National Liberation Movements

National liberation movements aim to free a certain geographical territory and its population (nation) from a regime considered as suppressive and / or foreign-rulled. As the demand for national liberation radically puts the existing balances of power into question, the resulting encounters frequently take a violent course. Both the understanding of what a 'nation' is and that of what constitutes 'freedom' or 'liberation' are constructed discursively and are subject to historical and regional changes. In general, when viewing the history of the Americas there are three paradigms under which national liberation movements have been constituted: 1. in the 18th and 19th centuries, the paradigm of the foundation of nation states by the colonies declaring their independence. 2. In the 20th century, the combination of social and national liberation as an anti-imperialistic battle. 3. Since the final decades of the 20th century, an increasing ethnic self-definition of sectors of population and their fight for a right to self-determination within the boundaries of a then plurinational state.

The first phase was based on the paradigm of the struggle for independence of colonies and their reconstitution as self-sufficient nations. These movements were ideologically undernourished by the liberal and republican spirit of the Enlightenment; the European immigrants and their descendants were fundamental actors. In the second half of the 18th century, 13 British colonies in North America refused to pay the taxes imposed by the British Parliament, leading to the War of Independence (1775-1783), to the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and to the passing of the constitution of the USA in 1787. Significantly, at the final meeting on the Declaration of Independence, the passage expressing criticism of slavery was removed—African Americans only received full, formal civil rights in the USA in 1866, and only with the Civil Rights Act of 1968 were all forms of discrimination forbidden. In addition, the displacement of the Native Americans and the appropriation of their territories by European immigrants was still forced by the new nation; Native Americans only received full civil rights in 1924. After a tough fight the suffragist movement gained in 1920 with the 19th amendment to the constitution voting rights for women.

In the first half of the 19th century, independence movements followed in most nations of Latin America. Here, the Creole elites in the Spanish and Brazilian colonies were likewise the driving force. Major figures of the independence movement such as Simon Bolivar were opponents to slavery, yet the formation of the nation state and the freedom from colonial power in everyday life hardly seemed liberating for the African American and indigenous peoples who in fact formed the majority of the populations of many of these countries. In contrast to the USA, the Wars of Independence did not result in a united Latin America as foreseen in Bolivar’s vision of a Patria Grande and as taken up again by José Marti during the Cuban fight for independence towards the end of the century in his concept of Nuestra América.

During the course of the Cuban wars for independence of 1886 onwards, the shift in the role of the USA during the 19th century from a role model for declaring independence to a threat, itself carrying out imperialistic policies towards its southern neighbors, became complete. When in 1898 the USA entered into the Cuban-Spanish-War, Spain surrendered and the USA occupied Cuba and Puerto Rico. Beforehand, the USA had declared the Americas as their sphere of
interest to the European powers in the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 and annexed large areas of Mexico between 1845 and 1848. Up to the present day there are still direct and covert military interventions by the USA when governments are too socialistically oriented or when large companies from the USA consider their interests as being impaired, for example ITT in Chile in 1973 or the United Fruits Company in Guatemala in 1954.

This altered geopolitical situation and the postcolonial dependencies despite the formal independence of Latin American nations together with large social inequalities within society led to a second paradigm of national liberation in the 20th century which could perhaps be described as the classical one. Many of these movements carry the term 'national liberation' in their names and consider themselves as anti-imperialistic. They combine demands for actual democracy, social justice and redistribution of land with freedom from influence of external, imperialistic powers, namely the USA. The influential dependencia theory—for example—considered the imperialistic influence on the postcolonial nation states as the cause of the inequality and underdevelopment of the Latin-American nations. The local upper classes, consisting of big landowners, the military generals, political holders of power and, where already existent, large-scale entrepreneurs, are described in these concepts as comprador bourgeoisie that sells national interests to foreign capital and acts as proconsul of foreign capital by suppressing the rest of the population. Therefore the comprador bourgeoisie is considered as smitten with imperialism and thus ideologically expatriated. In a kind of popular front, the poor—mostly indigenous—small farmers, the rural proletariat and, where existent, industrial proletariat, together with small traders, craftsmen and the intellectual middle class were to discover their mutual interests under the banner of national liberation, and join forces against the suppressive regime. In these descriptions of the conflict, indigenous groups and African Americans are referred to as small farmers and a part of the rural and industrial (sub)proletariat, even where liberation movements explicitly referred to the long tradition of indigenous resistance against colonial powers. E. g. in the name of the Uruguayan Movimento de Liberacion Nacional - Tupamaros the resistance of Tupac Amaru in the 18th century was picked up without a special analysis of indigenous expectations of liberation and development having been carried out. An exception in this period was the founder of the Peruvian communist party Carlos Mariategui (1894 – 1930) who insisted on the specificity of indigenous experience and the importance to consider this in the analysis and politics of liberation movements.

In some cases, these movements were initiated in trade unions and agricultural societies which due to state and paramilitary repression were driven to illegality and armed combat. In other cases, they can be attributed to political parties, student groups, and intellectuals, often a mixture of the aforementioned. The theology of liberation also played a role in many cases of formations of movements; indeed, some members of the clergy joined a Guerrilla, such as Camilo Torres in Colombia joined the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN). Even though many of the groups were linked to a civil political party or organization, the reality of Guerrilla war has often imprinted a domination of military logic onto the movements. For the women active in the movements, their participation in fights for liberation led in many cases to an escape from traditionally assigned roles; despite this, patriarchal structures within the organizations were / are still a cause of criticism.
One of the most successful movements of this phase was surely the Cuban Movimiento del 26. de Julio against the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. The successful victory of the revolutionaries around Fidel Castro and Che Guevara in 1959 became a source of inspiration for many movements around the world. In Nicaragua, the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional achieved a victory over the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza in 1979. Other movements, such as the Frente Farabundo Marti de Liberación Nacional in El Salvador and the Union Revolucionaria Nacional de Guatemala, ended their armed conflicts after peace talks in 1990 and 1996. Many movements were worn down in battles with numerous losses or had to surrender; others, such as the ELN and the FARC in Colombia, are today still engaged in armed conflict. The participation of the Argentine Che Guevara in the Cuban Revolution and his later Guerrilla activities in Africa and South America demonstrate that within these movements the internationalist idea of solidarity is present, and the Latin American perspective of Bolivar and Marti is taken up.

A third paradigm of national liberation has been gaining importance since the last decades of the 20th century. The critiques and protests against the preparations of the 500 year anniversary of the "discovery of America", which was later renamed the "meeting of two worlds", mark a departure in Latin America from discourse about national liberation. The indigenous peoples organize themselves more and more not based on their social position as small farmers or as proletariat, but based on cultural and ethnic self-definitions as indigenous peoples. They thus oppose not only social and legal disadvantages due to racist exclusions and legal incompatibilities with indigenous concepts of order, but also against a perception distributed worldwide within the "classical" national liberation movements, in which indigenous concepts and cultures often only appear as an expression of backwardness to be overcome. Thus, the Sandinista revolutionaries in Nicaragua run into conflict with the Miskito at the Atlantic coast in the 1980s because they wanted to develop their areas according to a western model of progress.

This third paradigm has led to the relationship between state and nation being re-negotiated. As such, indigenous movements in Ecuador have achieved a definition of the state as plurinational in the constitution of 2008. The Ejercito Zapatista de Liberación Nacional in the southeast of Mexico, supporting itself through grass-roots democratic self-organizational structures in indigenous communities, drew international attention in 1994 with a declaration of war against the Mexican state. At the same time it rose arms and questioned the use of military conquest of the political state power and demanded instead the recognition and expansion of local autonomy and grass-roots structures throughout Mexico. The indigenous movements in Bolivia managed to overthrow the government through demonstrations and mass protests in 2005. Through the election of Evo Morales, for the first time in the history of the nation, an indigenous candidate won the presidency. While Morales and the Movimento al Socialismo represent an openly integrative policy towards non-indigenous minorities in the population, Felipe Quispe Huanca from the Movimiento Indígena Pachakuti criticizes this position as a betrayal of the indigenous movement.

In the USA, the Latin American movements did not only find an echo in various movements of solidarity. In the 1960s and 1970s in parts of the Chicano/a Movement the demands for the national liberation of Aztlán gained momentum. Aztlán is the mystical place of origin of the Aztecs and supposedly encompassing todays Southwest of the USA. Before the US annexed this area it belonged to Mexico and the Chicano/as are the descendants of the Mexican population.
that was ‘crossed by the boarder’. The envisaged liberation in, for example, the Plan Espiritual de Aztlan of 1969 aims more, however, for self-organization and civil rights than for an actual governmental separation. In a similar fashion, activists of the Native Americans built on the discourses of national liberation movements and the black civil rights movement with spectacular campaigns. E.g. the occupation of the island Alcatraz from 1969 until 1971, which they claimed for themselves, amongst other things by performing a ‘discovery of an virgin island’ and referring to a contract from 1868.

The desire for national liberation along ethnic demarcation can, however, also lead to separatist demands. Some Native Americans not only demand their conceded territories based on contracts of the 19th century back, but also proclaimed the area in question the independent Republic of Lakotah in 2007. The Nation of Islam, formed in 1930, as well understands nation and liberation based on ethnic demarcation and called for a separate nation for the African American population of the USA. In Canada, forces desiring to detach the French-speaking part of the country from the rest along ethnic boundaries gained in prominence in the second half of the 20th century. Between 1963 and 1970, the Front de Libération du Québec carried out a number of attacks on top-class politicians. A referendum on the division of Canada carried out by the provincial government in 1995 was turned down with a slight majority.

This cursory overview shows that very different content can be linked to the concept of national liberation. A result of this is a problem of separating national liberation movements from other social movements also aiming for profound changes in the national state framework without them being understood as national liberation. Ultimately, the term 'national liberation' is a discursive figure used to legitimize one's own political actions. The reference to the nation may unite people across social, cultural and gender boundaries, but also faces the danger that these boundaries might become blurred, rendering individual groups and interests unseen or excluded and exercising pressure for the homogenization of different ways of life. That is why it finds itself in a complex tension with the promise of emancipation and empowerment for each single person which is found in the term 'liberation' as well. The reference to ethnicities and indigenous cultures can be an emancipatory expansion of the horizon of social struggles in this context and can sensitize the movement for alternative models of development and society. It can, however, also lead to restrictions and demarcations, marking people by ethnic membership with certain ‘natural’ roles and certain ‘natural’ interests. Whether and how this tension between nations, ethnicities and emancipation opens new perspectives productively, or blocks collective and individual potential for development, can only be determined in detailed analyses of every individual movement and the field of forces within which it operates.

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Bibliography


