

The Case for Left Wing Nationalism

By Stephen Maxwell
Luath Press, 2013
ISBN 9781908373878
£9.99

The educator, according to Paulo Freire, cannot claim neutrality – to do so is both deceitful and to side with the oppressor. Personally, I am partisan about the progressive socialist possibilities presented by the forthcoming Referendum on Scottish Independence. I feel Stephen Maxwell's posthumous collection of political and cultural essays is a necessary, valuable and exciting contribution to the current debate. Maxwell is, I think, determinedly radical in attempting to create a rupture that might ensure the break-up of the archaic, imperialist British State. Not only does his book display Gramscian analytical insight, it is also a manifesto, and indeed a curriculum, to base a popular educational dialogue around a vision for a new Scotland. I believe it provides the missing key for the strategic journey the left has been trying to navigate since 1979. It is difficult to conceive of anything more potentially revolutionary - certainly in my lifetime!

Maxwell's important book recognises that the contemporary political debate is obfuscated by a 'nationalist' discourse. In his review of Tom Nairn's 'vigorous and passionate' *The Break-up of Britain* (1981), Maxwell emphasises the significance of Nairn's analysis which explains nationalism as a response to the unequal development of capitalism in its industrial phase. Nationalist ideologies, Maxwell contends, are based in part on 'myth', especially in the Scottish context. Moreover, nationalism is, in Nairn's phrase, 'Janus faced'. Leftist concerns about the contradictory, 'two edged sword' nature of nationalism and, indeed, of promoting nationalism/national popular strategies to overcome British imperialism in the past, are obviously well founded. Nationalism's centre of gravity as an ideology can, it would seem, be as easily pulled to the right as to the left. This was vividly illustrated in the debacle of Éamon de Valera's Irish Free State, after the Civil War in 1921, which evolved under his

tutelage from militant republicanism to a social and cultural conservatism that was entrenched in a reactionary, oppressive and patriarchal Catholic ideology.

Unease is felt by the Left in Scotland about the fickle and perhaps unreliable claims of the Scottish National Party to have been transformed into a social democratic party in line with the aims and objectives the SNP's 79 Group, of which Maxwell was an influential member. In 1981 he was right to denounce the ineffectiveness of naïve essentialist and idealist theories of nationalism which were promulgated by earlier SNP activists and intellectuals. For Maxwell:

the only nationalism that has a serious chance of winning and keeping the level of electoral support required to take Scotland to independence is a nationalism which, disregarding romantic concepts of nationhood, builds its appeal on an unsentimental view of the social and economic interests of the Scottish people. (76)

Alex Salmond, along with Kenny MacAskill and others, was part of the left of centre 79 Group who were temporarily expelled from the SNP. Subsequently in 2011 the SNP, under Salmond's leadership, won a landslide victory and became the first party to form a majority government in the new Scottish Parliament. The SNP victory demonstrated a politically literate Scottish electorate using tactical voting adeptly to defeat the defensive and dependent Labour Party in Scotland. Even Alex Salmond, who would keep us in NATO and retain aspects of the British State such as the monarchy, likes to emphasise that his party is the Scottish *National* Party, not the Scottish *Nationalist* Party. This discourse, endorsed by Maxwell, is about the Scottish road to direct popular and industrial democracy, the sovereignty of the people, the eradication of the unequal distribution of wealth and income that scars and debases us, and a citizen's income - in short, a new historic settlement for a socialist Scotland;

Scotland's economic revival...depends on a major extension of the public sector in the form of improved public services, increased public finance for industry, conditional on the adoption of co-operative ownership and other

forms of industrial democracy, and public control of Scotland's financial institutions. (94)

Moreover, throughout the book Maxwell maintains that 'the working class offers the only possible base for popular nationalism' (96). No other class in Scotland has, he insists, such an overwhelming interest in breaking out of the decaying political and economic system of post-imperial Britain. Strategically, he concurs with Gramsci, in that they both assert, in their appeal for national-popular mobilisation, that a,

...class cannot achieve national leadership, and become a hegemonic class, 'if it confines itself only to class interests' it must also take into account the popular and democratic aspirations and struggles of the people which do not have a necessarily class character. (Simon 1982: 42)

Maxwell's central concern, due in part to the Gramscian influence of Tom Nairn (1981; 2000; 2001; 2001), is to propose that, in this critical conjuncture for Scotland, counter-hegemony must have a *national-popular* dimension as well as a *class* dimension.

For Stephen Maxwell, a key issue is the possibility of a socialist Scotland posing the 'threat of a good example' to the rest of world today. If we don't engage with his argument and use our unique and privileged position as educators and community workers at this critical moment in Scotland's history, then we must, in the telling words of Herbert Marcuse (1968), ask ourselves the question: 'Who are the Camp Guards?'

Stephen Maxwell's *The Case for Left Wing Nationalism*, enriched and inspired by the creative Marxism of Antonio Gramsci and Tom Nairn, stands as a distinctive and essential resource for individual and collective action and reflection. It is a book we cannot afford to be without.

John Player

Community Educator

References

Freire P, Horton M, Bell B, Gaventa J, & Peters J (1990) *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press

Marcuse, Herbert (1968) *One Dimensional Man; The Ideology of Industrial Society* London, Sphere Books

Nairn, Tom (1981) *The Break-up of Britain* London, Verso

Nairn, Tom (2000) 'Ukania under Blair' *New Left Review* 1 Jan Feb 2000

Nairn, Tom (2001) 'Mario and the Magician' in *New Left Review* 9 May Jun 2001

Nairn, Tom (2001) 'Farewell Britannia' *New Left Review* 7, Jan Feb 2001

Simon, Roger (1982) *Gramsci's Political Thought, An Introduction* London, Lawrence and Wishart