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Endism - A flawed vision of the future

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Arthur Aughey: (University of Ulster): When I finished the manuscript of my book *Nationalism, Devolution and the United Kingdom State* (Pluto 2001) I did so with what I thought was not only a literary flourish but also a political warning.

The literary flourish was intended to engage with Tom Nairn's polemic against 'UKania' in *After Britain* (Granta 2000) where he had employed the Kakanian metaphor of Robert Musil's novel *The Man without Qualities*. Nairn argued that just as the fond hope of Austro-Marxists that they could save the integrity of the Habsburg Empire from nationalist challenge came to nothing so too Labour's constitutional activism merely replayed the old Austrian saying - '*es muss etwas geschehen*' (something must be done). However, the fatalistic end was implied in that action - '*es ist passiert*' (it just happened). And what will just happen, is already happening, is the dissolution of the United Kingdom. It was like the old Austrian lament of 1916 we find in Strong (*History of European Ideas* 1984, p. 305):

Unser Kaiser is tot, is alles weg,

is alles aus? Ja...es is alles

aus! Nicht gleich...aber bald!

(Our Emperor is dead, is everything gone,

is everything finished? Yes, it's all finished

Not quite yet...but soon!)

The literary reference was to Josef Roth's short story *The Bust of the Emperor* where he argued that the old Austro-Hungarian Empire did not collapse because of its inevitable contradictions (as Nairn implied) but because those who should have known better stopped believing in it. The Unionist warning was self-evident.

Following Nairn, as I noted in [my review](#) [0] of Mark Perryman (ed) *Imagined Nation: England after Britain* it is expected now of radicals to write and speak (as the subtitle proclaims) of the United Kingdom already broken up, its fate already decided at the bar of history. Nairn has done a good job. How casually this is assumed is illustrated in a recent interview in *The Independent* (22 June) with the novelist Ian McEwan. He 'serenely predicted the balkanisation of the United Kingdom' (note the word 'serenely') stating that 'Great Britain (note: he doesn't understand the difference between GB and UK) is an artificial construction of three or four nations. I'm waiting for the Northern Irish to unite with the Irish Republic sooner or later (note: wait on, Ian), and also Scotland could go its own way and become independent'. When asked if this prospect disturbed him, McEwan replied not and that the future lay with 'Englishness'.

This state of mind I call 'endism' and its attraction to a certain type of radical pose is obvious. Not only does it appear visionary it also appears in tune with 'history'. For novelists who can't be bothered with the messiness of practicalities, it is also smooth and clean. To what Andre Gorz

considered the most disturbing questions of all: given this condition, is another choice possible? given this choice, another condition?, the endist vision answers 'no' secure in its certainty and dismissal of contingency.

It is actually a radical version of Hegel's *Philosophy of History* the appeal of which is its suggestion that 'the good is already fulfilled just in virtue of the fact that it is in the process of being fulfilled' (see J McCarney *Hegel on History* Routledge 2000). In this radically transformative understanding, expectation becomes fact. Devolution is on the way to becoming what it ought to be – the break-up of the United Kingdom. Not only *should* Scotland, for example, be other than what it is but crucially it already *is* other than what it once was – it is no longer British. Equally, for the English the 'is' of the devolutionary settlement encourages the belief that devolution should become *other* than what it is, an anticipatory move towards independence. That end is prescribed in the present.

David Goodhart's recent article [1] (*Prospect* July 2008) provides another example of endism. Much of what he says is sensible and intelligent but his reflections on the Union are evidence of this disturbing endist trend. He begins by expressing his sympathy for British multi-nationalism and the virtue of an overarching solidarity. He also argues (correctly) that its break up 'is still not inevitable' and has no desire to see the Union dissolved. Nevertheless, he makes a very good case for dissolving it because he assumes there is benefit for England in that process and that the outcome will be reasonably benign.

But why not make the case for the Union? Why not challenge the nationalist narrative rather than going with its flow? For example, the new nationalism is a romance that wants to emancipate people not only from the old political and cultural system (Britain) but also from their old cultural selves. That emancipation can only found in a separation which is really a re-connection with the world for we are already 'after Britain'. It announces a national identity unblemished by the inwardness of parochialism, championing the particular and the universal at the same time. That new home is in Europe and the Republic of Ireland is the model. Well, how secure in the European Union does the Republic feel now, bullied by Brussels and threatened with exclusion?

In short, my point is this. If you do not subscribe to that end, why submit to the logic of endism? Why lose your belief when there is no need to do so?

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[1] http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article_details.php?id=10267