NOTEBOOK

Nationalist and institutionalist horizons in (post-)referendum Scottish politics

Arianna Introna

If a more honest dialogue on the Scottish independence movement is to be encouraged, the radical nostalgia that idealises it should be interrogated.

During the referendum debate on Scottish independence, Gordon Asher and Leigh French drew attention to the rhetoric of progressiveness that defined the Yes campaign. This rhetoric, according to Asher and French, was responsible for closing down debate on social justice while co-opting its struggles. As a result, 'what could be an opportunity for dialogue [was] instead functioning as a process of closure, where independence [was] posited as *ipso facto* "progressive"' (Asher and French, 2014a, 1). Post-indyref, Asher and French's argument is all the more relevant: both the independence movement and its relationship to the legacy of the referendum have not become emancipated from 'consensualism' and 'forced positivity'. Instead, they have become translated into a commitment to conceptualise the independence movement as defined by a radical impetus. However, this impetus, manifested in democratic renewal, a concern with social justice, and grassroots organisation in the run-up to the vote, cannot be approached in isolation from the nationalist and institutionalist dynamics that framed it. As Asher and French suggested in a later article, any independence

movement by definition naturalises 'the national-state as a naturally pre-given form' rather than as 'a historically contingent social construct' (2014b).

Jodi Dean's concept of horizon is helpful in thinking about both the rhetoric of progressiveness and the institutionalist and nationalist pressures operating in the independence movement. Drawing on Bruno Bosteels, Dean engages with the idea of a horizon 'to designate a dimension of experience that we can never lose, even if, lost in a fog or focused on our feet, we fail to see it' (2012, 1). On the one hand, the radicalism associated with the pro-independence campaign may confirm Dean's conviction that the horizon that frames much contemporary politics is that of communism, whether as a threat feared by the right, as a loss mourned by the left, or as the spirit powering twenty-first century social movements (2012, 53). According to Dean, within the communist horizon 'the field of possibilities for revolutionary theory and practice starts to change shape' and 'new potentials and challenges come to the fore' (2012, 11). Yes supporters and sympathetic commentators have consistently identified similar dynamics in the independence movement. On the other hand, if Dean's horizon constitutes 'a necessary dimension of our actuality' and 'the fundamental division establishing where we are' (2012, 2), nationalist and institutionalist discourses and structures possess a valid claim to fulfilling this function in the context of the Scottish independence movement, defined by the pursuit of independence or, failing this, increased powers for a Scottish state. In what follows, I will explore the changing, if persistent, relationship between progressiveness, nationalism and institutionalism as it emerges from post-referendum accounts of the independence movement before and after the vote.

A 'festival of democracy'

The progressive ethos of the independence movement has become identified with the democratic renewal the indyref is perceived to have enabled. In his post-referendum memoir *Disunited Kingdom: How Westminster Won a Referendum but Lost Scotland*, Iain Macwhirter declares that the referendum debate was 'a festival of democracy' (2014, 14). On the one hand, accounts of the pro-independence progressiveness that generated such a festival have been concerned to dissociate it from nationalism. For Chris Bambery, 'we need to repeat again and again that the 45 per cent vote for independence was overwhelmingly not for nationalism but for greater democracy' (2014). On the other hand, intensified political engagement has been put forward as proof of the departure from twenty-first-century post-democracy stimulated by the indyref. Macwhirter points out how the 'festival of democracy' that

was the referendum debate 'defied the conventional wisdom of political scientists and opinion pollsters who say that we live in an age of comfort, political apathy and retail politics' (2014, 14).

Indeed, the Scottish political context contrasts with scenarios defined by lack of democratic engagement. For Colin Crouch, 'democracy thrives when there are major opportunities for the mass of ordinary people actively to participate, through discussion and autonomous organisations, in shaping the agenda of public life' (2004, 2). Instead, 'unambitious democratic expectations of liberal democracy' and an electoral debate transformed into a 'tightly controlled spectacle, managed by rival teams of professionals' are conducive to what he calls 'post-democracy' (2004, 4). The independence movement afforded an opportunity 'for the mass of ordinary people actively to participate', and its activists asserted the right to shaping 'the agenda of public life' in ways that that Crouch identifies with a thriving democracy. For Susan Evans, Policy Unit Director of Common Weal, the indyref demonstrated that in Scotland 'the vast majority of people care about politics … *if* they believe their votes and other actions can make a difference. The myth of apathy has been dispelled' (2014).

Narratives of a 'crisis of democracy' therefore do not resonate with the experience of people involved in the referendum debate and its aftermath. In a recent lecture, Nancy Fraser has suggested that an administrative aspect and a legitimation aspect form the political dimension of the crisis of democracy we are experiencing. The former is rooted in the failure of 'institutionalised public powers … to take and enact binding decisions in the public interest and impose them on private powers'; the latter develops in the 'public spheres' where 'those who are governed must be able to scrutinise alternative policy proposals, while also clarifying their own interests and needs' (2014). For Fraser, awareness of and reaction against a legitimation crisis 'can lead to the sort of deep-structural transformation of the financialised capitalist order that is needed to resolve in an emancipatory way *all* the strands of the multidimensional crisis complex' (2014). In the independence movement, similar discourses have been mobilised to critique the managed politics and austerity policies promoted by Westminster: the independence movement has indeed been energised by its reaction against the administrative and legitimation crisis of the UK government. However, the 'deep-structural transformation' the movement has aimed to achieve has not been addressed to 'the financialised capitalist order'. Rather, it has been oriented to establish, or gain more powers for, a Scottish state imbricated in that very same order.

This has resulted in a nationalist and institutionalist bias whereby the focus on Westminster has shielded Holyrood from scrutiny – before and after the referendum. Reflecting on the failure to discuss 'the constraining influence of international political economy on the progressive ambitions of individual states' and 'the concrete mechanisms through which Scotland might actually break free from austerity' in relation to a future, independent Scottish state, James Stafford has recently questioned the democratic credentials of the pro-independence campaign. For Stafford, 'with hindsight, it seems clear that the Yes campaign's claim to the soul of social democracy was tenuous at best' (2014). This should come as no surprise if Dean's criticism of left movements that 'name their goal democracy' is borne in mind: Dean reminds us that struggles 'specifically' conceived as 'struggles for democracy' are not synonymous with 'struggles for the abolition of capitalism, collective ownership of the means of production, and economic equality within an already democratic setting' (2012, 57). Dean's and Stafford's points make it difficult to situate the politics of the independence movement squarely within the horizon of communism.

A very Scottish 'othering' of right-wing conservatism: class politics and nationalism

In the same way as the democratic claims of the independence movement have worked to distance it from nationalism, pro-independence radicalism too has been positioned in opposition to it. According to Macwhirter, 'the case for Scottish self-determination has nothing to do with "othering" another group or nationality', but 'if it is "othering" to oppose right-wing conservatism, then Scots plead guilty' (2014, 103). Neil Davidson agrees that for independence supporters establishing a Scottish state 'offered better opportunities for equality and social justice in our current condition of neo-liberal austerity', and was therefore 'a way of conducting the class struggle, not denying its existence' (2014b). In this way, the independence movement could easily be taken to have forestalled the demise of politics triggered by lack of anti-capitalist alternatives: for Alex Callinicos, 'capital is economically weak, but much stronger politically, less because of mass ideological commitment to the system than because of the weakness of credible anti-capitalist alternatives' (2014). Callinicos' argument is difficult to apply to a Scottish context. The same holds for his reflections on the fragmentation of the left, which he perceives to be rooted in 'the general tendency in advanced capitalist societies towards the greater fragmentation and individualisation', intensified by neo-liberalism (2014). In contrast to this, after the loss of the unifying objective of the vote, the independence

movement has presented itself as the bulwark against the atomisation of the Scottish left. As Jonathon Shafi from RIC remarked soon after the Radical Independence Conference 2014 (22 November), the success of the event demonstrated that in the independence movement 'while the uniting objective was September 18th, the uniting political ideas were about social, economic and political issues related to poverty, corporate power, war and democracy' (2014).

However, critiques of Scottish left nationalism have drawn attention to the correlation between nationalism and a reformist, rather than radical, class politics. In an older essay recently reprinted, Neil Davidson reflects on the connection between nationalism and capitalism: 'The capitalist system generates nationalism as a necessary, everyday condition of its existence. Consequently, it forms part of the reformist consciousness among the working class' (2014a, 31). In light of this scenario, Davidson concludes that in an independent Scotland there will be 'increased reformist pressure on workers, both to identify with "their" capitalism against that of other rival nations, and to unite with other social classes in Scotland' (2014a, 34). This pressure has been prefigured in the independence movement before and after the vote, and Stafford has challenged pro-independence radicals to face up to 'the evident limitations of Scottish statehood as a means to social justice – at least within the bounds of the moderately reformist politics espoused by nearly everybody in the Yes campaign' (2014).

In the opposite direction to that proposed by Stafford, while during the referendum debate there was resistance to identification of the movement as nationalist, post-referendum the revaluation of nationalism through its perceived connection with working-class politics has become commonplace. For Alistair Davidson, often 'debates about class and Scottish nationhood are polarised. Either Scottish independence is a pan-class end-in-itself ... or nationalism of any kind is a distraction from the task of fighting for social justice'. Davidson opposes this view and suggests that those identifying themselves as 'the 45' per cent who voted Yes 'understand something much supposedly informed comment misses – that nation and class are intertwined' within a context in which 'the Scottish working class will always be held as inferior and excluded in the British system' (2014). Davidson's argument supports Macwhirter's that 'Marxists always accused nationalists of inviting people to support a reactionary abstraction, the nation, that didn't really exist', but for those 'involved in the Yes campaign, their better nation seemed a lot more concrete and rational, as well as inspirational, than the dry abstraction of proletarian internationalism'. In light of this, Macwhirter calls for the redemption of nationalism from a

reputation that frames it as less radical than class politics. For him, 'after the 2014 referendum, the left has to ask itself whether it makes sense any longer to regard nationalism as an inherently reactionary and undemocratic force' (2014, 107).

As this suggests, post-referendum nationalism has become respectable on its own terms, allowing the naturalisation of the class politics-nationalist politics nexus, and the latter to comfortably colour the former without being scrutinised. In its post-vote statement, RIC declared: 'We were set up as something more than an pro-independence campaign' but 'we will continue to work with the independence movement, and will raise the need for Scotland to be an independent nation' (2014). Similarly, Scottish Left Project proposes to 'stand for the two spirits of '45: the vast grassroots movement that inspired 45 per cent of the population to vote Yes for social justice and equality in an independent Scotland' and 'the year of 1945, when the generation that had defeated fascism created the National Health Service' (2014). In line with this, for Frances Curran, Scottish Left Project is about people that 'consider themselves to be left, to be anti-capitalist, interconnected across the Yes campaign' (2014). And according to Cat Boyd, the initiative unites the desire for 'Scotland to be independent' with that for 'working class people to have a powerful voice' (2014b).

Prefiguring independence: grassroots politics and institutionalism

The progressive impetus of the independence movement during the indyref has been related both to its democratic and left politics and to its grassroots organisation, autonomous of institutional structures and perceived to have earned the Yes campaign the status of social movement. Cristina Flesher Fominaya describes social movements as 'one of the main ways in which people collectively give voice to their grievances and concerns, and demand that something be done about them' (2014, 7). Flesher Fominaya's emphasis on the collective effort through which participants find a voice and engage in political action resonates with Neil Davidson's investigation of dynamics whereby participants in the independence movement discovered 'aspects of their selves, and their capacities, which they had not previously tested', through the act of focusing their 'energy and attention on a new collective project' (2014b). On the one hand, the independence movement has presented itself as embodying what Peter Hallward calls the 'will of the people', through which the people 'prescribe, through the terrain that confronts them, the course of their own history' (2009, 2). On the other hand, it has proposed to realise in its own practice the self-determination it pursues for the nation.

Approaching the independence movement as a social movement allows considera-tion of its prefigurative aspects. For Marina Sitrin, prefigurative revolutionary movements 'create the future in the present': they 'do not adhere to dogma and hierarchy' but 'build direct democracy and consensus' (2006, 2) in the here and now through what she calls *horizontalidad*. According to Marianne Maeckelbergh, 'horizontality is both a value and a practice' that rests on the assumption that 'inequality will always permeate every social interaction' and must therefore be fought at that level too (2012, 211). In a fascinating article that came out during the referendum debate, Thomas Swann identified a key prefigurative element in the independence movement that operated outwith the framework of the official Yes campaign. For Swann, the groups that made up the movement were 'involved in prefiguring the independence they campaign[ed] for, and all without any coordin-ated leadership; in fact often in explicit rejection of any such centralised leadership' (2014).

However, alongside this prefigurative logic there operated a strong strategic pull in an institutionalist direction. In a recent roundtable Adrian Wilding, Richard Gunn, R.C. Smith, Christian Fuchs and Michael Ott have problematised the dualism between strategic and prefigurative politics in social movements (2014) that Mark Engler and Paul Engler had posited in a previous contribution (2014). However, in considering the independence movement, the distinction is worth preserving as it maps onto the tension between progressive and institutionalist forces by which the movement has been animated. Flesher Fominaya explains that 'prefigurative social movements attempt to embody through practice an alternative vision of society' and points out that 'for these types of movements, it would make little sense to evaluate their success or failure in terms of policy outcomes' (2014, 13). Crucially, this final reflection does not apply to the independence movement, which responds both to a grassroots base and to a strategy informed by the institutionalism inherent in the nationalist project of securing an independent Scottish state (or more powers for it).

During the indyref, the pressure exerted by the institutional context was downplayed but inescapable. Asher and French noted that independence functioned as a utopian condition to be achieved 'not through struggle but passive support for hierarchical campaigns derivative of parliamentarians and electoral strategists' (2014a, 2). Similar concerns were raised by Gunn, who pointed out the inextricable connection between nationalism and institutionalism: 'a small nation, even an ethically "good" nation – is an institution'. Consequently, 'an unqualified YES campaign ... celebrates an institution' (Gunn, 2014a) because a '*national independence movement*' is pro-

grammed to 'fix its eyes on the institution of the nation state' (Gunn, 2014b). Introducing a perspective further developed by Asher and French (2014b) and Swann (2014b), Gunn therefore argued for critical support for independence. His call for a qualified pro-independence stance should prompt reflection on whether the prefigurative side of the independence movement relates to the achievement of a more equal society, or to the containment of this within wider institutionalist horizons.

Post-indyref, the institutional framework to which grassroots mobilisation contributes has gained in legitimacy. Both activists and commentators have welcomed the increase in pro-independence party membership as a sign of continued democratic vitality. Such stronger legitimacy derives both from the opposition of pro-independence parties to Westminster in the context of the UK, and from their continued commitment to independence. On the one hand, as Macwhirter suggests, 'the experience of the referendum underlined to many the importance of ensuring that they elected political parties that promoted Scottish interests within the union' (2014, 158). On the other hand, as Nicola McEwen noted immediately after the vote, 'In the wake of the referendum, many now seem to see the pro-independence parties as the best outlet to advance their self-government aspirations' (2014).

In parallel, the grassroots have become comfortable with the nationalist, institutional politics conducted by pro-independence parties. Robin McAlpine, writing on behalf of Common Weal soon after the vote, declared 'our first priority must be to remove as much of the unionist powerbase in Scotland as we can ... We should begin by seeking to create an electoral alliance for the 2015 General Election' (2014). A Yes alliance is not likely to materialise. However, the popularity of institutional politics has not diminished. Rather, it has found renewed focus in Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland's new First Minister. For Christopher Silver, involved both in National Collective and in the new media that flourished during the referendum debate: 'Today it's difficult to live in one of the few countries in the world in which a female is the head of government and not feel the pull of genuine collective pride' (2014). In a similar spirit, Pat Kane has captured the intimacy between grassroots movement and institutions that has replaced, post-referendum, the awkward relationship that obtained between the two before the vote: for Kane, 'the new Era of Nicola would seem like the next expression of the positive, inclusive, modern pluralism that typified the whole Yes campaign', so that independence supporters 'rushed towards it, turning trauma into progress' (2014).

Indyref exceptionalism

So far, this article has examined the relationship between the idea that democratic renewal, class radicalism and grassroots mobilisation constitute the defining features of the independence movement, alongside the nationalist and institutional-ist horizons which have provided their conditions of possibility. It has pointed to an entrenchment of the latter, post-referendum, in the form of the intensification of trends established during the referendum debate itself. This suggests the need to avoid the 'indyref exceptionalism' that underpins the composite tendency to con-ceive of indyref dynamics as exceptional with respect to those developing post-referendum, and to see the indyref as having bequeathed to the independence movement an exceptionally progressive heritage to be defended and continued post-referendum.

The post-referendum consensus has been that the referendum debate has trans-formed Scotland through the unique political engagement it fostered. For James Mitchell, 'Scotland is widely recognised to be a changed place despite the majority voting in favour of the union', as in 2014 the country 'witnessed levels of public engagement and debate never before seen' (2014). In his compelling post-referen-dum account of the referendum debate, Peter Geoghegan has compared the atmosphere of the pro-independence rallies held immediately before the vote to that of 'occupied' places he had reported from – 'Cairo's Tahrir Square, Occupy London, restive nights in the Balkans – not the country [he] had lived in for the best part of a decade' (2014, 9). Amid the enthusiasm, fear that such inspiring political activity will not be sustained in a context of managed post-referendum politics has domin-ated accounts sympathetic to the independence movement. This unease was perceived and expressed by Scott Hames soon after the vote: 'the Yes campaign is over. It was a creature of the referendum itself' and 'the broad, sunny and direct appeal of Yes contrasts sharply with the long grind of triangulation and compromise likely to characterise the next phase of home-ruleism' (2014). However, while Hames' insight perceptively captured the mood of those involved in the independence movement before and/or after the vote, it downplayed the extent to which the 'furiously glowing embers' of the Yes campaign were constrained by institutionalist horizons from the start. These horizons had an impact similar to that exerted by the '"deep state" containment strategy' (2014) which Hames' work (2013) associates with devolutionary politics – only, in the opposite nationalist direction.

In the same spirit, anxieties over the possibility of nationalism taking over the progressive independence movement have been voiced from positions internal to

the movement. For Geoghegan, a major danger is that 'if everything becomes refracted through the "national question", the dull but vital business of quotidian politics can grind to a halt' (2014, 167). For Neil Davidson, if 'the main impetus for the Yes campaign was not nationalism, but a desire for social change expressed through the demand for self-determination, the danger is that it will now *become* nationalist in orientation' (2014b). However, these statements obscure the extent to which nationalism provided the horizon within which the independence movement could perform its progressiveness before the vote, in the same way as it does post-referendum: they therefore exemplify how indyref exceptionalism may pre-empt scrutiny of indyref nationalism and skew interrogation of its impact post-referendum.

Similar dynamics can be identified in relation to the institutionalist horizons that frame pro-independence politics. Neil Davidson has drawn attention to the risk that the independence movement might become 'an electoral support-group for the SNP'. For him, the new SNP members 'are unlikely to change its overall character as a mildly reformist party on the left wing of the social neo-liberal spectrum' (2014b). The risk of institutional domination has also been flagged by Geoghegan, according to whom 'the SNP and Scotland have become interchangeable in many party dispatches as if to suggest that what is good for the party is necessarily good for the nation'. Geoghegan is more hopeful than Davidson regarding the potential of a radicalised SNP membership (2014, 167). However, Gunn's warning about the risk of institutional co-optation does not leave much room for optimism: 'If an emancipatory movement enters institutionalist – corporatist or statist – territory, it does so at its peril', because 'it risks becoming institutionally channeled and controlled'. These dynamics are intensified in nationalist milieux as 'an individual who supports a struggle for national independence finds – and finds all too quickly – that an *institutional* component has entered his or her *sense of self*' (Gunn, 2014c). Gunn's contention significantly illuminates both post-indyref and indyref pro-inde-pendence politics.

Post-indyref nostalgia

The concerns voiced by commentators over the possible dissipation, post-indyref, of the progressive spirit of the referendum debate, under the impact of aberrant nationalist and institutionalist impulses, are informed by indyref exceptionalism alongside what may be termed a 'post-indyref nostalgia'. Commenting on Wendy Brown's reading of Walter Benjamin's idea of 'left melancholy', Dean disagrees with

Brown's suggestion that Benjamin's 'left melancholy' indicates that experienced by the 'revolutionary hack who is, finally, attached more to a particular political analysis or ideal – even to the failure of that ideal – than to seizing possibilities for radical change in the present'. For Dean, left melancholy is what informs practice that 'has compromised revolutionary ideals by reducing them to consumer products' (2014, 161). Both the attachment to an ideal associated with a past moment and the betrayal of radical ideas through compromise in the present characterise post-indyref approaches to the independence movement. The indyref is perceived to enshrine the essence of a precious progressive politics that has been endangered by post-referendum dynamics. At the same time, faithfulness to its legacy discourages critique and refusal of the nationalist and institutionalist frameworks established during the referendum debate, and carried over into post-indyref campaigns for home rule (if not independence).

Indeed, the imperative to continue the grassroots legacy of the referendum debate dominates all reflections on future directions for the independence movement. According to Gunn, 'in the weeks building up to the referendum, grassroots radicalism came into focus' and 'Occupy-style perspectives, including prefigurative invocations of participatory democracy, seemed not altogether remote from Scottish debates'. In light of this, 'to hold on to this fragile and tentative beginning is ... the most urgent task in Scottish politics today' (2014c). Similarly, for Gerry Hassan, 'one of the most positive aspects of the indyref was the self-education of hundreds of thousands of Scots'. Therefore, post-indyref, 'it is this rich practice ... which has to be encouraged and given sustenance' (2014a). The mood underpinning these statements is explained by Geoghegan, who suggests that 'the dynamism of summer 2014 has yet to fade fully. Whether this energy ultimately dissipates or can be turned into new, productive forms will determine the lasting impact of the referendum' (2014, 171).

However, as my exploration has tried to trace, the legacy of the referendum debate is defined not only by radical democratic and grassroots mobilisation, but also by nationalist and institutionalist pressures. On the one hand, respected commentators have emphasised the need to leave behind nationalist politics which were progressive before the vote but have become anachronistic post-referendum. For Hassan, independence supporters must realise that 'Yes and No are over. They are not the future. There is no future in them. They belong to the past – and died on September 18th' (2014a). On the other hand, organisations such as Common Weal and Scottish Left Project propose to channel grassroots energy by continuing, in constitutional

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contexts, the simultaneous espousal and disavowal of nationalist politics that characterised indyref radicalism. For Boyd, 'what we need is a further expression of the amazing, youthful energy of the grassroots independence movement', and what is necessary to respond to it is 'a new radical party' – hence Scottish Left Project (2014a). Common Weal similarly plans to 'pursue a vision of a better Scotland' by 'tapping into the energy and enthusiasm of the many people who made this movement so great' (2014).

Both the commitment to direct the independence movement away from intensified nationalist politics and the determination to channel its radical energy into organisations not hostile to Scottish pro-independence parties point to the interconnection between indyref exceptionalism and post-indyref nostalgia. The indyref is idealised as a period which, unlike the post-referendum, was defined by unproblematic progressiveness rather than nationalism and institutionalism. This within a post-referendum context that naturalises attachment to the ideal of a past, radical, pro-independence politics, alongside compromise with the (disavowed) nationalist and institutionalist framework that underpinned it. If a more honest dialogue on – and in – the independence movement is to be encouraged, the radical nostalgia that idealises the movement before the vote, ironing out its contradictions, and the indyref exceptionalism that associates the referendum debate with dynamics unrelated to post-referendum ones, should be interrogated. Appreciation of the persisting tension between progressive principles and their nationalist and institutionalist horizons, before and after the vote, provides a perspective from which this can be done.

Arianna Introna is studying for a PhD in Scottish Studies and Disability Studies at the University of Stirling.

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