
Tom Nairn on the State, Nations and Community in the British Political Imaginary

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Abstract

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For Tom Nairn, in Britain, the formation of Nations in the modern sense of the term is a phenomenon which has been widely suppressed by the prevalence of pre-modern social forms, in particular by the type of national-Royalism which represents in his view the fundamental substance of Britain as a polity. From this perspective, the prevalence of political discourse around the idea of "community" is a result of the suppression of modernity and the persistence of the pre-modern within the British political imaginary. Our paper will retrace the development the thought of this Scottish Marxist thinker on the emergence of Britain as a modern social formation, in the aim of bringing into relief his specific critique of the notion of "community" as it operates in British political culture.

Taking as our object of analysis the development of Nairn's thought, from his essays in the early in the 1960s, in the *New Left Review*, to the publication of his seminal work, *The Break-Up of Britain* (1977), his polemical masterpiece, *The Enchanted Glass, Britain and its Monarchy* (1989), as well as his later writings, on nationalism in the context of globalization, in *Faces of Nationalism: Janus Revisited* (1997), and on the British polity in the XXI century, in his essay *on Gordon Brown : Bard of Britishness* (2006). The paper will begin by retracing Nairn's formulation, with Perry Anderson, of their theory of the "abnormal" development of the British State and modernity, the so-called Nairn-Anderson theses. This will be taken as the foundation of his later thought on the role of the phenomenon of Royalism in Britain, and the glorification of the pre-modern as the substance of British political anthropology. Building on these two ideas, the paper will proceed to examine Nairn's reflections on the notion of "community" in British political discourse. This will be done through the lens of the classical opposition in social science, between *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*, as respectively, pre-modern and modern forms of association. The paper will be concluded with a brief reflection on the possible limits of Nairn's excessively anti-British and pro-modernization critique of the notion of "community", particularly in the context of neoliberal forms of "modernization" and the horizon of ecological crisis.

Bio

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