

NATIONALISM AND SOCIAL IDENTITY: WHO OWNS THE INTEREST OF SCOTLAND?

Anthony P. Cohen

The anthropological study of one's 'own' society, or one with which you have some familiarity, requires you to resist taking for granted anything which, as a competent social member, you think you may already understand. Of course you then run the risk of mystifying the familiar. But the dividend may be that you also re-discover and reveal the richness of ordinary social practice the significance of which may have become understated, precisely because of its very familiarity. I am going to deal with a subject which will be more than familiar to most readers of **Scottish Affairs**, and will hope to suggest the importance of continuing to think about it: the meaning to individuals of their Scottishness. Along the way, I will touch on an event, the Burns Supper, which people seem to find either fabulously exotic or mind-numbingly tedious - witness Ian Hamilton's vituperative outburst in **The Scotsman** last July.

In a recent and well-known book, the social psychologist Michael Billig argued that everyday social life in the Western liberal democracies is suffused with nationalism of a kind which we simply do not notice. It is a

Anthony Cohen is Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh. This article is taken from the text of the Town and Gown Lecture, delivered at City Chambers, Edinburgh, on 29 November 1996. The author's thanks go to Professor Tom Schuller, Director of the University of Edinburgh Centre for Continuing Education, both for the invitation to give the lecture, and for organising the event; and to Depute Lord Provost Margaret McGregor and Vice-Principal Professor John Laver who represented, respectively, town and gown. An earlier version of the lecture was given as a plenary address to the 1996 Biennial conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists, Barcelona, at which Professors Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Ladislav Holy both commented most generously on it.

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prime example of familiarity breeding neglect. In a world of nations, he says, the nation is so continuously 'flagged' - his pregnant word - that we take it for granted even though it is the essential predicate of our identities. He calls it 'banal nationalism' (Billig 1995). He makes a persuasive case and one which, though he may not have realised it, is characteristic of anthropology in seeking to make explicit what is ordinarily implicit (Strathern 1992). However, my interest in nationalism is as a way of thinking, rather than a way of not thinking. Therefore, if I may be permitted a neologism, I would describe the phenomenon with which Billig is concerned as 'nationism' rather than nationalism. Moreover, I want to explore what the nation means to individuals, rather than to expose its bearing on the collectivity, which is his purpose (Billig 1995, p.70).

WHOSE INTEREST?

Although my research and writing have for many years been concerned with social identity, it is only in the last two or three years that I have begun to work on and to think about the relationship between national and personal identity, and it is in this context that I have become interested in the personal significance of Scottish nationhood, nationism and nationalism. There seem to me to be three complex and significant words which crop up repeatedly in the history of Scottish national discourse: 'right' (as in 'Claim of...'); 'covenant' and 'interest'. I have discussed the first in a preliminary way in an article just published (Cohen 1996). 'Covenant' is one I may get to in due course, and, in the meantime, is being addressed by the young American anthropologist, Jonathan Hearn (1994). So here I will discuss just the third. I have few settled views about nationalism, so I am being entirely speculative, rather than conclusive. My concern is not to enter any debate about types of nationalism, but to raise the question of what 'the nation' may mean to people who identify themselves with it, and who see in it a kind of referent of themselves. I begin with anecdotal accounts of two events more than twenty years apart.

On 28 June 1975, there was a meeting held in Whalsay, Shetland, organised by the Scottish National Party. The speakers were George Reid, then the SNP member of parliament for Clackmannan and East Stirlingshire; and the SNP candidate for Orkney and Shetland, Howie Firth, who is an Orcadian. It was not a good night for the Party. At this time, the construction of North Sea oil-related facilities was at its height: the Sullom Voe terminal was well underway, the pipelines having almost reached the shore; the skies over

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Shetland were noisy with the clattering of helicopters, and the island's waters were constantly full of construction barges and service vessels. The infrastructure was in a state of transformation; there was a certain sense of occupation, and the future seemed more uncertain than ever.

The SNP, of course, were increasingly buoyant on the mainland of Scotland, with the successful elections of 1974 behind them. North Sea oil offered the prospect of a very substantial enhancement of tax revenues, not to mention royalties and secondary industries, and thereby significantly increased the plausibility of the economic argument for Scotland's independence. Oil represented a lucrative late-twentieth century replacement for the declining heavy and extractive industries on which for so long the Scottish economy had depended. The SNP speakers argued that under government from London, Scotland was being deprived of its rightful share of North Sea oil income; indeed, its very wealth was being alienated. The Scottish people were being deprived of what was rightfully theirs. 'How can it be in anything other than our best interests,' asked the MP, George Reid, 'for Scotland to be independent so that she can regain control of her economy and with it her destiny?'

With a loud scraping of chair legs at the back of the hall, Ina of West Hamister, a fisher wife and a formidable woman, stood up:

Noo, jist dü haa'd dü on dere, boy,' she said. 'Wha's oil is it onywye? Dü says it's Scotland's 'cos it's lyin' in Scottish waaters. Da hell it is! Man, dose're Shetlan' waaters. We've bin fishin' dem for hunnerts o'years, an' noo dose drillin'rigs and pipelines are in wir fishin' groonds, the service boats are workin' oot o' wir harbours. If it wisnae fae Shetlan', there'd be no bloody oil industry.

And she asked him,

Dü says it's in wir interest to be governed frae Eedinbur. If dere wis a SNP government in Eedinbur, what proporton o' da oil revenue wid we get fae da oil i'da East Shetlan' Basin?

Without batting an eyelid, the MP replied, 'One percent. We think that would be a fair balance.' He looked baffled as the audience hooted with derision. The great Henry Stewart of Whalsay rose to his feet declaring, 'Man, dü're taakin' jist a lok o' rubbish!' Whereupon he walked out, and the meeting collapsed in great good humour.

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So far as that audience was concerned, whoever else's interests Scottish independence might serve, it certainly would not be theirs. How could it be? The Scottish National Party was at least as alien an entity to Shetland as the other main British parties, perhaps even more so, for both the Liberal and Labour Parties and their antecedents had had strong followings throughout Shetland since the late 19th century. No local people were involved in the organisation of this meeting in Whalsay. It had been convened by the recently-installed Church of Scotland minister who was a Glaswegian via London, was widely disliked and distrusted, and whose association with the SNP did nothing at all to enhance the Party's standing in local eyes. Within wider political conversation in Shetland, the talk was not of Scottish independence - in which there was no obvious interest; it was of the devolution of governmental powers to Shetland itself, the only alternative to government from London which could conceivably be in the interests of Shetland. Very soon after this, a cross-party devolutionist alliance was formed, the Orkney and Shetland Movement, which rapidly became the most significant bloc on the Shetland Islands Council. It was not until after the 1987 general election that this group effectively disbanded, its more activist members now closely associated with a chastened and repentant Scottish National Party.

Now, twenty years later, only the Conservative Party argues for the virtual continuation of the constitutional status quo in Scotland. On the devolutionist/independence side of the debate, the argument is conducted in a wide variety of divergent terms, some philosophical, some emotional, some strategic and tactical. The opposition unreformed-unionist argument is partly ideological and partly pragmatic. But all of these arguments can be, and often are couched rhetorically in terms of 'interests': that it cannot be in Scotland's interest to risk the addition of the so-called 'tartan tax', or to risk a deep reduction of inward investment, or to risk a further layer of bureaucracy; that it must be in Scotland's interests to repatriate the power of decision, or to afford to citizens the right of self-determination, or to bring government closer to the people. All of these advocates claim, of course, to be advocating other people's interests, and their advocacy entails the claim that they know wherein these interests lie. So the argument is not just about what the interest of Scotland may be, but about who owns it and who, thereby, wins the right to define and dispose it.

Let me take you on in time to 25 January 1996, a significant date for all Burns enthusiasts. At a Burns Supper, held in the imposing dining room of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, a leading member of Her

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Majesty's Opposition is giving the toast to 'The Immortal Memory'. I shall have a little more to say about Burns suppers later. After the customary jokes - many, as usual, at the Chairman's expense - the speaker changes the mood, and, using some well-rehearsed quotations from Burns's poetry, he shows that Burns personified and espoused the essential political and ideological values of Scottishness. According to this eulogist, he was the 'lad o'pairs', the country boy who, born into poverty, nevertheless rose on the basis of his intellectual abilities and was enabled to do so by the democratic nature of Scottish education. He was an egalitarian, contemptuously dismissive of the trappings of wealth and power - in the famous words of one of his last songs, 'A man's a man for aa' that'. Despite his notorious womanising (in fact as well as in verse), he was, so the speaker tells us, a feminist. And then he came to the tricky part: was Burns a Scottish nationalist (small 'n') or a British unionist? A difficult question for, not only did Burns hold an, albeit minor, office of profit under the crown, but there were also the well-known, if awkward letters, to Robert Graham of Fintry (December 1792) and to John Francis Erskine of Mar (April 1793) in which he proclaimed and protested his loyalty to the 'British constitution' - indeed, 'to our glorious constitution'. How do we get out of this one? Well, said the speaker, Burns was a canny man. He knew where his interests lay, and they certainly did not lie in his unemployment. Moreover, he said, by retaining his favoured, if minor position in the government's service, he could remain advantageously placed to proclaim the interests of Scotland, foremost among which was that Scotland should not be England; and, so long as the primacy of democracy, egalitarianism and the equality of opportunity across class and gender were maintained, Scotland's interests would be secure because the fundamental differences from England would be maintained.

Now, in these two pieces of rhetoric we have encountered two very different uses of the notion of interest which, though disparate, may in certain circumstances be complementary. In the first case, interests are treated as a statement of material advantage; in the second, the concept of 'interests' abuts so closely on that messy business to which we often refer as 'identity' that it is not clear how they might usefully be separated (see Billig 1995, p.60). This is not an accident of rhetorical licence or flourish; nor is it a consequence of public speakers being conceptually sloppy. The interpretation of Scottishness as entailing the more ineffable qualities of identity and, possibly, material benefit of some vague kind seems to me to be a faithful rendering of Scottish discourse; and, I believe, would be familiar in the discourse of other peoples strongly conscious of their nationhood but still struggling politically to see it legally expressed in nationality or statehood.

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There is much to interest anthropologists in the complementarity of these two versions of national interest. I focus here on two of its interrelated aspects: the relationship of material advantage to personal and social identities; and, secondly, the intriguing facts that 'interest' tends to be claimed rhetorically for other people, on their behalf as it were, but the claim is very rarely subjected to test. The reason, I think, is obvious: that if it was tested, the claim might be revealed as insubstantial, not because national identity is a trivial or insubstantial matter, but because when generalised, it is extremely difficult to retain or sustain the substantiality which is claimed for it. Mapped on to the infinitely disparate interests of personal identity, that is, of the identities of individuals, it threatens to disappear, or is at least very difficult to recognise, as a matter of meaningful interests, a point explored in an excellent recent book by the political theorist, David Miller (Miller 1995, p.120). I believe this explains why the widespread commitment to Scottishness, which has clearly survived the nearly three centuries of Union (see Brown, McCrone and Paterson 1996, p.198), has only fitfully been successfully translated into a movement for the re-establishment of Scotland's political sovereignty. The political transformation which has taken place over the last two decades has been significant, but may also have been historically adventitious.

When we speak of nationalism, we are talking of something different from just love of country, or patriotism. There is much dispute about how these terms should be defined, but I suggest that for the nationalist, the nation must in some sense have primacy: again, not necessarily in terms of loyalty, but possibly strategically, and in terms of the ways in which nationalists identify themselves: they are, first and foremost, Scottish, or Catalunyan, or Quebecois, whatever those attachments may mean. Neil MacCormick argues that among rights to self-determination, national self determination has primacy, by which he means the right to choose to make nationhood coincide with statehood (MacCormick 1982; and see Miller 1995).

The weight of anthropological theory and of the ethnographic record suggests that this is a very problematic position. First, for most social purposes, individuals are identified in terms of much lower-level or immediate referents, such as family, locality, gender, occupation and class and so on. The nation tends to be more occasionally significant (see Miller 1995, pp.15-16), often in the context of the obligations of citizenship, whether those of liability for tax or for military service or the bearing of a passport. Again, it is

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important to remember the distinction between nationalism and patriotism. We all remember Jim Sillars bitterly deriding those Scots to whom he referred as 'ninety minute patriots'. In this view, national identity must go much deeper than an essentially oppositional commitment to national icons which, by its very nature, is activated only occasionally. We are also all too familiar with associations and affiliations which can intervene between the individual and the nation to an extent which results in conflicts ranging from mere partisanship to bloody civil war. The primacy to an individual of interest in a national identity would seem to be something which needs to be explained rather than to be assumed.

But this is to argue just that a national interest may be difficult to recognise, let alone to realise, when set against other more proximate or immediate interests. There is also an argument which emerges strongly from the comparative ethnography of western Europe, though it is certainly apparent elsewhere too, that more purely local interests actively militate against, rather than just obscure, the greater national interest, a phenomenon in Scotland which Tom Nairn has satirised as 'Auchtermuchterism'. This may be for reasons of local rivalry, the kind of picture which has emerged from studies all over Europe; or because of a deeply-embedded inclination to argumentativeness, Hugh MacDiarmid's Caledonian anti-syzygy. Is it the case, then, that a sense of national identity must be extraordinary for it to supervene in the argument of interests? If I was to identify myself as 'Scottish' rather than as Shetlander, or Glaswegian, or Presbyterian, on what basis might we regard this as a statement of interest, rather than as merely the projection of myself onto a plane of imagined communality or generality? And in whose interest is it really for me to think of myself, as the nationalist politicians tell me I should, as Scottish first, and as Shetlander or Glaswegian second? Of course, the nationalist orator could try to argue, as Canadian federalists used to argue, that there is no contradiction between identification in terms of the national whole and the more local particular (and see Miller 1995, p.121). That argument became manifestly bankrupt in Canada throughout the protracted attempts to redefine the constitutional relationships between the Canadian federal and provincial governments; and it clearly cut no ice twenty years ago with my Whalsay friends; nor has it proved any more convincing in 1996 as a means of resolving the bitter differences between Scottish and Shetland fishermen in the formulation of a national response to the threats which they see posed by the incursion of Spanish fishermen, among others, into their waters.

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National identity is hardly very convincing if it is invoked only on the basis of 'all other things being equal': that is, if my other interests are not thereby compromised, I identify myself as Scottish. 'How do you think of yourself primarily?' 'Scottish-sometimes!' No, if interests are to be a plausible explanation of voluntaristic national identity, then surely, as is shown in the discussion of the famous 'Moreno question' by Alice Brown and her colleagues in their new book (Brown, McCrone and Paterson 1996), they must be so strong as to encompass knowingly the possibility that they may contradict material self-interest? Again, there is a distinction to be made here between nationally-orientated identity, and patriotism. We are not talking about 'my country right or wrong'; but, 'I have so strongly vested my personal interests in those of the nation that it would be a contradiction in terms to suggest that the national interest could be at odds with my personal self-interest.' This could be seen as a para-marxian kind of nationalism: a view that one can only fully realise oneself in the nation. A softer version of this would be the belief that one's very personhood derives from one's membership of the nation - which is, incidentally, exactly how Holy portrays Czech cultural nationalism in his excellent new book (1996, pp.65, 89). I think that this may explain the view of some scholars, prominent among them Tom Nairn, David McCrone (1996) and Lindsay Paterson (1996) that material interests - whether they be economic, political or ethnic - are giving way to civic and 'identity' interests as the dynamic of contemporary western nationalisms. It is part of what has been theorised (inter alia by MacCormick (1996) and by Yael Tamir [1993]) as 'liberal nationalism'.

Twenty years ago, when the Whalsay folk gave them such short shrift, the Nationalist politicians argued in material terms of the export from Scotland of tax revenues to the UK Treasury, balancing them unfavourably against the UK government's expenditure on Scotland (just as unionist politicians now attempt the reverse argument). They measured the values of Scotland-originating exports against the decline of English manufacturing. They castigated the greater investment in publicly-funded housing stock and employment initiatives in England compared to those in Scotland. This kind of argumentation has not disappeared, but it has diminished. The Scottish interest is now articulated in a quite different way, as a matter of cultural value and vitality. I do not know where, why or how this turn originated. It may have been related to the inspired marketing campaign which proclaimed 'Glasgow's miles better' (see Charsley 1986); or to the mood and the moment which made a mega-star of Billy Connolly, and cult fiction out of, first, 'Tutti-frutti'; and, later, the distinctly un-chic subjects of James Kelman's and Irving Welsh's novels. The modern forms of Scottish language and music are

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celebrated now alongside their less degraded antecedents; the forbidding Highland landscape is regarded as the context of human resourcefulness, rather than as an explanation for economic weakness or failure; even the glorious defeat provides the excuse (regularly) to wax lyrical over national sports and players. 'Braveheart' becomes a world-wide phenomenon, while music, the theatre and the artistic heritage are regenerated and revived in ways which show up England by contrast as worn, weary, dull and decrepit.

The nationalism of the 1970s was defended in terms of material interests and issues, as well as those of justice and political destiny. Some politicians may still be inclined to grind out a similar song, though one which has become rather less issue-specific. By contrast, the popular nationalism of the 1990s is post-modern in its eclecticism: everything can be grist to its mill. It is therefore a nationalism on which it is much easier to predicate identity than to conduct the argument of interests other than in the most general of terms: of sovereignty as the ultimate test of democracy, of nationhood and nationality as the final realisation of self-determining people. Symbols and icons do not require the approval of the chattering classes in order to be potent media of personal identity. Indeed, a feature of the new eclectic vitality is the openness of the symbolic agenda. We may turn up our sensitive noses at tartanry and the kailyard, but I suspect that people may get something more than just entertainment out of 'Machair' and 'Dr Finlay'. As expressions of Scottishness, we make room now both for the pibroch and the electrically-amplified fiddle, the Harris Tweed and the string vest. I fear that the aesthetic crimes of Torness or Tyndrum (Hunter 1995) are as valid as symbols of Scottish place as are Jarlshof, Calton Hill or even Glencoe.

Curiously, in an age in which the manipulation of images supposedly dominates politics, some politicians and others continue to underestimate the efficacy of symbolism. We have heard much gnashing of teeth about symbols and stones. 'Give us power,' they say, 'not symbols.' Well, they are not separate: power and symbolism are mutually implicated. Symbolism without power would be pretty vacuous, and would anyway be instantly redundant, but political history (and the anthropological literature) is full of important instances in which major political change has been engineered through the use of symbols. Again, Holy offers us the Czech 'velvet revolution' as a prime example (1996). (See also Cohen 1975.) On the other hand, symbol-less power is unimaginable, simply inconceivable, even for the most bureaucratic of regimes. Lindsay Paterson has argued forcefully about the extent of the de facto, if popularly unacknowledged, autonomy of the Scottish political system (1994). The object of the political use of symbolism

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is precisely to elicit that acknowledgement. Both the call of the 'Liberal Nationalist' for the right to national self-determination, and the collective representation of the democratic nature of the Scottish political tradition require that people feel and believe that they have that right, rather than that it is somehow exercised on their and Scotland's behalf by the Scottish Office and the legal profession. The **Sun** newspaper proclaimed the slogan, repeated on the rear windows of tens of thousands of cars in Scotland, 'Rise up and be a nation again!' It seems to me that, by liberating and 'populising' the control of the symbols of Scottishness, the people have largely won the argument: it is over, but despite the politicians. Again, in his ceremonial choreography for the return of the Stone of Destiny to Scotland, surely the Secretary of State got the symbolism wrong: military escorts and flypasts are not symbolic of the nation but of the state - which, in this instance, are in antagonistic rather than complementary relation to each other. Joyce Macmillan noted in her account of the ceremony in **Scotland on Sunday** (1 December 1996) that its public reception was muted. There was the near-silence of the crowd, and also, she comments, the distinct lack of any manifest enthusiasm either for the militaristic character of, or the dignitaries attending, the procession.

The argument could not have been won in terms of the materiality of interest, for Scotland, like Catalunya, like Quebec, is too heterogeneous, too disparate internally, manifests material and political interests which are simply too discrepant. But the interest with which the widest range of people may be able to identify is one which symbolically offers them an explanation of their selves and which gives them an added value: of their Scottishness and all that that entails culturally. That is why alongside partisan Scottish Nationalism, 'upper case' nationalism as Tom Nairn has put it, there is a very widespread 'lower case' nationalism which crosses party lines (Nairn 1995); and even, though it seems a contradiction in terms, also transcends the political division between nationalists and so-called unionists. The essence of personal nationalism is that nation and individual are mirror images of each other, not that they have a relationship of mutual expediency.

The irony of the argument of interests is that, if successful, it can quickly become bankrupt, especially if the putative interests in question are material. This is as true when the argument is deployed in favour of nationalism as when it is employed in the contest of class. So let us suppose (as I do) that on or before 30 April 2007 Scotland gains her independence and the people become more prosperous: what then of the argument of interests? If we continue to claim the interests of others in the interest of the nation, we are in a different kind of discourse: of national chauvinism, sectarianism. And if

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they do not become more prosperous, or whatever else has been promised, the argument fails anyway. It seems to me that the argument can only be sustained if the interests in question are not materialistic, but are so closely bound up with one's self perception, one's identity, that the national interest is somehow embodied in the self, and inherent in one's very experience of the world.

HAGGIS: THE GREAT LEVELLER

I will conclude by returning briefly to the Burns supper: as iconic, as symbol-rich a commensal occasion as any national ceremonial could be. The tropic highlight of the meal comes, of course, with the arrival in the hall of the haggis, paraded around the diners by the cook, preceded by a piper. The haggis is placed before the Chairman. Before he offers the cook and piper a dram, he delivers Burns's ode 'To a Haggis', at the climax of which, he slices into it, not mimicking slaughter, as has sometimes been claimed, but to disclose its heart-warming, stomach-filling ingredients:

'Fair fa' your honest sonsie face,
Great chieftain o' the puddin'-race!'

- a declaration which really defies sensible translation. Elsewhere, it could be so banal as to be ridiculous, but it isn't here. Why? Because this dramatic recitation of the virtues and contents of the haggis is a celebration not of haute cuisine or of élite taste, but of the common people's food. Let us remember how ordinary are the ingredients and the cooking of the haggis: a pudding or sausage of seasoned oatmeal and minced mutton stuffed into sheep's intestine and boiled for several weeks. It is eaten at the Burns supper, as it is at the kitchen table, 'wi' bashed neeps and champit tatties' - hardly the stuff of gastronomic delicacy other than to Scots and, possibly, Norwegians. But is not that the point? That it is a leveller: that the rich consume the people's food, and in this case, a food which could be clearly regarded as the product of a subsistence economy.

But mark the rustic, haggis-fed,
The trembling earth resounds his tread,
Clap in his walie nieve a blade,
 He'll mak' it whistle;
An' legs, an' arms, an' heads will sned,
 Like taps o' thrissle.

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The haggis is an icon which, like innumerable others, can be made to evoke the democratic idea which stands at the very heart of Scottish political theory and self identity. The haggis speaks of self-sufficiency: of crofters or farmers slaughtering (even if only for a special occasion) and butchering their own stock and making ingenious use of all of its parts, of growing their own cereals, and perhaps producing just enough surplus to provide the means of exchange at market, the archetypal picture of peasant production.

Ye pow'rs wha mak mankind your care,
And dish them out their bill o' fare,
Auld Scotland wants nae skinking ware
That jaups in luggies;
But, if ye wish her gratefu' pray'r,
Gie her a Haggis!

Clarissa Dickson White may be quite correct that the haggis has Norse origins (1996), but there are few pristine cultures or cultural products. If the haggis has Norse influences on it, so too does the language. So what? It remains the case that, like so many other items, the haggis symbolises Scotland if we choose to make it do so.

Well, this is hardly a difficult piece of decoding, and I would not go to the stake for it. I would not wish to suggest that when people sit down to their supper they are necessarily consciously contemplating their sense of nationhood, rather than enjoying a good night out, warm company, and so forth. But, then, perhaps they are. Perhaps the sense of shared humour, or of a common ability to appreciate the language and the imagery of Burns's poetry and the Supper speakers, the knowledge that others are moved by the pipes or the sung melodies as one is oneself, is precisely what the sense of nationhood is about. *Pace* Billig, this is the crucial stuff of culture, not of banality. As a reluctant hill-walker, I have often had occasion, frozen, wet, hungry and sometimes terrified, to wonder why there is such a passion for Munro-bagging. For some, it may be the Everest motivation: I climbed it because it was there. But there may be something more: those ineffable senses of association, ownership, of aesthetic which, even on the most dreich of days when you can hardly see your own feet, makes people regard the mountain, the view (if there is one), the path underfoot, and think, 'H'mm: this is special; this is mine, or ours; this massive bit of Scotland is somehow in me.' (See Hunter 1995.)

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That is the construction of nation in terms of self, or the identity of nation and self, that I have called 'personal nationalism' (Cohen 1996). It is what I think makes the substance of nationalism ungeneralisable, almost incomprehensible to outsiders, and very difficult to assimilate to an argument of material interests. It is quite different from what is claimed by politicians for their audiences. It is a sentiment, the communication of which perhaps needs the genius of the poet and the musician, by means of which people claim the nation for themselves by claiming it as themselves, and thereby make its interests and theirs entirely coincident.

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