

REVIEW: SCOTS' CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE

A. P. Cohen

Carol Craig, **The Scots' Crisis of Confidence**, Glasgow: Big Thinking, 2003, 308 + xv pp, pb., £14.99, ISBN 0954439600.

I doubt whether anyone who is interested in the study of Scottish society and culture could be indifferent to or agnostic about this book. One would either nod happily at its parade of familiar and clichéd stereotypes — antiszygy, fear of failure, suspicion of success, Presbyterian inhibition — as at old, familiar and comfortable friends. Or, like this reviewer, you would 'harrumph' cholericly at the author's misconceived theory and the concoction of simplistic generalisations which she adduces as evidence to support it.

The thesis is simple; I am tempted to say 'simple-minded' because, in a sense, that is the condition which Craig attributes to Scotland. She sees Scottish society as generalisable into a collective psyche to which she applies terms drawn from Jungian analysis, and from which she derives a deterministic culture which explains pretty well everything from economic failure to dreary conformity. Her intention is to compile a balance sheet of our cultural and psychological strengths and weaknesses, and to argue that the bottom line does not justify our lack of self-confidence.

Whose? You may well ask. At the very outset of this book there is a contradiction which Craig acknowledges, and then blithely ignores. She concedes, 'that it is extremely difficult to say anything meaningful about a people or culture as a whole. People are individuals ...' and then spends three hundred pages lumping us all into deeply questionable categories. How does she resolve this contradiction? By claiming axiomatically the reality of

*Anthony Cohen is a social anthropologist, unconfident (but not critically so), and author of **Self Consciousness** (1994), an argument against the over-generalisation of individuals.*

Scottish Affairs

national character — which she plainly confuses with stereotypical ways in which others depict us. The contradiction is implicated in the entire argument of the book, even leading to a tabulated comparison of Scotland and England. Thus, we are principled; they are pragmatic. We are opinionated; they are open-minded. We are judgemental; they are tolerant. We are 'collectivist'; they are individualistic — and so on. She compounds the contradiction by asserting its reality, arguing that Scottishness actually inhibits individual development and individuality. Her solution is that we should abandon our concern with Scottishness and national identity — the very concern which revitalised Scottish theatre, literature, music and politics over the last thirty years, producing devolution and the national parliament as a result. There is a literature on the relationships among individual and social identity; she might profitably read it.

If, like me, you are of the harrumphing tendency, you will ask, 'Which Scotland is she talking about?' Anyone who reads the press, or modern fiction, or Scottish history could easily find instances of the 'psychological types' Craig describes — and, equally, could and would find their opposites. I think the conceptual basis of her mistake is that she does not understand what 'culture' is, though as an anthropologist I probably would say that. After all, it is our core concept, just as 'mind' is for psychologists. Whatever else it may be (and it is a complex concept), culture is *not* deterministic, and there are few social scientists other than those given to tedious typologies of behaviour who would argue that it is. Craig may not describe herself as a social scientist (although her background is in political science); and I think would certainly not wish to be thought of as an academic. But that does not absolve her from a responsibility to use concepts drawn from social science with proper rigour, or to use the available literature rigorously (rather than very selectively).

I may well be over-critical, even stuffy, but it is a long time since a book has made me harrumph with quite such cantankerous indignation. I suspect this is because I am sympathetic to Craig's ostensible objective which is to question the justification for a putative crisis of confidence in Scotland, an objective which she fails to achieve because of the flabbiness of her argument. Too much is based on anecdote, or on a fortuitous story in the press, or the last book she has read. I cannot help but judge that the Scotland to which she refers is the world immediately around her. Any of us could put up countervailing examples by the bucketful. I do not recognise in her Scotland (a) the 1000-strong community of Whalsay, Shetland, which, thirty years

Review: Scots' Crisis of Confidence

ago, began to create the most modern and most valuable pelagic fishing fleet in the UK; (b) the Dumfriesshire farmers who, against the odds, have rebuilt their herds from the ashes of the foot-and-mouth epidemic; (c) the Scottish higher education sector which, for all its uncertainties over funding, recruitment and retention, does not evince to me any of the 'complex inferiority' which seems to have so impressed Carol Craig. Once again, you cannot simultaneously assert the existence of multiple 'Scotlands' (whether of the mind, or the body) and of a monolithic and homogeneous collective psychology which purportedly explains the real-world behaviour of Scottish people.

What might be said in mitigation? Craig's professional calling is as a counsellor and trainer, specialising in the bolstering of confidence. People's confidence deficits are thus her business; and it is therefore not surprising that 'the problem of confidence' provides a prism through which she sees her Scotland. It is a version of Scotland, albeit a polemical, partial and unconvincing one.

February 2004