

REVIEW:
NATION, IDENTITY AND SOCIAL THEORY:
PERSPECTIVES FROM WALES

Neil Evans

Review of Ralph Fevre and Andrew Thompson (eds), **Nation, Identity and Social Theory: Perspectives from Wales**, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999, pp. x + 278, £25.

Christopher Harvie remarks somewhere that an important part of the sense of excitement that there was in Scotland in the 1960s was that people were publishing books about the contemporary scene and that they were being discussed fervently. Something similar was happening in Wales. In 1962 Brinley Thomas published an edited collection, **The Welsh Economy**, which reflected the current mood of optimism about that phase of economic restructuring. It also contained his explosive essay on 'Wales and the Atlantic Economy' which argued that industrialisation had saved the Welsh language from nineteenth-century extinction rather than fatally undermined it. That began a debate which is still continuing. At that time the Welsh representation in the fields of sociology and anthropology was almost entirely confined to community studies of remote locations, seeking an elusive essence of Welshness which had survived through into the modern world. In the 1970s sociology became the cutting edge of contemporary studies in Wales with the emergence of the interdisciplinary Sociology of Wales Group under the auspices of the British Sociological Association. There was much stimulus from the work of Hechter and Nairn which seemed to place Wales (in terms of intellectual significance, if not in Hechter's analysis) in the centre rather than at the periphery. Out of this grouping came several edited collections, with the most notable being that produced by

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Gareth and Teresa Rees in 1980: **Poverty and Social Inequality in Wales**. The title reflected a new pessimism compared with Brinley Thomas and a move beyond the essentially sectoral approach to the economy which his book had represented. Since then there have been two paradoxical developments in the sociology of Wales: the disappearance of the Sociology of Wales Group in the mid 1980s - and the launching of the annual journal **Contemporary Wales** (which is essentially a product of the group) in 1987. A conference in 1990 effectively reconstituted the group but this did not prove to be enduring. Running alongside this there is the emergence of a tradition of political science which is challenging the hegemony once enjoyed by sociology.

Fevre and Thompson's edited book therefore stands in a line of descent, and one of which it is conscious. The focus has shifted from restructuring and inequality to images, identity and discourses. According to the index there are twenty references to Benedict Anderson's **Imagined Communities** and fourteen to Ernest Gellner. Nairn and Hechter rate a mere handful each. The only rival for intellectual hegemony is the historian Gwyn Alf Williams whose **When Was Wales?** (1985) gets ten references. This suggests either a striking convergence of interests or a tight editorial brief. The rationale of the book seems to be to showcase Welsh work in the exhibition spaces of these approaches, for much of it will be familiar to those who know the current state of the field in Wales. Virtually all the authors have published related - and often very closely related - work elsewhere. Brian Roberts' chapter is (as is acknowledged) simply a reprint of his article from **Contemporary Wales** in 1995. The book stands or falls, then, as an attempt to give some kind of coherence to the field of social research in Wales at the turn of the century.

In this it is partly but not entirely successful. The editorial contributions are mainly a mapping of the theoretical positions and a summary of the contents of the book. There is no attempt to try to tie the discourses identities and images together, a point to which I will return. The greatest revelation of new ground is in Thompson and Day's chapter on 'Situating Welshness' based on a range of interviews with respondents in the Bangor area. It throws up interesting issues which could well be followed up elsewhere in Wales. Why doesn't someone interview the inhabitants of working-class Cardiff about their sense of identity? Not many of the chapters are able to provide such new interview or survey evidence. Roberts has some which display the increasing respect for the Welsh language in the anglicised valleys of Gwent, and Bella Dicks has also done such work on heritage tourism, though it is not presented here. Otherwise the authors mainly read existing texts. That is not to say that they do not do it well. Prys Gruffudd, always a lively, imaginative

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and intelligent commentator on cultural geography, does so with his characteristic insight. Charlotte Williams brings in the issue of 'race relations' and locates it against conceptions of Welshness in a highly effective way. Fevre, Borland and Denney occupy some of the same territory with more specific reference to north Wales. Charlotte Aull Davies extends her previous study of women in the nationalist movement to make more general points and to relate differing conceptions of women's role to differing kinds of nationalism. Dave Marks gives a revealing account of the different styles of heritage tourism in Wales bringing out the difference between the construction of the slate industry as an industrial experience while the 'great little trains' are severed from this context and located as part of an English fascination with railways. Along the way he wins this reviewer's prize for the best phrase in the book (it was not closely contested). These railways he describes as a 'narrow swathe of English eccentricity' (p. 202). One sees them in a new light - and I see them almost daily.

If Marks has some style, I thought at first that Dicks and Van Loon had perpetrated a hoax of Sokal dimensions in the early part of their chapter. Here the characteristic language of the book becomes self parody. Dicks is a lucid writer when left to herself, it must be added. This is a pity as their work contains some nuggets, even if extracting them is almost as arduous as gold mining in Meirionnydd. They show that the presentation of the Rhondda Heritage Centre is shaped by local perceptions of the area's past and has to be if it is to have any credibility. Yet the narrative of struggle stops in 1958 resolved into a welfare state and nationalisation.

The most impressive chapter in the book is Huw Thomas's on the restructuring of Cardiff. This is a splendid synthesis of work he has been engaged in for many years and brings an insider's feel for the processes to an engagement with the variety of planning initiatives. What distinguished his chapter, for me, is its sense of power and politics. He puts a variety of conflicting perceptions in Cardiff together and relates them to social conflicts. Marks also glimpses this when he defines 'place and its history [as] the outcome of a multilayered power struggle' (p. 206). Gruffudd too broaches a more general conception with his idea of the 'moral geographies' in inter-war Wales. Adamson loiters with the same intent by using Gramsci's idea of the historical bloc.

What is missing from the book is any attempt to construct this power struggle and its discourses for Wales as a whole. One starting point might have been Dennis Balsom's 'three Wales model' which was developed in the 1980s and established broad regional voting patterns in Wales on the basis of voters'

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perceived identity. Of the contributors only Roberts refers to this work. It is now supplemented by a host of electoral studies from 1997-9 and might have provided the editors with at least a basis for constructing some kind of framework for the book. Dicks and Van Loon miss the dimension of power in their chapter. While they rightly show the influence of local perception on the Rhondda Heritage Park, this was not simply the result of intelligent marketing. The early ideas which informed the park were much more Disneyesque but criticisms of the heritage industry which emerged in the later 1980s forced some kind of rethink. It is clear that the historian Dai Smith was an adviser to it - and the view which they argue that it presents is in essence his view of the history of south Wales.

What is helpful about this book - apart from the insights which many readers will gain from its individual chapters - is the laying of this work side-by-side within a theoretical context. That at least prompts questions about the shape of the cultural map of Wales in the late twentieth century. It would have been better if the editors had tried to sketch this out. But they do raise the question, at least implicitly. Social research in Wales has been characterised by the edited collection, as has been demonstrated here. This has meant the loss of some coherence and synthesis. What this collection indicates, both in its strengths and its weaknesses, is how urgent the task of synthesis now is. Graham Day, a stalwart of the Sociology of Wales Group, and the only contributor to appear in both Rees and Rees and this volume, is currently engaged in such a work. The time could not be more ripe for it.

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THE 'EUROPE OF THE REGIONS' AND THE IDENTITY POLITICS OF NATIONS WITHOUT STATES

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Some effects of economic globalisation like 'niche'-production, internal decentralisation of big companies, the growing importance of 'soft factors', and attempts to create 'industrial districts' are said to promote regional or national identities of 'nations without states'. The European Union, it could be argued, has reinforced these economic incentives by allowing and institutionalising regional participation. This article¹ will therefore sketch the 'regionalisation' of the European Union and discuss who might benefit from it, and analyse whether this kind of regionalisation effectively defends cultural identities. Here, the question is whether changes in the European arena enhance the opportunities not only for regional administrative institutions, but also for certain non-state nationalisms. What kind of nationalism might profit from it, what adaptations and sacrifices are needed to make non-state nationalism succeed in the new environment, and what gains can be expected?²

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¹ *This article is based on papers presented to the International Conference of the Regional Studies Association on "Regional Potentials in an Integrating Europe" (Bilbao, 18.-21.9.1999) and the ESRC Research Seminar "State and Civil Society in Scotland and Catalunya" in Edinburgh (21.-22.5.1999). See also my article "A unificación europea. Unha nova escena posible para os nacionalismos non estatais?", Grial (Santiago de Compostela) 138, 1998, p. 199-237.*

² *Examples are drawn mainly from the Catalan experience, but also from the Welsh and Occitan cases. For a comparison between the first two, see Loughlin, John et al.: Regionale Mobilisierung in Wales und Katalonien: Eine vergleichende Analyse, in:*

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Regions have been conceptualised as a third level of government, and it has been said that the state, caught in the middle, will be stripped of its power from above and from below, as if we were in a zero-sum game. The scheme has been called the sandwich thesis⁴, and seems attractive for minority nationalists. Its realisation would mean co-operation between the regions and Brussels, to the detriment of the State. The Commission might have an interest in strategically weakening the nation states, favouring a 'Europe of the regions'. As the European bureaucracy is very small, it might look for regional bureaucracies to implement its policies, circumventing the States, which might fight thoroughgoing 'Europeanisation' by the European Commission.

A different vision might be what has been called 'Europe with the regions', a less hierarchical and democratically less transparent mode of multi-level governance.⁵ 'Europe with the regions' means 'networking' and negotiations

Kohler-Koch, Beate et al.: *Interaktive Politik in Europa. Regionen im Netzwerk der Integration*, Opladen 1998, p. 182-228.

³ On the "Europe of the regions", see, among others: Borrás-Alomar, Susana et al.: *Towards a 'Europe of the Regions'? Visions and reality from a critical perspective*, *Regional Politics & Policy* 4, 1994, pp. 1-27; Bullmann, Udo (ed.): *Die Politik der dritten Ebene. Regionen in Europa der Union*, Baden-Baden 1994; Jones, Barry/Keating, Michael (eds.): *The European Union and the regions*, Oxford 1995; Kohler-Koch, Beate: *Regionen als Handlungseinheiten in der europäischen Politik*, *WeltTrends* 11, 1996, pp. 7-35; Petschen, Santiago: *La Europa de las regiones*, Barcelona 1993; Puhle, Hans-Jürgen: *Staaten, Nationen und Regionen in Europa*, Viena 1995; Rhodes, Martin (ed.): *The regions and the new Europe*, Manchester/New York 1995; Sharpe, L. J. (ed.): *The rise of meso government in Europe*, London et al. 1993.

⁴ See Eser, Thiemo W.: *Europäische Einigung, Föderalismus und Regionalpolitik*, Trier 1991.

⁵ See Hooghe, Liesbet: *Subnational mobilisation in the European Union*, *West European Politics* 18, 1995, pp. 175-198; Kohler-Koch, Beate et al.: *Interaktive Politik in Europa*, Opladen 1998; Kohler-Koch, Beate: *The strength of weakness: the transformation of governance in the EU*, in: Gustavsson, Sverker/Lewin, Leif (eds.): *The future of the nation state. Essays on cultural pluralism and political integration*, Stockholm 1996, pp. 169-210; Kohler-Koch, Beate: *Catching up with change: the transformation of governance in the European Union*, *Journal of European Public Policy* 3, 1996, 3, pp. 359-380; König, Thomas/Rieger, Elmar/Schmitt, Hermann (eds.): *Das europäische Mehrebenensystem*, Frankfurt/New York 1996; Marks, Gary

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between partners at different levels with different competencies and responding to different notions of legitimacy, even including private interests.⁶ The Commission, which has little in the way of own bureaucratic resources, is particularly prone to lobbying and the European political system has many access points. Everyone is aware that the Maastricht Treaty opened the way for a Europe of fast and slow routes, i.e. a 'Europe à la carte', and there has even been some discussion about a return to Medieval times, with unclear or shared competencies and overlapping regimes of governance for single policy fields.⁷ In this non-transparent situation, strong regions might act in some policy fields as if they were small states, but both would not be sovereign powers.

Regional politics is perhaps the field where direct contact between regional administrations and the European bureaucracy is most important.⁸ In historical perspective, this is a new development, since the Community had ignored the regions till the end of the 80s. The reforms of the structural funds and the doubling of their budget were a way of buying off the poorer states and preventing them exercising their veto in 1988 when the Single European Act opened the way to a really common market. But direct cooperation does not necessarily favour minority nationalism. One of the main reasons is the continuing omnipresence of the state. The director of regional policies in

et al.: Governance in the European Union, London et al. 1996; Négrier, Emmanuel/Jouve, Bernard (eds.): Que gouvernent les régions d'Europe?, Paris/Montréal 1998.

⁶ For the discussion of this interpretation see Kassim, Hussein: *Policy networks, networks and European Union policy making: a sceptical view, West European Politics* 17, 1994, 4, pp. 15-27; Peterson, John: *Policy networks and European Union policy making: a reply to Kassim, West European Politics* 18, 1995, 2, pp. 389-407, and Rhodes, R.A.W./Bache, Ian/George, Stephen: *Policy networks and policy-making in the European Union: a critical appraisal, in: Hooghe, Liesbet (ed.): Cohesion policy and European integration, Oxford 1996, p. 367-387.*

⁷ For a discussion of various scenarios, see Schmitter, Philipp: *If the Nation-State Were to Wither Away in Europe, What Might Replace It?, in: Gustavsson/Lewin (eds.) 1996: 211-244. See also Jáuregui, Gurutz: Los nacionalismos minoritarios y la Unión Europea, Barcelona 1997, chapter 4.*

⁸ For regional policies see: Hooghe (ed.) 1996; Leonardi, Robert (ed.): *Regions and the European Community, London et al. 1993; Marks, Gary: Structural policy and multilevel governance in the EC, in: Cafruny, Alan W./Rosenthal, Glenda G. (eds.): The state of the European Community, 2: the Maastricht debate and beyond, Boulder/Harlow 1993, p. 391-410.*

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Directory General XVI once said⁹ : '... dans le contexte ... des critiques assez fortes de Maastricht, le partenariat de la Commission avec les régions ne peut pas être un partenariat direct et exclusif. La règle du jeu définie dans les règlements fait que le partenariat est tripartite et non Commission-régions contre l'Etat (...) La commission ne se prêtera pas á ce petit jeu.' Another reason is the European system of NUTS regions, which does not coincide with nationalist aspirations or realities. Catalonia for example is not eligible for objective 1 subventions. But smaller NUTS regions which form part of its territory are objective 2 and objective 5b regions.¹⁰

Partnership in regional policy is less important for well-off stateless nations. But even these regions have found ways to draw on the smaller funds and programs. Catalonia's keen interest in trans-border co-operation may well have something to do with 'Prince INTERREG' whose 'golden kiss' awakened dormant cross-frontier co-operation schemes of regions which were not eligible for bigger programs. However, it has to be said that INTERREG funding is pretty small beer compared with regional fund subsidies. The truth is that some form of State co-operation is essential to lay hands on really sizeable funds.¹¹

The Maastricht Treaty introduced cohesion funds for infrastructure and ecology, to buy the votes of poorer countries and stop them hindering the path to the Euro. Despite being one of the State's richer regions, Catalonia received 18 of the 40 thousand million Pesetas of Spain's share of cohesion funds in 1995.¹² The Socialist central government's dependence on Catalan

⁹ Cited by Balme, Richard/Brouard, Sylvain/Burbaud, François: *Politique des coopérations atlantiques. Mobilisations inter-régionales et intégration européenne*, Bordeaux 1995.

¹⁰ Carles Gasòliba, General Secretary of the Patronat Català Pro-Europa and MEP for *Convergència*, prides himself to have lobbied successfully for those objectives, against the first Felipe González government which was more inclined to concentrate the money on the really poor *Comunidades Autónomas* (see interview in *EL TEMPS* 9.2.98).

¹¹ See Marks, Gary et al.: *Competencies, cracks and conflicts: regional mobilization in the European Union*, in: Marks, Gary et al.: *Governance in the European Union*, London et al. 1996, p. 40-63.

¹² See Petschen, Santiago: *Kataloniens internationale Politik: Zum auswärtigen Handeln einer spanischen Comunidad Autónoma*, *WeltTrends* 11, 1996, p. 79; Morata, Françesc/Muñoz, Xavier: *Vying for European Funds: territorial restructuring in Spain*, in: Hooghe, Liesbet (ed.) 1996, p. 194-218.

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nationalist votes undoubtedly had a great deal to do with this. Between 1993 and 1996, Catalonia received 15.13% of the Spanish share and it was the region (Autonomous Community) which got most.¹³ Nevertheless, Catalonia is said to be a net payer both to Spain and Europe. Between 1993 and 1996, Catalonia received 67 pesetas from Brussels for every 100 paid, whereas Spain received 199 for every 100. Catalonia seems to have been a net contributor ever since Spain joined the Community.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, Catalan nationalists are beginning to consider the disadvantages of being a rich nation in a poor state. Their enthusiasm for Europe may well cool if Catalonia continues to pay the piper without calling the tune.

There are two lessons for minority nationalists. First, the best way to lay hands on EU funds is to have one's State as an ally. Second, political influence in one's own State is more effective than lobbying Brussels in making sure one's own region gets the lion's share. Thus, the most effective strategy is not to seek more independence, but to achieve greater participation and influence. In Gary Marks' words¹⁵, 'When it comes to finances, the EU is a state-centric polity, and a regional government that is oriented to money will operate through national rather than European channels.'

Regional policy is, of course, only one side of the coin, freedom of competition being the other. Indeed, one could say that freedom of competition is a stronger feature of Commission policy. Rich regions (by European standards) may want to act autonomously and compete freely with other regions. But one should remember that the economic performance of European regions measured in terms of growth rates or per capita production usually develops in national clusters.¹⁶

It might be thought such considerations notwithstanding, 'Maastricht' meant a leap forward in the recognition of a third level in Europe. After all, did it not install a new collective regional actor, the Committee of the Regions (CoR), about which a great deal of ballyhoo was made?¹⁷ However the treaty

¹³ See ABC 20.10.1997. *The money was administered by Madrid and most of it still is.*

¹⁴ See EXPANSION 28.7.1998.

¹⁵ Marks, Gary et al. 1996, pp. 40-63.

¹⁶ See the empirical material presented by Borrás-Alomar et al.

¹⁷ See Dehousse, Renaud/Christiansen, Thomas (eds.): *What model for the Committee of the Regions? Past experiences and future perspectives*, Florence 1995 (EUI Working Paper EUI 95/2); Jeffery, Charlie: *Whither the Committee of the Regions?*

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provisions for the new body proved flawed and the purely consultative functions of this institution have proved a bitter disappointment to both the governments of Catalonia and the stronger 'Länder' in Germany (which had done so much to promote the 'third level').¹⁸ The first deliberations of the CoR showed that strong regions were losing out against weak ones, the latter often allying themselves with local authorities, which nationalists like Pujol and the Belgian regions and German 'Länder' had not wanted in the CoR.¹⁹ One of the first decisions of the CoR was to forbid delegated votes, a decision which conveniently ignored the fact that political heavyweights like the presidents of Belgian regions or German Länder simply cannot be present at the long sessions of a mere consultative agency like the CoR. One of the main cleavages in the CoR continues to be the origin of the deputies, who normally are seen (and see themselves) as representatives of their states, which name them according to their own internal rules.

CoR may well be an example for symbolic policy; it seems that Europe is intent on legitimising itself by integrating the regions in its institutional structure. At the same time, regional leaders can present themselves to their voters as influential politicians at a European level. It is questionable if the device will work in the long run. In any case, regional and local administrations which co-operate with their existing State and the Commission may profit more than regions seeking more autonomy.

Reflections on the Committee's 'Opinion on the Revision of the Treaty on European Union', Regional & Federal Studies 5, 1995, p. 247-257; Knaap, Peter van der: The Committee of the Regions: the outset of a 'Europe of the Regions?', Regional Politics & Policy 4, 1994, 2, p. 86-100; Fundació Carles Pi i Sunyer d'Estudis Autònoms i Locals (ed.): Regiones y ciudades ante la Unión Europea. La Declaración de Amsterdam de la Cumbre Europea de Regiones y Ciudades, y otros documentos, Barcelona 1997; Loughlin, John: Representing regions in Europe: The Committee of the Regions, in: Jeffery, Charlie (ed.): The regional dimension of the European Union. Towards a third level in Europe?, London/Portland 1997, p. 147-165; Farrows, Martyn: The Committee of the Regions: regionalising the Union or pacifying the regionalists?, Limerick Papers in European Integration 3, Limerick 1997; Farrows, Martyn/McCarthy, Rosarie: Opinion formulation and impact in the Committee of the Regions, Regional & Federal Studies 7, 1997, 1, p. 23-49.

¹⁸ See my article on *Problemes i tendències del federalisme alemany desde 1945*, *Afers* 35, 2000, p. 127-156.

¹⁹ The irony is that the local authorities were led by Pasqual Maragall, then mayor of Barcelona, who has been Pujol's antagonist in the Catalan elections in October 1999. Europe is sometimes as symbolic battleground for party contest at home.