

YES, BUT

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I know that it's late in the day, but maybe it is time to reconsider fundamentals.

In Scotland, perhaps we should support not a YES campaign, but a YES, BUT campaign.

A YES, BUT campaign would (as I picture it) recommend a “yes” vote as our least worst option on September 18<sup>th</sup>. And – most important – it would support the autonomy of social movements **REGARDLESS OF WHICH SIDE IN THE REFERENDUM WON**. (By the “autonomy” of social movements, I mean their freedom from all institutional structures – for example, states and corporations. I mean social movements' freedom to develop in their own interactive terms.)

For me, a focus on the tension – more, the contradiction – between *institutions* and *interaction* is fundamental to radical politics. Institutions have a built-in, hierarchical dynamic: they obey an iron law of oligarchy that generates role definitions – role definitions which claim authority and cluster together at the top. By contrast, interaction *which follows its own inner logic* is unrestricted and unconstrained and in principle free. As in conversation which follows its argument wherever this argument leads, interaction broadens into openness and a non-predetermined world. Thus understood, can *institutions* and *interaction* combine? They can. In the real world, rather than in a world of concepts, a range of hybrids can and does obtain. But the combination has an oil-and-water character. Most often, it is institutions which succeed in channelling interaction: they force interaction into patterns which institutionally-approved role definitions approve. Emancipation occurs when, on the contrary, interaction gives the rule to institutions. My proposal is that, if the left loses a sense of the institutions/interaction contrast, the prospect of moving towards an emancipated future is lost.

How does this apply to the debate on Scottish independence? The implications are, I think, all too clear. A nation – even a small nation, even an ethically “good” nation – is an *institution*. As such, it belongs in an institutional system. A state disciplines its citizens, and it conforms to (and is disciplined by) a larger world order. In 2014, the world order to which states belong is neoliberalism. This point may be developed: whether domestically or internationally, a state is complicit in discipline and coercion. A *non-complicit* state either is, in fact, complicit despite its protestations –

or it ceases to be a state. In the neoliberal world, a state is not merely complicit in coercion and discipline. Courtesy of a barbaric world order, it possesses teeth.

Here, issues which are close to home concern me. An unqualified YES campaign – a campaign without the “BUT” which I favour – celebrates an *institution*. It celebrates an *institution* in the sense which I have tried to make clear. This should make us uneasy. It should make us *more than uneasy* when we find the institution concerned (an independent Scotland) being praised to the skies. Institutional thinking is, I suggest, insidious: all too easily, it may cloud perspectives which should be interactive and open and free. Gordon Asher and Leigh French point to a striking instance of this clouding in their *Crisis Capitalism and Independence Doctrines*: they point out that a struggle for national independence 'maintains a referent to state-foundational individualism'. Asher's and French's point can be stated in a number of ways. It suggests that, in a pro-national independence campaign, the spectre of *institutional thinking* appears in the close and intimate space between an individual and his or her self. It suggests that, in a pro-national independence struggle, *the individual* is pictured in a specific (a specifically *institutionalist*) way. It suggests that, in a phrase, the distinction between institutionalist and interactive thinking is being blurred.

If Asher and French are right, then *all* pro-national independence struggles run the risk of becoming institutionalist. In 2014, it runs the risk of consolidating (rather than questioning or undermining) a neoliberal order of things. If the NO campaign wins, then neoliberalism will be safe under Cameron. If the unqualified YES campaign wins, neoliberalism will be safe under Salmond and his friends. Neoliberal co-option is present in the form – the deeply institutional form – that a question about national independence takes. The question which is asked on September 18<sup>th</sup> is a mystified and mystifying question.

Hence my recommendation: our campaign should not be for YES but for YES, BUT. We should, indeed, vote YES as the least worst option that is before us: no-one in their right mind should give succour to Cameron. But this YES should be a YES, BUT – in the sense that caution and reserve and doubtfulness should be present from the very start. A YES, BUT result refuses to give institutionalist politicians room for manoeuvre – whereas an unadorned YES campaign (or an unadorned NO campaign) operates in institutionalist politicians' terms. A YES, BUT campaign gives notice that both the notions of Scottish government and Westminster government are mistrusted. Such a campaign warns not merely Cameron but whoever rules Scotland after September 18<sup>th</sup> that a peace movement, an ecologically-sensitive movement, a movement for social justice and a movement for participatory democracy flourish at a grassroots level. It warns that movements of this kind have their own, interactive dynamic and are in no way beholden – in their inspiration and their life – to the structures of a Scottish or UK state. It warns that social movements are not merely quangos, or quangos in the waiting, but sites where interaction and emancipation lie.

Both an unadorned YES campaign and an unadorned NO campaign endorse neoliberal positions. By contrast, a YES, BUT campaign reformulates issues in an interactive way.

I end with a comment on the formulation that I have favoured. When I have discussed the notion of a YES, BUT campaign with friends the response has, mainly, been favourable. But two rejoinders have given me thought. One offers a reformulation of my suggested slogan: in place of YES, BUT should we not say YES, AND or YES, NEXT – or, perhaps, YES, THEN? My feeling is that YES, BUT is better – much better – than the rival formulations. YES, BUT remains cautious, and introduces political conditions, whereas the other (more positive) formulations embrace national independence wholeheartedly and attempt to go on from there. I worry that, for the left, national independence is a semi-poisoned chalice – as I have argued. To a dangerous degree, an independent Scotland remains (like a non-independent Scotland) a neoliberal Scotland. If this is so, it is important for us to say that social movements *even in a independent Scotland* must remain independent from corporations and states.

The second rejoinder that has given me pause for thought is more dismissive. Is the addition of “BUT” to the word or slogan “YES” merely a self-indulgent nicety? In place of YES, BUT or, really, “yes, anything” should we support YES, WHATEVER? This rejoinder gives me pause because it introduces – or seems to introduce – a note of *my country right or wrong* into current political debates. So far, this note has been refreshingly absent from recent debates on Scottish independence. The circumstance that the note can still be sounded makes it all the more important to campaign for a YES, BUT – rather than for an unqualified YES.

