

Geoghegan, P., 2015, *The People's Referendum. Why Scotland Will Never be the Same Again*, Luath Press Limited, Edinburgh, pp. 192.

In 1952 the French edition of the famous and even to this day debated book *Casa-grande e senzala. Formação da família brasileira sob regime de economia patriarcal* by the Brazilian anthropologist, historian and sociologist Gilberto Freyre was published by Gallimard (the title was modified by the translator Roger Bastide to *Maîtres et esclaves. La formation de la société brésilienne*). In the preface Lucien Febvre, one of the founders of the Annales School of history, praises Freyre for creating a masterpiece combining history and sociology, serving not only as an interpretation of the past, but also as a meditation on the future. Febvre also stresses the overwhelming richness of Brazil's landscapes, regions, histories, cities and peoples, by suggesting that the number of different "Brazils" in Brazil is almost innumerable (his amazement sounds especially beautiful in Portuguese – here in the translation by Pedro Puntoni and Renato Sztutman – *Tantos Brasis neste Brasil... Mas quantos outros Brasis ainda!*).

Febvre's remarks come to mind when reading the recently published book by Peter Geoghegan (an Irish writer, journalist and broadcaster currently residing in Glasgow; he is the author of *A Difficult Difference. Race, Religion and the New Northern Ireland* published in 2010 by Irish Academic Press) on the Scottish independence referendum. Of course, his aim is more modest than was the case with Freyre's; nevertheless, his work shares the basic features of the Brazilian classic. It is the search, in the often complicated past, for clues to the current situation and (if possible) the future. He also reflects the richness mentioned by Febvre. Scotland, obviously, is not as large as Brazil. Nevertheless, it is comprised of so many "Scotlands" that Geoghegan hits the road in order to try to tell, through them, the story of the independence referendum. What the reader gets as a result of his peregrinations (outside of Scotland too) is not another superficial travelogue, but a carefully balanced meditation on Scotland.

Geoghegan's book is divided into seven neatly organized chapters inspired by his travels. It is heartening that there are still journalists who are ready to tell the story of the referendum on the basis of

extensive conversations with the Scottish people and not by relying mostly on “insider” contacts in Holyrood, Westminster or various political parties instead. The author has a good eye for interesting places, stories and characters too. As was mentioned above, he is capable of putting them into a wider socio-historical context, thus exploring deeper trends and fault lines in Scottish society, which – obviously – are influencing current political trends. There is much more to Scotland when seen through Geoghegan’s eyes than those of ubiquitous and highly limited explanations, perceiving it through the binary and overly narrow perspective of an independence-willing nation as opposed to the stubborn political elite in London.

When in Coatbridge (a so called “Little Ireland” with substantial Catholic and Protestant populations of Irish descent), Geoghegan asks important questions about the role of religion in Scottish society. On the one hand, Scotland can be described as a typical western country where religious observance is in steep decline; on the other – and it is the author’s point – traditional allegiances and the legacy of intolerance towards Catholics cannot be treated as wholly irrelevant today, as mistrust or mutual fear is at times still palpable.

Geoghegan also cares about Scotland’s class profile. This is a thread explored especially during his visits to Glasgow’s deprived suburb of Easterhouse or the former coal mining towns of Fife. The social and economic situation of such places provokes him to ask why the idea of independence was so attractive to many young voters of a working class background? The answer has all to do with the effects of deindustrialization and its aftershocks. It is telling that even former communists, like Willie Clarke, were strongly pro-independence as if believing – somewhat contrary to the basics of Marxism – that change is possible only on the local, Scottish scale.

Such observations are skillfully juxtaposed with the places and views of those less enthusiastic about potential independence. Geoghegan’s visit to the Borders clearly shows that the links with the other British nations (although England especially in this particular case) are strong and varied. As a consequence, the results of the economic analysis were clear for the local populations – the majority voted to uphold the Union. At the same time a crucial question is posed: is the Union’s survival based only on cold hard economic logic? Geoghegan seems to be of the opinion that for the time being

it can be enough, but in the future such a justification may not guarantee its survival.

The paradoxes and unresolved problems of contemporary Scotland are also skillfully spotted. A sojourn to the Western Isles inspires the author to consider such subjects as land ownership (“About three-quarters of all private land in the entire country is owned by just 2,500 people”) or the Scottish National Party’s centralizing tendencies, causing irritation also on Orkney and Shetland.

Equally convincing are the results of the author’s trips abroad. Thanks to them the Janus face of nationalism – as Tom Nairn has famously put it – can be approached, in its Catalan (rather civic and inclusive) and Republika Srpska variants (decidedly ethnic and confrontational).

The above examples, obviously, do not exhaust the richness of this fascinating book. Maybe Geoghegan’s work will not cause such a lasting furore as Freyre’s opus magnum did (and still does), but two things are certain. The first is that he has authored a very good (the best?), multi-layered, balanced and insightful account of the independence referendum campaign. And the second is that it is worth looking forward to future books by this talented and engaging writer.

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