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HOW LIBERALISM ASSIMILATES MINORITIES

THE FAILURE TO DEVELOP A WELSH NATIONAL MOVEMENT IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Background and context: Wales, an unexpected failure

During the nineteenth century, the 'age of nationalism', no national movement worthy of the name developed in Wales. The failure was severe. Only in the 1880s, largely under the influence of Ireland, did a nascent nationalist grouping, Cymru Fydd (Wales Will Be), emerge as a ginger group within the British Liberal Party but it was quickly hemmed in. As a serious force, it barely lasted ten years. On a continent in which a hundred linguistic nationalisms bloomed, the Welsh language movement never flowered. In the 1870s, the pioneering geographer of ethnicity, migration and language, Ernst Georg Ravenstein, was unable to find a single 'Welsh school' in the whole of Wales.[1] In every facet of official life and state activity, the Celtic languages of the British Isles had neither rights nor presence, a fact remarked upon in Central Europe where majorities like the Magyars employed it as justification for the oppression of their own minorities.[2] Religiously, the Welsh, a predominantly Nonconformist people with their own Welsh-language denominations, pressed for the separation of Church and state but when deliverance

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finally came in 1920, social change had made it a pyrrhic victory, indeed an anachronism. The emphasis on religion had drawn the Welsh away from the fight for language, and the Welsh had been transmuted in the interim into a British socialist and largely secular and English-speaking people.

Yet these failures draw attention to the considerable potential for following an alternative, more nationalistic path which the Welsh situation had once contained. Ethnically, linguistically and religiously, Wales differed radically from England, the dominant nation in the British Isles. In such circumstances, it might be thought that Wales would be at the forefront of the development of nationalism in Europe in the nineteenth century. Yet this was not the case, and the distinguishing mark of nationalism in Wales was its scarcity.

Here then is the 'Welsh question' to be posed for those interested in comparative studies of European nationalisms. Why did the Welsh national movement fail? Or, put more properly, why did it fail to emerge? The Czech theoretician Miroslav Hroch describes the situation well, indeed provides the *locus classicus*, maintaining that Wales is 'an extreme example' of the failure of some European ethnic groups to become 'nations':

> For Wales at the end of the 19th century all the features of the 'classical' definition [of nationhood] were valid in their full extent: it had a compact area of settlement, an old-established and distinctive cultural unity, a modernized literary language, its territory even formed an economic whole, comparable with a national market – and despite all this we cannot speak at that time of a fully developed Welsh nation.[3]

Many theories have been offered for why this was so. None are convincing. Perhaps the British Empire was unique in its international reach, and its appeal to the Welsh elite irresistible. But Ireland too was part of the British state, and the Irish forged a successful national movement for independence. Could it be that the Welsh were wedded to the English as common inhabitants of a Protestant island, united in enmity towards

Catholic Ireland and the Catholic peninsula of Western Europe? But the Welsh rejected Anglicanism, the state interpretation of the Protestant faith, a serious schism.

True too that the Welsh faced only one dominant neighbour, England, rather than several to be played off against one another, as the Baltic peoples, for example, could play off the Germans and Russians. But in this they were not alone – the Czechs faced only one hegemonic power, the Germans, although their location within the multilingual Austrian (later Austro-Hungarian) Empire was rather more fortunate. And Wales was largely linguistically homogenous until at least the middle of the century, a situation very different to that in Bohemia and other 'national' homelands. But the Welsh made no use of their trump card that they were a cohesive ethnolinguistic group with one national language on one territory (for much of the century the word for the Welsh and for Welsh-speakers, *Cymry*, was wholly interchangeable). It was only after a language shift in the populous South East from the 1880s onwards that the link between language and nationality came to loosen.

Wales was unfortunate in its geography. It lacked urban centres and prior to industrialisation was an impoverished highland area in close proximity to a much wealthier and dominant plain (rather like the territories of the Scottish Gaels and the Slovaks).[4] This maintained ethnic difference, but made it more difficult to raise the capital for expansion and nation-building. Many of the Welsh bourgeoisie congregated in English conurbations like Liverpool and Manchester rather than in Wales. But the life of other small European peoples flourished in cities outside the national territory. Vienna played such a role for some of the smaller nations of the Austrian Empire. In any case, Cardiff, the Welsh capital to be, was in the 1840s a Welsh-speaking town, and for another generation a bilingual one: its complete anglicisation by 1900 suggests that it was the loss of Welsh-identifying urban centres rather than the lack of urban life in Wales *per se* which undermined the Welsh national cause.

Nor were the Welsh uniquely parochial although their location within the Anglophone rather than German sphere of influence meant rather less exposure to Johann Gottfried von Herder's ideas of linguistic nationalism

than was the norm in Central Europe. (The small Herderian movement which coalesced in Wales in the 1820s and 1830s, the Llanover Circle, received the patronage of an Anglo-German family of industrialists who promoted the Welsh language; the group was not dissimilar to those German landowners in the Baltic countries who developed an interest in 'peasant' vernaculars. However, its activities had little impact on 'Nonconformist Wales'.)

Intellectually, the building blocks for national revival were at hand. Wales had a long literary history stretching back to the post-Roman period. It had a print culture and an indigenous intellectual elite. The bulk of the Welsh had been literate since the eighteenth century and the Bible had been translated in the sixteenth. A Methodist Revival had created a popular culture. The Romantic Age and the revolutionary-induced air of the 1790s had provided Wales with visionaries like Iolo Morganwg who had declared Wales a nation. The similarity with other Romantic figures, say in the Czech lands, is remarkable – yet all this failed to spawn a national movement.

Nor can one argue that the Welsh were unaware of nationalist developments on the continent. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Hungarian and Italian campaigns for 'freedom' became *causes célèbres* in Wales: streets were named after the first Italian Prime Minister, Count Cavour, and books, of poetry and prose, were published in Welsh praising the Hungarian national leader, Lajos Kossuth.[5] But these events were viewed, in political if not always in psychological terms, through the prism of a British rather than specifically Welsh worldview which emphasised a sort of general emancipation for mankind rather than a national awakening.

Neither was Wales in the period concerned an industrial backwater. Indeed it was one of the very cradles of the industrial revolution. There was a proto-socialist rising in Merthyr Tudful, an iron-making town, in 1831: it had to be put down by the military and a man was hung; this gives something of the flavour. For the political theorist who holds that nationalism is the product of modernising and urbanising ethnic groups put under strain by the demands of international capitalism, and which

seek comfort in the embrace of an imagined ethnic community, Wales provides something of a dilemma. By the middle of the nineteenth century, it had become an integral part of a modern, industrial, imperial economy. Yet there was no national movement.

Then there is the argument that although Wales experienced modernity, it was the wrong sort of modernity. Thus some Welsh historians have held that an overdependence on primary production, coal in particular, meant that while Wales was undoubtedly industrialised it was not modern in the sense of having developed an indigenous, mercantile capitalism.[6] Hroch himself holds that because the industrial revolution in Wales, which took off in a serious sense in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, preceded the heyday of nineteenth-century ethnolinguistic nationalism, any Welsh national movement was bound to be fatally weakened by the competing ideology of class. He turns to Flanders as an example of a sophisticated society where industrialisation occurred before the growth of nationalism, and where the movement for political autonomy subsequently failed.[7] However the extent to which this thesis can be said to hold true in a Welsh context is doubtful for in Wales the proletariat was more patriotic than the bourgeoisie![8]

Liberalism, universalism, inclusivity and the civic: the assimilation of the Welsh

In any case, the life of nations is not lived in the dialectic between base and superstructure alone. It is best not to answer the 'Welsh question' in the singular, as Karl Marx reduced history to the study of economic relations. The pace and nature of industrial development certainly plays a role, but so too does discourse, and the parameters of discourse limit the possibilities of what can and cannot be said. In the nineteenth century, when the Welsh might have climbed the path to 'national self-consciousness', as were most other small European peoples at the time, Welsh national, linguistic and ethnic identities were subsumed by an 'inclusive' discourse of Britishness. This was not because the British state

was autocratic, nor was it peculiarly oppressive. Paradoxically, it was for the opposite reason, namely that the British state was democratic, for men of a certain financial means at least, and that its constitution, although it contained anachronistic elements, was broadly liberal. The franchise was limited in terms of gender and class (and prior to 1872 cast in public and thus open to abuse), but there was no direct racial or ethnic discrimination. Liberal concepts of equal citizenship were at the heart of how some of the more progressive elements in England viewed cultural and linguistic difference within the British state This is significant, for the failure of Welsh nationalism in nineteenth-century Wales reflects some of the wider problems met by national movements in liberal-democratic societies in general.

It was the supposedly unique nature of British liberalism which in the mind of many Welsh intellectuals set the Welsh apart from other stateless European peoples. In an important article published in 1849 in the Welsh journal *Y Traethodydd*, the great radical Welsh journalist Gwilym Hiraethog explains why, in his opinion, there had been no revolution in Britain in 1848, the year when revolts had torn through the European continent. 'Our form of government,' wrote Hiraethog referring to British government (which he regarded, quite unequivocally, as his own), 'was the broadest in base and principles of any in Europe before that; and the throne and

Gwilym Hiraethog (1802-1883), campaigning Welsh liberal journalist | NATIONAL LIBRARY OF WALES

government of Britain stood firm and steadfast when the thrones of Europe were being felled and brought down on every side.'[9]

Liberalism had its advocates in other European countries: it was an important force among the German-speaking peoples of Central Europe, for example. Liberalism also appealed to some of the larger stateless nations – the national revolution of 1848 in Hungary, and the *Risorgimento* in Italy, were cloaked in the rhetoric of a liberalism which opposed autocracy. Many smaller nations, such as the Czechs and others on Habsburg territory, swung between their own brands of liberalism and conservatism according to the tactical needs of the day. But nowhere was liberalism as strong as it was in Britain. Indeed, Wales is the only example of a significant national minority defining itself almost wholly in terms of adherence to the liberalism of the dominant ethnic group in the state. Welsh support for the British Liberal Party far outgrew anything in England, and the famous English Liberal MP, Richard Cobden, a *laissez-faire* promoter of free trade and very keen too that the Welsh should learn English, joked that he was the MP for Wales.[10] This is the crucial point: the Welsh did not advance liberal arguments based upon claims and privileges which pertained to their own national community. Rather they embraced a liberalism which was part and parcel of English hegemony within the British Isles, by which they came to be absorbed.

As a leading historian of Central Europe, Robin Okey, remarks (in Welsh),

> the Welsh became Liberals, while nearly every other small nation fought against Liberalism, or rather against the Liberal parties of the governing nations – the Czechs and Slovenes of Austria, the Poles of Prussia, the Flemish, the Basques, the Fennomans (the Svecomans were Liberals) and so on. […] the small nations had to side tactically with the Conservative supporters of federalism or with the Church in order to defend themselves from attacks by those in the big nations who claimed that they had the monopoly on universal values and on the inheritance of the Enlightenment.[11]

This was the context for Slav opposition to the German and Magyar revolutions of 1848. Although themselves often liberals, nationalist leaders like the Czech František Palacký, rejected the creation of liberal

nation-states such as 'Germany' and 'Hungary' in favour of maintaining the 'sovereignty and integrity' of the imperial Austrian state, which was autocratic but at least multi-ethnic and devolved.[12] The tactical alliance between the so-called 'non-historic' peoples of the Empire and the Habsburg Monarchy pushed Friedrich Engels to condemn the Slavs as tribes standing on the side of 'counter-revolution'.[13] But the Czech logic is difficult to fault: nothing was to be won by aping peoples like the Welsh in becoming a hopelessly outnumbered minority awaiting assimilation in a liberal, unitary state.

It is the assimilatory nature of liberalism and the creation of a common civic space supposedly free of ethnicity that best explains the Welsh failure. In reality this so-called non-ethnicised state was full to the brim with Anglo-British culture. Although the umbilical cord between national politics and liberalism is not as tight in Scotland as in Wales, the Scottish emphasis on the creation of civic space in the shadow of a composite Britishness suggests this assimilatory logic was at work in Scotland too. However, not every national minority in Britain was supine in the face of British inquisition. The comparison with Scotland suggests that assimilation to the Anglo-British civic lies at the heart of the failure of the Welsh nation, and that it was a factor too in the failure of Scotland, but not so in the history of the Irish, a Catholic people who dwelt 'beyond the pale'. The Irish as an 'uncivilised', non-Protestant people were not part of the imagined British civic in the same way as the Welsh, and as a result they were in a better position to build a national movement.

At its heart, liberalism is a political theory about the rights of the individual. Its intellectual roots are in the Enlightenment, and the argument that individuals should be free from unreasonable forms of political and religious repression. Men (and supplementarily women) were to be free to compete against each other for social and economic gain, and unfair restrictions should not be imposed preventing this. Many liberals have taken the view that group rights for members of national and ethnic minorities create enclosed identities which are limited and predefined, hindering individuals from acting freely in their own interest in wider society. Minority nationalism is an attempt to impose an unnecessary group identity on individuals who might otherwise access

advantages and benefits available to all. While these arguments have been challenged recently by some liberal thinkers, such as the Canadian political theorist Will Kymlicka, in the nineteenth century they were predominant.[14]

During the 'age of nationalism', English Liberals came to the conclusion that minority languages and identities restricted rather than enhanced life opportunities, condemning the individual 'to sulk on his own rocks, the half-savage relic of past times, revolving in his own little mental orbit, without participation or interest in the general movement of the world' as the liberal philosopher, John Stuart Mill, had it.[15] The 1847 'Blue Books', a government report on the state of education in Wales, which soon turned its attention to the supposed sexual immorality of the common people and their ignorance of the English language, shows how this assimilatory logic played out as an act of emancipation. In order for the Welsh to take hold of their birthright as free citizens of the British Empire, it was essential for the Welsh and English to have a common language and thus for the Welsh to learn English: 'Through no other medium than a common language can ideas become common. It is impossible to open formal sluice-gates for them from one language into another.'[16]

Thus the demise of the Welsh language was written into the DNA of liberalism, for those who had most to lose if the Welsh remained Welsh were the Welsh themselves. Although some Welsh Liberals were willing to appeal to the Welsh language as a sign of resistance to alien Tory (Conservative) exploitation, this was largely a rhetorical position which did not change the intellectual standpoint of mainstream British liberalism that the Welsh language and culture were a barrier to free thought and trade. In a telling phrase, the liberal *Westminster Review* condemned supporters of the Welsh language as 'linguistic Tories'.[17]

For the individual to be free he had to have access to the market. Welsh Nonconformists like Lewis Edwards, Henry Richard MP and the preacher brothers, Samuel Roberts ('S.R.') and John Roberts ('J.R.'), championed a radicalism which was a social extension of the principle of free trade. Thus they opposed slavery because a slave could not sell his labour, and were pacifists because war was a barrier to free trade: they believed in the

Samuel Roberts (1800-1885), Welsh radical | NATIONAL LIBRARY OF WALES

freedom of individuals, but not in the freedom of communities. They were radical in the sense that the twentieth-century British Conservative Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, was radical. J.R., for example, was viciously opposed to trade unions.[18] The social contract implicit in trade union membership undermined the autonomy of the individual: it would be better for a man to emigrate than to join a union. The problem Welsh nationalism posed for *laissez-faire* liberals is obvious, for nation too is a communal concept, a form of joint bargaining. Furthermore, when *laissez-faire* principles of free trade were applied to the linguistic market, the outcome was certain. In an article whose adjectives reveal a lot about the attitude of the Welsh elite towards their own people, the Nonconformist minister Kilsby Jones argued that

> [...] the difference in the situation of two men – one who understands English and the other who knows nothing of it is that the former is able to associate and trade unimpeded with seventy million of the wealthiest and most adventurous people in the whole world, while the latter is restricted to some seven hundred and fifty thousand Welsh speakers in Wales, where it is assumed,

> for the sake of argument, that they live; and worse than that the monoglot Welsh are unusually small in number, they are amongst the poorest and lowest their circumstances of any, and as a result it is disadvantageous, in every sense, that a man has to limit his influence and activities to an insignificant and unnoticed few in a *wordly* and *marketable* sense – of worthless dead – *but* as the vassals of others.[19]

Linguistic change would be a sort of alchemy by which the material hopes of the Welshman would be transformed. Welsh, an inherently useless language, would be replaced by English, a useful language with capital. 'Welsh is dying', reported the Welsh-language newspaper, *Y Cronicl*, 'it is dying in the financial market and in nearly every other market too.'[20] The market became the key metaphor of cultural and linguistic debate in nineteenth-century Wales.

This *laissez-faire* liberalism was wrapped up in the ideology of universalism. In order to reach all corners of the marketplace, and to enable all to participate in the common good and benefit from it, great emphasis was placed on inclusivity. Edwards reminded his flock in 1867 that English was a universal language of the theological market place, similar to Greek in the ancient world. Greek was contrasted with the narrower sphere of influence of an 'ethnic' language like Hebrew, clearly a metaphor for nineteenth-century Welsh. 'The apostles', he said, 'rather than restrict themselves to Hebrew, took possession of Greek, the language of world trade and humanism.'[21]

These liberal values of universality could be reconciled with individual rights; indeed in many ways they were an extension of them. But they also required what S.R. called 'the mixing of the nations', namely the dissolution of minority identities into the greater whole.[22] Writing in Civil War America, a country whose vibrant Welsh-language communities enjoyed constant cultural interaction with Wales, he wrote:

> Would it be a blessing or a curse for the whole world to be of one language? There was one language at the beginning in Eden. One language was in the world for nearly eighteen hundred years. […]; and there is cause to think that one of the plans of Providence to

> get the world in order once again, is to have the whole world to be *of one language* [...] the *English* language, in particular, is deepening its influence, and expanding its reach every day. [...] It is already far ahead on the way to becoming a '*general language*'. And the opposing argument about 'one language', instead of militating *against* the matter of the mixing of the nations, is a strong argument *in its favour*; because for the whole world to be of one language would be the most valuable blessing to it.[23]

The key phrase is 'general' as in 'general language': the whole emphasis of liberalism was on the promotion of universal values at the expense of the particular. Paradoxically however, liberalism argued that these universal values would have to take the form of a specific national culture. Through this sleight of hand, imperial cultures (for example, in the British, German, French, Spanish and Russian states) could claim to be 'general cultures', so that although they were undoubtedly based on the cultural attributes of one particular ethnic group, they could also claim to be universal. Members of ethnic majorities had access to the individual rights enjoyed by all citizens, regardless of ethnic or linguistic background, who accepted the common culture of the state. But because the common culture was based on the culture of the ethnic group of which they happened to be members, their group rights were also protected, and their ethnic identity underlay the civic identity of the state as a whole.

State nationalisms were rendered invisible by the civic; that is to say they were normalised and made part of the apparatus of social power, both real and symbolic. In comparison, the minority identities and discourses of the smaller European peoples were made visible as that which diverged from the civic. Minority identities were cast as ethnic and particular and hence outside, and indeed an affront to, the values of progress and universality. But this visibility as discrete ethnic groups, frozen in time, exiled from modernity, makes these minoritised peoples invisible as well, in the sense of being cast out from centres of power.

'What it *has* been, what it *has* done,' said the English liberal Matthew Arnold of the Celtic spirit, 'let it ask us to attend to that, as a matter of science and history; not to what it will be or will do, as a matter of modern

politics.'[24] The conflation of Welsh national identity with the 'progressive' values of English civic liberalism proved disastrous for Welsh nationalism. There could be no space in English liberalism, the dominant discourse of nineteenth-century Wales, for the development of a Welsh national movement.

The existence of nation-states sharing a common language and culture, as Mill claimed in his 1861 treatise *Considerations of representative government*, was necessary for civic society and representative democracy to function in a proper manner.[25] Identifying a common language was not only a question of economic and social necessity, but also a matter of principle. Any resistance to the common good was not only regarded as a form of ethnic particularism, it was almost a form of racism. Remaining Welsh in an English world was deeply offensive in both a moral and ethical sense, a sign of anti-Englishness and perhaps of anti-Welshness too. 'Antipathies of race' would not help the Welshman, said the liberal *Spectator* in 1863 accusing the Welsh of ethnic particularism, as Welshmen 'have the same laws and enjoy the same privileges as Englishmen'.[26]

Dominant ethnic groups made claims that their cultures were suitable vehicles for liberal universalism in many parts of Europe – from the Austro-Hungarian Empire to Norway to the Baltic countries. Indeed, the same ethnic group could find itself both the benefactor and the victim of this universalist ideology. In Slovenia and Bohemia, the German language community perceived itself as the carrier of 'general values' and dismissed Slovene and Czech linguistic nationalism by appealing to the value of German as a *Weltsprache*. In Transylvania, however, where German-speaking colonists had settled in the Middle Ages, the hegemonic Magyars took upon themselves the title of liberal universalists and saw the local German-speaking population as guilty of ethnic particularism. They demanded that the ethnolinguistic institutions of the Siebenbürger Saxons be opened up 'for the benefit of the whole property-owning population without discrimination on the basis of religion or language'.[27] This made the Saxon community vulnerable to *laissez-faire* interpretations of the linguistic marketplace which forced the language of the Hungarian state onto the minority German-speaking community. The ideology of liberal

universalism, rather than the supposed bigotry of any particular ethnic group, rendered minoritised groups powerless.

It is hardly surprising that the more successful national movements of the smaller nationalities of nineteenth-century Europe tried to deconstruct this logic, normally by the adoption of communitarian arguments emphasising their visibility as social groups. There are examples of this happening in Wales too, in the antiquarian and Romantic circle of Lady Llanover in the first half of the nineteenth century, and later in the century in the communitarian writings of two nationalist founding figures, Michael D. Jones and Emrys ap Iwan.

The communitarian emphasis of Jones, the main mover behind the establishment of the Welsh colony in Patagonia, Argentina in 1856, and Emrys ap Iwan, who called for official status for the Welsh language in the 1880s, directly challenged the claims of liberalism. Jones criticised the English roots of majoritarian civic nationalism in Britain, complaining that the English condemned cultural difference as ethnic intolerance, while expecting simultaneously that their own culture be dominant. Of particular interest are the arguments in an 1860 pamphlet pushing the case for his Welsh colony, *Gwladychfa Gymreig* (A Welsh colony). He argued that there were two categories of colonist in any colony, a 'formative element' and an 'element to be assimilated'.[28] The ethnic ethos of the colony was set by the 'formative element'. In America, the English had been the formative element and the descendants of Welsh immigrants to the United States were destined to give up their language and culture. Only in a Welsh colony could the Welsh identity flourish, and only in a Welsh colony could the individual Welshman realise his own potential. Individual autonomy was insufficient to secure justice for members of a minoritised ethnic group. The liberated individual required his social environment to reflect his cultural and linguistic needs as well. Liberalism denied this and was a mask for social power and national and linguistic oppression. 'Many English Liberals are if truth be told thoroughly oppressive of others', wrote Michael D. Jones in 1892 following attacks by the British liberal press on the Welsh language; 'I truly detest the liberalism of those who believe in subjugation.'[29]

The Welsh national movement failed in the nineteenth century because Welsh patriots chose to ally themselves with the radical and liberal politics of the dominant ethnic group in the state. The Welsh internalised liberal arguments which held that the suppression of Welsh national and language rights was not only inevitable, but also radical, just and equitable. Welsh Liberals believed it was wrong to challenge the principle of a common civic space where all men and women could engage with one another freely. It was taken for granted that the cultural and linguistic characteristics of this civic space would be English. As a result, liberal radicalism took a principled stand against cultural self-determination.

Endnotes

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