

Discussion

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Mother Wales, get off me back ?

Raymond Williams said that if it could have been done by talking, Wales could have been a socialist republic in the twenties. Now, sixty years on and three years after non-devolution, the talking carries on, though the subject is negative, how we got neither socialist nor national liberation. We have probably had more workshops, conferences, fraternal arguments, and good rows about socialism and the national question in the last five to six years than Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg. No contributor to this national conversation has been at once as scathing, analytical, pessimistic, prophetic, and finally cataclysmic, (there my rhetoric runs out, because anyway I've got nothing on his) than Gwyn Williams. His *Marxism Today* piece (December 1981) originally delivered at the first CUL in Cardiff, has already become itself a reference text in the whole argument. What is not yet clear is whether all our talk around a revived Marxism and socialism, and a reformulated national question, is a talking to death, or a 'talking cure'.

To ask explicit questions about nationality (not in the legal state sense, but in the Eastern European understanding of the *nationalities* question) is not some kind of national 'identity' crisis. Raymond Williams again:

in *Politics and Letters* he explains succinctly the historical reasons why and how the national question of Wales is asked. He regards the problematic element as characteristic, where virtually all Welsh people ask themselves what it is to be Welsh, and what Wales actually is. This is explained by the way in which Wales was incorporated into 'Britain' (his quotation marks) before it developed a separate national identity. It therefore had a 'cultural' rather than a 'national' existence. I would want to qualify that analysis by adding *national political* existence. One of the problems of the English Left is that the national question of England is so taken as read it is not asked. This means that the whole historical process of the construction of the British state as a multinational state, whose multiness has been suppressed by a mainly English ruling class, is not perceived. When Gwyn Williams says that the problems we face in Wales are British problems and that in Wales those British problems assume exaggerated and distorted form he is of course right. But Britishness itself as the name of a clapped-out post-Imperialist, but still aggressively capitalist culture (or rather dominant culture), is as much of a problem as Welshness. What Welsh writers, such as Raymond Williams and Gwyn Williams in very different ways, can bring to understanding the political cultures of Britain is a particularly acute awareness brought about by the consciousness of the tensions between class/nation/state/language/cultures.

English nationalism

The relative inability of the Left in England, until recently, to face up to what is called the 'Irish question' (but is in reality the question of the relation between class/nation/nationality/state) is the most acute example of the failure to understand the historical process which made, and is unmaking, 'Britain'. The deconstruction of English nationalism

becomes even more urgent as racism becomes more apparent within our society, a phenomenon recently demonstrated in *Labour and Racism* (by Annie Phizacklea and Robert Miles) not to be confined to right wing movements, but to be a fundamental in-built part of the structure of British state institutions. As that state itself finds itself increasingly unable to manage its deepening capitalist crisis, the contradictions and divisions inherent in the way it was historically constructed can only become more acute. Though clearly in response to such a drive, there is also a contradictory drive for 'national unity' constructed on the basis of centrist and centralised social democracy. The unpalatable facts to anyone who is sensitive to the inter-relation between class and national questions, is that the vocabulary and discourse of even left politics in Britain makes its appeals as much to a nationalist discourse, as to a socialist one. To this must be added an increasingly ethnocentric Europeanism, which is in reality a form of extended 'continental' nationalism. It seems to me that the denial of class politics, and its 'national' (including Euro-national) position which is at the core of the SDP appeal, makes it the authentic voice of English nationalism. The fact that English nationalism does not specify itself as such, but applies the adjective *nationalist* only to those nationalisms which conflict with it (that is, Irish, Welsh, Scottish) is not an indication of the absence of such an English nationalism, but is rather a tribute to its over-domination of the whole scene. A careful reading of Labour Party political statements, in particular the Callaghan appeals in the dying days of the last Labour administration, will reveal a continual reference to a 'national' political stance. Indeed, many of the positions taken by Tony Benn in his *Arguments for Democracy*, are grounded in a British 'national' position.

What I am saying is that not only do we want to analyse the specific class and national lines drawn on the map of Wales, but we also need simultaneously to examine them as they are drawn in British history, and that of necessity will mean examining both the internal lines, and the external lines of capital and neo-imperialist domination. Welsh Labourism

To return to the 'internal' politics of Wales, some of us would want to push a comparison in terms of its 'one party' state, and massively undemocratic nationalised (ie British) public sector, with the regimes of Eastern Europe. If East Germany calls itself 'actually existing socialism', the South Wales valleys are actually existing Labourism. Nothing has brought socialism more



into disrepute in Britain, except perhaps experiences in some parts of northern England, than the 'socialism' of the Labour Party in South Wales. Tony Benn is reported, or perhaps mis-reported, to have told a Labour Party fringe meeting that if he came from South Wales he would be a Welsh Nationalist because of what the Labour Party had done to South Wales. As I write this piece, the 'official national unemployment level' is 16.2%. Yet the fight-back representation from official Labourism is virtually non-existent. Whereas the Labour Party in the GLC, the West Midlands, or Sheffield, are developing SERA-type forms of local socialism and local enterprise, apart from a Wales TUC initiative on co-operatives, none of the Labour-controlled authorities in Wales have initiated any such development. Labourism is clapped-out of economic and cultural ideas, and to many of us on the extra-Labour Left, seems incapable of invigorating itself. Indeed, political education, and even perhaps thinking, or certainly radical thinking, has been actively discouraged in the labour movement in Wales during the past forty years. In education policy Labour LEAs created bilateral comprehensive schools where most of the attention of Labour Right teachers went on preparing a 'grammar school' core for export only. Labour education policy has provided a quarter of secondary school kids in Wales with the 'opportunity' of leaving school without any certification, as compared with a 12% figure for England. At the same time 'industrial development policies', both by counties, and by the Labour-created Welsh Development Agency, was all about making Wales the 'open country', as the WDA advert has it, for branch factory capital, in particular to employ women at relatively cheaper wage rates. Work by Kevin Morgan on the actual impact of 'regional policy' and studies of the Welsh economy by Phil Cooke and Gareth Rees of UWIST have set out quite clearly

the actual impact of this policy. The Wales of 1982 is summed up by the Welsh Development Agency advert: to the hymn tune Gym Rhondda, are set new words, which are the names of multinationals established in Wales, and significantly, the hymn to multinational capital does not even rhyme! No National Eisteddfod prize for the WDA PR outfit.

This is not a case of a proud and Utopian socialist mythology falling into disillusion, it is rather the actual destruction of the socialist idea itself by the practice of Labourism, which Wales faces.

The 'failure' of devolution has to be seen in the context of the Labourist politics which defined it. In the early 1970s a section of Welsh Labour, partly influenced by the bin-end of the participation policies of the 60s social democratic state, and partly as a response to protest-nationalism which had grasped the political emptiness of the delivery system without ammunition which was Labourist Welsh politics, proposed devolution. But it was proposed into a political culture which had been deliberately schooled out of autonomy. The referendum defeat was written into the very question itself, which became increasingly apparent to those of us who took some active part in the campaign, as the Labour Party in South Wales, in the case of devolution, as with most of its policies, failed either to campaign for or to implement what it supposedly 'believed in'. The Welsh electorate was set a question in an examination on national politics without the subject even being included on the political curriculum.

New stirrings

But Labour must not take the whole blame. As so often in conflicting political movements, supposedly in a combat with each other, the Labour Party created an antithetical Plaid Cymru which it in a sense deserved. The national question as advocated by the 'national party' in the 50s and 60s was constitutionalist, culturalist and

linguistic. A social democratic gloss of research and policy had been added, in typical technocratic fashion, in the late 60s and early 70s. Such social democratic national protest politics was able to create stirs at by-elections, but could not make a substantial political shift in allegiances, particularly as it continually fudged class politics.

But even while the Labourist, and culturalist Plaid, devo-referendum strategy was visibly failing, in the militant section of the national movement itself, crucial changes were taking place. In Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg, and the Welsh Socialist Republican Movement, socialist strategies were becoming increasingly obvious, as the only means of transforming public sector, and multinational capitalist, Wales into a popular democracy. The miners next step was being re-read by the miners' children and grandchildren.

In 1981 the same change finally overtook Plaid Cymru itself with the establishment of a left group and the writing in of 'a Welsh Socialist State' into the party objectives, while deleting the bourgeois form 'self-government'. On the Labour Left, an alliance of the NUM and NUPE and the Wales Labour Co-ordinating Committee succeeded in stopping a Healeyist revived social contract, and a Wales alternative economic strategy is actively being written and re-written. The crucial task of re-building a Welsh socialist culture has begun. A crucial immediate step would be to build on the quasi-autonomy of the Wales TUC, but it must have a clear purpose, not merely the deploying of a rhetoric of 'social disorder'! The task is nothing short of a recreation of the socialist idea by an active working class Welsh politics. Acronyms are insufficient but WALES must mean not, as the hackneyed pun, a threatened species, but Workers' Alternative Local Economic Strategy — Welsh Action Leads to Establishing Socialism, and of course, the essential negation, Warning Against Left Embracing Separatism. D

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