
Catriona Macdonald has taken the ‘linguistic turn’. Using as her theoretical framework concepts drawn from linguistics theory together with Gramsci’s concepts of ‘hegemony’ and ‘organic change,’ Macdonald traces the decline of Liberalism in Scotland and explains the “thread” that underpins and determines political change. The town of Paisley is the focal point of her study no doubt because she accepts the argument of Robert Kelly that “Paisley provides . . . a reference point in the history of Liberal thought in Britain.” (JBS, iv 1964, p. 133) On the whole, Macdonald puts forth a very good effort to present fairly her historical research. Her empirical evidence is well organized, supported and documented, and the historical record is used to good advantage. The reader is left in no doubt as to Macdonald’s strong abilities as an historian or the veracity of her historical research. However, in an effort to use a conceptual framework for analysis and interpretation of political change in Scotland, the author encounters one or two methodological problems.

At the outset, Macdonald assumes the reader’s familiarity with linguistics theory as well as Gramscian political theory. She accordingly makes no attempt to precis the actual theories, nor does she ever discuss whose linguistic theory she will be using. Moreover, she commits the faux-pas of not defining concepts which appear to be particularly relevant to her discussions and analysis. For example, in Chapter one she frequently refers to the political culture of Paisley yet nowhere, either in the beginning of her book or as the analysis progresses, does she concep-
tually define, or say how she will use, the term. As Macdonald is attempting to use a political concept for analytical purposes, defining a concept such as political culture becomes very important inasmuch as it has many meanings. In this instance, political culture appears to be equated with ideology, but the reader is left to guess at the meaning. When Macdonald does attempt to define noteworthy concepts such as community, political community and paternalism (Chapter two), she has a propensity to define the concept very narrowly as is the case with political community (p.36) or, in the case of paternalism, she chooses not to define the concept at all but rather lists five characteristics of it (p.55). This lack of definition, conceptualization and precision becomes particularly important to the historical analysis when, in Chapter three, Macdonald attempts to make the connection between the fall of Liberalism, the break-down of paternalism and the decline of elite influence on the political community.

Chapter three represents a critical point in the book insofar as it marks Macdonald’s first substantial effort at textual analysis. However, she uses this methodology rather parsimoniously, and there are very few instances in this chapter where this form of linguistical methodology is used to great advantage. Nevertheless, there is a consistent effort to work within the Gramscian framework and link his concept of ‘hegemony’ to the rhetorical language used on the political stage, although this reader is never quite clear on the actual point Macdonald is attempting to make. It is therefore disappointing that the reader must wait until the end of Chapter three to have the author interpret her empirical evidence within the theoretical framework she has indicated she will use.

The author again picks up the “thread” of linguistical analysis in Chapter four as she dissects the language used in the women’s movement, the Labour movement, and ‘radicalism’. However, she makes no attempt to interpret her historical analysis preferring instead to use it more as corroborative support to give credibility to her empirical evidence. Interestingly, in this chapter she takes to task two authors - Smith and McKinlay - for “… employing ill-defined terms” (p.182). This criticism is rather surprising coming from someone who commits the same faux-pas.
In Chapter five Macdonald seems to be warming to her task of discussing the downfall of the Liberal Party and their ‘pact’ with the Unionists. She apparently is quite at home with the 1914-1924 period and makes some valid observations with respect to Asquith, namely: that he failed to understand that his brand of Liberalism and the language used to express the Liberal ‘creed’ was out of step with the times (p. 228-9). Here Macdonald makes good use of textual analysis to explain the gradual decline of Liberalism.

Despite the methodological problems, Macdonald puts forth a good effort to trace the decline of Liberalism in Paisley and Scotland and determine the reasons for this decline which includes: the collapse of ‘paternalism’, the disintegration of the ‘hegemony’ of the ruling-class, the establishment of ‘class-based’ politics, the internal divisions within the Liberal Party and the inability of the Liberal and Conservative Parties to respond to the social problems of the day. The arguments and evidence that Macdonald presents are cogent and convincing based on the historical record. She thus achieves her first goal - of tracing the decline of Liberalism and turns her attention to the second goal, explaining the “thread” that underpins and determines ‘political change’.

Explaining the concept of ‘political change’ or ‘change’ of any kind is a challenging task as Macdonald readily acknowledges (p.35). She ‘zeros-in’ on Gramsci’s concept of ‘change’ and quotes him as saying “change . . . comes about as a form of discourse through rather than across lines of difference and . . . continuity rather than dramatic fracturing emerges as the key to explaining how change happens” (p.10). Using this notion, Macdonald has proceeded to use linguistic theory to assist her in her analysis of Liberalism, Radicalism, Unionism and the working class. Despite the well-known and recorded criticisms of the ‘linguistic turn’, Macdonald has made a good attempt to conjoin both linguistic theory and empiricism in her analysis. She also selects certain concepts from Gramscian theory such as ‘hegemony’ and ‘organic movements’ (of which the latter is subdivided into ‘permanent’ and ‘conjunctural’ crises) to organize her analysis of both the decline of Liberalism and political change.
in Paisley. These concepts, when conjoined with linguistical and post-structural approaches, are then applied to the deconstruction of political identities such as ‘Radical’, ‘Liberal’, ‘Working Class’ and ‘Unionist’, in order to assist in explaining the “thread” that underpins and determines ‘political change’. In this reader’s view, given the methodological problems encountered by Macdonald, she is remarkably successful in achieving her second goal.

Despite the criticisms, the book does satisfy its mandate to trace the decline of Liberalism and it goes a long way to explaining how the “thread” that underpins and determines ‘political change’ developed in Paisley and in Scotland. This book however, is not directed toward undergraduate students or students without some background in political theory and semiotics. Furthermore, despite the apparent chronological organization, the book does have a slight tendency to ‘ramble’ and occasionally seems somewhat disjointed. It is not an ‘easy read’. However, the book provides a most interesting look at the social structure of, and political changes in, both Paisley and Scotland during the 1885 to 1924 period and is worth the effort to read.

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