าวได้ว่าแนวคิดมาร์กซิสต์และแนวคิดชาตินิยมไม่เพียงไม่ขัดแย้งอย่างสุดโต่งแต่ยังมีความสอดคล้องสัมพันธ์กันในหลายแง่มุม ดังนั้น จึงมีความจำเป็นที่จะต้องบททวนข้อคิดเห็นเกี่ยวกับความแตกต่างและขัดแย้งกันระหว่างแนวคิดทั้งสองต่อไป

**คำสำคัญ:** กลุ่มนักเขียนลัทธิมาร์ก ลัทธิชาตินิยม ความขัดแย้งระหว่างแนวคิดมาร์กซิสต์และแนวคิดชาตินิยม

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## การวิพากษ์

### 1. The existence of the problem: Difficult Dialogue

Nationalism has long been one of the most influential ideological and social movements. For its great theoretical and practical significances, studies on Nationalism of contentious natures are just unfolding. Due to its involvement in major schools of thought from different positions and backgrounds, research schools of Nationalism with distinctive opinions have sprung up. Among these, Marxism, which had been widely regarded as one of the far-reaching ideologies of modern times, also has a lot of publications on Nationalism. Analyzed from the usual thinking pattern, Marxism should have been established as an important research school of Nationalism. However, a so-called “difficult dialogue” is a representative opinion regarding the relationship between Marxism and Nationalism because of their markedly different opinions, and the critical standpoint of Marxism against Nationalism.

To be more exact, rather than the theory of a particular school of thought, “difficult dialogue” is the collective term for the opinions and phenomena that evaded, neglected, ridiculed or even criticized Marxist classical writers’ statements on Nationalism by exaggerating the differences between Marxism and Nationalism. Ronaldo Munck, among western scholars, expressed his opinion through the title of his book, *Difficult Dialogue: Marxism and Nationalism*, which in a sense became the hallmark of this school of thought. Munck argued: “Marxism, as an ideology (it claims to find a way out for human liberation), has extreme difficulties in understanding Nationalism”; “in its essence, Marxism has no insightful theories regarding Nationalism”; “the connection between Marxism and Nationalism can merely be described as a kind of mis-collision”. Isaiah Berlin, a great master of Liberalism, stated: “Marx throughout his life understated Nationalism as an independent power, which is

one of the major weaknesses of his great thought system.” Shlomo Avineri, the author of the Nationalism Theory towards a kind of socialism, also said: “among all the historical phenomena, the researches of Karl Marx on Nationalism, Nationalism movement and appearance of nation-state are most dissatisfying.” In addition, scholars like Craig Calhoun, Montserrat Guibernau and Tom Bottomore also expressed similar ideas. Some Chinese scholars, like Mr. Wang Xi'en, argued that the opinions of Marxist classical writers on Nationalism should be seriously reconsidered. Undoubtedly, “Difficult Dialogue” is still an extensive practical existence. It seems that statements like “Marxism and Nationalism are non-reconcilable”, “the proletariat can never support the practice of consolidating Nationalism” and “Marxism is against any forms of Nationalism” are insurmountable. As one of the major research producers of Nationalism, the Chinese scholars of international politics still remain at the stage of introducing and digesting the research results of western Nationalism, almost completely neglecting Marxism while importing and analyzing nationalist theory. A full understanding of Marxist classical writers' publications about Nationalism renders it necessary to comment and analyze the opinion and phenomenon of the so-called “difficult dialogue”.

## **2. The difference and intersection of Marxism and Nationalism**

The key of the “difficult dialogue” lies in its exaggerating the differences between Marxism and Nationalism to the paralleled railway tracks that the two schools of thought can never interact and dialogue. Admittedly, Marxism and Nationalism have a variety of distinctions. By stating that human society can be laterally classified into classes and vertically into nations, Marxism classifies human beings living in society into the ruling class and ruled class (The bourgeoisie and proletariat in the capitalist period) by applying the class analysis method. However, Nationalism classifies “self” and

"otherness" according to the different ethnic communities (the highest hierarchy is country) by adopting ethnic (and/or national) viewpoints. Accordingly, in terms of their basic ideas and aspirations, Marxism, governed by proletarian internationalism, regards human liberation and communism as its highest goals. Starting from safeguarding the interests of the national community, Nationalism aims to obtain the independence of its nation-state and corresponding state power.

This difference between Marxism and Nationalism is the distinction between human society's two major schools of thought. Both Marxism and Nationalism aim to demand benefits, seek progress, and explore emancipation for their corresponding human groups. Both are influential in their respective believers and practitioners, or supporters.

In terms of the practical reality, the supporters of Marxism and Nationalism actually have large overlapping areas, which has been, however, neglected by writers positing a "difficult dialogue". In other words, these overlapping human groups, being supporters of Marxism, harbor the reasonable demands and ideas of Nationalism. In China, describing Chinese people in the international stage using the language of class struggle, Li Dazhao once called Chinese people a proletariat nation oppressed by Western bourgeois and an indispensable part of international proletariat. The government the Communists of China intended to establish "represent workers and farmers, as well as the nation", which was exactly the type of "class-nation". Abdallah Laroui and Walker Connor called this kind of Nationalism "class Nationalism". Of course, "class Nationalism" exists not only in China. Many nation state forms which have a mature sense of Nationalism, spontaneous behavior, and sense of class-conscious behavior have this kind of "class Nationalism".

### **3. Historical implications: Long-period Theory and Grand Theory focusing on Human Liberation**

The works of Marxist classical writers on Nationalism shows us a macro-view of Long-period Theory and Grand Theory focusing on Human Liberation, which surpass the theories of their predecessors such as Hegel and Feuerbach, and those of their peers, including Hess, Lugar, La Salle and Powell. Marx discovered the most essential regulation for human society's material world and spiritual world. He also tried to achieve the great goal of transforming the world rather than explaining the world with different methods. This great goal, human emancipation, is the final target for Marxism.

In his article on the Issues of Jews published in 1843, Marx put forward the two core concepts of "political liberation" and "human emancipation", which surpassed the theory of "political liberation". Marx discovered the unfair and unreasonable situation of human existence and its nature from the specific historic reality of German Jews' liberation. The necessity principle of "human liberation" is put forward. Marx and Engels critically inherited German philosophical essences represented by Feuerbach's "basic kernel" and Hegel's "rational kernel". They discovered the law of surplus value and created dialectical materialism, historical materialism, and scientific socialism. Starting from the height of all human society, they tried to create a social formation which guarantees the blessings of all human beings by critically analyzing human society, in particular, class society.

Their efforts led to the great theoretical system of Marxism, which centers on the theme of "human emancipation" focusing on the macro "Long-period Theory" and "Grand Theory".

Accordingly, Marxism classical writers always considered the ethnic issue from the aspects of "general problem of revolution" and "general problem of society", like Stalin said, "the ethnic issue is a part of general problem of proletariat revolution" (1979, p. \_\_).

#### 4. The dialectical illustration of Marxist classical writers on the dual nature of Nationalism and “two Nationalisms”

In terms of the historical implications of Long-period Theory and Grand Theory, Marxism in general held a critical attitude against Nationalism. However, Marxist theories are not dogmatic. Marxist classical writers dialectically show the distinctions of Nationalisms, be it the sense of “state nation” or “ethnic community”. Thus, we should dialectically evaluate the theories of Nationalism of Marxist classical writers. Their critical attitude, their “borrowing and absorption” and their distinction of “two Nationalisms” in theory and practice should all be taken into consideration.

The “dual nature” of Nationalism refers to its negative nature and positive nature. The former is mainly manifested as egoism, intolerance, extremism and isolationism; while the latter is mainly embodied in its reasonableness and progress. Objectively speaking, the percentage of Nationalism’s negative nature and positive nature varies with time and space. Its qualitative determination should be decided according to specific circumstances. This rule holds true in bourgeois Nationalism during the rising period of capitalism, the colonial and semi-colonial Nationalism in the imperialist age, and Nationalism in modern times.

The critical attitude of Marxist theorists against Nationalism is based on the fundamental position of the proletariat. They clearly understood that the self-interest of Nationalism, especially bourgeois Nationalism, tried to obliterated class relations, which was in turn harmful to the great cause of Proletarian Internationalism and “human emancipation” by hindering the proletariat’s struggle against the bourgeois.

While criticizing the “basic kernel” of Nationalism, Marx and Engels didn’t negate its “reasonable kernel”, its reasonableness and progress. Lenin likewise dialectically discussed the ethnic issue.

On the one hand, he had somber consciousness about the self-interest of bourgeois Nationalism. On the other hand, Lenin suggested major Nationalism and minor Nationalism, oppressor Nationalism and oppressed Nationalism, be distinguished. Lenin stated: "It's extremely inappropriate to discuss ethnic issue in the abstract manner. We must distinct major Nationalism against minor Nationalism, oppressor Nationalism against oppressed Nationalism". Of course, the precondition for Lenin's distinction of "two kinds of Nationalism" and seeking help from Nationalism is for the benefits of proletariat.

Therefore, the judgment of a "difficult dialogue" seems to make the mistake of sweeping generations. It merely realized Marxist classical writers' emphasis on class theory and their contradictory sense of Nationalism and class relation. However, "difficult dialogue" believers didn't understand the other side, that is, Marxism theorists referred to the appropriateness and progressiveness of Nationalism in particular historical stages. We can safely say that the dialectical discussion of Marxist theorists on Nationalism's "dual nature" and "two kinds of Nationalism" can be classified as important components of Marxist Nationalism theory.

### **5. Nation-state practices of Marxist classical writers from "workers without homeland" to "singing the song of homeland"**

The related theory and practice of Marxist classical writers included a nation-state process from "workers have no homeland" to "sing the song of homeland". Marxist theorists realized the interaction between Internationalism and Nationalism. We can see that their sense and solution on Nationalism advanced with the specific timing and circumstances.

Marx and Engels put forward the renowned conclusion that "workers have no homeland" in their historical work, the Communist



Manifesto, which was still misinterpreted as “abolish state and nationality” out of context; on the contrary, the exact reason why Marx and Engels drew the conclusion that “workers have no homeland” is to refute the blaming that “communists aim to abolish homeland and nationality” . The time in which the Communist Manifesto was published was an age when the proletariat were cruelly oppressed and exploited by the bourgeoisie. Such “homeland” had no attachment value for the proletariat. Marx and Engels made this point to find a solution to bourgeois cosmopolitanism (the united efforts of the international bourgeoisie). They emphasized Proletarian Internationalism and global revolution by finding “workers’ own homeland” .

With the success of the October Revolution of Russia and the inauguration of the Soviet Union, the first socialist state in the human history, the “triumph of one country” theory was successfully practiced. The theories and practices of Lenin and Stalin developed Marxism by strategically transforming the long-term goal . The wide dissemination of Marxism after the times of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin, especially its successful practice in China, likewise showcased the typical characteristics of Marxism’s nationalization. (Nationalization was called “Chinalization” in China). The statements of Marxist theorists on Nationalism glowed with new vitality in the new historical development stage.

## **6. Reconsidering the causes of the so-called “difficult dialogue” between Marxism and Nationalism**

The history and reality, and theories and practices in the past century fully stated that Marxism and Nationalism, as two great achievements of human civilization, had intense ideological collision and interaction rather than a “difficult dialogue” . However, we can’t evade the actual existence of this “difficult dialogue” . The only way out is to argue against it with reasoning. In addition to

factors of guiding ideology and political positions, we can't neglect those phenomena evolving around Marxism and Nationalism, such as dislocation, misreading, denial, and cognitive inertia.

The first focus is the dislocation of the two theoretical systems. Marxism regards proletarian internationalism and "human emancipation" to be its fundamental orientation, reflected as a world history view and global-revolutionary ideas. In contrast to the Long-period Theory and Grand Theory of Marxism, Nationalism emphasizes the issues of nation-state or ethnic community by focusing on the interests of a particular ethnic group, rather than the whole interest of human society, in particular, the interests of the proletariat. In addition, Nationalism studies only the staged history, namely, the historical stages when nations and Nationalism exist. Nonetheless, Marxism investigates all the stages of human history, reflecting its macro-historical view. The focus on the dislocation of Marxism and Nationalism leads to the understanding of the so-called "difficult dialogue".

The second is the misreading and denial of some statements of Marxist classical writers. Similar to the biased understanding of Marx and Engel's statement that "workers have no homeland", there are other out-of-context senses of Marxist theorists' statements such as "Marxism and Nationalism are irreconcilable", "the proletariat is unsupportive to any Nationalism consolidation practice", "being against any form of Nationalism". These prejudiced understandings gave people the impression that Marxism and Nationalism were completely distinct paradigms by denying Marxist classical writers' relative statements. In other words, the critical attitude of Marxism against Nationalism is deliberately emphasized. Marxism's confirmations in some circumstances have not been realized. Or even if realizing it, people couldn't discuss this kind of confirmation publicly and directly influenced by position judgment.

The third is the trademarked inertia sense . Nationalism is habitually sensed as derogatory and ideologized. On the one hand, Nationalism had connotations of being derogatory, leading to people’s inertia thinking. The critical attitude of Marxism against Nationalism reinforced this kind of perception. Accordingly, the cognitive differences between Marxism and Nationalism were deliberately consolidated. On the other hand, the relative definitions of Nationalism have long been understood in the sense of ideological field , which was most dominant in the Chinese Mainland.

In fact, the Nationalism-related statements of Marxist classical writers formed a wide-ranging theoretical system, which involves the macro Long-period Theory and Grand Theory, as well as a variety of micro individual cases. The intersection and dialogue between Marxism and Nationalism are reflected in many fields. Its contemporary significance lies in its source of reference when dealing with the relation between socialism and Nationalism for socialist countries, like China. On the one hand, socialist countries should handle appropriately “the two issues of Nationalism” in state governance. On the other hand, socialist countries should rationally understand the relation between “international” and “homeland”, namely, the association of international communist movement with “Internationalism and (nationalist) patriotism”. The past century’s practices verify that Internationalism, being the pivot for the proletarian revolutionary cause, should be the banner and orientation for international communist movement. However, the paramount element while choosing a socialist country’s national strategy and development pattern should be its national condition, interest, survival, and development.

## Conclusion

The contemporary significance for the Nationalism-related statements of Marxist pioneers lies in its coincidence with the direction of justice of the global political civilization. In comparison with feudalism, Marxist classical writers fully realized and approved the historical progressiveness of Nationalism during the rise of capitalism. During the imperialist period, while criticizing the negative nature of the generally understood Nationalism, Marxist theorists likewise positively confirmed the national liberation movements against imperialism and colonial rule in the colonies and semi-colonies. And these national liberation movements in fact had strong Nationalist features. Nationalism is still one of the most influential social trends in modern times. It derived many forms by adhering to different carriers, such as politics, economy, culture, religion, and the internet. Some Nationalist thoughts are reflected in the justified and reasonable anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist, anti-hegemonic Nationalist appeals and national response against imperialism, colonialism and hegemonism. Other Nationalist thoughts are demonstrated as the form of extreme self-interest. The relative statements of Marxist pioneers still have current significance. In short, they strongly disagree with imperialism, colonialism, hegemonism and extremism. The progressiveness and reasonableness of Nationalism are identified. Nonetheless, the extreme self-interest of Nationalism is strongly excluded. In particular, the statements of extremely harmful “wholesale selfishness” have upright morality and practical guidance for our current struggle against the strong xenophobic extreme Nationalism .

Therefore, Marxism and Nationalism have multiple intersections rather than a so-called “difficult dialogue”. Thus, it is highly necessary to analyze and counter-criticize the criticism representing a difficult dialogue between Marxism and Nationalism.

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