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HOW NOT TO 'QUESTION SCOTLAND'

Gavin Miller

There have recently emerged a number of strongly-worded critiques of a malaise which is allegedly widespread amongst those who pronounce on Scottish culture. The sickness is called 'essentialism', and its symptoms are many, even though the pathogen is identical. The doctors who have diagnosed this disease have found it in the work of (amongst others) Tom Nairn, Craig Beveridge and Ronald Turnbull, and Cairns Craig. A striking recent diagnosis is provided by Eleanor Bell in her monograph **Questioning Scotland** (Bell 2004) – a book which is largely an assault on alleged essentialism, and which will provide a focus for my discussion. There have also been a number of other, more *ad hoc* criticisms from a variety of authors. A recent collection of cultural essays, **Beyond Scotland**, captures the mood well. We have all been stuck in the essentialist parish too long, implies the title; we need to get out more. The editors of this volume refer in their introduction to 'the damage wrought by an over-determined, self-defeating essentialism fostered by Scottish criticism's overweening desire for cultural self-determination' (Carruthers, Goldie, & Renfrew 2004, p.14). The essentialist sin is 'to mistake a complex, forward-looking, heterogeneous identity for one that is narrow and reductive in its nativism' (Carruthers et al 2004, p.15).

As the above quotation implies, sufferers from essentialism are taken to display a variety of symptoms. The following is a non-exhaustive list that I have culled from various recent critiques:

- investment in the idea of tradition
- parochialism
- singular self-definition

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Scottish Affairs

- stereotyping
- questionable generalisation
- cultural exclusiveness
- reductiveness

Few, though, have cared to explain at length, with appropriate arguments and counter-arguments, just exactly what is meant by 'essentialism' in this context. Even Bell's monograph never fully addresses this central issue. If we want to know what essentialism is, then we will have to start somewhere else.

Since the term 'essentialism' is derived from philosophy, this is the clearest starting point. What, philosophically speaking, does essentialism entail? The linguist and cognitive scientist George Lakoff sums up philosophical essentialism in the following way:

Among the properties that things have, some are essential; that is, they are those properties that make the thing what it is, and without which it would not be that *kind* of thing. Other properties are accidental – that is, they are properties that things happen to have, not properties that capture the essence of the thing. (Lakoff 1987, p.160)

So, for example, 'elephants might have evolved in North America, rather than Africa and Asia, and they would still have been elephants. But if no mammals with trunks, large ears, large bodies, and thick legs had evolved, then there wouldn't have been any elephants' (Lakoff 1987, p.172). If one then assumes that categories have an objective existence, then one can order the world in terms of natural kinds – these are classifications 'based on shared essential properties, as opposed to shared incidental properties' (Lakoff 1987, p.161).

National 'essentialism' (strictly, the existence of nations as natural kinds) is therefore most typically associated with ethnic nationalism: the ethnic descent group forms a natural kind (linked by 'blood') which, the essentialist argues, is the basis of a nation. In such a view, the nation persists despite any classification based on accidental properties (such as residency or civic allegiance) which citizens might care to make of themselves. Though, for example, the population of Alsace-Lorraine regarded themselves as French, the Prussians who invaded them were good essentialists who saw through this 'nominalist' fallacy (see Gilbert 1998, p.63).