

An Appreciation of Neil Davidson (1957-2020) - Scottish polymath, historian and activist

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The death of historian Neil Davidson, at the tragically early age of 62, has robbed Scotland, academia, the international socialist movement, and believers everywhere in a fairer, less alienated society, of a towering intellect and (above all) a truly warm, unassuming, generous human being. But for Scotland's petty, market-driven university establishment, Davidson would have been a professor with his own chair, as a pale but deserving signal of his intellectual contribution to Scottish historiography and intellectual life. Alas, the prophet is rarely appreciated in his own country.

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Neil Davidson was a true polymath with a polymath's interest in everything from hydraulic societies, rural Scottish history, and seventeenth-century intellectual thought. This was not aimless eclecticism. Neil thought in terms of social systems, their evolution and revolutionary transformation. This approach sprang from his lifelong Marxism. He was a Marxist not only in the activist sense – though he was politically committed all his life, and a founder member of the Radical Independence Campaign. Neil exemplified a creative, non-dogmatic Marxism; one he deployed when analysing complex historical questions, principally how capitalism emerged in Scotland. Yet he wrote in a pleasingly accessible style, without sacrificing rigour or complexity. His uncannily wide reading (to quote the late Angus Calder) and ability to absorb epic amounts of source material were legendary. Rumour has it that he had two lockups to house his ever-expanding book collection – one that included the collected works of Marx and Engels in Hungarian!

BACKGROUND AND WRITING

Neil's family roots (on both sides) lay in the poor farming communities of rural Aberdeenshire – a society given voice by Lewis Grassie Gibbon in his iconic novel *Sunset Song*. Agricultural mechanisation and the concentration of land ownership swept his grandparents into Aberdeen itself, and Neil remained a proud Aberdonian with an Aberdonian's thick Doric twang. Neil was born in 1957 shortly after the Tories won an outright majority of Scottish votes at the 1955 general election. His father Dougie was a radiographer – a respected profession during the mass TB campaigns of the time – and his mother Margaret a secretary. They and Neil, together with sister Shona, lived in a

house with an outside toilet – quite normal for working class Scots in the 1950s.

Neil attended Aberdeen Grammar, the city's premier council school for bright boys (no girls then) which was housed in an austere granite edifice built in true Victorian baronial style. But by the time Neil attended in the 1970s, the student revolt, the Vietnam War, and rock music had penetrated the grey granite walls. Neil turned Punk, embraced the Anti-Nazi League, and became a Marxist.

However, even Punks need to earn a living. Neil became a civil servant, a career that would last more than two decades. He also became a trades union activist and later chair of the Scottish Office PCS. None of this stopped him rising before dawn to read ferociously and systematically. Neil was a latter-day example of the traditional Scottish autodidact. Eventually, he worked for an Open University degree in social science. It took him five years. Only in 2008, did Neil finally escape civil service confinement for academia, becoming a senior research fellow at Strathclyde University, where he stayed five years. In 2013, he became a lecturer in the sociology department of Glasgow University, where he remained till his death.

Starting in early 1993, Neil Davidson's questing mind turned to the origins of a distinctive Scottish capitalism and of the continuing relevance of Scottish nationhood. Despite his heavy workload and trades union commitments, and despite his lack of an academic base, Neil was to write two seminal texts that transformed thinking on this topic. First came *The Origins of Scottish Nationhood* in 2000, for which he was awarded the prestigious Deutscher Memorial Prize, followed by *Discovering the Scottish Revolution 1692-1746*, three years later.

I have a small, walk-on part in Neil's intellectual revolution, as he explained – with characteristic generosity- in the preface to *The Origins of Scottish Nationhood*. This book he described as an "homage" to an article of my own, bearing the same title, which first appeared in the short-lived *Bulletin of Scottish Politics*, way back in 1981. The *Bulletin* was edited by Tom Nairn and I was a member of the rather amorphous editorial board. Sometime in the early 1990s, Neil found a dog-eared copy of the second (and last!) issue of the *Bulletin*, in the remainder box of Clyde Books in Glasgow. My piece – an experimental Marxist analysis of the rise of Scottish capitalism, cast as a reply to John Foster, the Communist Party historian – caught Neil's attention.

Neil credits me with asking "the right questions" but then failing to answer them – indeed to my having become a Marxist apostate. I freely admit to a Millennial political depression as neoliberalism seemed triumphant everywhere. Fortunately, Neil Davidson was made of sterner stuff. After an intellectual hiatus of nearly two decades, in which dull empiricism had dominated thinking on the trajectory of Scottish history, Neil reopened the debate regarding the economic and political forces that created modern Scotland. One very minor result of the publication of his *Origins of Scottish Nationhood* was that Neil got in touch (through a mutual friend, Ian Wall) to invite me to the book's public launch.

In essence, Davidson argues that while a Scottish state existed prior to 1707, Scottish mass national consciousness did not. Modern Scottish national consciousness arose (or was constructed) after the Union, for only then were the material obstacles to bourgeois nationhood – most importantly the Highland/Lowland divide – overcome. Indeed, Neil maintains that even the Union in itself did not transform Scottish society, because its initial *raison d'être* locally was to protect feudal relations north of the Border. The decisive shift came only after the defeat of the last Jacobite revolt in 1746, when the British state (and lowland bourgeoisie) suppressed the remnants of Scottish feudalism – a bourgeois revolution from above. Thus, a capitalist Scotland was constructed simultaneously with (and as part of) the consolidation of a new British nation state and British identity. Result: the majority of Scots entered the Industrial Revolution with a dual national consciousness, but only one political nationalism, which was "British".

If so, there is a political sting in the tail: the later, separatist nationalism of the SNP, which arose in Scotland during the 20th century, is not a simple revival of a pre-Union sentiment but an entirely new (and potentially anti-system) ideological construct. Though he did not know it at the time, Neil Davidson was laying the intellectual foundations for a progressive movement for self-determination that has come to dominate the Scottish left in the early 21st century, eclipsing the once hegemonic Labour Party.

Another result of Neil's path-defining work on Scottish development was that it facilitated his belated entry to academia. He put the new platform to good use, pouring out an impressive number of books, anthologies, and hundreds of articles on an extraordinary range subjects – more than most academics would produce in a normal career. These works fall into three broad categories. First, an intellectual engagement with two dominant figures in modern Scottish political philosophy, Alisdair MacIntyre and Tom Nairn. Second, a single-handed assault on American academic views on the advent of capitalist modernity, particularly those of Robert Brenner. And third, Neil's magnum opus in the form of a massive reimagining of the concept of "bourgeois revolutions" as necessary waystations on the path to modernity. This was an agenda to fill three academic lifetimes.

CHALLENGING THE PHILOSOPHERS: MACINTYRE AND NAIRN

Marx famously quipped that philosophers have only describe the world, the point is to change it. But how do you change it? Neil Davidson set himself the task (Gramsci-like) of engaging with two prominent Scottish public intellectuals whose political philosophy has had a major ideological impact – Alasdair MacIntyre on the conservative right, and Tom Nairn on the nationalist left. In a fury of books and articles, Neil forensically deconstructed their evolving positions, offered biting (yet fair) criticism; and through this process evolved a fresh political architecture to change the world.

Glasgow-born Alasdair MacIntyre is an internationally renowned philosopher, based in the United States since 1970. His book *After Virtue* (1981) is recognised as one of the most important works of moral philosophy written in the 20th century. MacIntyre may lack visibility in his native land but his global impact on conservative thinking is profound. Curiously, MacIntyre started out as a Trotskyist-Marxist in the 1950s (and later was leading member of the early version of Neil Davidson's own SWP) before embracing Catholicism and shifting ever rightwards.

The particular significance of Alasdair MacIntyre is that he abandoned Marxism to lead the ideological counter-revolution against the liberal 1960s. This coincided exactly with the rise of Reaganism and Thatcherism and the defeat of the Western industrial working class – a development with induced in MacIntyre a profound pessimism. But unlike many apostate Trotskyists who transmogrified into free-market libertarians, MacIntyre went on to champion an anti-individualist, anti-liberal, quasi-religious form of reaction. MacIntyre produced the most sophisticated contemporary attack on the Marxist project, by attacking its philosophical and moral under-pining. But by reconstructing MacIntyre's early Marxism, Neil recovers the promise that Marxism holds as a critique of capitalism and a revolutionary tool for the emancipation of humankind. Davidson's debate with MacIntyre was a Gramsci-like moment when the international left (in the shape of Neil) took on America's most prominent philosopher-ideologue in single intellectual combat – and won.

Neil also devoted considerable time to an ongoing debate with Tom Nairn, perhaps the central figure on the Marxist left to the study the material nature of nationalism and (practically) to champion the break-up of the British state. In the early 1960s, Nairn and Perry Anderson (in the pages of *New Left Review*) pioneered a critique of British capitalism. This argued that a thwarted bourgeois revolution had subordinated the interests of the industrial bourgeoisie to those of the aristocracy, and left the

UK imprisoned in an archaic state structure that was unable to compete with later competitors such as Germany and America. Nairn concluded that one way of destroying this archaic state was to break up Britain using Scottish independence as a battering ram. In later years, Nairn extended his analysis, viewing the nation state (and nationalism as an ideology) as material constructs necessary to all capitalist “modernisation”. Ultimately, Nairn seems to suggest that national revolutions are historically more important than unfulfilled Marxian proletarian ones.

Characteristically, Neil Davidson tears into Nairn’s analysis. First, he rejects the Nairn-Anderson theory of an archaic British state as a ruse to avoid confronting capitalism. Personally, I think Neil is too crude in his characterisation of the Nairn and Anderson thesis, which had the merit – at the time – of forcing the left to engage in a more serious study of how British capitalism maintained its ideological stranglehold. Besides, the issue is now moot because British capitalism used Thatcherism to demolish much of the archaic structure (state, economic and ideological) that Nairn and Anderson were criticising. Where Neil is correct, I think, is in criticising Nairn for seeming to argue that the break-up of Britain is automatically progressive, or that small states are automatically more democratic and progressive than larger ones. Nairn’s perennial weakness, as Neil suggests, is to displace his analysis into the ideological and state superstructures and ignore the clash of real class forces and its outcome.

Nevertheless, Neil Davidson can be credited with offering the most cogent and serious reply to Nairn anywhere – rather than the usual crude, pseudo-internationalist diatribes. I think this is possible because both Nairn and Davidson discern (correctly) that nations and nationalism are real material things embedded in the structure of the capitalist mode of production, and not some epiphenomena. Nairn, of course, was a seminal figure in re-discovering and promoting to the Anglophone world the writings of Antonio Gramsci, who well understood the material role of national consciousness. One of Neil’s most interesting articles describes Nairn’s discovery of Gramsci and the dissemination of Gramscian thought in Scotland. (As an aside: I note that Neil’s obituary published on the *New Left Review*/Verso website singularly fails to mention Tom Nairn or Neil’s engagement with him.)

TRANSATLANTIC TIME WARS

Amazingly, Neil also found time to take on the Marxist academic establishment in America, particularly the historian Robert Brenner, of UCLA. With the demise of the Soviet Union in 1989, there was a flowering of Marxian studies in American universities. This university Marxism was vastly creative in terms of ideas (laying part of the foundations for the recent rise of Democratic Socialists of America) but inevitably cut off from working class political activity. As a result, it has a tendency towards a scholastic revisionism that excludes messy class struggle from history.

In particular, Brenner (and co-thinkers such as Ellen Meiksins Wood) have implied that capitalism emerged without the necessary agency of a bourgeoisie or violent bourgeois revolution. Instead, they argue, capitalism was the result of a relatively passive process in which feudalism was replaced by tenant farmers creating a consumer market for their produce in nearby towns, eventually prompting industrial mass production. This might sound a mind-numbingly obscure debate but at its heart lies an attempt to undermine the Marxist notion that socio-economic change is the result of conscious human agency, not accidental economic advantage.

To polymath and old-school left-wing activist Neil Davidson, this was the proverbial red rag to the bull. He set about challenging Brenner’s reworking of the demise of feudalism and rise of capitalism, while at the same time reviving and deepening the Marxist notion of bourgeois revolutions as

necessary events to clear the path to modernity. The final result was Neil's *magnum opus* (literally) entitled *How Revolutionary were the Bourgeois Revolutions?* – a massive 812 pages published in 2012. But Neil added a new twist.

He argued that the earliest bourgeois revolutions (e.g. in Britain and France) clearly represented the “removal of backward-looking threats” to the expansion of nascent capitalism. However, later revolutions – mostly after the creation of a world market – were “revolutions from above”. This is where a particular fraction of an existing ruling class (sometimes bourgeois, sometimes aspirant feudal magnates, sometimes both in alliance) seeks re-fashion the state to facilitate new ways of capital accumulation. Here we return to the Scottish example, where Neil argues that the destruction of feudal rights after the 1745 Rising was the very first example of this “imposed” bourgeois revolution – aided and abetted by the Lowland bourgeoisie.

POLITICAL ACTIVIST

Neil's intellectual immense intellectual production was a function of his political activism. He joined the Socialist Workers Party in 1984 and remained an active member till 2013, when he left with a group of comrades to form a new group called rs21 (Revolutionary Socialism for the 21st Century). The split had many roots, but the detonator was a nasty internal case of sexual abuse. Rarely have I seen the gentle Neil Davidson be so angry. Some might think that three decades inside a tiny revolutionary group – one that exploded as is so often the case – was a waste. Neil would not have agreed. First, because his engagement with working class politics was the very thing that animated and drove his intellectual work. And second, because Neil Davidson's activism was actually far from sterile.

Neil's most significant contribution was helping to establish the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC) in 2012, as a mobiliser for the 2014 referendum. Within a year, RIC had thousands of animated supporters knocking on doors in Scotland's housing schemes. In my opinion, it was RIC's intervention to transform the referendum into a plebiscite on austerity – and so make it relevant to ordinary working class folk – that brought the campaign to within an ace of victory.

The last time I saw Neil was in September 2019, on the first day of a conference he had organised on Uneven and Combined Development – a Marxist theory of how nations and revolutions develop. He had asked me to read a paper – hopefully proof I was no longer an apostate. More importantly, Neil had also invited his American intellectual nemesis, Robert Brenner, to come across to Glasgow from California, to engage in the ongoing debate on the origins and (hopefully) demise of capitalism as an economic system. As always, Neil preferred open, unsectarian debate to a rigid orthodoxy. Alas, unexpectedly, Neil fell ill overnight and was unable to attend the rest of the conference. He was diagnosed with brain cancer.

Neil Davidson has left us too early. Arguably, he was the most gifted Scottish Marxist of his generation. Fortunately, his books and intellect live on. Haymarket Books will, in due course, publish two new works that Neil had been preparing before his untimely passing. Condolences to his partner Cathy Watkins.

George Kerevan

P.S.

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