

## Otto Bauer, Left-wing Populism and the Challenge of Right-wing Nationalism

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**Abstract.** This paper examines the underexplored parallels between the thought of Austrian Marxist Otto Bauer and contemporary discussions on left-wing populism and national identity. While Marxist theory has often been accused of disregarding the political salience of national belonging, Bauer's work offers a nuanced perspective, advocating for strategic engagement with national identities to counteract bourgeois and warlike nationalism. This study connects Bauer's early 20th-century reflections to the strategies employed by 21st-century European left-populist movements, such as Podemos in its early phase in Spain, identifying notable parallels in both political context and strategic insight. By revisiting Bauer's critique of *naïve cosmopolitanism* and his emphasis on national identity as a site of class struggle, the paper argues that 21st-century European left-wing populism, in seeking to reclaim national belonging and identity as platforms for progressive, inclusive politics, adopted a counter-hegemonic approach that closely resembles Bauer's vision.

**Keywords:** Otto Bauer; Left-Wing Populism; National Identity; Counter-Hegemony; Nationalism.

### [es] Otto Bauer, el populismo de izquierdas y el desafío del nacionalismo de derechas

**Resumen.** Este artículo examina el paralelismo, aún poco explorado, entre el pensamiento del marxista austriaco Otto Bauer y los debates contemporáneos sobre el populismo de izquierda y la identidad nacional. Si bien la teoría marxista ha sido frecuentemente acusada de ignorar la relevancia política del sentido de pertenencia nacional, la obra de Bauer ofrece una perspectiva matizada, abogando por un compromiso estratégico con las identidades nacionales para contrarrestar el nacionalismo burgués y belicista. Este estudio conecta las reflexiones de Bauer de principios del siglo XX con las estrategias empleadas por los movimientos populistas de izquierda europeos del siglo XXI, como el Podemos inicial en España, identificando paralelismos notables tanto en el contexto político como en la visión estratégica. Al revisar la crítica de Bauer al *cosmopolitismo ingenuo* y su énfasis en la identidad nacional como un espacio de lucha de clases, el artículo sostiene que el populismo de izquierda europeo del siglo XXI, al buscar recuperar el sentido de pertenencia e identidad nacional como plataformas para una política progresista e inclusiva, adoptó un enfoque contra-hegemónico que se asemeja estrechamente a la visión de Bauer.

**Palabras clave:** Otto Bauer; populismo de izquierdas; identidad nacional; contrahegemonía; nacionalismo.

**Sumario.** Introduction. 1. Nationalism is spellbinding the working class. What is to be done? 2. Carrying the war into the land of the enemy. 3. National identity and left-wing (populist) strategy. Conclusion. Bibliography.

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## Introduction

It has often been argued that Marxist theory has little to do with, and to say about, the concept of the nation<sup>1</sup>. Proponents of this view contend that many Marxist and Marx-inspired writings depict the nation as fated to disappear soon, being historically outdated by the internationalisation of capitalism as much as by the internationalism of the working class. They point to a lineage of thought that can be traced from Marx and Engels' early writings to Hardt and Negri's *Empire*, in which the authors reiterate the view that, all things considered, global capitalism is positively wiping out the narrowness of national belonging<sup>2</sup>. In this perspective, national identity becomes not only something to be rejected politically, but also a matter of minor significance, not so compelling to reflect upon, leading many Marxists and neo-Marxists to overlook the ways in which nationalism has channelled, and continues to channel, social discontent. As Tom Nairn famously claimed, the theory of nationalism represents "Marxism's great historical failure", because it underestimates the political importance of nations, fails to account for the immense historical power of nationalism and reflects an ill-fated optimism on the decay of national tensions<sup>3</sup>.

This paper does not aim to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the accuracy of these claims, nor to assess their flaws<sup>4</sup>. Rather, its focus is limited to one specific issue within the broader discussion of Marxism and the nation – an issue that has often gone unnoticed in the assessments outlined above: the extensive reflections on nationalities undertaken by the Austrian Social Democratic Party at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly by one of its influential politicians and intellectuals, Otto Bauer (1881–1938).

As will be discussed, although Bauer's ideas eventually disappeared from the main Marxist corpus, they were highly influential at the time, sparking a significant Marxist debate on nations and nationalism that involved the key Marxist figures of that time, until the outbreak of World War I.

Accordingly, this article first rediscovers Bauer's ideas on this subject and then seeks to connect them to 21st-century European left-wing populism and its approach to national belonging. As I will argue, Bauer held an original position: while opposing nationalism, he was equally critical of dismissing nationalities outright – a stance he termed "naïve

cosmopolitanism"<sup>5</sup>. Instead, he contended that countering aggressive nationalism requires treating national belonging as a crucial battleground of class struggle. This perspective shares significant parallels with the experiences of Europe's left-wing populism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To the best of my knowledge, this connection has not been explored in the academic literature, and addressing it constitutes the primary aim of this study. Specifically, this paper argues that the counter-hegemonic approaches to national issues adopted by left-wing populist movements – most notably the early Podemos in Spain – have a precedent in Bauer's thought, despite the lack of direct inspiration from his work. Crucially, this strategic parallelism is complemented by notable contextual similarities. The political challenges that preoccupied Bauer closely resemble contemporary issues, particularly the growing support for xenophobic and chauvinist politics among the working classes, as reflected in the recent electoral successes of right-wing populist movements in Europe and beyond.

Although the article remains largely illustrative, it does not merely seek to draw a descriptive analogy between Bauer's reflections and the practices of Europe's left-populism. Rather, it uses this analogy to show how Bauer's reflections provide a conceptual lens that illuminates the political logic of left-wing populist engagements with the nation. Reading these engagements through Bauer demonstrates that the national-popular turn of some recent leftist actors is not simply an opportunistic appeal to patriotism. Instead, it represents a strategy aimed at transforming national identity into a site for progressive politics – an approach with a long intellectual lineage and a clear connection to specific contextual factors.

This article is structured as follows. Section 1 provides a brief overview of Otto Bauer and his political context. Section 2 examines Bauer's ideas on countering nationalism. Section 3 analyses the parallels between Bauer's strategic insights and the counter-hegemonic patriotism of left-wing populism. The concluding section broadens the discussion by reflecting on the normative implications of the arguments advanced in the article.

## 1. Nationalism is spellbinding the working class. What is to be done?

At the end of the nineteenth century, the Austro-Hungarian Empire had a population made up of more than fifteen different nationalities, occupying an area smaller than the Iberian Peninsula. Its capital, Vienna, was a multiethnic city with workers from all angles of the empire. Ethnic, national and linguistic tensions were rising, as well as harming the unity of the labour movement. The protracted national conflicts paralysed the normal activities of the Social Democratic Party, forcing it to confront the ethnonational divisions within its ranks. Initially, the party "lacked any common analysis of national conflicts within the multinational state and could offer no united guidelines beyond an abstract

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance: T. Nairn, "The modern Janus", *New Left Review* 94, 1975, pp. 3–29; R. Debray, "Marxism and the national question", *New Left Review* 105, 1977, pp. 25–41; E. Nimni, "Great historical failure: Marxist theories of nationalism", *Capital & Class* 9(1), 1985, pp. 58–83; S. Avineri, "Marxism and nationalism", *Journal of Contemporary History* 26(3), 1991, pp. 637–657.

<sup>2</sup> M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2000, pp. 43–44, 336.

<sup>3</sup> T. Nairn, "The Modern Janus", *New Left Review* 1/94, 1975, pp. 3–29.

<sup>4</sup> For an assessment, see J. Custodi, *Radical left parties and national identity in Spain, Italy and Portugal: Rejecting or reclaiming the nation*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2024, pp. 55–85.

<sup>5</sup> O. Bauer, *The Question of Nationalities and Social Democracy*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2000 [1924], p. 245.

profession of internationalism”<sup>6</sup>. The German-speaking social democrats began addressing national tensions by simply preaching a humanist message of fraternisation. However, this message was largely ignored by other national groups, such as the Czech workers, who were instead under significant nationalist influence. The Social Democratic leaders faced difficulties also because the Marxist doctrine that inspired them held that the expansion of industrial capitalism would diminish the importance of nationalities. Although Marx and Engels revised this perspective in their late writings<sup>7</sup>, it remained a widespread view, explicitly expressed in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848. There, Marx and Engels had asserted that “national differences and antagonisms between peoples are daily more and more vanishing, owing to the development of the bourgeoisie, to freedom of commerce, to the world market, to uniformity in the mode of production and in the conditions of life corresponding thereto. The supremacy of the proletariat will cause them to vanish still faster”<sup>8</sup>.

The leaders of the Austro-Hungarian labour movement, however, soon realised that nationalist and cultural demands, rather than vanishing, were significantly increasing their appeal within the working class, thus challenging class unity among workers.

Faced with this situation, the Social Democratic Party gradually engaged in extensive reflection on national issues, albeit reluctantly. The party leaders would have preferred to focus on other matters rather than the thorny issue of nationalities, but they claimed that their “bad luck” of being located in Austria forced them to address it in search of a successful socialist strategy for their context.<sup>9</sup> One of the key figures in this debate was Otto Bauer, a young member close to the left side of the party, who was coming to light within the socialist movement. It is reported that when Karl Kautsky met him for the first time, he said: “This is how I imagine the young Marx”<sup>10</sup>. Like his party fellows, Bauer realised that the socialist struggle of the Social Democrats had become more difficult due to “the devastating power battles among the nations” and he feared that the working class would be dragged into this conflict, dooming “the unity and decisiveness of the proletarian army” to be “destroyed by these national contradictions”<sup>11</sup>.

Interestingly, these concerns emerged in a multi-ethnic context such as early 20th-century Vienna and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, whose cultural and national pluralism bears striking similarities to

that of many contemporary nation-states. As Nimni argues,

much in the same way as contemporary differential development has generated the ‘North-South’ divide and pushed many ethnically diverse migrants into metropolitan centers, differential development in late Imperial Austria pushed many different ethnic groups into Vienna and to the more affluent and predominately German-speaking areas of the Empire. Much in the same way as there is a reaction against ‘alien’ migration in Paris, Berlin, Rome, and Sydney today, there was a strong reaction in Vienna<sup>12</sup>.

As a first attempt to respond to this situation, in 1899 the party approved the *Brünner Programm*, which provided the socialist movement with a political line on the matter. Partly inspired by Kautsky, the programme advocated for restructuring Austria into a federal state based on language divisions. It aimed at transforming the state into a ‘democratic federation of nationalities’ (*demokratischen Nationalitätenbundesstaat*), where each nationality would be divided territorially and have administrative autonomy, while economic policy would be left to the central state. However, Otto Bauer disagreed with the idea that national differences should be crystallised territorially, as well as with the definition of nationality simply as a community of people speaking the same language. According to Bauer, dividing nationalities geographically, in a context in which they were so mixed within the same territory, was – to say the least – problematic.

Driven by pragmatic discussions on how to cope with the spread of nationalism within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Bauer deepened his studies on the national phenomenon, and in 1907 he published *The Question of Nationalities and Social Democracy*. The book aimed to present a theoretical analysis of nationalities from a Marxist perspective and advanced a series of arguments on national formation. These arguments culminated in his definition of the nation as “the totality of human beings bound together through a community of fate into a community of character” – a cryptic conceptualisation that can only be fully appreciated through a careful engagement with the book’s complex theoretical reasoning<sup>13</sup>. In the text, Bauer argued that “national characters” do exist, but they are a material product of history, not a “mysterious spirit of the people”. The character that marks out a nation is not “a fixed thing”, but rather an ongoing historical process whose elements are “variable” and change in time.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, for Bauer the nation cannot be understood by listing a set of categories or by referring to some essential

<sup>6</sup> R. Loew, “The Politics of Austro-Marxism”, *New Left Review* 1/118, 1979, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> J. Custodi, *op. cit.*, pp. 61–64.

<sup>8</sup> K. Marx and F. Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party”, *Marxist Internet Archive*, 2010 [1848].

<sup>9</sup> E. Nimni, “Introduction for the English-Reading Audience”, in O. Bauer, *The question of nationalities and social democracy*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p. xxiii.

<sup>10</sup> E. Nimni, *Introduction*, *op. cit.*, p. xvi.

<sup>11</sup> O. Bauer, “Remarks on the Question of Nationalities”, in M. E. Blum and W. Smaldone (eds.), *Austro-Marxism: the ideology of unity*, Leiden, Brill, 2016 [1908], p. 283.

<sup>12</sup> E. Nimni, *Introduction*, *op. cit.*, p. xvii.

<sup>13</sup> Bauer’s theoretical analysis extends beyond the scope of this article. However, it is important to note that the nation is not unique in possessing a ‘community of character’; class has one too. Yet, the community of character associated with class arises from a similarity of fate, whereas in the case of the nation, it emerges from a community of fate. See O. Bauer, *The Question of Nationalities*, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.



quality. This is why his theory has been defined as an “epistemological break”<sup>15</sup>.

The book soon became the cornerstone of the Viennese Marxist school (which was later to take the name of *Austro-Marxism*) and it paved the way to a far-reaching debate on nations and nationalism that lasted until the beginning of World War I, involving the major figures of the socialist movement of the time. In just a few years, high-profile Marxists published articles and books on this topic, often as a direct response to Bauer or to related discussions. Examples include Karl Kautsky's *Nationality and Internationality* (1908), Rosa Luxemburg's series of articles known as *The National Question and Autonomy* (1908-1909), Josef Stalin's *Marxism and the National Question* (1913) and Vladimir Lenin's *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination* (1914).

Denounced by Soviet authorities and subsequently consigned to the margins of the Marxist canon, Bauer eventually became a largely forgotten figure. In more recent times, some influential Marxist or Marx-inspired intellectuals have offered positive recollections of his work<sup>16</sup>. However, these have generally taken the form of brief acknowledgments of his theoretical contributions rather than sustained engagements with his political strategy. In scholarly works, Bauer is mostly remembered as the advocate (together with Karl Renner, despite some differences between the two) of an innovative administrative model for the polity of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, based on the assumption that the various nationalities of the state should be organised in a way that would permit them to freely administer their cultural affairs regardless of the territory in which they reside.<sup>17</sup> These analyses highlight the novelty and significance of this approach, emphasising its relevance for societies marked by deep ethnic conflicts in which territorial separation is either impossible or inconvenient. However, they tend to give insufficient attention to Bauer's political engagement within the socialist movement. As Bauer himself explains, the foundation of his theoretical interests was strategic and rooted in working-class politics: How should organised labour respond to the proliferation of nationalist ideas within its ranks? I argue that this is Bauer's most overlooked contribution – one that remains highly relevant to the strategic debates that have shaped left-wing populist movements in recent decades.

## 2. Carrying the war into the land of the enemy

In the Marxist debate that followed the publication of Bauer's book *The Question of Nationalities and Social Democracy*, Kautsky contended that the relevance given by Bauer to national belonging was enormously exaggerated<sup>18</sup>. For Kautsky, capitalism had made the proletariat intrinsically international, aspiring to an international rather than national culture. Furthermore, he believed that the constitutive element of the different nationalities of the working class was simply language, and thus nationality was likely fated to disappear with the international market leading to a world language. To these points, Bauer counterposed a more pragmatic appraisal of the meshing of class and national struggles. His reply is very instructive, since it summarises his strategic reasoning on this matter. As he wrote in response to Kautsky:

We both fight for unified and decisive tactics for the proletariat of all nations. Kautsky believes that this goal can most quickly be furthered when he stresses the international character of modern culture, reducing the nation to a mere language community, and complaining that the language differences are a hindrance to the mutual comprehension and single-minded action of the classes and peoples. I believe, however, that we can only defeat the bourgeois nationalism which also deludes many of our comrades, when we bring to light the national content of our international class war in its meaning for the international proletarian struggle in its development and widening of our national cultural community [...]. Thus, we seize nationalism and place it upon our own ground. Not, thereby, avoiding our enemy, but rather carrying the war into [his]<sup>19</sup> own land, so the art of war instructs us. Hegel, the master of masters, in his contesting of nationalism, teaches that these words must precede any great confutation: ‘The true confutation must go into the power of the opponent, and place itself within the compass of his strength; to fight him where he is not does not further the matter’<sup>20</sup>.

Like Kautsky and many other socialists of his era, Bauer was deeply concerned about the spread of bourgeois nationalism within the labour movement. He argued, however, that rigid adherence to a naive cosmopolitanism that neglected the cultural claims of various national groups would merely fuel the rise of nationalism. In contrast to Kautsky, Bauer maintained that nationalism should be confronted

<sup>15</sup> R. Munck, “Marxism and nationalism in the era of globalization”, *Capital & Class* 34(1), 2010, p. 49.

<sup>16</sup> E. Hobsbawm, “Working-class Internationalism”, in M. van Holthoon and M. van der Linden (eds.), *Internationalism in the Labour Movement 1830-1940*, Leiden, Brill, 1988, p. 13; E. Laclau, “Preface”, in E. Nimni, *Marxism and Nationalism: Theoretical Origins of a Political Crisis*, London, Pluto Press, 1991, p. X; B. Anderson, “Introduction”, in G. Balakrishnan (ed.), *Mapping the Nation*, London, Verso, 1996, pp. 3-4; M. Löwy, *Fatherland Or Mother Earth?: Essays on the National Question*, London, Pluto Press, 1998, pp. 45-50; N. Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, London, Verso, 2000, p. 94; G. M. Tamás, “Words from Budapest”, *New Left Review* 80, 2013, p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> For a contemporary assessment of this model of non-territorial ‘national cultural autonomy’, see E. Nimni (ed.), *National Cultural Autonomy and Its Contemporary Critics*, London, Routledge, 2005; E. Nimni, “National-Cultural Autonomy as an Alternative to Minority Territorial Nationalism”, *Ethnopolitics* 6(3), 2007, pp. 345-364.

<sup>18</sup> K. Kautsky, “Nationality and Internationality”, *Journal of Socialist Theory* 37(3), 2009 [1908], pp. 371-389.

<sup>19</sup> The English translation made by Blum and Smaldone was wrong here and I had to modify it. They wrote “carrying the war into our own land”, but it is the land of the adversary that Bauer is referring to. See the original version: O. Bauer, “Bemerkungen zur Nationalitätenfrage”, *Die neue Zeit - Wochenschrift der deutschen Sozialdemokratie* 26, 1907-1908, [http://library.fes.de/cgi-bin/neuzeit.pl?id=07.06628&dok=1907-08a&f=1907.08a\\_0792&l=190708a\\_0802](http://library.fes.de/cgi-bin/neuzeit.pl?id=07.06628&dok=1907-08a&f=1907.08a_0792&l=190708a_0802).

<sup>20</sup> O. Bauer, *Remarks*, op. cit., pp. 293-94.

on its own terrain. He asserted that, to effectively oppose an adversary, one must also engage within the adversary's spaces, rather than operating solely in spaces where the adversary is absent. According to Bauer, without a socialist counter-offensive in this domain, the workers' sense of national belonging could easily be exploited and manipulated by the bourgeoisie for its own interests.

Bauer's strategic position rested on two central ideas: First, nationality extends beyond language and encompasses an ever-evolving cultural dimension that cannot simply be disregarded; second, nationality constitutes a terrain of class struggle. While many Marxists of his time denied the existence of a unified national culture—viewing each nation instead as comprising two distinct cultures, one belonging to the bourgeoisie and the other to the proletariat—Bauer asserted that national culture did exist, albeit as an unsteady site of struggle between the classes. Therefore, the labour movement was charged with a major 'national' task: the appropriation of a national culture that was until now mainly controlled by the bourgeoisie.

As Bauer wrote, "the working class [...] by being in a class war, gain for the first time a participation in the living national culture of their people"<sup>21</sup>. Accordingly, the class war of the proletariat needed to be also a war for the seizure and control of the national culture. As both Munck and Nimni have observed, Bauer's perspective bears a resemblance to Antonio Gramsci's later insights, developed during his imprisonment in fascist Italy, particularly around the concept of hegemony – which centres on the idea that the working class must actively challenge bourgeois dominance at the broader cultural and ideological level<sup>22</sup>. It is no coincidence, in fact, that Gramsci is widely recognised as an important theoretical reference for left-wing populism and that the re-interpretation of Gramsci's reflections by left-wing populists regarding the national-popular precisely mirrors aspects that, in turn, echo Bauer's approach. As Ernesto Laclau argued, the Gramscian concept of 'hegemonic struggle' is central to a left-populist project. It involves engaging with the domains of the adversary and requires the construction of new political articulations centred around national and popular symbols<sup>23</sup>.

This class-based fight for the "possession of the national culture"<sup>24</sup> was an important political task for Bauer, because – in opposition to the widespread view of the capitalist world market dissolving national cultures – he believed that national identification was not losing relevance in politics. Although modern developments were greatly intensifying contact between members of different cultures, Bauer argued that this contact was not diminishing the political significance of these cultures. Rather, it was increasing their salience, promoting greater

differentiation among human cultures and individual identities. In this context, the function of socialism was not to counteract these tendencies of cultural differentiation and exchanges, but to put them on the right track. Socialism, in his own words, had to fight for the standardisation of material life at the most advanced level, rather than for the standardisation of culture.

However, this did not imply disregarding internationalist practice and cosmopolitan culture. For Bauer, the unity of the proletariat across all nations remained the highest goal to achieve. Nevertheless, for internationalism to be effective, it had to be expressed within national cultures, making the nation the 'vessel' that contained international culture and practices<sup>25</sup>. While advocating for socialist culture to be rooted in the specific culture of each country in order to be successful, he nonetheless praised and welcomed cosmopolitan tendencies, cultural hybrids and cross-fertilisation between national cultures. For Bauer, the encounter between different cultures was part of nationalities' historical evolution and unfixedness<sup>26</sup>.

Since under socialism workers would eventually become fully integrated into their national community, he believed that national specificities would then flourish and evolve freely, rather than disappearing (as in the classic Marxist view) or being governed by blind economic forces (as in capitalism). In his words:

Socialism will make the nation autonomous, will make its destiny a product of the nation's conscious will, will result in an increasing differentiation between the nations of the socialist society, a clearer expression of their specificities, a clearer distinction between their respective characters. This conclusion will perhaps surprise some; it is regarded as a certainty by supporters and opponents of socialism alike that socialism will reduce national diversity, narrowing or even doing away with the differences between nations<sup>27</sup>.

However, beyond theoretical discussions on future socialist societies, what mattered most to Bauer was, as we have already seen, to counter the spread of bourgeois nationalism and preserving the unity of the labour movement within the complex context of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Ultimately, Bauer was a pragmatic politician who viewed with growing concern the divisions in the working class and in the socialist movement, and insistently searched for unity in different domains. For example, when the delegations of the three Internationals of the time met in Berlin in 1922 discussing a possible merger<sup>28</sup>, Bauer went there enthusiastically, hoping that the conference could "bring together the three armies

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 287.

<sup>22</sup> E. Nimni, *Great Historical Failure*, op. cit., p. 78; R. Munck, *The Difficult Dialogue: Marxism and Nationalism*, London, Zed Books, 1986, p. 168.

<sup>23</sup> E. Laclau, "Politics as construction of the unthinkable", *Journal of Language and Politics* 20(1), 2021 [1981], pp. 10–21.

<sup>24</sup> O. Bauer, *Remarks*, op. cit., p. 289.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 288–89.

<sup>26</sup> O. Bauer, *The Question of Nationalities*, op. cit., pp. 105–106; Bauer, *Remarks*, op. cit., pp. 287–288.

<sup>27</sup> O. Bauer, *The Question of Nationalities*, op. cit., p. 96.

<sup>28</sup> The Conference of the Three Internationals took place in Berlin from 2 to 6 April 1922. The three Internationals were the Berne International (also known as the Second International), the International Working Union of Socialist Parties (also known as the 2½ International), and the Communist International, or Third International. Bauer was a delegate of the 2½ International.

into which the proletariat has been unfortunately divided, so that they may be able once more to march together against the common enemy, and, united, defeat that enemy"<sup>29</sup>. In a similar manner, he insisted that recognising and respecting the different national-cultural identities of the working class could help keep the movement united, making it better equipped to protect itself from the tensions promoted by bourgeois nationalisms. The task was to give space to the identitarian claims of the workers of different nations within a single united labour movement, giving them a socialist frame that would provide meaning and direction. This would make the workers less susceptible to reactionary nationalist discourses, thus removing a dangerous weapon from the hands of the bourgeoisie.

Although Bauer believed that national problems cannot be fully settled in capitalist society, he was convinced that national autonomy of workers could not wait for the establishment of a socialist society; it had to be rapidly recognised within the ranks of the labour movement, as it would permit to "remove the most dire consequence for the proletariat: the jeopardising of the unity of the proletarian army because of nationality struggles among themselves".<sup>30</sup> Only in this way, according to Bauer, can a multinational labour movement construct a shared class consciousness: not by denying the various national identities that compose it, but by recognising them and by wresting them from the grasp of reactionary nationalism.

Remarkably, Bauer's national autonomy did not imply a defence of the nation-state: just as he supported a united plurinational labour movement, he advocated for establishing a multinational socialist country, where various nationalities could freely administer their cultural affairs regardless of the territory in which they resided. Renner originally explained this point by comparing national communities to religious communities: just as different religions could exist within the same state, members of different national communities could coexist with their own unique institutions and national organisations, as long as they did not seek exclusive control over a particular territory. In this way, members of each national community, whatever their territory of residence within the multinational state, would form a single public association endowed with sovereign powers over all cultural affairs<sup>31</sup>. Only in this way, Bauer argued, it could have been possible to establish multinational socialist states where various national groups could proudly identify with, without the risk that nationalist demands would break the unity of the labour movement (and of the future socialist state). That is why Bauer was not

very enthusiastic about Lenin's right of nations to self-determination, stressing that even the most homogeneous nation has some national minorities within its territory. However, from 1918 onwards he at times endorsed the territorial self-determination of nations, in front of the feasibility of his ideas for multinational states fading away.<sup>32</sup>

After Stalin prevailed in the power struggle within the newly created Soviet state, his pamphlet *Marxism and the National Question*, that was explicitly directed against Bauer and written at the request of Lenin, became an unquestionable component of the Marxist-Leninist corpus. Paradoxically, although Stalin's pamphlet condemned Bauer's ideas with the accusation of being "a subtle form of nationalism"<sup>33</sup>, the totalitarian regime that Stalin gradually built in the USSR would eventually resort heavily to nationalism, both in geopolitical terms and for internal consensus.

Bauer's ideas, together with much of the discussion it triggered, sank into oblivion. This was the case within Soviet Marxism, but also within Heterodox Marxism – Trotsky himself praised Stalin's work on the national question, considering it theoretically correct, although claiming that it was "wholly inspired by Lenin, written under his unrelenting supervision and edited by him line by line"<sup>34</sup>. Not only was the debate sparked by Bauer never seriously resumed, but it also left few traces in twentieth-century Marxist traditions. It is not a surprise, then, that the first English translation of Bauer's *The Question of Nationalities and Social Democracy* dates back to 2000.

### 3. National identity and left-wing (populist) strategy

The twentieth century saw numerous expressions of national belonging within labour and communist movements. In communist regimes, ruling elites frequently invoked national pride and identity as instruments for consolidating power and fostering consensus. In colonial and postcolonial contexts, nationalism and socialism often became intertwined in struggles for national independence and economic development. Similarly, in Western countries, although communist parties rarely embraced nationalism explicitly, they nonetheless integrated elements of national attachment, culture, and symbolism into their political narratives and public imagery.

Over time, however, Western communist and radical left actors gradually distanced themselves from national identity. This detachment deepened with the emergence of new far-left subcultures and

<sup>29</sup> L. Balhorn, "Why the Three Internationals Couldn't Agree", *Jacobin Magazine*, 2022, <https://jacobin.com/2022/04/conference-three-internationals-1922-division-communists-social-democrats>.

<sup>30</sup> O. Bauer, *Remarks*, op. cit., pp. 292-93.

<sup>31</sup> This bears resemblance to Abdullah Öcalan's thought and the concrete politics of the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES). See F. Ventura and J. Custodi, "Nationality Beyond the Nation-State? The Search for Autonomy in Abdullah Öcalan and Otto Bauer", *Geopolitics* 29(4), 2023, pp. 1400-1421.

<sup>32</sup> M. E. Blum, *The Austro-Marxists 1890-1918: A Psychobiographical Study*, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 2015, p. 183.

<sup>33</sup> J. Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question*, London, CPGB-ML, 2012 [1913], p. 40.

<sup>34</sup> L. Trotsky, *Stalin: An Appraisal of the Man and His Influence*, ed. By A. Woods, London, Wellred Books, 2016 [1946], pp. 197-198. Whether Lenin actually agreed with Stalin's rigid definition of the nation remains a matter of debate. For instance, Löwy (1998) contends that Lenin did not share Stalin's stance on the nation. Notably, Michael Löwy is also among the first intellectuals within the Trotskyist tradition to positively reassess the legacy of Otto Bauer.



movements in the 1970s and was further reinforced by the decline of communist parties following the collapse of the USSR. A notable example is the Global Justice Movement in Europe and the United States which, at the turn of the twenty-first century, adopted an increasingly post-national discourse, largely eschewing national symbols and repertoires.<sup>35</sup>

In contrast, the rise of left-wing populism in some European countries following the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent austerity policies has reintroduced the national dimension into Europe's leftist politics. Through renewed practices and language, this trend has repositioned the nation as both a key arena of political struggle and a source of symbolic and cultural identity – standing in stark contrast to the post-Cold War radical Left in Europe. This shift is well documented in the literature and does not require detailed restatement here<sup>36</sup>.

What merits further attention – and constitutes the innovative contribution of this paper – is that the renewed engagement with the nation by left-wing populist actors bears a stronger resemblance to Otto Bauer's strategic approach than to the national orientation of most post-WW2 Western European communist parties. In fact, the form of patriotism cultivated by many of those parties (and still present, for example, in the contemporary Portuguese Communist Party)<sup>37</sup>, embodied a strong identification with national culture and history, but not a particularly conflictual or contested engagement with national belonging<sup>38</sup>. By contrast, left-wing populism exhibits a form of competitive national attachment that I have elsewhere termed *counter-hegemonic patriotism* because “it deliberately attempts to put forward an idea of nationality that challenges the dominant [right-wing] one on its own terrain”<sup>39</sup>. This is a form of patriotism that is shaped by the same strategic intuitions and contextual challenges that informed Bauer's reflections.

Contemporary societies are marked by growing ethnic pluralisation, largely driven by migration flows, alongside a simultaneous intensification of right-wing nationalism – two dynamics that closely parallel the conditions that shaped Bauer's political trajectory. The resurgence of right-wing nationalism is evident in the electoral successes of right-wing or even far-right parties across Europe and in their systematic appropriation and politicisation of national identity and belonging. By infusing national symbols and narratives with conservative and xenophobic content, these actors have recast nationality as a deeply politicised and ideologically charged identity.

Emerging in this context, the actors of Europe's left-populist wave arrived at the strategic insight that right-wing nationalism must be contested by advancing an alternative conception of belonging – one capable of rearticulating national identity in emancipatory and inclusive terms. This point is explicitly argued by Chantal Mouffe in her defence of a left-populist political strategy. As she explains:

A left populist strategy cannot ignore the strong libidinal investment at work in national – or regional – forms of identification and it would be very risky to abandon this terrain to right-wing populism. This does not mean following its example in promoting closed and defensive forms of nationalism, but instead offering another outlet for those affects, mobilizing them around a patriotic identification with the best and more egalitarian aspects of the national tradition.<sup>40</sup>

This approach acknowledges both the national culture and the sense of national identification of the people, but contends that they must be wrested from the Right's grasp and rearticulated with alternative values. In this sense, the populist Left's revival of ‘national-popular’ language and symbolism represents a fundamentally counter-hegemonic strategy: it seeks to challenge the Right's ideological dominance not by rejecting national identity, but by reclaiming and redefining it in inclusive and democratic terms. This strategy resonates strongly with Bauer's critique of naive cosmopolitanism and his insistence that national identity constitutes a crucial terrain of class struggle.

The early experience of Podemos in Spain (2014–2019) provides one of the most systematic examples of left-populism's counter-hegemonic politics on the national terrain. From the outset, the party's leadership advanced a progressive agenda aimed at reclaiming national identity from the Right and redefining its meaning. They argued that progressive forces must actively compete over national identification, lest the Right monopolise this terrain uncontested<sup>41</sup>. In doing so, they entangled the creation of the political frontiers typical of populism [us, the people vs. them, the elite] with the in-out relation typical of nationalism [patriot vs. antipatriot]. This has been clear since the first party conference in 2014, when Iglesias exemplified this entanglement by saying that “it is not the political elite that makes

<sup>35</sup> J. Custodi, *Un'idea di paese: la nazione nel pensiero di sinistra*, Roma, Castelvecchi Editore, 2023.

<sup>36</sup> E.g. Ó. García Agustín, *Left-Wing Populism. The Politics of the People*, Bingley, Emerald Points, 2020, pp. 65–81; J. Custodi, “Nationalism and populism on the left: The case of Podemos”, *Nations and Nationalism* 27(3), 2021, pp. 705–720; B. De Cleen and Y. Stavrakakis, “Avancées dans l'étude des connexions entre le populisme et le nationalisme”, *Populisme – La revue* 1(1), 2021, pp. 1–16; L. Chazel and V. Dain, “Left-wing populism and nationalism”, *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 15(2), 2021, pp. 73–94; J. Custodi and E. Padoan, “The nation of the people: An analysis of Podemos and Five Star Movement's discourse on the nation”, *Nations and Nationalism* 29(2), 2023, pp. 414–431; L. Chazel, “Left-wing populism and sovereignty: An analysis of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's discourse (2011–2022)”, in J. Rone, N. Brack, R. Coman and A. Crespy (eds.), *Sovereignty in Conflict: Political, Constitutional and Economic Dilemmas in the EU*, Cham, Springer, 2023, pp. 183–209; L. Karavasilis, J. Custodi and L. Chazel, “How Do Radical Left Parties Frame the Nation? A Comparison Between Greece, Spain and France”, *Partecipazione e Conflitto* 17(3), 2024, pp. 717–738.

<sup>37</sup> J. Custodi, *Radical Left Parties*, op. cit., pp. 215–216.

<sup>38</sup> A relevant exception here is the specific years of anti-fascist resistance during World War II, which, however, are less comparable to the type of political contestation seen in peacetime and pluralistic settings like those of Bauer's era or the present.

<sup>39</sup> J. Custodi, “Nationalism and populism on the left: The case of Podemos”, *Nations and Nationalism* 27(3), 2021, p. 712.

<sup>40</sup> C. Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, Verso, 2018, p. 70.

<sup>41</sup> J. Custodi, *Radical Left Parties*, op. cit., 2024, pp. 91–115.

the country work, nor does it make the trains run on time, or the hospitals and the schools work. It is the people. This is our patria: the people<sup>42</sup>. Accordingly, Podemos leaders consistently expressed pride in Spain, praised the *patria*, and openly framed their policies as patriotic. At the same time, they sought to subvert right-wing narratives by portraying conservative elites as betrayers of the nation and its interests. This rhetoric enabled Podemos, on the one hand, to attack its political adversaries – particularly the conservative *Partido Popular* – by branding them as “anti-patriots” and “enemies of Spain” for their involvement in corruption, austerity measures, and policies favouring the wealthy. On the other hand, it sought to construct a progressive and inclusive form of national identification – one with which left-wing constituencies, working-class voters, and ethnic minorities could identify. This redefinition of Spanish identity emphasised values such as social solidarity, grassroots mobilisation, a strong welfare state, and a moral community that explicitly rejected ethnic and linguistic exclusivism<sup>43</sup>.

A similar case is that of Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France, particularly during the period when he most clearly embraced a populist strategy. His party, *La France Insoumise*, sought to challenge the Right's appropriation of French pride and identity by advancing a conception of patriotism that was explicitly civic and universalistic. Mélenchon articulated an inclusive vision of French pride, one rooted in social rights and the revolutionary heritage, and firmly opposed to the ethno-nationalism of the Right. By extensively deploying the French flag and other national symbols, Mélenchon aimed both to attract white working-class voters from Marine Le Pen's electorate – those he famously described as *fâchés mais pas fachos* (“angry but not fascist”) – and to secure strong support in the Parisian suburbs, where many residents are workers of immigrant background who have long been excluded from dominant national narratives<sup>44</sup>.

This inclusive vision of the nation directly challenges right-wing discourses that portray cultural pluralism as a threat to national unity and underscores a key aspect of Bauer's strategic insights: national attachment is not inherently right-wing but remains open to both reclamation and contestation. Important differences, however, should be noted. Whereas for Bauer the political confrontation was conceived as a ‘classical’ class struggle – pitting the bourgeoisie against the working class – left-wing populism frames the central conflict as one between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’. Yet the underlying political logic on the national terrain remains strikingly similar: it involves the appropriation of national culture by the people/the Left/the working class, as a counter to the nationalism of the bourgeoisie/the elite/the Right. Another difference is that, while Bauer's constructivist understanding of nations was highly innovative for his time, his framework still retained a certain rigidity in how nations were delineated – even if these delineations were neither geographically nor

temporally fixed. Contemporary left-populist actors, by contrast, often seek to imagine more inclusive and fluid nations, where pluralism is recognised not only at the state level (as in Podemos's notion of Spain as a “country of countries,” which remains broadly consistent with Bauer's approach) but also as an integral feature of national identity itself. This has given rise to a more civic, open, and culturally flexible conception of national belonging – less bounded than Bauer's, yet grounded in similar political needs and strategic considerations.

## Conclusion

Despite his proposal to root socialist culture in the specific context of each country, and to recognise national differences within the working class, Bauer remained a committed internationalist. As Michael Löwy wrote talking about Bauer:

In an epoch of the rise of nationalism, racism, xenophobia and ‘ethnic cleansing’, it is useful to be able to turn back to a thinker who recognised the crucial role and importance of nations and national cultures, but rejected their mystified distortions<sup>45</sup>.

The assumption that the crisis of the nation-state in the face of globalisation would lead to the decline of national identities has proven incorrect. On the contrary, the global disruptions generated by neoliberal capitalism seem to have simultaneously weakened state sovereignty and intensified nationalist and identitarian reactions<sup>46</sup>. As a result, national symbols and references remain highly meaningful, particularly among the working and popular classes, who tend to be the most culturally ‘nationalised’ segments of society<sup>47</sup>. This suggests they are more responsive to symbolic and cultural elements related to national belonging compared to individuals with higher educational or class backgrounds, who tend to adopt a more culturally cosmopolitan outlook. Data from the European Quality of Government Index also indicate that, for most European citizens, the nation remains the primary level of territorial identity – more salient than both regional and European affiliations<sup>48</sup>.

This reality presents a strategic challenge for the Left. Ignoring the salience of national belonging risks distancing progressive politics from the popular sectors it seeks to represent. National frameworks remain crucial for communication, identification, and mobilisation among working-class communities. Calls for the Left to operate outside or beyond

<sup>42</sup> J. Custodi, *op. cit.*, 2021, p. 711.

<sup>43</sup> J. Custodi, *Nationalism and Populism*, *op. cit.*, 2021.

<sup>44</sup> L. Chazel, *op. cit.*

<sup>45</sup> M. Löwy, *Fatherland Or Mother Earth?: Essays on the National Question*, London, Pluto Press, 1998, p. 50.

<sup>46</sup> M. D'Eramo, “Prefazione: Chissà Se Capiranno”, in B. Anderson (ed.), *Comunità Immaginate*, Roma, Manifestolibri, 2009.

<sup>47</sup> Empirical studies based on survey data and informed by cleavage theory show this well. See, for example, L. Hooghe, G. Marks and J. Kamphorst, “Field of Education and Political Behavior: Predicting GAL/TAN Voting”, *American Political Science Review* 119(2), 2025, pp. 794–811.

<sup>48</sup> N. Charron, V. Lapuente, M. Bauhr and P. Annoni, “Change and Continuity in Quality of Government: Trends in subnational quality of government in EU member states”, *Investigaciones Regionales – Journal of Regional Research* 53, 2022, pp. 5–23.



national narratives often miss this point, risking the alienation of the very constituencies its policies seek to represent. Worse still, rejecting national identity outright risks ceding the terrain of national discourse to the Right – legitimising its exclusionary, ethnocultural interpretations of nationhood and leaving migrants and minorities increasingly vulnerable to marginalisation and xenophobic narratives that cast them as outsiders to the political community.

Bauer had already understood the importance of engaging national identities not as obstacles to socialism but as battlegrounds within the broader class struggle. For him, acknowledging national affiliations was not merely a way to unify the working class but also a strategic means of contesting nationalism by advancing a progressive alternative. This insight strongly resonates with the strategic turn of twenty-first-century left-wing populist movements. As discussed, parties such as Podemos in Spain and *La France Insoumise* in France have sought to redefine national belonging in civic, inclusive, and solidaristic terms – using national identity not as a retreat from internationalism but as a vehicle to challenge right-wing hegemony and to forge deeper connections with the popular classes. While Bauer's framework still maintained certain essentialist assumptions about nations – stressing the recognition of different nationalities within the same movement or polity – today's left-populist actors reflect a more fluid and civic interpretation of national identity, one that seeks to accommodate people with migratory backgrounds not only within the state but also within the national identity itself. What unites them is a shared strategic understanding: the nation remains a crucial terrain of struggle, and any emancipatory internationalism must be able to speak to, and speak through, national attachments.

Finally, it is important to note that this strategic orientation was most visible during the heyday of European left-wing populism in the 2010s. In more recent years, the populist wave has largely receded, and the parties or movements that emerged from it have not always continued to pursue a counter-hegemonic strategy on the national terrain. In some cases, the national-popular register has been downplayed or abandoned altogether<sup>49</sup>. The reasons behind this shift – and how it relates to the broader decline of left-populist strategies in Europe – deserve closer scrutiny. Exploring the conditions under which such counter-hegemonic approaches on the national terrain gain or lose traction remains a promising avenue for future research.

As Benedict Anderson, one of the foremost left-leaning theorists of nationalism, wrote in the final pages of his memoir:

[W]hat is increasingly needed is a sophisticated and serious blending of the emancipatory possibilities of both nationalism

and internationalism. Hence, in the spirit of Walt Kelly as well as Karl Marx in a good mood, I suggest the following slogan for young scholars:

Frogs in their fight for emancipation will only lose by crouching in their murky coconut half-shells.

Frogs of the world unite!<sup>50</sup>

Blending the power of national belonging with internationalist ambition was precisely Bauer's objective. The persistence of this need a century later underscores the enduring salience of national identity within modern societies. Ultimately, the national community – despite its inherent ambiguities – continues to fulfil a widespread demand for collective identification, one that is not necessarily at odds with other forms of identity (regional, global, class-based, gendered, or otherwise) nor with progressive political projects. A century after Bauer, national belonging remains what it was for him: a battlefield where competing visions of society struggle for hegemony.

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<sup>49</sup> S. Mazzolini and A. Borriello, "The normalization of left populism? The paradigmatic case of Podemos", *European Politics and Society* 23(3), 2022, pp. 285–300; R. Rojas-Andrés, S. Mazzolini and J. Custodi, "Does left populism short-circuit itself? Podemos in the labyrinths of cultural elitism and radical leftism", *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 32(4), 2024, pp. 960–977.

<sup>50</sup> B. Anderson, *A Life Beyond Boundaries – A Memoir*, London, Verso, 2016, p. 200.

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