

Stalinism, 'Nation Theory' and Scottish History: A Reply to John Foster

Tuesday 19 May 2020, by [DAVIDSON Neil](#) (Date first published: 1 January 2002).

***The Origins of Scottish Nationhood* was an attempt to resolve two problems, one of history and the other of contemporary politics. The historical problem was the apparent failure of the Scottish nation to conform to the modernist conception of nationhood, in which national consciousness first develops during the transition to either capitalism (in classical Marxism) or industrialisation (in classical sociology). If Scotland was a nation in 1057 or 1320, as is so often claimed, then it must either be an exceptional case, or the designation must also be extended to England, France, or any other unified kingdom of the medieval period. Since general theories abhor exceptions, we must conclude either that modernism is wrong, or - my preferred alternative - that Scotland achieved nationhood, not in the Dark Ages or the medieval period, but after the Treaty of Union with England, after the dissolution of the late-feudal state into Britain. [1]**

One attraction of the latter, admittedly counter-intuitive proposition is that it offers an explanation for the second problem: why Scottish nationalism has failed, for more than thirty years, to win more than minority support, even under the Thatcher and Major régimes. (Indeed, the SNP have never subsequently repeated the percentage of the poll they achieved in the general election of October 1974.) Why, in other words, were most Scots able to display high levels of both Scottish national *consciousness* and British *nationalism*. If a Scottish nation only came into existence after the construction of the British state, and if the formation of this Scottish national consciousness was historically inseparable from the formation of British national consciousness, then for Scots, particularly working-class Scots, 'Britishness' may have taken political priority, because it was at the level of the British state that crucial class battles had always been fought out.

John Foster once argued that there were five main 'theoretical problems posed by Scotland's history as a nation': the origins of Scottish nationality; the end of Scottish statehood; the survival of Scottish nationality; the duality of Scottish and English national allegiances; and the timing of demands for greater Scottish self-government. [2] As can be seen from the summary above, my book deals with the first four. Given that I disagree with the solutions which Foster has proposed to these problems, I turned to his review expecting to meet an unfavourable critical response. In this, at least, I *was* not disappointed. I was disappointed, however, to find that Foster had, for the most part, chosen not to engage with what I had actually written, but to dismiss my argument, *a priori*, on theoretical grounds. Foster ignores most of my material on Scotland, except for issues concerning Scottish economic history - issues which are important in their own right, but peripheral to this discussion. [3] Indeed, most of his review is a critique of the general positions set out in my first two chapters. Foster tells us that Marxism is not wrong over the origin and class content of nationhood - I have simply failed to understand it properly: Marxism apparently posits no necessary connection between nationhood and capitalism, or indeed any mode of production. [4]

I do not intend to repeat my arguments about either nationhood in general or Scottish nationhood in

particular, since they are set out at length in *Origins* and space is short. I want to focus instead on two issues. First, the arguments with which Foster seeks to challenge my understanding of Scottish history. Second, the theoretical assumptions which Foster himself brings to this debate (since these raise issues of concern, not only to socialists based in Scotland like Foster and myself, but to the Left more generally).

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Footnotes

[1] Contrary to what Foster says, I am not so immodest as to claim ‘to be the first (Marxist) to write comprehensively on Scottish history’ (Foster 2002, p. 259), since I am obviously aware of the work of Calder, Carter, Hunter, Keirnan and Young, in addition to his own. My only claim is that I am the first to make a comprehensive case for Scottish nationhood being formed after the Union. See Davidson 2000, p. 6.

[2] Foster 1989, pp. 35-6.

[3] As I note in the first very first paragraph of the Preface, *The Origins Of Scottish Nationhood* began as the last chapter of a larger work on the bourgeois revolution in Scotland. That work provides a more appropriate setting for discussion of the economic aspects of Scottish development. See Davidson forthcoming. There is a summary of the argument in Davidson 1999a.

[4] My misunderstanding is shared by, amongst others, a historian from an earlier generation than Foster, but one similarly associated with the Communist Party of Great Britain, Eric Hobsbawm: ‘The basic characteristics of the modern nation and everything connected with it is its modernity. This is now well understood . . .’ Hobsbawm 1990, p. 14 and Chapter 1, ‘The Nation as Novelty: From Revolution to Liberalism’, more generally. As this suggests, my view of the nation is not simply derived from sociologists like Gellner, as Foster insinuates, but from an entire modernist tradition, of which Marxism is part. It is worth noting that, in every other respect, Hobsbawm shares the same Popular Front-inspired view of contemporary nationalism as Foster himself; rejecting ‘separatism’ of the national movements within Britain on the one hand,

while accepting the need to identify with workingclass 'patriotism' on the other. See, respectively, Hobsbawm 1977 and Hobsbawm 1983.