Chapter Seven
Tom Nairn on Hating Britain Properly

I

Tom Nairn is a great hater. Though he has demonstrated little regard for the British working class and its institutions, and even less for the British middle-class and theirs, the prime object of his hate has been Britain, something he believes championed by both. Thus, Nairn proves that identity is more a function of what we are against rather than what we are for. In his case, hatred of Britain has been the only constant in what postmodernists have informed us is a contingent and never-ending project of identification. More so than his early association with socialist internationalism or his later, more enduring, fondness for Scotland, hatred of Britain has constituted the defining feature of his contribution to New Left political thought. Indeed, amid an intellectual career characterised by sometimes-abrupt shifts, Nairn’s enmity toward Britain stands out like a headland resistant to disintegration.¹

Nairn, though, has always sought to hate Britain properly: because it is a premodern, anti-democratic and imperial state resistant to modernisation whose obdurate presence has involved the suppression of ethnicity. But the wellsprings of his hatred have, nonetheless, changed over time. The reversals in his reasoning will constitute the subject of what follows. After a brief exploration of Nairn’s ‘identity problems’, the remaining sections of the

¹. For a compressed overview of what he has called his ‘embarrassingly long trail of “identity decisions”’ – including Italy, France, the Netherlands, Scotland, Ireland and Australia – see Nairn 2004a, p. 129, n. 10.
chapter will consider Nairn’s contributions to New Left political thought from the angle of the nexus between socialism and national identity. The first of these sections will interrogate the Nairn-Anderson theses and Nairn’s consequent socialist internationalism, manifest most clearly in *The Left against Europe? The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism*, and the shifts signalled in that book, will provide the focus of the chapter’s next section. Here, the touchstone will be as much Nairn’s attempt to marry nationalism and socialism as his continuing, if deepening, distaste for the British state. The last of these sections will provide an analysis of Nairn’s recent interventions into discussions of national identity. The chapter will conclude with a brief assessment of Nairn’s contribution to New Left thought in relation to the national question via brief comparison with other New Left thinkers’ identity-problems.

II

What is Tom Nairn’s country? At least initially, Nairn pledged allegiance to a non-country, international socialism. From this extra-territorial perspective, Nairn launched a number of sorties against the British state and its satrapies, including British socialism, and also against various British nationalisms. Indeed, at this time, Nairn defined himself against other New Left thinkers, particularly E.P. Thompson, whose supposed populism Nairn interpreted as a mirror of Britain’s outdated national culture. Eventually, however, Nairn repudiated his own rejection of roots and came to view socialist internationalism as a reflection of metropolitan hubris designed to suffocate ‘backwaters’ like Scotland, the country of Nairn’s birth and childhood. His repudiation of socialist internationalism did not involve any substantial revision of his view of Britain. Still primarily constructed against ‘old-hat’ Britain, Nairn’s country became a ‘born-again Scotland’ – a projected political community based on the resurrection of a historic nation to statehood. Socialism remained an aspect of this community, though subordinate to national liberation. Scotland, if not any sort of socialism, has remained his country, although not in any parochial sense. Indeed, like the late Raymond Williams, Nairn’s homeland might be a ‘nation’, but it is an ordinary nation, his identity constituted by what Williams called ‘anti-nationalist nationalism’.2

Nairn was born in Kirkcaldy, a small town on the east coast of Scotland, in 1932. A minor centre of industrial production, initially floorcloth, later coal-mining and printing, Kirkcaldy was subject to the modernisation common to north Britain in the Victorian period.3 However Kirkcaldy was not just a centre of heavy industry,

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