

EDITORIAL: WHO DO WE THINK WE ARE?

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In the latter months of 1993, the issue of what Scotland is and who the Scots are has been highlighted by the activities of Settler Watch and Scottish Watch. Leaving aside one's own moral stance on these activities, it has been instructive to observe the reactions of their opponents. These have been overwhelmingly hostile across the political spectrum and ideological divide. The leader of the Grampian Tories laid into a local SNP councillor for letting the racist cat out of the bag, while liberal opinion has drawn parallels with the debacle in the former Yugoslavia. Even the representatives of the organisations themselves have been at pains to establish their Scottish credentials as non-racist and firmly centred within (left of centre) Scottish political discourse. It is inaccurate to see them as some kind of tartan version of the BNP in Scotland, and the discourse on 'white settlers' has long predated their activities.

The stushie over 'English incomers' is much more interesting for what it makes explicit about the discourses of social change. What make the phenomena of Settler Watch and Scottish Watch particularly significant is the kind of reality-testing involved. It is highly unlikely that these groups will convert many folk to their way of thinking, but they have made explicit a debate which is well worth having. How do we account for the extent and impact of patterns of migration both at the local and the national level? What is the language we use to describe and explain them, and is it appropriate? (Lest we think that somehow this is unique to Scotland, we ought to pay attention to similar ones going on in Denmark and the Low Countries about German in-migration.)

Our own debate takes place almost entirely in national terms; it is presented as a Scottish/English question. But it is not at all clear what we mean, and whether these are the most appropriate terms. 'English' is undoubtedly a shorthand for some complex and contradictory terms. (Perhaps the reader should pause and ask what the term conjures up to her or him.) Why has

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nationality been employed to make sense of social change, rather than, say, townspeople/rural dwellers, lowlanders/highlanders, or working class/middle class?

The answer is that these social categories are probably included in the Scottish/English shorthand, but that they are deemed of lesser significance. In other words, we have decided to use one discourse rather than others which might do just as well as explanations. We have chosen to use the language of ethnicity and nationality because that is especially salient in our current political and economic situation. But it is just a language, rather than a self-evident explanation. Even the category-terms we use are leaky. 'Sassenach' refers to the English, does it not? Not really: its pre 20th century usage was to 'sassuns' - lowlanders or 'English-speakers'. Think too of our own social and geographical origins. The forebears of most of us did not come from the district where we now live, and yet it does not take much time for us to feel 'at home', that we 'come from' a place. A 1970s study of 'Ford', a small community in the Highlands shows that no-one who lives there was actually born there (Stephenson 1984). The conventional Scottish explanation of this, of course, is to see it as the result of enforced clearances, and while these undoubtedly happened, it was far more common for people to up sticks and move in search of a better way of life. Our genealogical claims to our communities are far weaker than we think.

None of this is to minimise the effects of social change and in-migration, but to remind ourselves that this is largely a local not a national issue. After all, the percentage of people living in Scotland but born in England in 1991 is virtually identical (at around 10%) with that in 1891. At a community level, however, considerable upheaval may take place if local power structures are perceived to be taken over by 'outsiders', who may be urban incomers, middle class, or from south of the border. It is undoubtedly interesting that the categories used are Scots versus English, but what do they mean?

Let us ask ourselves what we mean by 'Scots'. There are at least three competing definitions. In the first place, we may adopt a genealogical definition in terms of our lineage. The longer the chain, the better our credentials. The problem is that not only are we pushed to construct our family trees, but there is more than a racial tinge to this. Before the last general election, one sitting Conservative MP was heard to contrast his own Scottish lineage with that of his SNP opponent of recent 'Irish' stock. Defining 'Scots' in this way is not a popular thing to be doing in the late 20th century. A second way is to short-circuit the lineage issue by referring to place of birth. This is convenient but little more, in an age when national

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football managers have to invent curious lineages to allow players to play for the national team. We refer, after all, to the 'accident' of birth, and as T.C. Smout points out in his article in this issue, tartan tammy-wearing North Americans in search of roots are mildly embarrassing to the natives.

Almost by default we fall back on 'territorial' definitions, but there is more to it than that. Small nations like Scotland have always been faced with how to handle the politics of ethnicity. Some seek to draw ever tighter and more pure definitions of nationality, while others try to encompass it as widely as possible. In the Baltic states since 1989, for example, there is a lively debate as to whether people of Russian extraction have the right to be Latvians or Estonians. Scotland's historic answer, as Robert Bartlett shows in his magisterial **The Making of Europe** (Bartlett 1993) was to invite in potential aggressors (like Normans) and domesticate them as Scots, with considerable success, as Robert the Bruce is testimony to. The debate about citizenship is not confined to small countries either, although they have a particular need to solve this ethno-political problem. Whether being 'German' is an ethnic or a territorial question is one of the central issues in German politics, given that it has implications for the treatment of Turks in Germany and ethnic Germans from Russia. We see too in Bosnia how national definitions alter under duress. Do you have to be a Muslim to be a Bosnian, rather than simply someone (an ethnic Croat or Serb) who happen to live in the territory?

The Scottish question seems far less pressing in comparison, but it too is subject to political and cultural construction like any other form of ethnic-national one. Our need to redefine who is a Scot is affected by the changing ethno-political circumstances in which we find ourselves. Inevitably there is a temptation to rewrite our history to fit contemporary political and social needs. We have embraced the European dimension in large part because it affords a means of imagining a new political identity while allowing us to escape from under the old British one. History will always be rewritten to address the concerns of the present rather than the past, but we risk doing an injustice to our history if we airbrush over the British dimension of the last 300 years. Not only was it possible to be Scottish and British for much of that period (over 50% of Scots still describe themselves in some degree, albeit weak, as British), but our very Scottish identity was shaped within the British state (think of the Scottish icons of militarism, tartanry and so on). We may be tempted to kit ourselves out in a new set of clothes as Scottish Europeans, but we can't unpick very easily the threads of our old British sarks.

The controversy about 'English' in-migration, then, provides an opportunity for confronting our taken-for-granted assumptions about who is a Scot (as

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well as who is English for that matter). It also helps to forefront concerns at a community level about the impact of social change. That these concerns are expressed in the vocabulary of ethnicity rather than class or some other social dimension should alert us to the power and the weakness of this discourse. The language of ethnicity may well cause us to mistake symptoms for causes simply because we use the wrong words to describe the underlying processes. Language has the power to obfuscate as well as to illuminate. The social and cultural conditions of the late 20th century both afford and demand plural identities, and nowhere more than in small nations like Scotland.

REFERENCES

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