

10 Gaelic in democratic nationalism

Anyone travelling through Scotland today will notice a feature that makes Scotland a national culture in its own right: Scottish Gaelic. Does this contradict democratic nationalism? Are the street signs in Gaelic, the identification of Scotland as a Gaelic-Celtic nation an indication of autocratic nationalism?

Andrew Mycock makes the case of Scottish nationalism being an autocratic nationalism based on ethnicity. He argues for an ethno-Celtic identification of the Scottish nation. Mycock notes that the “coherence of how the SNP understand an independent Scottish state, nation and people” is undermined by the nation’s identification as a Celtic nation (Mycock 2012: 54). For his research, he focuses on a short period from 2007 to 2011 and on a few speeches, events and programmes of the then SNP minority government.

He notes, for example, that in 2011 the then First Minister Alex Salmond spoke of an above-average number of “family ties” between Northern Ireland and Scotland (not without reason, see Leslie et al. 2015). Mycock also notes that during the 2010 election campaign, the SNP in Scotland and Plaid Cymru in Wales referred to themselves as the ‘Celtic Bloc’ to oppose the ‘London parties’. Another example of ethnic nationalism is found in a 2008 SNP government document. It describes Gaelic as “a unique and essential part of our rich cultural life, it is a national language” (quoted in Mycock 2012: 60, 56).

Tom Nairn saw this as a paradox of Scottish nationalism. In Scotland, there is a “huge, virtually self-contained universe of kitsch” (Nairn, 1977, p. 134). This kitsch is a necessary counter-movement to globalisation: “The least home-bound population on earth has generated the most home-bound and nostalgic ideology of Heimat.” (Nairn 2014[2008]: 397) As he aptly observes, Scotland is a “pre-globalised nation”. Perhaps no other nation in the world is as closely linked to the emergence of global society as the Scottish nation, which is characterised by intellectual traditions and migrations. However, what is Scotland’s “most home-bound and nostalgic ideology” about? An important part of it is Gaelic.

10.1 Multicultural integration by Gaelic

In some cases, Gaelic is reduced to economic benefits. In the often rural and impoverished communities, support for the Gaelic communities creates new jobs in education and tourism.¹ This is particularly the case in remote areas such as the Outer Hebrides, where many people actively speak Gaelic and, at 68 %, slightly more than the average (62 %) consider themselves to be exclusively Scottish (National Records of Scotland 2011: counted 11 thousand Free Church adherents; Tanner 2004: 7; for discussion see Brown 2017: 898; on Sabbath observance Rowe 2017: 27).² However, Gaelic is much more important in another respect. Gaelic serves the multicultural integration of the Scottish nation, as one parliamentarian says: “Gaelic has a privileged position because of the heritage and the desire to preserve the culture and the language so it’s always going to get special treatment.” (Meer 2015: 1490) Leith and Soule cite a case in which a member of parliament who presents himself as a Gaelic speaker sees Gaelic as a national peculiarity of Scotland: “[Gaelic] the oldest ethnic sub-group within Scotland in a way, you can almost argue that Gaelic was the language that made Scotland. What really matters to Scotland, initially identifying Scotland is the linguistic root.” (Leith/Soule 2011: 135 Interview 40)

Yet, it is not about the linguistic root why Gaelic is important for Scotland as a nation. Gaelic is invoked in Scotland to unite the population as a multicultural and historic nation. In Scotland, Gaelic is valued as a central factor in national integration across party lines, regions and languages. Shortly before planning began for the Scottish Parliament building, Emily C. McEwan-Fujita wrote:

“[T]he nationalist sentiment linked with Gaelic is not a ‘political’ nationalism but a ‘cultural’ nationalism, which can help Gaelic appeal to as large an audience as possible in order to ‘save’ it. [...] Because Gaelic has never been successfully or continuously linked to party politics, it has the potential to hold much wider appeal and to serve as an ideal mobilizer of general national sentiment.” (McEwan-Fujita 1997: 142f.)

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- 1 “The Gaelic culture exists, to a large extent, in urban pockets, rural areas and on the islands, areas where there is often social deprivation. In such circumstances, CNSA [Comhairle nan Sgoiltean Araich] groups not only offer children a place to meet, learn, play and have fun, but bring jobs – an estimated 200 full-time and 400 part-time jobs – that are important to the revitalisation of communities.” (Scottish Parliament 2000: 413; cf. Tanner 2004; McLeod 2001: 18f., 24) See, for example, the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act, passed in 2005, promoting the learning and use of this language.
 - 2 One example is the north of the Outer Hebrides and some communities in the Scottish Highlands, where in particular many of the strict Calvinists live (National Records of Scotland 2011: counted 11 thousand Free Church adherents; Tanner 2004: 7; for discussion see Brown 2017: 898; on Sabbath observance Rowe 2017: 27).

According to this, Scottish Gaelic, a language spoken by less than 2 % of the population, has a nation-unifying function for the entire population. This unification takes the form of a “general national sentiment”.

A few years later, the deputy presiding officer, George Reid (SNP), welcomed a debate on the issue as follows: “Welcome to the first Gaelic debate in the Scottish Parliament for 700 years.” (Scottish Parliament 2000: 382)³

In the ensuing debate, dubbed the ‘dialogue’, the main point is that Gaelic is more than just a minority language. The promotion of this endangered language is linked to the “heart and soul of Scotland”. As the initiator of the motion, Alasdair Morrison, puts it in Gaelic:

“I open this dialogue today. [...] I say dialogue rather than debate because I believe that every party in the Scottish Parliament is empathetic with and supportive of Gaelic and the heritage and culture intertwined with the language and those who speak it. [...] Gaelic is a precious jewel in the heart and soul of Scotland. It is not constrained within strict boundaries or herded into tight corners. Gaelic is national, European and international. It is fundamental to Scotland; it is not on the periphery or on the fringes. It must be normalised and its rights must be secured. There are many precious components in the heritage of Scotland, but none is as ancient, as profound and as worthy as the Gaelic legacy. [...] If Gaelic is a national asset, so is an education that opens doors to a bilingual and multilingual society”. (Scottish Parliament 2000: 388, 391)

Scotland’s sense of national belonging is linked to a Gaelic legacy. Michael Russell (SNP) takes a similar line. He stresses that the Gaelic language integrates Scotland as a multicultural nation. Furthermore, the Gaelic nation is directly linked to the question of national self-determination:

“I think that this is the first debate in Gaelic since the Parliament, or part of it, met in Ardchattan, Argyll in 1309. King Robert the Bruce was in your chair, Presiding Officer, and freedom for Scotland was the first item on the agenda. This is not just a historically symbolic occasion; it is a chance for the Parliament to think about the importance of Gaelic for the Parliament and for Scotland itself. There is a great need for Gaelic to be at the very heart of government in Scotland. [...] If our promises on Scotland’s culture are to mean anything, we must make a space for Gaelic – and Scots and English [...]. Furthermore, we should recognise a place for the other languages in Scotland – the languages from China, Pakistan and India which are spoken in our country and which give welcome life to our culture.” (Scottish Parliament 2000: 398-399)

3 I am using the version of the debate that was simultaneously translated into English.

This shows a hierarchy of integration. Gaelic is at the top, followed by Scots and English, and then the other languages spoken in Scotland. Recognising and ironically criticising the importance of Gaelic as the national language used by less than 2 % of the population today, the first writer in residence at the new Scottish Parliament building, James Robertson, wrote the sonnet *Signage*. He wrote it in Scots to note that those who designed the Parliament building were sticking to Gaelic, even though it was not the language of the Scottish people, who spoke Scots.⁴ George Reid refers to Gaelic, also in the context of multiculturalism, calling it a way “to express something of our multiple identities” (Scottish Parliament 2000: 410–411).

In Scotland’s political self-image, Gaelic is much more than just a language. It implies the idea of a multicultural integration of the Scottish nation, with Gaelic at the top of this hierarchy.

10.2 Celtic revival: From virtue to sentimentality

Today, Scottish Gaelic links voluntarism with sentimentality. This was not always the case. In pre-modern times, Celts were seen as virtue-orientated warriors, which, if one trusts the historical sources, they actually were:

“[T]he Tolistobogii and Trocmi took off their clothes before battle with the Romans, exposing their podgy white bodies, enhancing the vividness of their wounds as they were cut to pieces by the Roman forces. [...] In sum, the evidence leaves little doubt that to fight naked was comparatively common occurrence in the Celtic world. [...] Heroism is a leitmotif in classical accounts of Celtic warfare. Wounds were a source of pride and might even be opened up further by the bearer if considered to be too insignificant. Failure, particularly of a war leader, was unacceptable.” (Cunliffe 2018: 222, 229)

According to Barry Cunliffe, fighting naked and having wounds served to represent the virtues with which the Celts in general and the Gaesati in particular belonged to a warrior class in the pre-modern social order.

In the culture that first came about in the modern age, however, Celts are understood quite differently. The culture that formed with the functionally differentiated world society in the mid-18th-century romanticised the originally virtuous Celtic warriors as warriors by heart: “The most blatant case of invention came from Scot-

4 “oh there wis a right stushie ower the signs/first they wrote aw that bloody gaelic oot/naebody seems tae ken whit that’s about” (Robertson 2005: 17)

land, [...] the poems of Ossian”, says Barry Cunliffe and he goes on to say that this “romantic nonsense of this phase still persists” (Cunliffe 2018: 16f.).⁵

Marcus Tanner agrees with this shift from virtue to emotion through the invention of culture. He also identifies the recent “Celtic Revival” with this shift. It began in the mid-18th century, reached a peak at the end of the 19th century and has been gaining momentum again since the 1970s. In contrast to the earlier revivals of Celtic, this revival, which first emerged in modern society, is characterised by an interest in sentimentality:

“Typical is the blurb that accompanies *Celtic Journey*, a CD I picked up on the Isle of Man: ‘It means real music with real values, real ideas and real emotions. Celts are spiritual, proud, courageous and believe in meaning what they say. They are born artists, visionaries, warriors. [...] [T]he 1970s and 1980s saw Celticism emerge as kind of shorthand expression for almost any unorthodox or non-traditional spirituality. [...] ‘A revived Celtic heart would ... put women in their rightful place next to men ... [for] the old Celt understood the sanctity of life and the sacred interconnectedness of everything.’” (Tanner 2004: 5, 8f.)

For Tanner, as for Cunliffe, this is a sentimental romanticisation of historical facts that was only invented in modern times. It is about culture.

But what is behind it? Behind this transfiguration lies the search for a democratic identification of the nation. This idea only came about with the phase of democratic and autocratic nationalism that began in the 1970s. This is the reason why Gaelic has received much attention in recent years in Scottish nationalism and the policies of the SNP government.

In this phase of either democratic or autocratic nationalism in world society, the collective is conceptualised as an “‘attitudinal’ entity” (Parsons 1974). By this, Talcott Parsons means that in modernity, a view has prevailed that values “persons as individuals” and aligns collective identities with them:

“It seems to me that what in a religious or quasi-religious context we tend to refer to as love can be interpreted in more technical sociological jargon as a bond of solidarity between persons as individuals and involving their mutual identity as members of a collective entity which is mediated not by accessibility to mutual erotic pleasure but by a more generalised accessibility to an ‘attitudinal’ entity, which I call affect.” (Parsons 1974: 217; very interesting on this subject Burstein 2001)

5 The culture that determines ethnicity only came about through the functionally differentiated world society (see Luhmann 1995a; Stichweh 1999).

With the Celtic Revival Gaelic became important for Scottish nationalism because it is a resource for a sense of national belonging based on the voluntarism of individuals. Furthermore, Gaelic today enables a non-virtuous self-description of the Scottish nation. Fighting naked for freedom if necessary is associated with the hopes, fears and feelings of the Scottish people.

10.3 European multiculturalism

In addition, Scottish Gaelic as a Celtic language recognises the European component of Scottish identity. The Celts are being integrated into European culture. Barry Cunliffe cites many examples of how current member states of the European Union have provided the “galaxy of national heroes” with Celts in the 18th and 19th centuries: “Boudica in Britain, Vercingetorix in France, Ambriorix in Belgium, Viriathus in Iberia”. The following example by Cunliffe is more important for Scottish nationalism in the era of the European Union. Cunliffe quotes from the exhibition catalogue of the 1991 Venice exhibition “The Celts, the Origins of Europe”:

“This exhibition is a tribute both to the new Europe which cannot come to fruition without a comprehensive awareness of its unity, and to the fact that, in addition to its Roman and Christian sources, today’s Europe traces its roots from the Celtic heritage, which is there for all to see.” (quoted in Cunliffe 2018: 25, on Scotland p. 379)

As a culture, Celtic is added to the European identity. This identification of Europe with the Celtic sentiment adds a further interpretation to Europe. Europe is thus becoming less and less a religious-Christian social system, because further interpretations are added to this interpretation with the Celtic (and others). Each new interpretation reduces the relevance of each individual cultural-collective definition. This strengthens democracy based on individual self-determination. John D. Rockefeller already recognised this in 1919 with regard to “representation in industry”:

“Surely it is not consistent for us as Americans to demand democracy in government and practice autocracy in industry. [...] With the developments of industry what they are today there is sure to come a progressive evolution from autocratic single control, whether by capital, labor, or the state, to democratic cooperative control by all three.” (zitiert in Wilson 2019: 550)

With the expansion of function systems, including the increasing number of nation states, each time a new ‘subculture’ is added to the more comprehensive cultural unit and thus each particular culture becomes a culture alongside others (on this “cumu-

lative picture” of modern civilisations Deutsch 1953: 193; cf. on Europe Stichweh 2010: 82).

As in Ireland, Celtic is part of the cultural definition of the nation in Scotland. This ethnic definition through Gaelic strengthens Scottish democracy because it now combines sentimentality with voluntarism and history. Moreover, both polities, as Cunliffe shows, offered important retreats for Celtic culture, which had been largely assimilated on the continent by 100 CE at the latest (Cunliffe 2018: 379).

10.4 Conclusion

What potential does the Scottish quest for autonomy have for transforming democratic nationalism into autocratic nationalism? First, there is the enmity with England that is addressed in the hymn *Flower of Scotland*. Secondly, there is the potential for ethno-religious conflict associated with the monarchy (the Stewarts) or the state (Protestantism).

Finally, Gaelic and the so-called ‘Cardiac Celts’ (see already Manning 1982) offer ethnic potential for the transformation towards autocratic nationalism. But Gaelic is a minority language. It is spoken by less than 2 % of the population and is threatened with extinction. Moreover, the Scottish autonomy movement is based primarily on the political collective of inclusion. Numerically and ideologically, Gaelic does not appear to be a threat to Scottish democratic nationalism. Rather, Gaelic offers a national semantics of multiculturalism which, in the words of Talcott Parsons, “secures the equality component of the normative structure of modern society”. For Parsons, the equality of modern society lies in the “educational revolution” (professions) and persuasion, all part of the “fiduciary complex” (Parsons 1970: 33–38).

A Gaelic-speaking aristocracy, it is to be expected, will not transform Scottish nationalism into autocratic nationalism, nor will it be conducive to Scottish democratic nationalism:

“The link between the Gaelic language and Scottish nationalism [...] is a weak one. Support for Scottish independence by no means signals a commitment to the Gaelic language, and speaking the Gaelic language by no means signals support for Scottish independence. Language revitalisation efforts in Scotland thus have little connection, overt or otherwise, to the nationalist cause.” (McLeod 2001: 8)

Nevertheless, the importance of Gaelic and its association with a multicultural hierarchy of integration should not be underestimated. The appreciation of Gaelic in Scottish politics underpins Scotland’s inclusive imperative of democracy through multiculturalism.

