

EDITORIAL: RHETORICS OF REGIONALISM

David McCrone

Christopher Harvie **The Rise of Regional Europe**, London: Routledge, 1994, 92 pages, paperback £6.95, ISBN 0415095239.

David Martin **European Union: the shattered dream?** Broxburn: John Wheatley Centre, 1993, 36 pages, paperback £3.50, ISBN 1873118082.

The failure of Charles Gray to get elected as president of the European Union's Council of the Regions (CoR) provides an opportunity to review the concept of 'region'. When ministers decided at Maastricht to set up the Council, there was pressure from Germany to allow it to grow into a possible second tier of the European Parliament. Instead, it was merely given advisory status, with little funds but a considerable volume of work.

Almost immediately its birth was announced, considerable jockeying began in Scotland where the issue of access to Brussels independent of the Conservatives in the Scottish Office loomed especially and unsurprisingly large. Given the weight of expectations, it was probably always going to end in tears. The desired agenda was quite clear. Charles Gray as the leader of the 24 strong British delegation (virtually all local councillors) thought that he had a fair chance of becoming president of the Council. The socialists numbered 71 members (the largest grouping, with the centre-right on 50), and, if he could win the support of his ideological colleagues, he would win the nomination. He reckoned without the byzantine politics of Europe.

The two major power blocs were to be the 'regions', and the municipalities. Gray's chances took a tumble when he was refused the status of 'regional' representative. The front runner was the centre-right prime minister of Flanders, and his socialist opponent, the mayor of Barcelona, Pasqual Maragall, represented the municipalists. At least, Gray thought, I have a good chance of becoming vice-president with socialist support. The scheme fell apart. Having withdrawn from the presidential race to improve his vice-presidential prospects, Gray was outmanoeuvred by Maragall who did a deal with the centre-right candidate, Jacques Blanc, a French Giscardian from Languedoc-Rousillon who had come through the middle. Maragall would

Scottish Affairs

become vice-president with a view to taking over the presidency two years later.

Such are the intricacies of Europe. In the words of the Scottish Conservative representative on the delegation, Brian Meek: 'This is the politics of consensus and compromise, of back door deals and late night discussions, of winks and nods, of many nudges.' (**The Herald**, 14 March 1994) Now nodding, winking and back-door dealing are not unknown in Scottish politics, especially in Strathclyde Regional Council, as Charles Gray knows painfully well. However, socialists doing deals with a rightist French politician who had a reputation for doing deals with the Front National was another matter.

There would be something faintly amusing about this episode were it not seen as another blow for Scottish aspirations. Charles Gray fell foul not simply of bobbing and weaving politicians (nothing new there), but of Scotland's anomalous status in Europe and the UK. The Council of the Regions serves two constituencies: directly elected regional authorities like the German *länder*, the Spanish autonomous regions, virtual nation states like Flanders, and, on the other hand, the municipalities, the big city-states like Barcelona, down to local councillors. Charles Gray's problem was that he represented CoSLA, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, which sees itself as a more representative form of government than the Scottish Office at the other end of Edinburgh's Princes Street. Scotland may pride itself on being one of the oldest nations in Europe, but it cuts no ice on that continent.

To understand why, we might turn to a recently published book **The Rise of Regional Europe** by Christopher Harvie. Here is confirmation of Scotland as anomaly. Harvie, in what is a comprehensive and allusion-rich account, reminds us of the complexity of regionalism in Europe. The continent may have been the locus of titanic struggles between the great states of the continent over the last two centuries, but its regional culture is ancient and complex. The concept of region, Harvie points out, is 'at once vague, specific and spatially intimate' (p. 9). In the Middle Ages, the region corresponded to the ecclesiastical diocese. The powerful city-regions (such as Milan and Barcelona) never gave up their powers to the central state. Similarly, with the onset of industrialisation, the new economic regions frequently had more in common with similar areas elsewhere than with regions in their own state.

The nineteenth century expansion of the 'nation-state' appeared, on the surface, to have eradicated the autonomy of the regions, but as Harvie remarks: 'The nation-state frustrated regionalism, but, as it intervened more in the economy, it promoted "regionalisation"' (pp. 23-4). While nation-building reinforced the power of the centre, and taught its populations how to live and

Rhetorics of Regionalism

die (especially that) for the fatherland, so regional identities did not disappear, nor were cultural differences simply realigned as national ones. Continental Catholicism, for instance, was not amenable to national identification. Socialists of various shades were suspicious of national identities' being superimposed on class ones. And despite attempts to concoct linguistic purity for each 'people', Europe remained much more polyglot than state structures felt comfortable with.

The three dominant Western European states, Britain, France and Germany, all had their own systems of political power and legitimacy, and within these regionalism found a role. The liberal-constitutional state of 18th century Britain had little to say or do about 'regions' because these were not its main focus of rule. Life went on in fairly autonomous cultural parts. The 19th century French state, republican and jacobin, did have a more coherent and centralist policy, but its ability to iron out provincial peasant habits proved to be quite limited in practice. The 20th century 'scientific rational' state of Germany had inherited a patchwork of regional differences, which came again to prominence in the Weimar Republic, and resurfaced in a new form in the post-war period.

In the post-war period, the European project has developed what we might call three rhetorics of regionalism. In its early days, regions were defined as those agricultural areas like the Italian Mezzogiorno which required economic modernisation to bring them into the mainstream of post-war prosperity. By the 1970s, this agenda of regionalism had altered to focus on declining industrial areas. This shift reflected the post-1973 oil crisis and coincided with the entry of Britain, with its legacy of industrial decline, into the EEC. The British view on entry was that, like Victorian missionaries, they would bring the expertise to deal with declining regions. For the next decade or so the 'modernist' strategy of the EEC was to channel funds to regions with problems of industrial decline in an attempt by the European and national states to combat uneven development.

By the late 1980s, however, a new strategy had emerged over which the EC, as it had then become, had little control. This time the regional project which emerged was 'bourgeois regionalism' or 'micro-capitalism', as key advantaged areas such as Baden-Württemberg, Catalonia, Rhône-Alpes, and Lombardy formed themselves into the 'four motors' of economic prosperity. Wales joined on the coat-tails as an associate member, but crucially did not have the necessary degree of democratic accountability to be a full member. This 'post-modern' form of regionalism was designed by affluent territories which catered for the requirements of hi-tech companies in the context of the internationalisation of capital markets. It seems significant that the latest form

Scottish Affairs

of regionalism is an economic adaptation to late capitalism by 'micro-states' who are able to use political and economic levers at their disposal, but who do not, as yet, feel the need to demand full statehood. That may come, *ab jure* or *ab facto*.

How fares Scotland in all this? The Council of the Regions debacle suggests that it is an awkward case. The implicit agenda for Scotland was that as a historic nation it had a strong claim to lead the regionalisation of Europe. But that is its problem, because Scotland is not a region. This is not simply to make again the slightly whingeing point that we are different, that we're not like the Saarland or the East Midlands. Scotland is a nation with its own history, culture and identity. The problem is that the regions of Europe which matter are those which have some levers of democratic accountability - like Catalonia, Lombardy, Bavaria. These are presently content to maximise their political powers within existing state structures, until such time as they outgrow them. Simply having formal statehood may not matter much. After all, these regions seem to carry greater economic and even political clout than the likes of Ireland, and possibly Denmark, and certainly Greece and Portugal.

Much of the confusion in the debate about a Europe of the Regions arises from the quite different versions of region that operate. At the cultural level, we could slice Europe up into regions reflecting religious and/or linguistic divisions which probably surprise us in the degree to which these did not correspond with existing states. We only have to drive across the territory to see how little correspondence there is between styles of language, religion, architecture, vis-à-vis state structures. It is hard to tell precisely where you are.

The second type of region we encounter is that which developed around the great European cities, the city-regions, whose power and wealth such as in Barcelona and Milan provide counterpulls to the national capital, except where the capital is also a city-region, as in the case of Brussels. In this regard, we might consider London to be less the capital city of the UK, and much more a city-region whose interests, political and economic, are not necessarily in alignment with the United Kingdom as a whole. In these instances, macro-national politics is almost an irrelevance.

The third kind of region is the administrative division of the 'national community'. In a British context, these are defined as the 'standard economic regions', but with implicit national hierarchies built into them (the North, the South, the Midlands - of England, of course - plus Scotland and Wales - what the BBC likes to call in oxymoronic form, 'national regions').

Rhetorics of Regionalism

Finally, we confront the region as a surrogate nation. Europe is littered with such examples, and many more in embryo. We may have rough and ready conceptual divisions between nation and region, but the claim to be in Benedict Anderson's phrase an 'imagined community' can be conjured up without too much cultural trouble. Whether or not the Lombards will fashion a distinct cultural identity and legitimating history can only be open to wager, not determined in advance.

A review of regions and regionalism, then, shows that we are dealing with rhetorics and discourses. It is clear with hindsight that Charles Gray's failure to get elected to the Council of the Regions had all to do with confused rhetorics. It was never likely that Scotland's historic status would be recognised by other 'regions' which range from Bavaria with 11 million people, to one district of 3000 people in Luxembourg. It is probably not a strategy Scots should put much faith in, given the lack of democratically accountable power at home, and the purely advisory status of the Council abroad. If Europe is not a community of nations in the true sense, still less is it currently a community of regions.

We are unwittingly part of a broader discourse about regionalisation and nationalism. Put simply, the issue is this. Does greater regional autonomy lead on to the demand for secession or not? The German answer would be no, as the *länder* - even those with distinctive cultural and economic power like Bavaria - have not demanded secession. Some members of what remains of the Italian state argue that the regionalisation of that country in the 1970s gave a major boost to secessionist movements, as in the North of Italy. This sort of argument would appeal to Conservative politicians at home, while the Labour party has placed its wager on the opposite outcome, namely that secession is more likely if no devolution of powers occurs. Time will tell.

The appeal of regionalism is especially strong to Labour in the 1990s. It is building up to a programme of regional decentralisation for the whole of the UK. The only question is whether it plumps for the same structures all round (on the German model), or recognises the demands of the Scots (and the Welsh behind them) for 'rolling devolution' whereby each 'region' is given the powers it requires when it requires them, in other words the Spanish model.

The regionalisation of Europe has found favour with Labour politicians such as the Lothian MEP David Martin who has published a pamphlet entitled **European Union: the shattered dream?**. Readers of this journal who saw his previous defence of a federal Europe (*Scottish Affairs*, no.1, 1992) will know that his answer to that question is 'no'. Martin is one of a new breed of social democratic politician who sees in regionalisation within and between

Scottish Affairs

states a means of overcoming the injuries of nationalism in 20th century Europe. Liberals have of course an older pedigree of supporting 'home rule all round', but there is tension in that party as in others between accommodating regionalism and nationalism in these islands. As others have pointed out, the problem remains one of weak regionalism in England, coupled with strong nationalism in Scotland and Wales, as there was in Ireland.

This tension has its own internal Scottish version, which is fairly much the orthodox wisdom among journalists at the moment. It surfaced again in March when the **Financial Times** did one of its periodic forays to the provinces to take soundings (18 March 1994: the other peripheral economy being reviewed on the same day was Poland). Scotland had become 'nearly a trouble-free zone', its headline ran, because the demand for constitutional change has gone quiet since the 1992 election and the 'victory' of the Tories over the Union. We have grown used to this response, just as we became used to frantic over-the-top predictions from the same community before the 1992 election. Telling journalists who asked (frequently) that the best predictions were that the Conservatives could gain up to three or lose up to three seats was not what they wanted to hear. Shades of post-1989 Eastern Europe were much more in order.

It is interesting, in the light of this discussion, to read that the FT thinks that the problem lies in too much regionalism within Scotland. The comment made by the editor of **The Herald** that 'Scotland is a nation so divided by regional jealousies and tortured by self-doubt' is taken down and used in evidence against us. This is a fairly standard accusation for Scotland's 'Failure' to develop rampant romantic nationalism where we all storm St Andrew's House. We should pause and remind ourselves that these 'regional jealousies' were remarkably absent in 1992, the year of that triumph, when the best the Conservatives could do was 42.5% in Dumfries and Galloway, and the worst, 20.8% in Strathclyde. Even in the Highlands, once such 'natural' Tory territory, they could only muster 22.4%.

You do not have to be a psephologist to understand the message of March 1994 opinion polls indicating a mere 16% for the constitutional status quo, 38% for independence, and 44% for devolution. The failure of the SNP to break through is the result of a strong nationalist showing for the newly minted Scottish Labour Party, and as this journal never tires of saying, you cannot equate 'nationalism' in Scotland with the SNP vote. We, even Ian Lang, are all nationalists now, in some form or another.

March 1994