

Textes et contextes

ISSN : 1961-991X

: Université Bourgogne Europe

2 | 2008

Varia 2008

The Adam Smith Attachment: Scotland and Globalization

The Adam Smith Attachment : Écosse et mondialisation

Tom Nairn

🔗 <http://preo.ube.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=130>

Licence CC BY 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Tom Nairn, « The Adam Smith Attachment: Scotland and Globalization », *Textes et contextes* [], 2 | 2008, . Copyright : Licence CC BY 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). URL : <http://preo.ube.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=130>

PREO

The Adam Smith Attachment: Scotland and Globalization

The Adam Smith Attachment : Écosse et mondialisation

Textes et contextes

2 | 2008
Varia 2008

Tom Nairn

🔗 <http://preo.ube.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=130>

Licence CC BY 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

-
1. Evidence of Awakening
 2. United Kingdom: for 'decline' read 'defeat'
 3. In the Wider World
 4. Democratic Republicanism
-

It often requires, perhaps, the highest effort of political wisdom, to determine when a real patriot ought to support and endeavour to re-establish the authority of the old system, and when he ought to give way to the more daring, but often dangerous spirit of innovation. Adam Smith (1959), *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Glasgow : Raphael & Macfie, 230-233.

- 1 A few weeks ago the Glasgow *Sunday Herald* newspaper published the latest opinion poll of the Scottish electorate, worth quoting here as a general indicator of the likely direction of events:

- 2 Independence has taken a dramatic lead in a new opinion poll on Scotland's constitutional future. An exclusive TNS System Three poll has found that 41% of Scots want the SNP government to negotiate an independence settlement, compared to 40% who are opposed to breaking up the UK. The extraordinary poll results mark one of the few occasions in which independence has out-poll support for the union. (April 13th 2008).
- 3 Of course such surveys fluctuate, and no-one can be sure how long such a conviction will endure. However, certain other features of the Scottish and the British-Isles environment suggest strongly that this manifestation of opinion will continue, and is more likely to grow than to decrease. Adam Smith's advice quoted above is again relevant, and convincing more 'real patriots' every day. In the 18th century he was of course moving in the other direction, urging compatriots to accept and make the most of dangerous innovation, in the shape of Great Britain and Union with the English. Today I'm pretty sure he would be telling them to go farther: globalization is the name of the new game – where they will stand a better chance on their own, by once more standing up for themselves upon the new world stage. Let me begin by simply listing some features supporting this stance; after which I will return to the question of just when and how pro-independence views could become more stable, and even dominant – something like the 'settled will of the Scottish people' for their own state.

1. Evidence of Awakening

- 4 First, the poll plainly reflects recent national experience, over the years 2007 and '08. In May 2007, the regionally devolved government of Scotland voted for an important change: the British Labour Party lost power in Scotland, for the first time since devolved government was set up in 1998, and the Scottish National Party – until quite recently an impotent sect – was able to form an administration. Though without an overall majority, as the largest single party it organized a government with support from smaller groups and independent members, under the leadership of First Minister Alex Salmond.

- 5 The fact was surprising enough but (second, and even more surprising) the administration that followed has proved both effective and popular – that is, popular in a sense that had never marked the Labour Party over its previous nine years of uninterrupted domination. One survey after another has shown this, all the more strikingly against the background of a Europe, and indeed a world, where it has become rather normal to suspect, distrust and ridicule ‘politics’ as such. The Scots have provided a counter-case, by voting for an untried political vehicle (as it were) and a year later being reasonably happy with the results. In spite of all the standard denunciations of Nationalism (bypassed, doom-laden, parochial, racist and so on) a National Party has not only won regional power but embarked on a program of moderate but consistent reform – a social-democratic drive towards persuading its electors that more complete self-government is both needed and attainable, for its program of change to continue.
- 6 The most reliable analysis of this unprecedented situation has probably come from Iain Macwhirter, the *Herald’s* (and Scotland’s) most serious political journalist. Writing one year after the Nationalists came into office, he said:

“It took a Nationalist government to discover the power of devolution...The SNP have set a blistering if sometimes chaotic pace. I recall arriving at Bute House (official residence of the First Minister) for a meeting with Salmond around this time and finding him in the state room surrounded by young aides, piles of paper and empty coffee cups. Civil servants scurried in and out, as if they were living in the early days of a better country. It was never like this under the previous management”.

- 7 A quiet earthquake had happened, and was continuing – even escalating – a year later. It had started from the voters, and altered even the civil servants. Macwhirter goes on to describe the country left behind. ‘Great Britain’ has turned out to be the least of the new and better country’s problems:

There could be troubles ahead. But the one thing that hasn’t caused significant trouble so far has been relations with Westminster. Yes there have been spats...but no real bust ups. Many people expected

that the SNP in office would spend much more of its time picking fights with UK ministries, blaming London for Scotland's ills and turning the Scottish Executive into a £30 billion battering ram for independence. It hasn't happened.

- 8 On the contrary, the Nationalists have been able to convert a wider disillusionment into a quite unexpectedly positive endorsement for a necessarily vague 'new deal' on the smaller stage of Scotland.
- 9 In the past, independence was a vague and distant possibility; a world of fantasy politics. Now, with a dynamic nationalist administration in office, it is possible to see what independence might actually look like in practice. Across Scotland surprising people, like the Scottish billionaire Tom Hunter, and Stephen Purcell, the Labour leader of Glasgow City Council, are talking seriously about a referendum on independence.
- 10 *Sunday Herald* readers are of course not representative of general opinion. But it may be of significance that in the opinion poll accompanying Macwhirter's article, no fewer than 90% of respondents saw the referendum as a good idea.

2. United Kingdom: for 'decline' read 'defeat'

- 11 The third, most important background feature of today's dilemma emerges from between the lines of all these arguments. 'Westminster' (the United Kingdom state) has made a poor showing over the past two years, for deeper historical and structural reasons than policy disputes can convey. At the same time as actual blood has been shed in Iraq and Afghanistan, by Labour Government support for a consistently unpopular war, something analogous has unfolded on the metaphorical and collective emotional plane. The life-blood has been rapidly draining out of United Kingdom identity, and led to a chronic anemia that most citizen/subjects now feel in their bones. Prime Minister Brown is an example of the sort of fiercely pro-British Scot who once predominated, and whose attitudes were simply taken for granted. Such attitudes didn't vanish overnight with de-colonization; but over a generation they have vanished none the less, in a terminal

thousand-cuts process, unaffected by London bluster and pretension. The last episode of the latter has been Brown's own painful and perfectly futile campaign to revive 'Britishness' over the years 2005-08.

- 12 It must also be kept in mind that such collapse has touched all parts of the United Kingdom. Scottish separation may become its most dramatic result. However, different forms of the same palsy have affected Wales, Northern Ireland *and England itself*. In Wales, a Nationalist-Labour Party coalition has assumed power in the Welsh Assembly, aiming at enhanced self-government by 2011 (also via a referendum). In Northern Ireland, the traditionally passionate adherence of the Protestant community to Crownland Britain has weakened to the extent of allowing an even more surprising regional alliance of forces – between the Protestants of Democratic Unionism and *Sinn Féin*, the pro-Republican Catholic movement led by Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness. This notably hybrid régime is supported by both London and Dublin states, the former weakened by disintegration and the latter empowered by economic success.
- 13 Thus Scottish moves towards statehood are taking place in an environment that has itself changed beyond recognition since the times of Margaret Thatcher and the younger Tony Blair. Just as in the nineteen-eighties the old Soviet-East-European imperium 'imploded' rather than merely suffering defeat from outside, so in the two-thousand-tens and 'twenties the 17th century British Kingdom looks like collapsing into its component parts through internal inertia, identity-foundering and the forced building of alternative political vehicles. Consistent failure to reform the central state and constitution has compelled the components of this multi-national order to reform themselves. Over a whole generation, the after-shocks of an Empire in retreat had remarkable little impact – less than the comparable process in France. But this was a very mixed blessing, because it enabled the core of the British *ancien régime* state to survive. Yet death is no less certain for having been prolonged by genteel 'decline'— and also, by increasingly absurd efforts at redemption.¹
- 14 Such efforts have of course relied upon the UK's 'special relationship' with American power, as if the latter's expansion could somehow save (or even reverse) the final loss of British world-power and status. One

should not underestimate the strength of this delusion. For one thing, it helps explain 'devolution'. Both Labourites and Liberal-Democrats remained so convinced of traditional multi-national stability and continuity that they could run the risk of giving some 'Home Rule' to peripheral nations – sometimes claiming the changes would *strengthen* all-British identity and institutions. Actually, the latter have been *defeated* during the Cold War decades, and turned into parodies of previous glory by de-colonization and subservience; but the ideology of 'decline' helped to misrepresent this fall. A 'decline' can also suggest the possibility of revival, of reanimation via minor victories like the South Atlantic War to recapture the Falkland Islands, or through forms of culture like popular music and the arts. Military and political defeat like that suffered by France in 1940 or later in Algeria, or by the Axis states in 1945-46, is something quite different: reform and new starts are determined by circumstances, not by party-political programmes and 'think-tanks'. By contrast, it is the latter that have signaled British-imperial attempts to remain 'great' from the 'fifties onwards: one 'vision' after another, culminating in Blair's 'New Labourism' at the end of the century.²

3. In the Wider World

- 15 Fourth, and perhaps most important, is the background of 'globalization'. UK decrepitude is the most obvious causative factor in the break-up trend; but one should never forget how this has intersected with universal trends like Neo-liberal capitalist expansion, in which British governments have played such a prominent part. Tony Blair followed Margaret Thatcher as an apostle of globalization in just that sense. The 'decline' discussed earlier has been compensated for by loud ideological assertiveness, in Europe as well as under the special relationship with two American Presidencies. London has over the relevant period been more than a camp-follower: Shakespearian Herald and persuasive Royal Messenger would seem more appropriate, relaying the messages that Charles de Gaulle originally identified as 'Anglo-Saxon'. Right-wing Anglo-Saxon historical materialism might be the more complete title: that is, the victorious counterpart of a pseudo-materialism still deployed by many socialist and communist parties and governments up to 1989 (and still enjoying life-after-death under the Chinese state). Antonio Gramsci called the Leninist

version *egemonia*, and urged the Left to conquer souls through it, as a desirable prelude to power and government. However, capitalist apostles learned the lesson and practiced *egemonia* better, in the nineteen-eighties and 'nineties – incidentally displaying the cruel limitations of the formula too.

- 16 I mentioned above how identity-hemorrhage has affected heartland-English opinion. The most striking expression of this has been a series of surveys over 2006-07 showing majorities of English opinion *indifferent* to the possibility of Scottish separation. In earlier times, most passionate intensity had appeared on the 'Unionist' side, displaying an indignant consciousness of the sacred character of 18th century all-British institutions and attitudes. Clearly, that sacral nature was the 'life-blood' that has now all but drained away. It was not at all the same thing as what has taken its place: *reasonable* arguments over the advantages of preserving links, or the 'good side' of coexistence in a single framework – more or less the same as in most debates about European Union. Few nationalists in Scotland, Wales or Ireland would dissent from such positions.
- 17 They are simply arguing for a new, better foundation for developing these 'good sides' to amity and cooperation. Within an antique 'common framework' visibly incapable of serious constitutional modernization, *societal* modernization must none the less be carried forward. All the more so, because many features of globalization appear to *favour* such changes, most evidently among *smaller* political units, regions and populations 'left behind' by the forced march of 19th and 20th century state-formation.³
- 18 To grasp the oddity of the UK and Scottish situations more thoroughly, perhaps more theory is required. The most interesting recent one has been presented by Professor Fred Halliday of the London School of Economics, in the OpenDemocracy website of May 13th 2008 (www.opendemocracy.net): 'The Politics of Failure'. Today's globe confronts any observer with a range of events disturbingly like old-fashioned empire or colonialism: from Hawaii to Wales, as it were, via West Papua, Taiwan, Tibet, Kashmir, Kurdistan, Iraq, Darfur, the Basque lands, Quebec and many others. And yet, most of the dominant states involved deny being old-fashioned in that sense – that is, unlike (e.g.) France in the Maghreb, Britain in India, or Japan in

China or Korea. Halliday argues they are (or perceive themselves) as in effect ‘tidying up’ the globalizing world. ‘Post-colonial sequestration’ is his term for it: bigger states are still at it, maintaining their right to have *not less* than the entitlements handed down from the previous age of nationalism, empire (and so on). The court of global opinion and the magistrates of the United Nations no longer recognize nation-*grabbing*; but nation-*retaining* and (of course) improving may be different. Those who failed their chances of independence in the main round (up to the nineteen-sixties) may today find themselves threatened by impoundment or ‘sequestration’, via assertions of legitimate priority and right. Such legitimacy may itself be dubious, grey, feigned or even absurd – still, as Halliday warns, the ‘what-we-have-we-hold’ bunch is most likely to prevail. Hence his counsel of ‘realistic pessimism’ over these issues: short of breakdown and crazed excesses (as in Indonesian East Timor) they’re likely to hold on to recognition.

- 19 Halliday uses mainly the case of Tibet and China for illustration. But examples like the Kurds and Turkey, the East-Timorese or West-Papuans against Indonesia, or the Kashmiris against both India and Pakistan would be equally useful. So (I would argue) is the case of peripheral-nation Britain versus the United Kingdom. What counts is, as he puts it, ‘respect for regional and cultural rights within a democratic framework’. So far the latter has been either absent, feeble or dubious in most sequestrator polities, with important exceptions like India and Canada. The case of the USA lies in the ‘dubious’ category: in the Year 2000 it failed to elect a President, and a failing state had to be rescued by High Court manipulation. And the UK? In 2005 the British unreformed constitution imposed a parliamentary majority founded on twenty-one-and-a-half percent of the vote. Any ‘realistic pessimism’ demands recognition that the same thing could recur in 2010. This is surely at least equally ‘dubious’: an anti-democratic *norm* staunchly upheld – sequestration by custom and sacred antecedents.
- 20 Loose ends, breakaways, democratic awakenings and new starts depend upon ‘de-sequestration’ – in effect upon ‘rights within a democratic framework’ being better served by (e.g.) an independent Tibet than as part of an Autocratic, Party-ruled China. There may indeed be cases where populations come to accept that ‘major goals of democracy, respect and economic prosperity’ are best served by remaining

part of the larger entity (Halliday mentions Catalonia, Bavaria, Crete and California). But that in turn depends upon larger entities doing far more than just being there, having and holding on to habitual fixations. It will depend, surely, on their *reforming themselves* to justify retention, or reimposition of rights and responsibilities. In times of democratic warming, resigned nods and acquiescent grunts from the UN and ‘international opinion’ will no longer suffice. For the failing U.K., anemic indifference of the majority won’t be enough: it may be better than repression, but is nothing like the positive drive needed for effective re-sequestration. On *this* display-board, the democratic credentials being offered by the peripheral de-sequestrators (including Halliday’s own Ireland) are surely more impressive.

4. Democratic Republicanism

- 21 One big advantage of Halliday’s speculation is that it compels one to think more concretely about alternatives – outside the existing ‘-isms’. His terminology is novel; but new words should inspire new ideas and ambitions, and a new debate. It’s no longer enough to aspire vaguely towards ‘democratic nationalism’, whether among the de-sequestrators or within the tidying-up majorities. Any ‘framework’ worth the name will consist of institutions; and the institution that counts here is surely the democratic *republic*.⁴
- 22 In the wake of short-cut Socialism’s failure, ‘Republicanism’ can no longer be taken for granted. It has to find new significance, as the ‘public factor’ now facing the foreseeable common future of capitalism-management. However, neither the former nor the latter are the same everywhere: globalizing unity both renders existing contrasts more striking *and* calls for farther differentiation, to counter-balance the elements of homogeneity that have inevitably been made centre-stage. Imperialist conflict and the Cold War posited generally divergent answers to human ‘species-being’, and imagined the coat of many colours at last dissolving into one or other wardrobe-‘world’. This choice has disappeared, but the colours have not.
- 23 Scotland is just one place where they are re-appearing: an early-modern version of ‘sequestration’ agreed to by the old Scottish ruling class in 1707 is being challenged, and may very soon be reversed. Hall-

iday suspects it may not come about, but gives no reasons why. In the circumstances outlined above, surely a serious constitutional reform would be needed – a shift of the centre more thorough and ambitious than devolution and (obviously) supported by the overwhelming English majority. But there is *no sign whatever* of such a new ‘democratic framework’ emerging. It may well be that most citizens of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland would indeed support (for example) a confederal rearrangement of the United Kingdom, a new ‘republicanism’ that left the multi-national monarchy in a symbolic place – as in Scandinavia. However, this would need prolonged preparation and bi-partisan support, as well as a referendum: the kind of all-round new start in which Anglo-British public opinion remains quite uninterested. As long as that remains true, ‘de-sequestration’ is the realist option – naturally opposed by America, Spain, Indonesia, Turkey and other states facing similar anguish.

24 Whether pessimism or optimism are in order for such developments, I leave to the reader. But I hope it is not unreasonable to imagine support from broad sectors of French opinion, since the Scots would probably have to apply to join (or rejoin) the European Union. The sequestrator mentality of Westminsterism appears likely to ensure such an outcome: no mere fragment or descendant should be seen as bearing rights and recognition with it. It would then be up to the French electorate to vote on the issue. Let that day come, the sooner the better. Mutations of the globalizing world can’t be held up forever by obfuscation in Westminster, ancestral tales and the woeful mantras of sequestration.

1 On this general theme an outstanding recent overview of state-formation can also be quoted in evidence: Roeder, Philip (2007). *Where Nation-States Come From: Institutional Change in an Age of Nationalism*, Princeton : Princeton University Press. The author’s argument is that East-bloc implosion was guided more by the prior existence of state-like or national *institutions* than by ethnicity, tongue or religious beliefs. Scotland is of course a farther example of the thesis: the ‘civic-historical’ has weighed much more heavily than an often over-estimated ethnic and folkloric past.

2 For an overview of the process, see Moran, Michael (2007). *The British Regulatory State: High Modernism and Hyper-innovation*, Oxford : Oxford University Press. ‘Devolution’ was in this author’s sense an episode of despairing ‘hyper-innovation’, whose final result has been a heightening of *ancien régime* autocracy.

3 I put forward this aspect of the changes at greater length in an earlier ‘Edinburgh Lecture’ delivered on March 4th 2008, at the invitation of Scotland’s First Minister. See Scottish Left Review, ‘Globalization’s New Deal’, 46. www.scottishleftreview.org/uk.

4 A valuable overview of recent thinking on republicanism is provided by Audier, Serge (2004). *Les théories de la république*, Paris La Découverte, and a relevant history can be found in Spitz, Jean-Fabien (2005). *Le moment républicain en France*, Paris : Gallimard).

English

This article argues in favour of the view that support for independence is beginning to dominate Scottish opinion, and that this is something to be sought after in a globalizing world. Taking as his starting point an article by Fred Halliday, in which post-colonial states are seen as sequestering bordering national entities, which leads the author to demand the “de-sequestration” of Scotland, hoping for the support of European opinion, Tom Nairn bases his argument on the success of Scottish nationalism, as revealed by the electoral victory of the SNP in Scotland and the current identity-hemorrhage of British institutions, which he sees as the collapse of the United Kingdom.

Français

Cet article développe la thèse selon laquelle le soutien pour l’indépendance est en train de devenir majoritaire dans l’opinion écossaise et qu’elle est souhaitable dans un monde globalisé. Partant d’un article de Fred Halliday décrivant les États post-coloniaux “séquestrant” des entités nationales périphériques, ce qui permet à l’auteur de réclamer la “déséquestration” de l’Écosse, en espérant le soutien de l’opinion européenne, Tom Nairn appuie sa démonstration sur la réussite du nationalisme écossais, attestée par la victoire électorale du SNP en Écosse, et la crise de l’identité et des institutions britanniques, ce qu’il appelle l’effondrement du Royaume-Uni.

Tom Nairn

Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology