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Nationalism and Normality: A Comment on the Scottish Independence Referendum

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When I was a graduate student studying anthropology at the CUNY Graduate Center in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was conventional to divide anthropological theory between ‘idealist’ and ‘materialist’ approaches. Most students found this distinction meaningful, but at the same time too stark. Today this distinction comes back to haunt me. Having lived in Edinburgh since the late 1990s, working in sociology, and specialising in Scotland and nationalism among other things, our recent referendum on Scottish independence has forced me to think again about this distinction. Not in the sense of having to choose between materialist and idealist modes of analysis, but in terms of witnessing manifest tensions between materialist and idealist types of arguments in the debates that surrounded the referendum. Repeatedly I was struck by how, when confronted by the sheer incalculability of material realities and future economic prospects, hope, aspiration, and enthusiasm seemed to rush in to fill the void. Imponderable, and frankly tedious questions about how much North Sea oil is left, what will become of the Euro, and so on, would run into the ground, to be

supplanted by affirmations of sheer will. Before I say more about this, let me back up a bit, and present the general situation.

On September 18, 2014, a referendum was put to the Scottish people that posed the question: "Should Scotland be an independent country?". On a record 84.6% turnout, 55.3% answered 'No', while 44.7% answered 'Yes'. Citizens of Britain, Commonwealth Countries, and other European Union member countries resident in Scotland were eligible to vote, and the voting age was exceptionally lowered from 18 to 16 for this referendum. The date was set about a year and half before the referendum, and it seemed to take about a year before the public debates got rolling, and it was only in the last three months or so, as the Yes Campaign gained ground and polls narrowed, that debates really began to heat up.

In contrast to the rest of Britain, or more accurately, the southeast of England, predominant political opinion in Scotland tends towards a slightly left of center social democratic model, and thus the debate in Scotland was couched primarily as one between contending views of how to pursue that social democratic vision. Whether the British state had become so constitutionally clapped-out and ideologically beholden to a 'neoliberal' agenda, that the only hope of progressive change lay in departing from the UK and setting up a new state, or whether UK-wide left solidarities and pooling of risks were worth defending, and ultimately the more rational way forward. This is not to say that other more rightward social and political views are not present in Scotland, but they are distinctly muted, a point I will return to. At any rate, this meant the Conservative Party that dominates the coalition government currently in charge of the UK (with the

Liberal Democrats), and that agreed to this referendum in the first place, probably expecting an easy win, had to court public opinion in Scotland gingerly, for fear of raising the ghost of that great hate figure of Scotland's period of de-industrialisation—Margaret Thatcher. Thus towards the end of the run up, it was former Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown who came out of hiding to make the case for the union, and serving Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron mostly stayed home.

This referendum did not arise out of the blue, but was instead yet another episode in the gradualist path to greater autonomy within the UK (and more recently the European Union) that has characterised modern Scottish history. In the context of heavy industrialisation in the late nineteenth century, organisations such as the Association for the Vindication of Scottish Rights and the Scottish Home Rule Association had campaigned for greater recognition, and the post of Secretary of State for Scotland and the Scottish Office had been set up. In the 1960s, after three decades of marginality, the Scottish National Party (SNP) began to have intermittent success, putting pressure on the dominant Labour Party to eventually consider putting home rule back on the agenda, and itself shifting more firmly leftward, adapting to the left-of-center-ground of opinion in which support had to be won. By 1979 these pressures led to a referendum on devolution that was lost, but by 1997, after almost two decades of Conservative rule, deindustrialisation, and piecemeal trimming of the welfare state, the Labour Party came back into power, having secured Scottish support by promising to legislate promptly on a new referendum on devolution, which it did, holding the referendum that same year. The new Scottish Parliament

opened in July 1999. It had substantial devolved powers over domestic legislation in regard to areas such as health care and education, with powers over macro-economic policy and foreign affairs crucially retained at Westminster.

The 129 seat Scottish Parliament is elected through a combination of first-past-the post constituency seats, topped up with seats filled from party lists by a principle of proportional representation, to achieve a combination of direct electoral mandate and rough proportionality. This design was expected to yield either a Labour majority or coalition governments for a long time to come. But to the surprise of many in the Labour camp, by 2007 the SNP had achieved minority government as the largest party, and by 2011 the SNP had achieved a majority government and proceeded towards legislating for the referendum on independence, as promised, naturally enough, in their party manifesto. In general, this success is due to the fact that the SNP is today a left-of-center party only marginally different in its domestic policies from the Labour Party, with a relatively able and charismatic leader in Alex Salmond¹, and has managed to appear competent and as working in the interests of people in Scotland.

Meanwhile the Labour Party in Scotland during this same period has been dogged by ineffectual leadership, and an appearance of being run from the UK center, and tarnished by the mantle of 'New Labour', which is frequently seen as having compromised too much with neoliberalism.

¹ Salmond stepped down as party leader immediately after the referendum, and has been replaced by his former deputy, Nicola Sturgeon.

It is important to understand that in the Scottish context, correlations between national identity, party support, and constitutional preferences are loose and shifting. While a small minority that identifies as British more than Scottish, supports the Conservative Party, and prefers the union and is lukewarm about devolution is relatively stable, at the other end of the left-right spectrum, voting for the SNP is no guarantee that one wants independence, nor voting for Labour an assurance that one doesn't. And almost everyone at this end of the spectrum identifies as equally or more Scottish than British. So as I suggested before, our most recent independence referendum debates took place within a frame of identification with a broad, left-of-center Scottishness. Moreover, polling for many years has oscillated roughly around 25-30% in favour of independence, 50% in favour of increasing devolved powers, and around 20-25% wanting to remain with the devolved status quo. Thus by far the dominant preference, more powers to the Scottish Parliament (which came to be known in referendum parlance as 'devo-max') was, after some negotiation, excluded from the independence referendum, which instead offered a strict yes or no choice. So people of this dominant middle position were forced to make a choice that they would not otherwise have made. It is probable that both Alex Salmond and David Cameron (and their advisors) reasoned that the difficulties of interpreting a three-way distribution of choices, that primarily confirmed the general direction of gradualist travel, would not serve either of their causes all that well. Cameron could hope that on balance people would be scared away from independence, appearing to simply prefer the status quo ('no'), while Salmond could reasonably claim that anything around 35% was a historic high-water

mark for the independence cause, and showed that history was inexorably moving in the SNP's direction.

As it turned out, according to polling data, from a spread on February 1, 2013 of 47% 'no', 32% 'yes' and 21% 'don't know', the 'don't knows' gradually ebbed away from mid-July 2014, and the gap between 'yes' and 'no' closed, although with 'no' having a slight lead of often less than 5 points in most polls (see website: What Scotland Thinks). It was neck-and-neck. It appeared that the yes campaign might just pull it off, despite the scepticism of long-time, careful observers of this process. In the final days of the campaign the various 'unionist' parties (Labour, Liberal Democrats, Conservatives) asserted a 'vow' to work together to hammer-out a new set of increased powers for the existing Scottish parliament as away of showing that something better would be on offer if one voted no. And the all-party commission led by Lord Kelvin Smith has already begun consulting on proposals for increased powers, details to be worked out in the coming months. So ironically, the substantial outcome of the referendum will be another step along the slow path of gradually increasing devolution, despite the perverse decision to rule out this alternative from the referendum itself. But then, that is how much of democratic politics actually works.

For the rest of this essay, let me try to look behind the blow-by-blow politics, to say something about the material circumstances and ideational atmosphere, about the wider political culture, that shaped this latest referendum. As a US citizen, with no right to vote in this election, I found myself in a liminal position, as long time friends took positions on either side, and tempers occasionally frayed. My own position, despite not having a vote, was that I was unconvinced

that the case was being adequately made to go for full independence at this point, given the weakened state of the world and European economy, considerable national debt, and the SNP's contested proposal to remain in a currency union with the rest of the UK. This proposal stuck me as extremely problematic, because either much of Scottish policy would be determined by the Bank of England, or intolerable tensions would develop between the two countries.

One often has to explain to outsiders the way nationalism in Scotland is largely moderate and to the left. It mobilises historical and cultural symbols, but for the most part in a fairly flexible and inclusive way. It is, on balance, more 'liberal' than 'ethnic' in its core concepts and symbols. Its discourse is characterised less by cultural essentialism, and more by the classic Enlightenment aspiration to establish collective liberty through the founding of 'new' nations, as in the British Colonies in 1776 and France in 1789. It is in this peculiar ideological innovation of the 18th century, of the people collectively ruling themselves as supposed equals, that the problematic and enduring nature of modern nationalism lies. The result was an ideological template with a specific formal principle, the people must rule themselves, but chronic indeterminacy as to the ideas and symbols that give this form content. The people can be defined by ethnicity, religion, language, history, political ideology, civic values, and so on almost indefinitely. And these can be used to bolster national political programmes in all sorts of ways, civic and ethnic, leftward and rightward, and usually somewhere in between. Where the democratic state is the dominant political organisation, people are obliged to couch their political projects, whatever side

they come from, in national terms, as an argument about who we are, in this territory, what our values should be, and how we should govern ourselves. And sometimes, as may eventually happen in the Scottish case, divisions and polarisation may become so strong that (aided by contingencies of territorial history), secession rather than struggle over the direction of a larger whole, may seem the best or only solution. All this is to say that in Scotland, normal politics is not a struggle between nationalism (represented by the SNP) and something else, it is between contending nationalisms. In the referendum, both sides, yes and no, were advocating their preferred conception of the Scottish nation and what is in its interest.

The recent referendum was disturbing in certain respects, precisely because there is a commonsense view in Scotland that we are pretty much all 'left of center' and 'want what's best for Scotland', while also wanting to be good, outward looking 'global citizens'. On the one hand, the referendum forced people to make a strategic choice that cut through the middle of this broad consensus, on the other, the consensus is perhaps not all it appears to be. In the 20th century, Scottish public opinion, and the opinions of its leading professional classes, consolidated around the Keynesian vision of a modern welfare state, with substantial active intervention from government to offset economic problems. This contributed to the relative hegemony of the Labour Party in the latter half of that century, which it has lost its grip on in the last decade.

Meanwhile, from a high point in the early 1950s, the Conservative Party saw a decline in its support in Scotland, precipitously in the last three decades. The dominant discourse in Scotland's political culture is about how to become a

Scandinavian-like social democracy within the policy confines of a 'neoliberal' state featuring low levels of taxation, a very open economy, and a preference for privatisation and austerity to reduce governmental costs. But it needs to be borne in mind that Scotland's political culture, like all political cultures, is an artefact of the prevailing balance of powers in the UK, not a direct reflection of some underlying reality. A left-leaning, highly educated and professionalised middle class is able to dominate Scotland's domestic politics precisely because it does not have to soil its hands with the levers of macroeconomics, beholden to the powers of the City of London, and of international relations, bound up with the interests of major players such as the US, China, and Russia. While there is only one Scottish Conservative MP at Westminster, by proportional representation 15 out of the current 129 MPs to the Scottish Parliament are Conservatives (down from 18 a few years ago). This indicates that while clearly a minority, there is an enduring constituency here, one I suspect has disengaged a bit from Scottish politics under the circumstances, as many of its core class interest can be met through other British institutions. But if Scotland were to become independent, my guess is that one should expect this constituency to reassess its interests and use its powers to strengthen its position, to come out of relative dormancy as it were. In the recent 2014 European parliamentary elections, the right-wing, anti-immigration UK Independence Party won 10% of the vote (on an admittedly low turnout) sending one Scottish UKIP member to Strasbourg, disquieting the popular view that Scotland would have no truck with such things. I suspect that this UKIP support in Scotland is similar to that found more strongly in England, among highly alienated working class people who feel abandoned by Labour. Again, this represents a small minority. However, I do

think the language around the independence referendum proceeded as if natural constituencies of right wing and 'neoliberal' economic interests, and parochial and beleaguered working class interests, were not present in Scotland, and would not be present in an independent Scotland. I think it is more likely that these views would become more visible, and have to be somehow integrated into the general political culture.

All this is normal for any modern European country, and not a case against independence *per se*. But it flags up the somewhat surreal quality of the Yes Campaign. This was a coalition was led by the SNP on one front, proffering a white paper on independence and offering a not entirely coherent combination of Scandinavian ideals, and small-nation, business-friendly economic policies, with another wing, further to the left, more 'grassroots', organised under the banner of 'radical independence', offering a more thorough-going critique of capitalism, and casting the project more as a fight-back for the working classes. In this mix was a small but effective Green Party, seeing an independent Scotland as the best way to advance its mixture of ecological and egalitarian politics. These last two are positions with which I have sympathies. For all of these, the prospect of an independent country served as a blank canvass on which to project visions of a better world. On the 'Better Together' (i.e. 'No') side, leadership was generally provided by Scottish stalwarts of the Labour Party, such as Alastair Darling, Douglas Alexander, and finally Gordon Brown. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats tended to play a back seat role, aware of the unpopularity in Scotland of their current coalition government in Westminster, and the general un-receptivity to interventions from down south,

in what was seen as a Scottish matter. An exception to this was the able debating skills of the new leader of the Scottish Conservatives, Ruth Davidson, who could speak with more authority as a member of the Scottish Parliament. If the yes campaign tended toward utopian vision, the no campaign tended toward dreary facts and policy-speak (see Paterson, forthcoming). Where the yes team were building a better tomorrow, the no team were picking things apart and finding holes (some quite real in my opinion).

Part of the reason for this is simply that the hard material questions about what the future of an independent Scotland would look like are very difficult to calculate. Materialist explanation is always easier in retrospect. I have little doubt that an independent Scotland would eventually weather the rough storms of transition, be as economically viable as similar small European countries, and be welcomed back into the European Union. But how far it would be able to travel towards the idealised visions proffered by the yes campaign I am unsure. It is difficult to know how much North Sea oil is left (experts disagree) and how long tax revenues from that industry might help subsidise the Scottish economy on its social democratic path. Given the weakened state of European economies post-2008, it is difficult to know how quickly the regional economy might recover, which is a critical context for Scotland. At what pace would Scotland be able to unburden itself of the share of the UK national debt that it would inherit (which is still growing)? This again depends on the general economic recovery of the European Union and the UK, the effects of long term inflation on national debt, and the absence of other unanticipated shocks.

Again and again, in public and private debates, I witnessed people simply talking past one another, not really engaging with the premise of the others' argument, because it didn't start from the same aspirational or sceptical assumptions. The overall effect of this discursive stalemate, was that the 'no' campaign seemed to be hectoring and fact-crunching to an audience that had lost interest in irresolvable questions, while the 'yes' campaign frequently reduced the opposing view to a general psychological state, of being cowed by the threats of Westminster and Big Business, of being, as the Scots say 'feart' (afraid, as a general disposition). If rational predictions could reasonably be steered either way, than these tended to fall by the wayside, and it became a question of courage versus cowardice (on the yes side), or reality versus utopia (on the no side). One side was battling to capture hearts, while the other side was battling to capture minds. At any rate, the dust is settling, old friends that found themselves on either side of the divide are either letting things lie, or gently exploring differences with some detachment. Meanwhile, work is proceeding on the formulation of a set of further devolved powers for Scotland that can be agreed by all parties.

What might the implications of all this be for Britain as a whole? It is hard to say. It is important to understand that in certain respects, the issue of Scottish discontent with the UK is part of the general problem of the entire UK being dominated by a London-centric, high finance economy. Much of Wales and the English north and midlands, and all the major northern cities, have grievances with an economy in which they all routinely play second fiddle when it comes to investment. Immediately after the referendum there was much talk about the

need for a rethink of devolution across the UK, with Cameron seeing it as an opportunity to 'fix' the problem of Scottish MPs in Westminster being able to vote on legislative issues that concern England, but are devolved to the Scottish Parliament, by restricting when they can vote in Westminster. These are of course largely Labour MPs, critical to the UK Labour Party's capacity to push through legislation in England. Some urban leaders have justly seen it as an opportunity to argue for greater powers devolved to UK cities. Welsh politicians have seen it as an opportunity to call for more powers to the National Assembly for Wales. The Liberal Democrats have a long held policy in favour of federalism in the UK, and more generally of decentralising power, so these events are grist for their mill. But Britain is an extremely London-centric place, and there is a question about whether the larger message of this referendum for the UK as a whole will sink in. That message is: there is widespread alienation in the UK from the free-market driven, London dominated economy, and this is expressing itself as weakening support for the Labour and Conservative parties, to the benefits of the SNP in Scotland, and UKIP in England. The referendum on Scottish independence gave people in one part of the UK a context and means to express that alienation, but in many respects this is not a matter relevant only to Scotland. There is a deeper and wider political malaise.

Does all this have any implications for what we should think about nationalism in general? Yes. It should help us recognise that nationalism, in the way I have defined it above, is normal. It becomes peculiarly visible when aligned with options of territorial secession, as in the Scottish case, with the possibility of separation between Scotland and the rest of the UK. But within Scotland, the

referendum triggered an episode in an ongoing argument about what kind of country the people in Scotland want to live in, and how to get there. This is the regular stuff of elections in liberal democracies more generally. Nationalism, in the sense of an ongoing debate about identity and values in the context of people having power over one another as citizens, is the routine fuel that modern states and their political systems run on. There has to be an ongoing argument. Far from being an exotic exception, that rears its head from time to time in ethnically divided backward regions, nationalism in this sense is normal and unavoidable. And the people in Scotland have managed to engage in it in its most acute form, where the secession option is on the table, peaceably, and with remarkably high democratic participation. In that we all must 'do' nationalism to some extent, Scotland sets a pretty good example of how to do it.

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