

Crises Capitalism and Independence Doctrines

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“The interest of the oppressors lie in changing the consciousness of the oppressed not the situation which oppresses them.”

(Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1968)

Much of leftist debate on ‘the Scottish question’ is perplexing, not to say frustrating. What could be an opportunity for dialogue is instead functioning as a process of closure, where independence is posited as *ipso facto* ‘progressive’. Such thinking serves to elide and co-opt struggles for social justice in ways that demand critical attention. This article aims to open up a critical dialogue on independence, self-determination and nation-building, and to re-focus these questions on *participation* as empowerment.

Our notion of social justice encompasses both a politics of *redistribution* and a politics of *recognition*: an approach oriented to ‘changing both the economic structure and the status order of society’ (Fraser, 2003, p.22). Recognising the integrated nature of the injustices of contemporary society – also between societies – we propose a strategy of *participatory change* which exposes and addresses *intersectional* oppressions: how biological, social and cultural categories such as gender, race, ability, class (its status component), etc., interact at multiple, often simultaneous levels with capitalist economic relations to contribute to systemic inequality.

Rather than taking a pro- or an anti-stance to voting (if at all) in the referendum, here we seek to problematise the limits of the central terms, narratives, assumptions and promises of the independence campaigns, in a spirit of critical dialogue. An abiding concern is the importance of wider contexts, influences and consequences; we cannot

separate the assumed 'interest-bearing unit' of Scotland from its global socio-economic contexts.

In attempting to move beyond any simplistic yes/no approach, we ask:

- What is meant by independence, by whom, and what kind of society would an 'independent' Scotland be likely to produce?
- How might people work towards social justice through these communicative processes – if indeed it is possible within a nation-state framework intimately and comfortably tied to capitalism?
- What of the (progressives') appeal to notions of nationalism incorporating claims of 'self-determination' and social democracy?

Much independence rhetoric across the 'Yes' campaign(s) is superficial and internally contradictory – insisting that 'Scots' should vote yes whatever our competing conceptions of a desirable future society. 'Independence' here functions as a utopian category into which people pour their desires, hopes and aspirations – such as for freedom, equality and democracy, or simply for the fantasy of the good life. This condition is to be achieved, it seems, not through struggle but passive support for hierarchical campaigns derivative of parliamentarians and electoral strategists. Deferring to 'experts' only entrenches the alienation of people's own capacity to effect transformation, affirming the alienating paradigm of capitalist nation-state representative 'democracy'. This pattern guarantees that 'post-independence' power, wealth and resources will continue to be determined by capitalist relations, and the perpetuation of systemic oppressions.

'Democracy'

Representation is a mythical form of 'democracy'. It is neither representative of (or accountable to) those whom it claims to be, nor is it democratic: in that it does not lead to the people of a given state being the decision makers – to people having the ultimate power over policies to the extent that they are affected by them. Rather, it tends towards hierarchical, authoritarian, centralised rule through a set of institutions,

systems and relations: electoral systems, political parties, constitutional structures and powers (monopoly on violence), limits on political 'debate', voice and participation etc.

Further, it is vital to recognise that 'representative democracies' are set within (and serve to maintain and evolve) much wider networks and structures of institutional and relational power, serving to further foreclose notions of legitimacy, accountability and participation.

Even within this 'representative' paradigm, Scotland has yet to attain 'normative' levels of European democracy: At the local level Scotland is the least democratic country in Europe. The state of local democracy in Scotland means that it is virtually impossible for any community to make any decision about itself (Jimmy Reid Foundation, 2012). Debates around a sovereign parliament for Scotland also tend to neglect the contemporary culture of intense corporate lobbying at Holyrood. Critical oversight for informing such debate has been further foreclosed by the increasing neoliberalisation of the Scottish education system. Alongside corporate media influence, this has led not merely to the curtailment of holding power to account but exemplifies how corporate power is accomplished through integration into governance.

The referendum, we are told, is precisely about Scotland choosing its own future. But the SNP's vision of independence accepts in advance the neoliberal *doxa* of competition, markets and growth. It seems important to emphasise that *referenda* are not liberating acts of direct democracy. Capitalism isn't actually being threatened here; in truth, it seems many left-nationalists only dare to hope that a truly-'Scottish' capitalist society would be more generously welfarist and/or more industrious. Campaigning merely for a 'Yes' vote at the referendum arguably displaces and forestalls current popular struggles for transformation against current very real threats, onto an underdetermined yet supposedly more promising future territory.

The consensus around ‘competitive nationalism’ (where aspects of life and identity, including education, arts, sports and culture, are harnessed as marks of distinction; as competitive factors of national economic advantage) underscores the cosmetic nature of the select social-democratic reforms supposedly in prospect, just as much as the continuity-exploitation of oil and imperative of infinite growth on a finite planet.

Actual self-determination concerns individual and collective autonomy as articulated through *participatory democratic* decision-making – the difficult process of changing what the reproduction of life means in both pragmatic and phantasmatic terms – none of which is conspicuous in the campaigns thus far. We argue that political, economic and social transformation has to be communicated, contested, struggled for – transformation is not inherent to ‘independence’, and will certainly not be achieved simply by campaigning for a 'Yes' vote.

Geographical Communities

Focusing on nationalism – the mobilisation of sentiment around national identity – homogenises and flattens our multiple, complex and mutable identities thus masking oppressions, repressions and exploitations centred on them – as these axes of identity interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels, contributing to systematic social inequality. Surely this is dangerous territory for those of us focusing on social justice? This flattened discourse on oppressions has a strange, strangled way of representing ‘power’; always just out of view, as if the political class and its interests were merely ‘geographically’ bound, and spatial proximity was the real concern. The SNP have clearly decided that a ‘spatialised’ discourse is more palatable than more divisive alternatives; thus independence is about bringing power ‘home’, and ensuring decisions concerning Scotland are taken ‘in’ Scotland. This spatial cleaving sets up a disingenuous ‘location’ of the interests of the political class – and so also locationally legitimises them closer to home as the ‘solver’ of the internal effects of now ‘external’ problems. This model seems fundamentally anti-political, ushering in a *post-politics* for post-independence Scotland. Erik Swyngedouw (2009) characterises ‘the post-political condition [as] one in which consensus has been built around the inevitability of neo-liberal capitalism as an economic system’ – that is, ‘a political formation that

actually forecloses the political'. There is no alternative: TINA. Swyngedouw insists 'that this post-political condition in fact annuls democracy', as we are presently seeing in Ireland, Italy and Greece. What are the prospects for post-independence political action understood in these terms? An exercise in managing conceptions of governance – claiming consensual participation and community democracy for a process that merely delivers to neoliberalism a public neutered by its 'liberation' into the same old 'end of history'?

Having the political class closer to home doesn't necessarily make replacing them any easier, never mind challenging the idea of a political class *per se* (Glasgow Anarchist Federation member, 2012). If anything, the intensification of the nationalist-centred independence project championed by much apparently 'progressive' opinion could have a significant effect in mystifying power and oppressive relations and undermining self-organisation through their replacement by a passive, implicit support for 'the nation'.

Who is offering actual alternatives to the *disaster capitalism* (Naomi Klein, 2007) of continued and entrenched 'austerity' – in reality, the rapid-fire corporate-state re-engineering of societies reeling from shock?

Incidental heirs?

Nation states are not *natural* but historically contingent, ongoing political constructs, reflective of power struggles of empire and colonialism. 'Scots' have been foot-soldiers, leaders and beneficiaries of empire and neo-colonialism – not just historically, but in the present. Scotland's institutions, systems of law and governance, its pursuance of economics and politics, sit within that, not aside or separate from it, but as fundamental functioning, reproductive participants in it. Scotland is not simply some colonially-tainted otherwise-bastion-of-virtue that can be removed from the history upon which where we are today is contingent. Scotland participated in, and reproduced, modes of oppression many nationalists would like to externalise as 'alien' to claimed core national social democratic values, the remedy to which figures independence as mystical 'release'.

Where does this leave hopes for participatory democracy? The 'civic' dimension of the SNP's nationalism is an ideology of social partnership predicated on the managed appearance of public participation. It is about delivering people to policy – to the imperatives of neoliberal capitalism. If independence is 'achieved' on these terms we will merely have replaced one set of post-democratic political managers with another.

Moreover, if 'Scotland' remains as fully within and reproducing international capital relations, to what extent can it be 'sovereign' (within the realities of a nexus of powerful governments, institutions and financial interests: US, EU, NATO, UN, IMF, World Bank, WTO)? We are therefore left asking if it's at all possible to seek transformation for social justice through voting for independence if any campaigning for any new nation state is *ipso facto* nation building?

Beyond State and Capital?

What roles, if any, can exist for notions of independence or national self-determination? If such roles are possible (thereby raising transitional issues), can a conception of independence for Scotland provide a useful opportunity in struggles for social justice? Further, if it can be, is it at present? And if not, how could it be?

How can a process for and beyond independence take an antithetic stance in acknowledging the realities of empire and neo-colonialism, past and present? One that is also necessarily anti-capitalist? For the oppressions these produce are intertwined – throughout, across, and between societies. As post-Soviet 'new' states exemplify, multinational interests can also thrive on smaller 'centralised' inter-dependent states.

Must such stances lead to a position, in the here and now, that rejects states and nations? Or might such stances accept the tactical desirability of transitional arrangements, perhaps even viewed as necessarily pre-conditional, that encompass the (re)creation of nation states?

How, if at all, do such considerations play out with regard to actual and potential moves towards independence for Scotland? If social justice is the vision, what strategies, based in our contemporary contextual realities, can get us from this here to those there-s?

What we perceive in much of the contemporary framing of this debate is a division between state-building (the political classes and the continuity of their privileges/interests) and securing a referendum 'win' through identitarian myth building. What is to be the relationship between the state and society? Who is to decide? How? And if not in the 'doing' then when?

It would be pointless 'breaking' the British state only for it to come back in multiple forms of itself, replicating the self-same interests/ powers/ privileges. So it's not just a case of voting to dismantle a British state structure, while leaving concurrent interests intact, but of politicising the processes and realising the participatory potentials of *actually* disassembling state power. Taking an active role, as agents in these processes, cannot be postponed out of perceived 'fragility' in the present, nor in the name of 'unity'. Independence is not a moment to vote for, but a process of state formation to participate in (or be excluded from) or to resist.

Our concern with the 'Yes' campaigns' consensualism, and forced positivity from progressives generally, is the consequences if not always intent of their proposals; if they were successful, they should leave us *in, with, and for* the nexus of capitalism/ nation state/ representative 'democracy'.

Our proposal is for a clearer orientation of not just 'against', but 'beyond' – speaking to a society and world that is post- both capitalism and nation state. A dissolving rather than a devolving of the state –which may include independence. A proposal for collective grass-roots empowerment, of praxis for social justice. One premised on dialogues which engage issues of independence, nationalism and self-determination – and allow for divergences and possible futures on the way. Processes that continue whatever the results of the referendum.

These debates need to be about *being* and *becoming*, rather than accepting a flattening assertion of who ‘we’ are as premised on a mythical, ‘natural’, homogenised and non-conflicted past and promised future. It is not about imagining a better capitalism – though non-reformist reforms will be essential to achieving transformational change – it is about working towards a post-capitalist society. It is about other, better, worlds that are possible, necessary and under construction.

Yes, against the plodding redundancy of positivism

Yes, to something more than a contingently agreed upon consensus

Yes, to concerns that political action is denied any space for critical self-reflection

Yes, to the interrogation of existing circumstances and contexts

Yes, to going forward in terms which do not confirm the social status quo

Yes, let dialogue and discussion proliferate, disrespectful of authority

Yes, against merely reproducing the categories which underwrite existing alienations – the existing order of social things

Yes, let's undermine the hegemonic ‘common sense’– that which appears obvious beyond question

Yes, to politicising a social or ‘public’ world, thinking through and articulating the changes before us

Yes, to the free exchange and dissemination of ideas, to processes always alive to the circumstances of change, to possibilities and potential – to hope

Yes, to practical reflexivity, to place at issue anything and everything

Yes to exposing the power of language and to education for social justice and democracy

Yes, not as a seamless monolith but as the movements of contradiction and tension

Yes, to propagation of critical thought, to unearth the hidden, the obscured, the mythical

Yes, to questioning the adequacy of traditional political theory and practice, to the status of the law, and to the supposed benefits of the capitalist social democratic state

Yes, to a recognition of our individual and collective agency

Yes, to participatory democracy, and to an anti-capitalist stance to the economy

Yes, to an intercommunalist stance to community, culture and identity, and to a queer/feminist one to patriarchy and gender/sex relations

Yes, to sustainable ecology and to relations between nations being peaceful and just

Yes, to praxis, to new ways of thinking, talking and acting, living and relating – of being and becoming

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