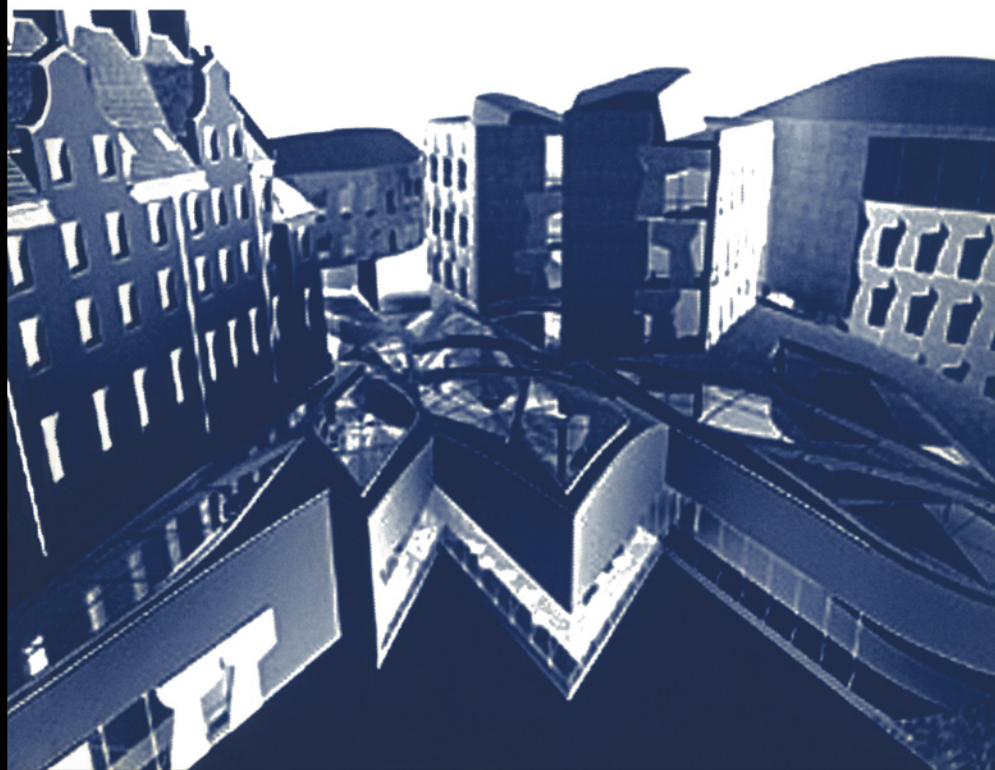


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David McCrone



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Understanding Scotland

The Sociology of a Nation

Second edition

David McCrone



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Scotland has been an interesting and challenging place in the past decade or so, and many readers of the first edition have made helpful comments and suggestions, which, if I have not taken them all on board, have made me think. Books are transient things, and that is how it should be.

The book is dedicated to my wife, Mary, who has had to live with two editions, well beyond the call of duty. None of this would have happened without her.

Introduction

Scotland in the twenty-first century: how are we to understand it sociologically? Should we even try? It might seem that we would be better focusing on the broad social, economic and cultural processes which shape the modern world as a whole, and that there is little to be said that is different about a small, north-west European nation to make the effort worthwhile. Do we not, after all, live in a 'global' world in which individual societies, especially small ones which are part of bigger states, seem to be unimportant players? That would be to misunderstand the modern world. Globalisation does not create bland, uniform homogeneity. How territories react to these broad social forces is very different, and the local and the global are but two sides of the same coin. Further, we are frequently more likely to spot social change in small societies before we do so in bigger ones, just as we notice the turn of the tide by observing small boats rather than large ships.

It is almost ten years since the first edition of this book was published. What has changed? First of all, and significantly, the title has altered. It is no longer the sociology of a 'stateless nation'. Recovering its parliament, albeit a devolved one, after almost 300 years of union means that Scotland is no longer stateless. To be sure, it never was, for it had retained and developed considerable institutional autonomy within the British Union such that it was always semi-detached in what was constitutionally a unitary state. Scotland was – and remains – of course, stateless in the sense that it is not formally independent, but one of the features of the past decade has been that few would lay odds against that possibility in the next. Whether or not the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland will survive even in its present devolved form remains to be seen. The people of these islands, the English not least, but at last, have entered a debate about who they are and how they wish to be governed. This is an argument as much about the new Europe as anything which is happening within the British archipelago. The UK has long had a constitutional contradiction at its heart: it is manifestly a multinational state, but its system of governance has been unitary, and nowhere has been more anomalous than Scotland, with its considerable apparatus of self-government.

What has this to do with sociology, as opposed to politics? This is to make a false dichotomy, for political change in Scotland has largely been driven by

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social and cultural pressure. If anything, the political system was inordinately slow in coming to terms with demands for constitutional change, and it took sustained pressure from civil society on Scotland's political classes throughout the 1980s and 1990s to bring about a parliament. Further, it would be a brave politician to assume that devolution is the final, settled will of the Scottish people.

The decade since the first edition was published has been an intensely political one, and that is properly reflected in this book. There is, however, no longer the same need to show that 'Scotland' exists as a unit for sociological analysis. The lazy assumption that 'societies' were nothing more than 'nation-states' is no longer tenable. Indeed, even the term 'nation-state' is no longer tenable, if by that we mean that all states are in some real sociological sense cultural units, or 'nations'. We now recognise that there are very few genuine nation-states in which political and cultural boundaries intersect, and that the world is a much messier – and more interesting – place because of that. We are living through a period of major political and social re-formation such that the old view that the world resembled a large jigsaw puzzle of sovereign nation-states is hopelessly dated.

We do not know what the political and social world of the twenty-first century will look like, but we do know that the past will be a fairly poor predictor of the future. There is a growing interest in how territories – hitherto stateless nations – such as Scotland, Wales, Catalunya, the Basque Country, Quebec, Flanders and so on make the adjustments in this global world. One senses that they are more optimistic about their future than the conventional states which they are currently part of, namely the UK, Spain, Canada, and Belgium. Lying behind this is a feeling that the old notion of sovereignty as a zero-sum game – all or nothing – no longer makes sense. A new process whereby political authority is layered and shared seems more meaningful. The debate which ensues concerns how levels of governance interact in the interests of the nation.

In Scotland, this debate has been intense throughout the 1990s. It has been framed by fundamental political and social changes which make a new edition all the more pressing. Since the previous edition of this book was written, the politics of Thatcherism have ended, a Labour government, styling itself 'New' to distance itself from its past, has been elected with a massive majority at Westminster; Scotland has regained a parliament; and the process of Europeanisation has been both broadened and deepened. In sociological terms, we no longer need to work so hard at justifying Scotland as a unit for social and political analysis. Hence, there is no longer a chapter on whether or not Scotland is 'different'. That debate, in so far as it related Scotland to the rest of the UK, is over. The past decade has also seen a considerable increase in writing about Scotland, and the UK. What is striking about that literature is how eclectic it is: history, politics, sociology and culture are woven into each other, and that is how it should be. Addressing the big questions demands it.

Asking what kind of society this is, and where it is going, is a quest for all disciplines and perspectives. No one has all the answers.

Neither does this book. Ten years on, the sociology of Scotland cannot be captured in one volume. This book tackles the ways in which Scotland's social structure and its culture interact with each other. It seeks to relate broad social change to how people make sense of that; in other words, the debate about how Scotland's culture and its politics are shaped by and help in turn to shape social processes. It tries to relate social and economic development to systems of political and cultural meaning. In that sense it is not a 'post-modern' book. 'Scotland' is not simply what you want it to mean. It is a complex theatre of memory in which different ways of 'being Scottish' are interpellated and handed down, constructed and mobilised by social and political forces which seek to naturalise them. There is a complex interaction of social process and cultural meaning.

There are two major changes in this edition. The opening chapter is a sociological history of Scotland in the twentieth century. Its purpose is to tell a story by focusing on the dominant motifs of that century: consecutively, the market, the state and the nation. The point is not that these followed each other, but that, as in a piece of music, they are interconnected themes. Chapter 1 sets the scene for a discussion of the relevant concepts and theories which follow, especially in Chapter 2. The other change from the previous edition is that there is now a sustained discussion of national identity (Chapter 7). Identity is not a 'thing' which can be treated as real or unreal, but a social space in which matters of structure and culture come together. What it means to be 'Scottish' is far less important for the answers than for the terms in which the debate occurs. Identity politics, then, becomes a sphere in which history, society and culture interact. It is a debate about different versions of being Scottish, which seek to mobilise process and iconography. The reader will also find much of the material recast in other chapters. That there is no longer a chapter entitled 'Who runs Scotland?' does not imply that this is no longer an important question. It seems more sensible to locate it in the context of Scotland's development (Chapter 3), and power and politics (Chapter 5). These chapters which analyse economic, social and political processes set the context for the discussion of social opportunity and social mobility in Chapter 4. The final three chapters focus on culture, identity and nationalism.

There is, of course, more than one way of understanding Scotland in sociological terms. It would be possible to have chapters dealing with social institutions: the family, gender, education, deviance, media and so on. Another approach would be to write a sociography of Scotland describing in some statistical detail what society looks like with regard to, for example, demography and social inequality. Given the relatively healthy state of sociology in Scotland compared with a decade ago, there is room for more than one approach. There are now a number of sociologists in Scotland involved in social research, and undoubtedly the greater focus on policy which a parliament brings will be beneficial in research terms. There is also much greater interest in

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these islands in comparative research, and funding bodies like the Economic and Social Research Council and The Leverhulme Trust have invested considerable sums in empirical work. What is especially heartening is that there is now a new generation of sociologists who will take the sociology of Scotland on to a higher analytic plane. If this book does anything to encourage them, and their students, then it will have achieved its purpose. For this author, and his generation, the comment made by Tom Burns, the first professor of sociology at Edinburgh, that the business of sociology is to conduct a critical debate with society about its social institutions (Burns, 1966), has been a guiding motif. In the new Scotland, it continues to be so.

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