

REVIEW: CULTURAL IDENTITIES

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Glenda Norquay and Gerry Smyth (eds). **Across the Margins: Cultural Identity and Change in the Atlantic Archipelago**. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002. Pp. viii + 214. £??
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The question of cultural identity is a tricky one and the question of cultural marginality even trickier. To think through the trickiness it is best to refer to those who have addressed these questions with a passionate intensity for, literally, their lives have depended on it. Take, for example, Jean Amery's reflections on the meaning of 'home'. Home, for the Jewish exile, means security, full command of the 'dialectics of knowledge and recognition, of trust and confidence'. Amery admits the possibility that what we today call globalisation could 'expel the homeland and possibly the mother tongue and will let them exist peripherally as a subject of specialised research only' (subjects which are indeed addressed in the book reviewed). However, experience of the absolute marginality of the European Jew obliges him to believe one simple fact: 'it is not good to have no home'.¹ Take, as a further example, Andre Gorz's meditations on identity. For Gorz, the intellectual, especially the marginalised intellectual, seeks to define a world in which being an outsider has been overcome. The defect of all existing identities, therefore, is 'their very particularity and their historicity', what Gorz calls that 'great flabby body' of nationality whose incarnation cannot be deduced by reason and in which everything is 'permeated by the smell of wine, vodka or beer'. The intellectual's quest remains that of an identity 'relieved of the contingency of existing and the 'metaphysical fault' of finitude'.² What is

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¹Amery, Jean (1980) *At the Mind's Limits*. London: Granta, 41-61.

²Gorz, Andre (1989) *The Traitor*. London: Verso, 196-99.

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sought is absolute abstraction. In short, Amery and Gorz expose the twin illusions of modernity: the illusion of cosmopolitanism in which the local is exchanged for the world and the illusion of provincialism in which the local sustains its authenticity against the world.

In their thoughtful introduction to this collection of essays, Norquay and Smyth note a similar 'negotiation' between these illusions across the cultural margins of these islands. (Since they claim that the term 'British' cannot now be used unproblematically, J. G. A. Pocock's expression 'Atlantic archipelago' is adopted as an alternative.) In their words, the recognition by contemporary thought 'that in a sense all national identities are "constructed"' operates alongside 'an awareness that culture nevertheless continues to be practised and, perhaps more significantly, understood, in terms of national affiliations'. Scepticism of cultural identities co-exists with the (selective) celebration of such identities. The contributors consider, from a number of angles, the respective merits of scepticism and celebration. As the editors admit, 'this disparate range of interests and material' may create 'tension' (p.6). It may also create incoherence, that curse of such books compiled from conference papers.

The essays are arranged into two sections. The first section attempts to theorise identities across the archipelago and comprises five essays exploring language, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and postcolonial theory. The second comprises five further essays on poetry, ethnicity and popular music, Welsh drama, Scottish art, and contemporary Scottish and Irish fiction. The aim is to move away from that model of political and cultural relations which assumes an English core and a Celtic periphery and 'to question the term "marginal" itself, to hear voices talking "across" borders and not only to or through an English centre' (p.2). That is an important critical enterprise. However, if one is invited to read across borders then one would appreciate some greater reflection by the authors across their own individual chapters. Rarely is this the case. More importantly, if the enterprise is to initiate a new critical subject then it requires some clearer mapping of terms by Norquay and Smyth (p.4).

Nor does 'theory' link the essays because theory is mostly incantatory (ritualised references to Barthes, Bhabba, Bakhtin, Spivak, Said, Memmi, Deleuze and Foucault) rather than explicatory (a systematic exposition of how postcolonial theory illuminates relationships within the archipelago). Colin Graham's chapter, for example, notes a particular Irish version of the illusions of modernity where the nation insists 'on being bowed down to,

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while at the same time pressing itself into a continual futurity which can never facilitate full definition' (p.48). Unfortunately, the opaque language frustrates insight and there is a disposition to accept rather than to question the relevance of postcolonial theory to the cultural politics of the archipelago. What the essays do share is a common grievance for which the term marginal is merely a vehicle. It is a grievance against England. Within the archipelago, the argument runs, Englishness asserted not only its cosmopolitan character against the provincialism of the other nations but also confused its own provincial culture with the cosmopolitan. As a consequence, the historical hegemony of Englishness promoted two anxieties at the margins: the anxiety of parochiality, in which acknowledgement by London (the centre) was thought necessary to validate local cultural achievement and the corresponding anxiety of influence, in which such validation also meant appropriation by English cultural hegemony.

The best of the essays engage with these anxieties and interrogate the character of the grievance. Murdo Macdonald's chapter on Scottish art is an important contribution to that wider debate amongst those scholars 'who take the plurality of Britishness as their starting point' (p.184). Shaun Richard's review of the plays of the Welsh dramatist Ed Thomas argues that the pursuit of the new is not necessarily the whole of creativity and evokes 'the regenerative possibilities' of the country's past (p.153). Peter Childs explores intelligently the contours of a more inclusive and expansive English cultural identity. However, a reading of Amery and Gorz would have prevented him from making the erroneous claim that 'Englishness is essentially only a vacant term' and from confusing this claim with the truism that Englishness is 'a constant revision of the traditional view of national identity in relation to the current population' (p.63).

This collection does not advance significantly our understanding of political and cultural relations in the Atlantic archipelago. The flabby bodies of its constituent identities make their presence felt but there is little sense of that common cultural space which they all inhabit. The 'more useful, and ultimately more enabling, positions' which this book seeks remain to be discovered.

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