

NEW PRIORITIES

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In post-referendum Scotland, what might be the implications of a YES, BUT approach?¹ Essentially, a YES, BUT approach is a reflection on revolutionary priorities. As such, it offers a perspective on which issues the revolutionary left should view as essential. This perspective is relevant not merely in the pre-September 18th situation.

I start with with some general observations. At the core of a YES, BUT approach lies a claim and a warning. The claim is that *emancipation exists through free interaction*. (By 'free interaction' I mean interaction that follows its own dynamic – like a conversation which follows wherever its subject-matter leads.) The warning is as follows. If an emancipatory movement enters institutionalist – corporatist or statist – territory, it does so at its peril. It risks becoming institutionally channelled and controlled. Once interaction has made its peace with an institutional world, it no longer lives by its own rules.

These general comments invite an objection. Can an emancipatory politics avoid entering institutional territory? Is a politics of *pure interaction* conceivable? My reply is that, in an institutional world, institutions and interaction are linked in complex ways. There can be no question of purity. *Of course*, in the world as we know it, interaction takes place in contradictory – institutional and, thereby, alienated – ways. *Of course* institutions differ amongst themselves. *Of course* openings between institutions may come into being – if only briefly. My point is that, given these circumstances, an order of priority is necessary. From a revolutionary perspective, the *first* priority must be free interaction – since it is there that emancipation lies. The *second* priority is deciding on institutional issues. Viewed in such a perspective, an *institutional* choice is a choice between *least worst* options. A “but” must attach to it. What is decided must be *yes but* or *no but*. Revolutionary thinking which idealises a *least worse* choice or option loses its way. It loses its way amongst *institutions*. By contrast, an emancipatory movement which stays on course formulates its own goals

1 See R. Gunn 'Yes, But' *Heathwood Institute and Press* (www.heathwoodpress.com) 12 September 2014 and *Bella Caledonia* (www.bellacaledonia.org.uk) 14 September 2014: 'A YES, BUT campaign would (as I picture it) recommend a “yes” vote as our least worst option on September 18th. And – most important – it would support the autonomy of social movements REGARDLESS OF WHICH SIDE IN THE REFERENDUM WON'. For discussion and development of the approach, see G. Asher and L. French 'The Scottish Referendum 2014: Eco-Social Justice and a Critical “Yes, But”' *Heathwood Institute and Press* 17 September 2014; G. Asher and L. French 'A Proposal on the Scottish Referendum: “Yes, but”' *ROAR Magazine* (<http://roarmag.org>) 17 September 2014 and *Znet* (zcomm.org) 18 September 2014; T. Swann 'Why anarchists should vote “Yes”' *Bella Caledonia* 17 September 2014.

– the formulation having an interactive character.

What do such reflections imply in the light of the 18 September referendum? In the weeks building up to the referendum, grassroots radicalism came into focus. Occupy-style perspectives, including prefigurative invocations of participatory democracy, seemed not altogether remote from Scottish debates. Free interaction came to be valued not merely instrumentally, as a method of reaching this or that constitutional arrangement, but for its own sake. To hold on to *this* fragile and tentative beginning is, I suggest, the most urgent task in Scottish politics today.

To hold on to, and to sustain, this beginning involves drawing upon the experience of global struggles. It involves learning from a range of education movements, occupations, climate justice groups and action groups that is world wide. The prioritising which I favour goes beyond internationalism. It involves internationalism of an interactive kind.

How can this beginning in Scottish politics be furthered? In order to act in a manner which nurtures free interaction, the radical YES campaign must transform itself. It must prise its attention (and its sense of political identity) away from notions of nationhood – not because NO was victorious but because the YES campaign generated something beyond itself. This “something” was a movement – a sense, an intensity of life, an alertness – which surpassed the terms of September 18th.

Let me explain. On September 18th, we – whoever “we” are – were asked a question. *We* asked nothing and were confronted with a question that institutionalist politicians had framed. Because a *nation state* is an institution which belongs in a neoliberal world order, the question can be summarised: “Which form of neoliberal existence do you prefer?” The mystifying character of the referendum must be clearly seen.

In perceiving the referendum's mystifying character, no oversimplification is involved. *Of course* not all forms of neoliberalism are equally good (or equally bad). It is *of course* possible for a given state to turn against a neoliberal order of things. A state which does so is, however, exposed to neoliberal pressure and, so to say, fights on a terrain that neoliberalism has selected. What follows from these remarks? My comments do not imply that national independence struggle and turning against neoliberalism are senseless. They do, however, imply that a choice to support or not to support a campaign for national independence must be decided on what I have termed a “least worst” basis. If a nation state is a neoliberal institution, and if the goal is emancipation, a choice regarding nationhood is a choice about the *least unfavourable* set of odds.

My explanation has a further dimension. Regarding nationhood, there is more to be said. In the aftermath of the September 18th referendum, a mood of numbness and disbelief and depression prevailed amongst sections of the Scottish left. This depression was deeply personal and amounted, almost, to a sense of grief. What had happened? Why was the depression *so* deep? At the level of individual experience,

why was defeat of the YES campaign *so* undermining? My suggestion is that September 18th was (or was seen as) a *national* defeat. In the light of the deeply personal feelings unleashed by the defeat of the YES campaign, Gordon Asher's and Leigh French's words seem almost prophetic: a struggle for national independence is, they say, one which 'maintains a referent to state-foundational individualism'.² That is to say: an individual who supports a struggle for national independence finds – and finds all too quickly – that an *institutional* component has entered his or her *sense of self*. His or her awareness of himself or herself becomes mediated through “national” awareness. When he or she dreams, his or her dreams take on a national tinge. This point is most evident when the *élan* and euphoria that goes with national struggle is considered. My suggestion is that the point is equally valid in cases of national defeat. In other words, the depression which prevailed in the aftermath of September 18th is, in part, institutionally constructed. It is part and parcel not of ourselves as interactive individuals but of what nationhood – victorious nationhood or defeated nationhood – means. In the aftermath of the referendum, our task is to remove the institutional component that has lodged at the centre of ourselves.

I turn, now, from nationhood to the movement that the YES campaign brought into being. This movement is, I have suggested, one that has run ahead of its beginning. Who should be a member of such a movement? If this question is asked while depression prevails, the discussion to which it leads turns on issues of reconciliation or betrayal. Should the post-referendum movement *include everyone*, as “reconciliation” requires? Or should the movement be *exclusive*, or unwelcoming to NO-voters, as scenarios of “national betrayal” dictate? My response to such questions is that *inclusiveness* and *exclusiveness* are, like *reconciliation* and *betrayal*, categories that presuppose boundaries. They are categories which do, indeed, differ. However, they differ only on where – close to one's chest or at the furthest horizon – boundaries are to be drawn. My further response is to say that, in the Occupy-style movement which the YES campaign has invoked, there *are no boundaries*. We – whoever “we” are – are those of us who freely interact. To impose boundaries (however wide) upon interaction is to guide it into institutional channels.

What objectives should a post-referendum movement pursue? Unless this question is answered, comments regarding an interactive movement have an unspecific ring. The question is difficult, not because answers are lacking but because, in Chomsky's words, 'opportunities are all there'.³ In the closing months of 2014, a host of issues – ecological issues, issues of social justice, issues concerning peace – confront the radical left in Scotland. Thinking about how these issues are interrelated has scarcely got under way. So, too, the question of *how campaigning on such issues can retain an interactive centre of gravity* has hardly been posed. In what way can, for example, an eco-social movement become what Raúl Zibechi terms a 'pedagogical subject'?⁴ The

2 G. Asher and L. French 'Crises Capitalism and Independence Doctrines' *Ground Left* (<http://groundleft.wordpress.com>) 27 August 2014.

3 N. Chomsky *Occupy* (Penguin Books 2012) p. 103.

4 R. Zibechi *Territories in Resistance: A Cartography of Latin American Social Movements* (Oakland and Edinburgh: AK Press 2012) p. 24.

question is not merely fascinating, politically and conceptually. It is urgent as well.

To the issues just mentioned, a further set may be added. In post-referendum Scotland, constitutional issues – issues concerning the UK and devolution – occupy a central place. In prioritising interaction, a YES, BUT does not downplay the significance of constitutional questions. It notes, however, that such questions highlight professional politicians and take an institutional form: a nervous élite reaches to constitution-building in a period of reaction, or when power has started to slip. A YES, BUT approach acknowledges the significance of constitutional issues but addresses them in a *least worst* way.

What, finally, about the suggestion that post-referendum Scotland requires a 'new radical party'?⁵ I respond with suspicion. Too frequently, the structure of political parties mirror the structure of the institutional world. Too readily, political parties – even oppositional political parties – attempt to play down or diffuse the 'dance between social movements and states'.⁶ In a phrase, political parties tend to blur the distinction between institutions and interaction. In 2014, founding a party risks moving struggle on to neoliberalism's terrain.

My suspicions regarding a 'new radical party' are not, however, confined to general issues. They are based on points concerning Scotland in the present day. As I write, the Scottish radical left is taking its first steps beyond despair and disappointment. The movement to which it has given birth has merely fragile and tentative existence. In this situation, there can be no question of a vigorously-developed movement which might, as an expression of its strength, decide upon founding a party. Why found a party now? What effect would it have on the movement? The left must beware of thinking that *movements without parties* cannot exist.

On the eve of the referendum, a YES, BUT approach stressed the autonomy of social movements. It stressed that such autonomy must be supported whichever side in the referendum won. My argument here reflects the same sense of priorities. It urges that political action can be assessed only by asking what free interaction means.

5 C. Boyd 'A Scottish Poremos' *Bella Caledonia* 23 September 2014.

6 B. Dangl *Dancing with Dynamite: Social Movements and States in Latin America* (Oakland and Edinburgh: AK Press 2010) p. 2. The 'dance' that Dangl has in mind is the dance of death.