

A Durable Concept: Anthony Smith's concept of 'National Identity' and the case of Wales

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Abstract

The concept of nationalism has always rested uncomfortably with the case of Wales. The territory's only recognised 'sovereign' institutions existed for only a brief period, five centuries before the modern 'Age of Nationalism'. Contemporary Wales has also rejected the principles of classical nationalism. A sovereign state, based on ethnic boundaries, has rarely, if ever, been a requisite for the Welsh identity. The 'nationalist' political party, Plaid Cymru, eschews the concept of 'independence', thus placing Wales in direct contrast to the nationalisms of territories such as Scotland or Québec. There exists, however, a more permeable concept that does help us to understand 'national' based political phenomena in Wales. Anthony Smith's understanding of national identity allows us to take account of both temporal and political contextual changes (Smith, 1991; 2001). This reinforces a recently-expressed view that the Welsh identity is indeed a 'situational' phenomena (Snicker, 1998). Such an informal approach to the 'nation' may prove to be of greater utility for both theorists and practitioners of nationalism, in an age that is witnessing a potential decoupling of the terms 'nation' and 'state'.

Nationalism

Broadly speaking, we can contend that modern academic literature on nationalism and national identity began in 1945, with Kohn's *The Idea of Nationalism*. The introduction to Kohn's work provides the classic definitions of nationalism and the nation-state. Nationalism is a state of mind, translated by man's conscious political action into a legal and material reality. The most important visible aspect of nationality is a common territory, supplemented by "a living and active corporate will" to form a nation-state:

"... As long as a nationality is not able to attain this consummation, it satisfies itself with some form of autonomy or pre-state organisation which, however, always tends at a given moment, the moment of "liberation", to develop into a sovereign state. Nationalism demands the nation-state; the creation of the nation-state strengthens nationalism." (Kohn, 1945, p. 19).

Elie Kedourie's *Nationalism* is the other key defining work of the period. The work outlines a relationship between individual, the nation, the state and God in the nationalist age. The opening paragraphs present an uncompromising definition of what the author perceives to be nationalism's origins and real aims:

"Nationalism is a doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century...Briefly, the doctrine holds that humanity is naturally divided into nations, that nations are known by certain characteristics which can be ascertained, and that the only legitimate type of government is national self-government." (Kedourie, 1960, p. 9)

Smith's definition of 'national identity'

“... ‘national’ identity involves some sort of political community, however tenuous. A political community in turn implies at least some common institutions and a single code of rights and duties for all the members of the community. It also suggests a definite social space, a fairly well demarcated and bounded territory, with which the members identify and to which they feel they belong.”

(Smith, 1991, p. 9)

Looking at the various aspects of Smith's definition, one might argue that in the Welsh case, at least, territory is perhaps the first requisite of the national identity. Without the 'pull' of massive economic, industrial and demographic changes, that drew hundreds of thousands of migrants towards the coalfields in the southern and north-eastern parts of the territory of Wales, then the basis for modernized and coherent national or even cultural identities would have been much weaker. Common institutions and a political community have developed in Wales, on an incremental basis, since around 1870 (Bogdanor, 1979; Rose, 1982). However, they have flowed from wider social and economic changes that took place earlier on a territorial basis within Wales (Morgan, 1982; Williams, 1985; Davies, 1993).

The establishment of the National Assembly for Wales, a measure of recent political devolution in the United Kingdom, after a referendum in 1997, might signal that Wales has, for the first time since the post-1789 'Age of Nationalism', obtained a 'single code of rights and duties for all its citizens', as Smith puts it, or that Wales has at least gained a foothold on this path (Wyn Jones, 2000; Osmond, 2000). Certainly, this civic approach to national identity was assumed by most political parties in Wales as a basis for an 'inclusive' model of self-government in 1997, that might bridge the popularly-entrenched geographic, linguistic and economic cleavages in Wales (Wyn Jones and Trystan, 1999).

An unqualified Jacobin reading of Welsh identity, however, does raise considerable points of contention. The Acts of Union between England and Wales in 1536 and 1542 stripped the Welsh 'nation' of any remaining independent legal and territorial structures. Welsh identity was therefore maintained, whether consciously or not, almost solely through the medium of the Welsh language. The translation of the Bible into Welsh in 1523—with the full authority of the (protestant) English parliament—served at least as an anchor for a living Welsh language in Wales, along with a tradition of dissenting Protestantism. The historical background of distinct Welsh religious structures, combined with the Welsh language, would prove to be a significant contributory factor to the Welsh identity during the 'modern' political age after 1870 (Butt-Philip, 1975; Combs, 1978; Fowler, 2001; McAllister, 2001).

In fact, we may note specific instances where a cultural-based form of mobilization has contested and even superceded the civic or territorial approach outlined above. First, and inspired by the Irish home-rule movement, younger members of the Welsh Liberals founded a pressure group for home rule, *Cymru Fydd* (literally “The Wales that will be”), within the UK Liberal party of the late nineteenth century. This movement centered on the dis-establishment of the Welsh and English churches. Broader calls for “home-rule all round” fell on increasingly barren ground, leading to the formation of *Plaid Cymru* (the Party of Wales) in 1925 as an independent political party.

Second, the contribution of Saunders Lewis, a founder member of Plaid Cymru, is key to an understanding of the contradictions of national identity in Wales. Certainly, he was important in helping to found a political party that would compete in Wales in elections on a territorially-defined basis. However, his most notable political contribution was probably made in 1962. In a BBC radio speech, *Tynged yr Iaith* (Fate of the Language), he argued that unless drastic political action was taken, the language, and therefore the Welsh culture, would be extinct early in the twenty-first century. Lewis stressed that political autonomy is subordinate to the need to preserve the cultural traditions of Wales:

"Maybe the language will bring self-government in its wake; I don't know. The language is more important than self-government. In my opinion, if any form of self-government for Wales was gained before restoring and using Welsh as an official language in the entire administration of local and national government in the Welsh speaking regions of our country, it would not be an official language at all, and its decline would be quicker than its decline will be under England's government" (Lewis 1962, p. 32).

Finally, the period 2001-2 has witnessed open tensions within the national movement in Wales. These have centered on a debate between the respective advocates of cultural and civic identities. Self-defined 'cultural nationalist' actors have argued that a 'consensus' of civic national identity, centered upon on Plaid Cymru's recent electoral success, has militated against the continuation of the Welsh language as a community language. The foundation of "Cymuned" ("Community") and "Cymdeithas DJ" ("DJ's Society" - after prominent Plaid Cymru figure DJ Williams) represent the first overt challenge to the civic ethos within post-1997 Welsh national identity.¹

Agents of Welsh 'nationalism'

If we look at the main agents of Welsh "nationalist" political campaigns since 1870, we see that they have been subject to a number of distinctive historic political and cultural influences. This paper cites four particular bodies a) Welsh Liberals; b) Plaid Cymru – the Party of Wales; c) Nonconformist chapels and d) Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg. The main strand running through each of these cases are the tendency to reject state encroachment upon the freedom of both individual and collective identity in Wales. They are therefore running contrary to a mainstream 19th century, Jacobin ideal of the nation-state.

a) The Welsh Liberal Party

The emergence of the Liberal Party in Wales, and across the UK, was facilitated by a process of electoral reform that took place during the latter stages of the nineteenth century. Thus, the Liberals gained a comfortable majority in every election in Wales from 1868 until 1922 (Davies, 1993, ch. 8). The party gained its popularity through campaigning on a wide range of issues, such as land reform, working conditions and,

¹ The views presented in the initial meetings and articles of these groups make for quite significant theoretical reading. See: www.cymuned.org and www.cymdeithasdj.org.

symbolically, on the proposal for Disestablishment of the Church in Wales. It can be argued that in terms of popularity and policy programme, the Welsh Liberals had indeed become the first “Party of Wales”.

However, Welsh Liberals of the period never countenanced secession from the UK, as was advocated by Sinn Féin. Indeed, it should be argued that the Liberal position was in fact to entrench Wales’ position firmly within UK structures. Having witnessed the failure of Cymru Fydd to force a home-rule act for Wales, David Lloyd George turned his attention to UK matters and ultimately rose to the position of Prime Minister.

b) Plaid Cymru / The Party of Wales

Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru (The National Party of Wales) was founded in 1925, by a group of Welsh cultural thinkers who had become frustrated with the failure of attempts to gain home-rule through the established British political parties.

Plaid Cymru’s founding president, Saunders Lewis, was determined that the dominance of the centralist state, witnessed in the UK, should not be replicated in a self-governing Wales. Furthermore, Plaid Cymru acknowledged from their inception the concept of shared or pooled sovereignty. Their immediate aim was for “Dominion Status”, on a par with the self-governing territories under the British crown, within the Commonwealth. As Combs (1978) notes, Saunders Lewis rejected the word “independence” out of hand in the party’s first pamphlet, *Egwyddorion Cenedlaetholdeb* (“Principles of Nationalism”), published in 1926.

Over seventy years later, when challenged on the issue of separatism in the first elections to the National Assembly for Wales in 1999, Plaid Cymru president Dafydd Wigley was able to point out that Plaid had “*never, ever*” advocated independence². A subsequent search of Plaid Cymru election literature has, in fact, yielded one official party document that uses the word ‘independence’ in explicit terms³. However, this document can surely be considered as an aberration in the overall context of party history. As Combs states:

“Plaid Cymru’s concept of political freedom for Wales does not connote either a self-imposed isolation or complete economic separation from England. The Party’s spokesmen since 1925 have carefully differentiated between the goal of national freedom and what others have labelled a quest for independence. To men like Saunders Lewis...freedom connotes a spiritual,

² *Western Mail*, April 13th, 1999.

³ “*A Voice for Wales in Europe*”, *Plaid Cymru 1984 European Election Manifesto*, pp. 2-3. Indeed, the whole tone of this document is out of character with Plaid Cymru’s gradualist ethos. Its blunt allusions towards economic nationalism and unilateral full national status seems to have more in common with the literature of the fundamentalist wing of the SNP, than with orthodox Plaid Cymru theory.

“Wales is energy-rich with a coalfield which is more viable than any in France, Belgium or Germany; with hydroelectric resources to meet all our energy needs when North Sea Oil is exhausted...Our deep-water ports, open to the Atlantic, could put Wales at the crossroads of the western world...Independence is the only answer and the crisis in Europe is our opportunity.”

moral and individualistic quality that the word independence lacks.” (Combs, 1978, p. 170)

c) Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg

The Welsh language has become a central, even an inherent component of Welsh nationalism. Prominent “nationalists” have argued that there is little worth in the symbolic existence of institutions, if the language and culture remains ignored. In order to understand this argument, we might consider two particular catalysts in the language campaign. First, Saunders Lewis, a founder member of Plaid Cymru. Second, Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg, a pressure group which took its cue from a radio speech made by Saunders Lewis in 1962, and has campaigned on most language-related issues, to the present day.

One of Saunders Lewis’ key political contributions was ` BBC radio speech, *Tynged yr Iaith* (Fate of the Language) (Lewis, 1962). He argued that unless drastic political action was taken, the language would be extinct early in the twenty-first century. Saunders Lewis’ call was answered by a group of members within Plaid Cymru, concerned that the party was failing to address adequately the perceived crisis of the Welsh language. Within twenty years, Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg (The Welsh Language Society) had campaigned extensively against public institutions in Wales which failed to recognise the existence of Welsh in the official sphere (Phillips, 1998).

However, the campaigns of Cymdeithas yr Iaith nevertheless implicitly acknowledged the context of the British state. The majority of members probably favoured a form of self-government, even independence. However, Cymdeithas yr Iaith never offered a blueprint for a future Welsh state. Despite the rhetorical criticism directed at UK state institutions, we should also note that their campaigns always assumed a UK governmental context. It is this reluctance to involve in a serious discussion of Welsh statehood that sets the modern Welsh nationalism of 1870-2000 apart from its counterparts in, for example, Ireland, Scotland or Lithuania.

d) Nonconformist chapels in Wales

The influence of nonconformist religion on Welsh national identity does not necessarily lie in its numerical strength or weakness, but rather in its more implicit social, historical and cultural influence. Until 1689, nonconformists could not be described as full citizens in terms of personal and religious liberty. Perhaps the most symbolic example of this predicament was the tithing system, which compelled every person to pay a due to the Church of England, regardless of individual faith.

The democratic ethos embraced by nonconformist church structures remains to this day, and may be compared directly with the constitution of Plaid Cymru, with its own emphasis on the strong branch - annual conference axis. By the beginning of the twentieth century, nonconformism had become synonymous with Welsh nationhood, to the extent that it was claimed at one point that “The Nonconformists of Wales are the people of Wales.” (Davies, 1993, p. 422). This was undoubtedly a highly exaggerated statement, yet the nonconformist influence upon Welsh nationalist tradition, and *vice versa*, remains unmistakable.

CONCLUSIONS

Use and misuse of concepts in the Welsh case

The main conclusion of this paper is that ‘national identity’, according to the terms of Smith’s definition, is probably more promising than “nationalism” or even “regionalism” for the purposes of an analysis of the Welsh nation. The concept upholds the validity of certain civic aspects, such as territory, rights, duties and institutions. It is also more definite than an “ethnic group”, which would not usually claim all of these specific civic aspects for itself. It also distinguishes the nation from, for example, the model of the French administrative/planning regions, that were founded on a fairly arbitrary, top-down rationale (Keating and Loughlin, 1997).

However, “national identity” does not go as far as to prescribe that the nation is inexorably bound-up with the state, and that it can only survive through the existence of a state apparatus. This is particularly appropriate in an era of multi-level governance and subsidiarity, where the demarcation of state functions and responsibilities is less clear. And there is one further point. By using the term “national identity” in the Welsh context, we are also free from the value-laden aspects of nationalism and the invariably negative overtones and fears of “separatism” and “isolationism”, that are exploited by the party political opponents of “Welsh nationalism”.

Indeed, such fears have also been betrayed in recent scholarly contributions (Jones & Balsom, 2000; Hazell, 2001). They have tended to assume a normative premise, namely that the current process of devolution should serve to strengthen the UK as a political union, and that this is indeed a desirable goal. Implicitly, this is to argue that the territorial imperatives of one “nationalism”-British- are either pre-ordained, or somehow inherently more desirable or legitimate than its Welsh, Scottish or Irish variants.

A different proposition is argued by Fowler (2001). Member statehood for Wales within the EU should not be rejected on subjective grounds. It certainly need not lead to a “constitutional cataclysm” (Jones and Balsom, 2000, p. 282). For example, the threat of political and economic isolationism on the part of the English right-wing, is harder to gauge. Taken to its full extent, however. Its consequences would present a far more pronounced “cataclysm” for Wales. In short, “Team Wales” – a WDA/Welsh Executive cliché - might have to be deployed in substance, in the medium-long term, for the prospect of being made to choose between either UK or EU membership. On the other hand, the paper would urge caution against the simplistic view, as apparently espoused by some activists, that Wales should vote for a platform of independence in an election on Thursday and expect 'Cymru' to be sitting in the U.N. alongside Cuba and Cyprus on the following Monday morning⁴.

Nevertheless, it is surely not unreasonable to suggest that, given the fragile position of the National Assembly within Welsh public opinion, and the lack of a coherent Welsh

⁴ <http://www.independentwales.com/gwasgcymrurhydd.htm>

language policy at a time of crisis for the language in its western 'heartlands', that the viability of an wholistic Welsh policy process itself will be dependent upon a strong representation of members - from across party lines - who identify the Welsh gradualist-nationalist tradition. This appears to be very much in keeping with Smith's notion of national identity.

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