

## **THE SAME, BUT DIFFERENT: WHY SCOTLAND?**

*David McCrone*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Forty years ago last autumn I became a sociologist. I went to Aberdeen in October 1965 to do English Lit, was persuaded into sociology 1 as an outside subject because history was 'full', and was immediately hooked. Though I didn't graduate for another 4 years, I saw the world through sociological eyes. I was lucky that sociology at Aberdeen was in its infancy; indeed, it was the 2<sup>nd</sup> department in Scotland after Edinburgh which began undergraduate courses in 1964. Others came later. Sociology, however, was largely *in* Scotland but not *of* it. As an undergraduate, I learned a lot about families in Bethnal Green, and gangs in Chicago, but virtually nothing about my own country. This was of course the era of 'us-too' sociology, in the sense that modernisation theory was supreme, asserting that social change was a linear process through which all 'industrial' societies travelled. (Later on, we had a phase of 'not-us' sociology which tried to convince that Scotland was some kind of colony of England, that it was systematically and deliberately 'underdeveloped', in the language of the day, but that didn't wash either.) That left of course a myriad of cases that did not fit the general theory, and inordinate effort went into showing that they were 'backward', unwilling to follow future pathways, or simply charmingly deviant and exotic cases which proved the rule. Scotland was probably seen as a bit of both, insofar as it was seen at all.

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*David McCrone is professor of sociology and director of the Institute of Governance, Edinburgh University. This article is based on a talk given to the Annual Seminar of the British Sociological Association Scottish Studies Study Group on 27 September 2005.*

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The key unit of course was the so-called nation-state of which 'Britain' was a premier and pioneering example. On reflection, the mid-1960s were the cusp. The long post-war period of economic growth hadn't yet come to an end; the election of a reforming Labour government in 1964 (after 13 wasted years, as I recall) ushered in much-needed cultural and legal changes; and by the late 1960s, 'les évènements' were happening, the Vietnam war was on (and we were protesting), and Scottish nationalism was giving Labour a very nasty fright.

When I came to Edinburgh a couple of years later, I was fortunate to encounter Tom Burns as the first professor of sociology. In his inaugural lecture of 1966 he commented: 'One cannot speak of a sociology of Scotland as one can of the Scottish economy'. What Tom meant by that was that sociology is not defined by its substantive area of study as are, for example, politics or economics, and that many of its sub-fields such as education, law, medicine, are defined by other disciplines or practices. He observed:

Sociology operates in and upon these fields in quite specific directions and in quite specific ways. It does so by questioning assumptions which seem to be made by people, and especially by people in authority in education, law, politics and so forth, about the behaviour of people. (Emmet and MacIntyre 1970, p.59)

'Scotland', of course, is not an 'institutional area' as such, but a bundle of these, which some of us have tried over the years to make sense of in sociological terms. In many ways Tom's comment about the sociology of Scotland has been the grit in the oyster for me ever since, as has his mantra that:

The practice of sociology is criticism. It exists to criticise claims about the value of achievement and to question assumptions about the meaning of conduct. It is the business of sociologists to conduct a critical debate with the public about its equipment of social institutions. (ibid, p.72)

Along with Tom's insights, I was drawn to C. Wright Mills's **Sociological Imagination** which made so much sense to me. I was also lucky to have colleagues who have been an inspiration and support during my career, and one of the main reasons I have remained in Edinburgh man and boy ever since. I take the view that social processes which may be very specific to 'place' may actually illuminate important processes that we are likely to miss.

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That will be my focus here. In other words, you *can* have a sociology of Scotland which has much wider implications than this small territory.

### **WHY SHOULD IT MATTER?**

The more conventional objection to a sociology of Scotland is that it is not a conventional ‘society’, and anyway is not different enough from the rest of the UK which *is* a ‘society’ because it is a state, in the parlance a nation-state. In other words, you can have a sociology of places if they are societies, where society = state = nation. That seems to me not only to be empirically dubious, but conceptually flawed, but very much part of our discipline’s furniture. It seems to me that we are wishing away many of the really interesting questions if we align these concepts, and anyway the world we inhabit no longer conforms to this crude model. Let us however examine where we got this idea from in the first place. Over 20 years ago, Alain Touraine observed:

The abstract idea of society cannot be separated from the concrete reality of a national society, since this idea is defined as a network of institutions, controls and education. This necessarily refers us back to a government, to a territory, to a political collectivity. The idea of society was and still is the ideology of nations in the making. (1981, p.5 (my translation))

This statement is still a commonplace in the social sciences, when another commonplace is not in operation, society with a capital ‘S’. Norbert Elias once observed that in talking about society, sociologists often refer to the diluted image of the nation-state, and possibly are less likely to refer to ‘human society’ or ‘bourgeois society’, for example, than their predecessors did. Either way, when speaking of upper case ‘Society’ or lower case ‘society’ – that is, the state – Scotland seems ill-suited to conventional sociological endeavour.

That, it seems to me, is an assumption too far. In fact, if we wish to use the term ‘society’ in a more meaningful way, we cannot simply (a) treat all societies the same (a temptation too easily succumbed to by theorists of globalisation, in my view); or (b) treat them like so many pieces in a jigsaw in which all fit together because they are labelled nation-states. In other words, I think we have to recover the term ‘society’ precisely because it is not coterminous with the state, still less a synonym for ‘nation’. It seems to me that society, state and nation belong to quite different aspects of social reality.

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The state is in essence a *political* concept, referring to a political apparatus of governing institutions – legislature, civil service, courts, ruling a given territory by means of a legal system, and with the capacity for force to back up its policies. A ‘nation’ is a *cultural* concept and usefully exemplified by Benedict Anderson’s notion of ‘imagined community’ (not, note, imaginary): imagined as a community of people, with finite territorial boundaries (usually, but not necessarily), implying self-determination, and community – deep and horizontal comradeship (Anderson 1996). Society – civil society, to give it its full and helpful title – refers to those areas of *social* life, the domestic, economic, cultural and even lower-case political, which are organised by private and voluntary arrangements between individuals and groups outwith the direct control of the state. Put simply, state refers to the political realm, nation to the cultural, and society to the social sphere.

At this point, I want to address what I think of as an important but dangerous development in my own discipline of sociology – a tendency to give up on the concept of ‘society’ altogether. In his challenging book called **Sociology beyond Societies**, John Urry (2000) accepts that it has been too easy to elide the distinction between state and society – certainly in these islands – and he comes, remarkably for a sociologist, to the aid of Mrs Thatcher and her famous statement: ‘there is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families’ (courtesy of, I seem to recall, **Woman’s Own**). Well, Urry says, she may have been oddly right, but not in way she meant. He argues that sociology must abandon its original practice of studying society as a set of bounded institutions – the study of structures – and instead focus on mobility, on movements. At a time of global change, process and networks, sociology seems to be cast adrift once it leaves the relatively safe boundaries of functionally integrated and bounded societies bequeathed to it by its founders, notably Durkheim. Urry comments:

sociology may be able to develop a new agenda, an agenda for a discipline that is losing its central concept of human ‘society’. It is a discipline organised around networks, mobility and horizontal fluidities. (2000, p.3)

In other words, we must seek a sociology of mobilities which disrupts a ‘sociology of the social as societies’ (p.4). This seems to me to resonate an old issue of studying structure and change, and while I have no objection to focusing on change, on mobility, it does seem to me to be throwing the baby out not only with the bath water, but even the bath, in a fairly spectacular

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way. Unless one really wants to hold on to the jigsaw puzzle of free-standing societies, then why not treat societies as semi-bounded, partial, overlapping systems and networks? I wonder if the susceptibility of some sociologists in these islands to be enamoured of globalisation is designed to let them off the hook of studying the complex and layered societies, and nations, which make up these islands, and indeed, this state.

There is an issue of legacy here. Sociology came into its own in the post-war period as a sociology of the welfare state, assumed to be homogeneous, and with social class its only meaningful stratifier. Recognising, as we do now, that 'Britain' (or the UK if you prefer) is not, and never has been, a nation-state in the strict sense of the term, but some kind of post-imperial state-nation, does not absolve us from puzzling out how its inhabitants make sense of the territories and social systems they inhabit.

Our work on national identities at Edinburgh indicates that people have quite complex and sophisticated understandings which don't seem to be interesting to many in the political classes and intellectual elites in these islands. Either, they say, the bits fit or they don't; either you're in or you're out. Well, no – that's not how it works, nor how people make sense of it. It is as if we have given up studying society because it no longer corresponds with the state and/or the nation (if they ever did), and study instead 'the world', as, of course, true cosmopolitans. I'd welcome that if it didn't seem to me to be a disavowal from doing the hard and interesting work of making sense of partial, multiple and overlapping societies in all their complexities, and actually making better sense of what is general and what is particular. I often wonder why so few sociologists south of the border find 'England' an interesting concept, in sociological and not simply in cultural and literary terms, and I am concerned that saying there is no such thing as society leads us on to say that there is no such thing as sociology. After all, political science can do the 'state', and social anthropology the 'nation'. Are we talking ourselves out of a job?

Why, then, is 'society' interesting? Once we have disposed of the powerful but confounding simplicity that societies are nation-states – and Robin Cohen has pointed out in his book **Global Diasporas** that there are around 200 states, but at least 2000 'nation-peoples', as he calls them, and so there is a lot of dislocation and ambiguous locations around – then we can get down to exploring society properly. It does imply a bounded social system, an overlapping network of social interaction expressed often in institutional and associational terms. 'Society' then is a unit within whose boundaries social

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interactions are relatively stable and reasonably dense, and while social interaction takes place across the boundaries, those occurring within it are frequently some of the most significant and consistent.

### **A SCOTTISH FRAME OF REFERENCE**

The separateness of Scottish systems of education, law, religion, in short, civil society, are what marks it out. In short, people think of themselves as Scots – and they do, in increasing numbers, while not denying that they are also British in a minor key – because they have been educated, governed and embedded in a Scottish way. It is a matter of governance, not of sentiment; and, if anything, the latter derives from the former. In other words, people think of themselves as Scottish because of the micro-contexts of their lives reinforced by, for example, the school system. This ‘governance’ of Scotland is a social system, but, especially in Scotland since 1999, a ‘political’ i.e. constitutional, one. A law-making parliament both embodies as well as transforms and determines that social will.

At this point in the argument one might usefully elaborate on the concept of civil society and how it connects to notions of capital. In Scotland it has been used to describe the relatively dense networks of organizations and institutions resulting from the day-to-day interactions of people, and which in turn circumscribe them. Above all, the distinctiveness of such bodies help to ‘Scotticise’ everyday interactions. Thus, for example, debates about education are framed within Scottish experiences and structures rather than English ones, even to the point of generating cultural as well as institutional differences. ‘Civil society’ has also done a considerable amount of political work in Scotland of a rhetorical and normative sort. The constitutional impasse of the 1980s and 1990s when Conservative politicians ran the Scottish Office without a popular mandate – the democratic deficit – helped to bring into being the Scottish Constitutional Convention made up of civil organizations such as churches, trade unions, community and women’s groups, and voluntary associations. The Convention helped to formulate the demand for a Scottish parliament – Home Rule – which Labour was required to implement when it came to power in 1997.

One might argue that this process was as much ‘political’ as ‘social’, and so it is. In practice, as our erstwhile colleague at Edinburgh Gianfranco Poggi has pointed out, the line of demarcation between state and civil society in modern times may well lack stability. Civil society institutions, notably those in the

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economic sphere, may need the state as ultimate guarantor, but their subsistence in a realm separate from that where the state predominantly operates is intrinsic to the very nature of the state, as a set of differentiated, specifically political institutions complementary to that realm. (Poggi 2001, p.145) This political process helps to explain why the notion of civil society seems to have wider currency in Scotland, but it also highlighted its ambiguity as both an analytical and a normative concept. In other words, it has some heuristic value in providing ways of measuring the density of civil society in any given territory, but on the other, it is used normatively to imply that it is a good thing. This ambiguity has been picked up by critics of the concept, who also point to its ethnocentric origins and assumptions (Kumar 1993; Kaviraj and Khilnani, in Khilnani 2001). Khilnani, for example, points out that there is no agreement about the proper location of civil society. He observes that the 'liberal' position sees the effective powers of civil society as residing in the economy, in property rights and the market. A more radical position locates it in a 'society' independent of both the economic domain and the political apparatus of the state, while conservatives locate civil society in a set of cultural practices and manners of civility which modulate relations between people and groups.

It is probably fair to say that civil society as a mobilizing concept in modern Scotland derives largely from the radical perspective, namely, that it provides the social hinge between economic capital on the one hand, and the political apparatus of the state on the other. Hence, its insistence that the new Scottish parliament should be premised on 'sharing power' between people, government and parliament which has been built into the institution's founding principles. In other words, a parliament became necessary to safeguard the democratic and self-governing mechanisms of Scottish society. This is set in a political-economic system which need not – indeed, is not – completely separate and independent: it is not a state, in the conventional sense of the term. Scotland is, however, an understated nation, and it is the cultural context, in the sociological sense of that term, which makes it so. Indeed, if one broadens the perspective, all or most 'societies' actually are that very thing. In other words, state and society, political and social realms, do not precisely coincide, and probably never have done. Perhaps we have allowed ourselves to be (be)guiled into a kind of parochial universalism which treats societies as essentially the 'same', except in so far as there are particular local colours to the same landscape. One of the de-merits of 'globalization' is that it perhaps universalizes and essentialises social and cultural change in an unwarranted manner and degree. Those inhabiting

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smaller, more peripheral societies do tend to see the world differently than those who do, or consider themselves to, inhabit the core, whether it is America or England.

'Cultures', comments Jonathan Hearn 'involve a certain density of institutions and interactions, but they are never discrete, bounded systems' (Hearn 2000, p.10). What they provide are systems for framing not only debate but also ways of seeing. Another example makes the important point. It is sometimes claimed that Scottish public opinion is much more left-of-centre than in England, that the latter is 'naturally' more right-wing – witness the Thatcher years – and that this accounts for the weakness of the Scottish Conservative party in particular. Again, it is not difficult to show that (a) there are more similarities than differences as regard political attitudes and values north and south of the border; (b) Conservative weakness does not derive either from being seen as an alien – English – party, nor as the result of social structural differences such that Scotland is more working class than England (it is, marginally, but all social classes in Scotland for that matter are less thirled to the Tories) (McCrone 2001). On the other hand, if we divide public opinion in Scotland and England into left, centre and right in ideological terms, in Scotland the centre more resembles the left than it does the right, whereas in England the centre is closer to the right (Paterson 2002). Further, the proportions saying they are Scottish not British, or Scottish more than British are 75 per cent on the left, 70 per cent in the centre and 56 per cent on the right, whereas in England the corresponding proportions (prioritizing English over British) are 36 per cent on the left, 32 per cent in the centre and 31 per cent on the right. Paterson observes: 'Governing from the centre in Scotland signifies Scottishness, and indeed attempting to govern with a British accent would tend to be interpreted as being associated with the right.' (Paterson 2002, p.212)

In like manner, survey research shows that there are few differences between Scotland and England with regard to the amount of 'social capital' people have, whether measured by associational membership, political activism, the willingness to trust those one comes into contact with (Paterson 2002). What is significant, however, is that people in Scotland with high levels of social capital tended to be more trusting of politics and politicians, and to believe that the Scottish parliament stands up for Scotland's long-term interests than those who are more cynical of the political process. Not surprisingly, the better educated and the middle classes have higher levels of social capital, and are more willing to trust the parliament and the political process. Indeed,

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the middle classes generally shifted their attitudes to devolution over the 20 year period. Whereas in the 1979 referendum on Scottish devolution only 40 per cent of them voted for an 'assembly' as it was then, by 1997, 69 per cent were voting 'yes' in the referendum for a Scottish parliament. It was this switch among the middle classes from 'no' to 'yes' which swung the result, given that the working class voted in favour on both occasions (by 57 per cent in 1979, and 91 per cent in 1997). It is likely that in the interim period the perceived attack on Scottish institutional autonomy by the Conservative government, and thereby on the middle-class cadres who ran such institutions, was sufficient to convert them to becoming strong supporters of the new Scottish parliament.

The key point is not that somehow Scottish and English people of whatever social class differ fundamentally in terms of political and social attitudes, but that there is a Scottish 'frame of reference', a prism, through which social, economic and political processes are refracted. In other words, the same or similar social attitudes and values will take on different forms of political expression. To be sure, many issues are common to all parts of the British state, indeed, to any late capitalist society. Just as there is little problem understanding that the French, the Germans, the Swedes react to these shared processes differently because they have 'national' frames of reference, most obviously expressed via political systems, one should not expect Scotland (and Wales, and England for that matter) to be much different. The issue is one of degree rather than kind. In other words, to reiterate Hearn's comment, cultures are never bounded, discrete systems, but they are distinctive.

Since the Union of 1707, Scotland has always been 'different' – the Scottish anomaly, as Neil MacCormick put it – a national entity within a unitary state. The 'difference' did not always manifest itself in quite the 'political' way it has done since the 1970s, but it was always there, to be mobilized in a political way as and when the conditions arose. If Scotland was 'unionist' and politically British in the 1950s (there was virtually no difference in how Scotland and England voted in this decade, nor in the 1960s), it was not because its people did not think of themselves as Scots rather than Brits, but because these territorial identities were sufficiently nested one in the other, and the political frames of references were very similar. Since the 1970s, we have grown used to the apparent contradiction between the frames of reference because of the emergent political-cultural conditions of the period. The point is not that suddenly Scots changed their values and attitudes, but that the political prism through which they expressed these altered. To put it

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another way, what was construed as ‘the national interest’ was defined differently. ‘Scotland’ rather than Britain was construed as the unit of political and economic management from the 1970s. During the 1980s and the Thatcher years, the middle classes in Scotland found their power eroded by a centralizing state in London, and it was this, rather than some sudden switch to the left, which swung bourgeois opinion behind home rule. To be sure, neither in Scotland nor in England did the middle classes become ‘Thatcherite’ in social values, as the series of British Social Attitudes surveys has consistently shown. Rather, north of the border, what undoubtedly occurred was that plainly social democratic values were in Scotland badged as ‘Scottish’, just as they tended to be thought of as ‘British’ rather than ‘English’ among the liberal left south of the border (Curtice and Heath 2000). The same sort of people, in other words, retained similar values but translated them into their politics quite differently.

The emerging Scottish frame of reference fixed a new dimension to politics north of the Tweed, reflected in but by no means coterminous with the rise of the Scottish National Party. This is perhaps how one should understand Scottish–English differences, not as the result of some deep differences in social and economic structures (because there are no significant structural ones), nor because there are separate ‘Scottish’ and ‘English’ values (again, because there few), but because the cultural prism for translating social change into political meaning and action is different, always has been, and, if anything, has become more so. That is what one means by cultural capital, and how it is different north and south of the border. It is neither essentialised nor contingent, but dependent upon what Bourdieu called *habitus* (1977, p.82), which ‘produces individual and collective practices and hence, history, in accordance with the schemes engendered by history’. If one has a sufficiently distinctive civil society evolving in the loose constitutional structures of the British state (where simple nation-building strategies are impossible, for what ‘nation’ means in these contexts is ambiguous), then the cultural prism through which politics, society, economy is done is bound to generate difference. It continues to surprise me that debates about ‘Britishness’ which seem to be everywhere in the British press at the moment cannot come to terms with the obvious fact that virtually all modern, post-industrial societies (or whatever one chooses to call them) are committed to justice, tolerance, liberty, public service, enterprise and so on. The point is not that such values are unique to any particular society or polity – they obviously are not – but that they are naturalised or domesticated as appropriate.

## CONCLUSION

Why should this matter? – because in many ways we may have inherited a conceptual tool-bag which serves us ill in the modern world. ‘Societies’ may not be states, and in turn, states are rarely nations *tout court*. These are concepts which require rethinking, or, at the very least, need to be disengaged from each other. What happens in this island archipelago of ours on the fringes of NW Europe should sensitise us to this task. There are two states (in terms the UN would recognise), at least four, maybe five, nations, and we haven’t even begun to unscramble how many ‘societies’ there are. One nation, one society, one state no longer seems possible or desirable. The conventional model of the ‘nation-state’ as a self-contained bounded social system is losing its *raison d’être* in the modern world. As Yael Tamir has observed: ‘The era of the homogeneous and viable nation-state is over (or rather the era of the delusion that homogenous and viable nation-states are possible is over, since such states never existed) and the rational vision must be redefined’ (1993, p.3).

Daniel Bell’s comment that the nation-state in its classical format is too small for the major problems of life, and yet too large to handle the small problems of life, is another version of that sentiment. The nation-state cedes power above and below itself, and while its *raison d’etat* may not have ended, it has certainly been transformed. Those who would draw a cultural and legal line around states, and impose uniformity within, are having a tough time of it. Let me stress that I am not arguing that ‘the state’ has had its day, still less that the whole world has become one, big commercial ‘society’ – the McDonaldisation of the universe, let us call it McWorld. The other side of the globalisation coin is the emergence of ‘local’ identities, as people make sense of these forces through the cultural and political apparatuses available to them.

The kaleidoscope of social, political and cultural change in the world then has been shaken; our theories of the world need re-examining in a very basic way. The world is not some uniform system, still less a jigsaw of nation-states whose pieces are made to fit together with time and patience, if it ever was so. That was the world, though, that made invisible ‘stateless nations’ like Scotland because they did not fit conventional models of the world. This, in hindsight, was remarkable, given the Scottish bedrock to sociology and the social sciences more generally. Scotland, far from being some kind of sociological anomaly best left to one side, or treated as a part of a

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homogeneous state of Britain, seems to me to become a particularly useful example of the fissiparous tendencies in the modern world, a world in which the correspondence of states, societies and nations is far less clear-cut. Instead of being an odd, ill-fitting case, Scotland moves to the centre of the social science dilemma about the autonomy and boundaries of societies. We owe it to our Enlightenment predecessors as well as ourselves to make proper sense of it.

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