

The idea of Scottish independence has moved from the implausible to the very possible. Whether or not it actually happens, the idea that the union of England and Scotland, which has existed for more than 300 years, could be dissolved has enormous implications in its own right, and significant implications for Europe and even for global stability.

The United Kingdom was the center of gravity of the international system from the end of the Napoleonic Wars until World War II. It crafted an imperial structure that shaped not only the international system but also the internal political order of countries as diverse as the United States and India. The United Kingdom devised and drove the Industrial Revolution. In many ways, this union was a pivot of world history. To realize it might be dissolved is startling and reveals important things about the direction of the world.

Scotland and England are historical enemies. Their sense of competing nationhoods stretches back centuries, and their occupation of the same island has caused them to fight many wars. Historically they have distrusted each other, and each has given the other good reason for the distrust. The national question was intertwined with dynastic struggles and attempts at union imposed either through conquest or dynastic intrigue. The British were deeply concerned that foreign powers, particularly France, would use Scotland as a base for attacking England. The Scots were afraid that the English desire to prevent this would result in the exploitation of Scotland by England, and perhaps the extinction of the Scottish nation.

The Union of 1707 was the result of acts of parliaments on both sides and led to the creation of the Parliament of Great Britain. England's motive was its old geopolitical fears. Scotland was driven more by financial problems it was unable to solve by itself. What was created was a united island, acting as a single nation. From an outsider's perspective, Scotland and England were charming variations on a single national theme - the British - and it was not necessary to consider them as two nations. If there was ever a national distinction that one would have expected to be extinguished in other than cultural terms, it was this one. Now we learn that it is intact. We need a deeper intellectual framework for understanding why Scottish nationalism has persisted.

The Principle of National Self-Determination

The French Enlightenment and subsequent revolution had elevated the nation to the moral center of the world. It was a rebellion against the transnational dynasties and fragments of nations that had governed much of Europe. The Enlightenment saw the nation, which it defined in terms of shared language, culture and history, as having an inherent right to self-determination and as the framework for the republican democracies it argued were the morally correct form of government.

After the French Revolution, some nations, such as Germany and Italy, united into nation-states. After World War I, when the Hapsburg, Hohenzollern, Romanov and Ottoman empires all collapsed, a wave of devolution took place in Europe. The empires devolved into their national components. Some were amalgamated into one larger nation,

such as Yugoslavia or Czechoslovakia, while others, such as Poland, were single nation-states. Some had republican democracies, others had variations on the theme, and others were dictatorships. A second major wave of devolution occurred in 1992, when the Soviet Union collapsed and its constituent republics became independent nation-states.

The doctrine of the right to national self-determination drove the first wave of revolts against European imperialism in the Western Hemisphere, creating republics in the Americas. The second wave of colonial rising and European withdrawal occurred after World War II. In some cases, nations became self-determining. In other cases, nation-states simply were invented without corresponding to any nation and actually dividing many. In other cases, there were nations, but republican democracy was never instituted except by pretense. A French thinker, Francois de La Rochefoucauld, said, "Hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue." Even while betraying its principles, the entire world could not resist the compulsion to embrace the principles of national self-determination through republican democracy. This effectively was codified as the global gold standard of national morality in the charters of the League of Nations and then the United Nations.

The Imperfection of the Nation-State

The incredible power of the nation-state as a moral principle and right could be only imperfectly imposed. No nation was pure. Each had fragments and minorities of other nations. In many cases, they lived with each other. In other cases, the majority tried to expel or even destroy the minority nation. In yet other cases, the minority demanded independence and the right to form its own nation-state. These conflicts were not only internal; they also caused external conflict over the right of a particular nation to exist or over the precise borders separating the nations.

Europe in particular tore itself apart in wars between 1914 and 1945 over issues related to the rights of nation-states, with the idea of the nation-state being taken to its reductio ad absurdum - by the Germans as a prime example. After the war, a principle emerged in Europe that the borders as they stood, however imperfect, were not to be challenged. The goal was to abolish one of the primary causes of war in Europe.

The doctrine was imperfectly applied. The collapse of the Soviet Union abolished one set of borders, turning internal frontiers into external borders. The Yugoslavian civil war turned into an international war once Yugoslavia ceased to exist, and into civil wars within nation-states such as Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia. At the same time, the borders in the Caucasus were redrawn when newly independent Armenia seized what had been part of Azerbaijan. And in an act that flew in the face of the principle, NATO countries divided Serbia into two parts: an Albanian part called Kosovo and the rest of Serbia.

The point of all this is to understand that the right to national self-determination comes from deep within European principles and that it has been pursued with an intensity and even viciousness that has torn Europe apart and redrawn its borders. One of the reasons that the European Union exists is to formally abolish these wars of national self-

determination by attempting to create a framework that both protects and trivializes the nation-state.

The possibility of Scottish independence must be understood in this context. Nationalism, the remembrance and love of history and culture, is not a trivial thing. It has driven Europe and even the world for more than two centuries in ever-increasing waves. The upcoming Scottish election, whichever way it goes, demonstrates the enormous power of the desire for national self-determination. If it can corrode the British union, it can corrode anything.

There are those who argue that Scottish independence could lead to economic problems or complicate the management of national defense. These are not trivial questions, but they are not what is at stake here. From an economic point of view, it makes no sense for Scotland to undergo this sort of turmoil. At best, the economic benefits are uncertain. But this is why any theory of human behavior that assumes that the singular purpose of humans is to maximize economic benefits is wrong. Humans have other motivations that are incomprehensible to the economic model but can be empirically demonstrated to be powerful. If this referendum succeeds, it will still show that after more than 300 years, almost half of Scots prefer economic uncertainty to union with a foreign nation.

This is something that must be considered carefully in a continent that is prone to extreme conflicts and still full of borders that do not map to nations as they are understood historically. Catalonia, whose capital is Barcelona, the second-largest and most vibrant city in Spain, has a significant independence movement. The Treaty of Trianon divided Hungary so that some Hungarians live in Romania, while others live in Slovakia. Belgium consists of French and Dutch groups (Walloons and Fleming), and it is not too extreme to say they detest each other. The eastern half of Poland was seized by the Soviet Union and is now part of Ukraine and Belarus. Many Chechens and Dagestanis want to secede from Russia, as do Karelians, who see themselves as Finns. There is a movement in northern Italy to separate its wealthy cities from the rest of Italy. The war between Azerbaijan and Armenia is far from settled. Myriad other examples can be found in Europe alone.

The right to national self-determination is not simply about the nation governing itself but also about the right of the nation to occupy its traditional geography. And since historical memories of geography vary, the possibility of conflict grows. Consider Ireland: After its fight for independence from England and then Britain, the right to Northern Ireland, whose national identity depended on whose memory was viewing it, resulted in bloody warfare for decades.

Scottish independence would transform British history. All of the attempts at minimizing its significance miss the point. It would mean that the British island would be divided into two nation-states, and however warm the feelings now, they were not warm in the past nor can we be sure that they will be warm in the future. England will be vulnerable in ways that it hasn't been for three centuries. And Scotland will have to determine its

future. The tough part of national self-determination is the need to make decisions and live with them.

This is not an argument for or against Scottish nationhood. It is simply drawing attention to the enormous power of nationalism in Europe in particular, and in countries colonized by Europeans. Even Scotland remembers what it once was, and many - perhaps a majority and perhaps a large minority - long for its return. But the idea that Scotland recalls its past and wants to resurrect it is a stunning testimony less to Scottish history than to the Enlightenment's turning national rights into a moral imperative that cannot be suppressed.

More important, perhaps, is that although Yugoslavia and the Soviet collapse were not seen as precedents for the rest of Europe, Scotland would be seen that way. No one can deny that Britain is an entity of singular importance. If that can melt away, what is certain? At a time when the European Union's economic crisis is intense, challenging European institutions and principles, the dissolution of the British union would legitimize national claims that have been buried for decades.

But then we have to remember that Scotland was buried in Britain for centuries and has resurrected itself. This raises the question of how confident any of us can be that national claims buried for only decades are settled. I have no idea how the Scottish will vote. What strikes me as overwhelmingly important is that the future of Britain is now on the table, and there is a serious possibility that it will cease to be in the way it was. Nationalism has a tendency to move to its logical conclusion, so I put little stock in the moderate assurances of the Scottish nationalists. Nor do I find the arguments against secession based on tax receipts or banks' movements compelling. For centuries, nationalism has trumped economic issues. The model of economic man may be an ideal to some, but it is empirically false. People are interested in economic well-being, but not at the exclusion of all else. In this case, it does not clearly outweigh the right of the Scottish nation to national-self determination.

I think that however the vote goes, unless the nationalists are surprised by an overwhelming defeat, the genie is out of the bottle, and not merely in Britain. The referendum will re-legitimize questions that have caused much strife throughout the European continent for centuries, including the 31-year war of the 20th century that left 80 million dead.