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Of Oil and Agency: Scotland and the Material Conditions of National Imagining

James Foley 

Abstract

North Sea oil discoveries introduced a qualitative divide that gave rise to at least the prospect of an economically viable Scottish independence, insofar as it made the “Scottish economy” a legitimate point of contestation on constitutional lines. In turn, this problematised the nature of minority nationalism in advanced, developed, post-imperial capitalist regional economies. The research assesses how economic factors – most notably oil – materially affected the prospects of asserting power, and thus the possibilities for imagining collective agency as a national (i.e. Scottish) project. Oil helped shift “New Left” thinking away from assimilationist and modernising projects of assimilating regional consciousness into “national” projects, while also inspiring outright nationalists to define their own project in relation to the earlier phases of nationalism. The study thus contributes to recentring the study of Scotland, with a smaller emphasis on the local dimension and identities, as against the role of national actors in untangling relationships with wider geopolitical and geo-economic forces. The claim is not simply that global forces formed the qualitative divide that made nationalist action possible; but also that these were conscious considerations of actors in the aftermath of North Sea discoveries.

The division of oil between Scotland and the rest of the UK remains central to debates about Scotland's post-independence public finances. It likewise forms one of Scottish nationalism's central grievances against the UK's Margaret Thatcher era: the contrast between the waste of neoliberal-monetarism as against the implied potential for Norwegian-style investment (e.g. Brotherstone, 2013; Harvie, 1994). But oil has also emerged as perhaps the largest contradiction in Scottish nationalism itself, insofar as the latter has defined itself by its ethical, social movement and environmentalist opposition to the Westminster-style politics of extraction. Thus the most recent campaigns for Scottish independence have been more reticent about the status of oil, reflecting the incorporation

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of progressive campaigners (including the Scottish Green Party) into the pro-independence bloc that dominates devolved Scottish elections. Themes of depletion and “just transition” have been emphasised. Scholarship has tended to follow this lead, with few studies of the recent upsurge of Scottish nationalism having addressed the North Sea oil phenomenon (although see McCrone, 2021; Gibbs, 2021).

The claim pursued here is that North Sea oil discoveries introduced a qualitative divide that gave rise to at least the prospect of an economically viable Scottish independence, insofar as it made the “Scottish economy” a legitimate point of contestation on constitutional lines. In turn, this problematised the nature of minority nationalism in advanced, developed, post-imperial capitalist regional economies. The claim is not, crudely, about “naked material interest” in oil revenues. Rather, the research assesses how economic factors – most notably oil – materially affected the prospects of asserting power, and thus the possibilities for imagining collective agency as a national (i.e. Scottish) project. This helped shift “New Left” thinking away from assimilationist and modernising projects of assimilating regional consciousness into “national” projects, while also inspiring outright nationalists to define their own project in relation to the earlier phases of nationalism. The study thus contributes to recentring the study of Scotland, with a smaller emphasis on the local dimension and identities, as against the role of national actors in untangling relationships with wider geopolitical and geo-economic forces. In terms of what follows, the paper examines the post-imperial context of oil development shaping the prospects for social action in Scotland; and how actors perceived these new forces, whether as radical new forms of alienation, or as new prospects for collective agency. The claim is not simply that global forces formed the qualitative divide that made nationalist action possible; but also that these were quite conscious considerations of actors in the aftermath of the oil discoveries. This research thus aims to reaffirm the role of oil in forming, not just the viability of Scottish independence as a political cause, but the qualitative nature of Scotland within the history of nationalist movements. It does this by examining oil within a broader context of imperial decline and the “New Left” crisis of emancipatory politics that issues from the crisis of top-down social democracy.

While there is an established literature on resource nationalism, the context has often been post-colonial, defined by the rise of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) cartel and the crisis of Third Worldism (e.g. Dietrich, 2016; Koch & Perreault, 2019). The Scottish case occupies a peculiar position, not just because oil-nationalism occurred in a developed former colonial power, but also because this peculiarity has been central to understanding how Scottish nationalists historicised their cause. As explored below, the impetus for North Sea prospecting was precisely the combination of oil's rising significance to “Fordist” capitalism in the global north, set against a corresponding wave of post-colonial nationalism. In this context, oil discoveries inspired Scottish intellectuals to untangle the peculiar place of Scotland in the history of nationalist causes, in seeking national independence for pragmatic purposes without a fundamentally existential appeal to national liberation. In political-economic terms, the oil discovery exposed a tension between “underdevelopment” and “overdevelopment”. Furthermore, there was a tension inherent in themes of extraction and colonisation: Scotland's experience of “underdevelopment” within the United Kingdom was a consequence of having declined from a position of colonial dominance; conversely, the American oil companies entering the UK's offshore industry evoked folk memories of the Highland Clearances. The theme of alienation, understood as a feeling of helplessness before “blind social forces”, was central to Scottish culture and politics: oil extraction epitomised these fears, and helped connect Scotland to other “New Left” thinking on national and class politics. Yet insofar as oil discoveries upended established patterns of Scottish (under)development in the UK, it provided new leverage and opportunities for mobilisation in Scotland. It thus inspired considerable discourse on themes of emancipation, liberation and authenticity, centred on a perceived new agency to Scottish politics, against a backdrop of the decline of top-down social democracy.

This article is divided into five parts. The first part considers how the combination of nationalist mobilisation and oil extraction has, directly and indirectly, shaped debates about the particularity of the Scottish case. It sketches the decline of modernisation theories and rising interest in the role of regional-national consciousness. The second section examines the geopolitical context of oil, which shaped uncertainties about Scotland's peculiar

post-colonial situation; this is followed by a brief consideration of the Labour Party's responses to oil, epitomised by the British National Oil Corporation (BNOC), which formed the backdrop to the rise of Scottish nationalism. The third section considers how the oil discovery formed the occasion for New Left discourse on Scotland, based on themes of alienation and emancipation, centring on the subjectivity of the (implicitly male) industrial worker, which in turn generated discourses on national consciousness and agency. The fourth examines how Scottish nationalists specifically addressed, through the question of oil, the specific nature of Scotland in the history of nationalist movements, including narrating the complexities of "colonisation". A final section concludes by examining the ongoing, if largely implicit influence of North Sea oil in forming Scottish national politics, suggesting that the debates of the 1970s have not been adequately resolved.

Methodologically, this study drew from a critical discourse analysis of roughly 100 texts about the Scottish economy. Conceptually, with reference to critical realism (Bhaskar, 2009; Collier, 1994; Danermark et al., 2002; Fairclough et al., 2004), the aim was to examine how economic factors (uneven development or an oil discovery) are processed as discourses which form the foundation of political mobilisation; and, in turn, the potential for political intervention to reshape objective economic relationships. The study's background in critical realism necessitated the choice of an intensive research design focused on examining the foundations of concepts in a particular case (e.g. Sayer, 2000: 24-24).

OIL AND THE SPECIFICITY OF SCOTLAND

Kellas has observed that "practically no political science publications on Scotland existed before the mid-1960s" (1980: 366). Previously, through the lens of modernisation theories, the politics of peripheral regionalist and nationalist movements were often considered as deviant or anachronistic cases (Keating, 2008; McCrone, 1984). On top of this, an influential strain had held that Britain was an especially homogenous political community, free of the regionalist deviations found elsewhere (e.g. Birch, 1967; cf. Budge & Urwin, 1966). Notably, the discovery of oil coincided with theoretical shifts away from this perspective. Events peculiar to Scotland would thus combine with a wider process of rethinking the importance of nationalism and regional consciousness. While some continued to present Scottish national consciousness as a deviant case, subsequent generations of research would capture how Scotland epitomised shifts towards a new territorial politics inspired by shifts in identity, governance and capitalist organisation (e.g. Keating, 2001; McCrone, 1992; Paterson, 1994). This section will review how, by forming the conditions of possibility for Scottish nationalist mobilisation, the issue of oil also helped shape efforts to capture the particularities of Scotland in theoretical terms. Oil, in essence, served to unsettle and problematise established patterns of Scotland's economic dependency on Westminster; the subsequent uncertainty and scope for political contestation helped to stimulate a serious strain of research in Scottish political sociology.

The first wave of interest, directly coinciding with the wave of nationalism that followed North Sea oil discovery, was inspired by theories of development and world systems theory (Esman, 1977; Hechter, 1977; Nairn, 1975; Smout, 1980). These formed a research programme that centred on themes of dependency, core-periphery relations, uneven development and external ownership. While this strain has faced significant criticism, especially insofar as it depended on a metaphor of "colonialism", it played a crucial mediating role in establishing cases like Scotland as objects of serious research interest. Firstly, it helped liberate political sociology from modernisation paradigms which centred on integration and assimilation into a unified state (Keating, 2008). Secondly, it showed how peripheral mobilisation could provoke "modernisation" rather than merely serving as a barrier to it. Thirdly, it thus linked Scotland to wider forces shaping global politics at the time, such as post-colonial state formation in a context of growing capitalist interdependency. Fourthly, in conceptual terms, world systems theory served to decouple social theory from its traditional methodological framing in the nation state. The resulting couplet was one of a universal division of labour, contrasted with particular local cultural orders, which, as

McCrone (1992) observes, helped free the study of Scotland and other minority national cultures from the methodological container of the nation state.

Nonetheless, subsequent sociological efforts to conceptualise Scottish nationalism and ethnic identity would consider earlier themes of dependency, dispossession or underdevelopment largely as points of departure (Orridge, 1981). Both Marxist and Weberian critics agreed that Scotland's economic weaknesses emerged, if anything, from a "surfeit of imperialism" (McCrone, 1992: 73), which left it poorly adapted to the emerging American-led Fordist economic model, rather than from dependency or client status. Even those Marxist theorists who continued to operate within an uneven/combined development paradigm (e.g. Davidson, 2010a) would reject the application of dependency theory to the Scottish case.

A more lasting contribution is that of Nairn (1975, 1981; see also Campsie, 2021), whose writings on Scotland and Britain would exercise a significant influence on nationalism as a field of study (e.g. McCrone, 1998 75-6; Ozkirimli, 2000: 87-96). While departing from themes of colonisation, his approach was likewise rooted in theories of uneven development, in a sense influenced by Gellner's (2008) theses on the origins of ethnic difference in uneven industrialisation (e.g. Hearn, 2006: 72). North Sea oil would play a central role in this respect. As McCrone (1992) suggests, oil allowed Nairn to overcome many of the theoretical problems inherent in applying an uneven development paradigm to the Scottish case. Rejecting the emphasis on an underdeveloped "Celtic fringe", the peculiar vigour of seventies nationalism was linked to the simultaneous occurrence of underdevelopment and overdevelopment. In contrast to theses of Scottish colonisation, the Nairn-Anderson thesis had always laid a stress on the problems of precocious development, specifically with regard to the British state's development. The specificity of Scottish nationalism in the seventies thus emerges from the longstanding decline of the UK state's global power, coinciding with the chance discovery of oil, the industry of American-led hypercapitalism. The oil industry was the "most critical, and the newest" factor behind Scottish politics. "The oil industry has collided with the country at a moment of extreme and growing debility in the traditional political apparatus...[it] has cut into the pallid corpse of Unionism like a knife" (Nairn, 1981: 130). Oil transformed the terms of Scotland's adaptation to the 1970s global crisis, with the contrast between "backwardness" in practice with the disruptive presence of advanced capitalist technological modernity and the resulting prospects of accelerated regional development. Notably, unlike others who sought to combine neo-Marxist analytical categories with nationalist conclusions (e.g. Young, 1979, 1983), Nairn did not read nationalism back into Scottish history. Instead, there was a focus precisely on the disruptive qualitative divide introduced by the capitalist commodity of oil.

While oil's role has been less explicitly theorised, it has remained a contributor to a broader debate on the origins of regional political autonomy. As Keating (2008) observes, the waning influence of theories of colonisation did not remove the central analytical problem of uneven development. Instead, it left a lacuna: "Socio-economic disparities among territories are not enough to explain territorial politics...rather politics must be central to the explanation" (2008: 66). The failures of Third Worldism and the collapse of the Soviet Union brought a new interest in territorial politics, inspired by efforts to move beyond nation-state paradigms in the context of American-led globalisation. A proliferation of Scottish studies emerged in this context, with focuses on institutional autonomy inside seemingly unified states (Paterson, 1994); the phenomenon of "stateless nations" (McCrone, 1992); and the re-emergence of nationhood within "post-sovereignty" parameters (Keating, 2004). This theme had parallels in radical scholarship, which centred on the types of identity and territorial mobilisation that proliferated in "new state spaces" (Brenner, 2003; Brenner et al., 2010; Peck and Tickell, 1994, 2007). Post-1999 Scottish devolution was often regarded as epitomising this new territorial politics; it was also clearly inspired, in part, by these theoretical trends (Davidson et al., 2010; Paterson et al., 2004). The new territorial framework centred on competitive adaptation and the search for footloose inward investment. In turn, the nationalism that proliferated was the small-n nationalism of identity consciousness and interest formation within devolution, as opposed to the 1970s phase of large-n nationalism, epitomised by earlier demands for control over North Sea oil wealth.

However, the post-2008 phase of scholarship has been forced to adjust to a succession of challenges. The parameters of territorial and national mobilisation have been transformed by a succession of multifaceted crises of

neoliberal globalisation. Within that, two trends are significant. Firstly, the partial supersession of the “post-sovereignty” era, and the return of outright claims for national independence in Western European territories including Scotland, Northern Ireland and Catalonia. Secondly, an emerging energy crisis, driven by geopolitical conflicts and the rise of climate politics, which has likewise problematised taken-for-granted assumptions about globalisation. Politically, the period of economic crisis has coincided with the rise to hegemony of Scottish nationalism, including in UK-wide elections, displacing the earlier phase of Scottish Labour dominance.

In adjusting to the displacement of Scottish Labour by Scottish nationalism, much of the research focus has centred on the declining “moral economy” of close-knit Labour-voting local communities linked to workplaces (Clark & Gibbs, 2020; Gibbs, 2018; Gibbs & Scothorne, 2020; Phillips et al., 2020, 2021). This has focused on themes of waning trade union masculinities; folk memory; and the local, communitarian dimension. However, there is tentative new recognition of the persisting role of North Sea oil in Scotland's main political conflict (Gibbs, 2021; McCrone, 2021). By re-centring oil, the global dimension to claims of Scottish autonomy is re-emphasised. Oil may not always dominate discussion of Scottish independence: indeed, most recently, the pro-independence Scottish Government has been actively intent on downplaying its significance. However, this research will show that conscious reflection about oil and associated themes – such as the prospect of agency under straitened conditions of American-led globalisation – introduced a qualitative divide, in which Scotland's taken-for-granted economic conditions were opened to new parameters of contestation, and new dilemmas of class, agency and power.

OIL, IMPERIALISM AND NATIONALISM

Oil is considered, of all the commodities under capitalism, the one most clearly marked by shifts in international power (Delaisi, 1922; Heinberg, 2003; Klare, 2004, 2008; Odell, 2013; Yergin, 2011). It forms an interesting contrast, in this respect, with coal, which had powered the earlier phase of British imperial development, but which had centred on localised communities which formed a foundation of trade union radicalism (e.g. Phillips, 2018). North Sea oil entered British politics during a phase of post-colonial adjustment, between the policy blitzkriegs of post-War nationalisations and post-1979 privatisations. Geopolitically, the era was defined simultaneously by the Cold War and by political uncertainties over former European colonies, particularly those rich in the mineral resources that powered the American-led phase of post-War capitalism. The expensive pursuit of oil exploration in European waters was a consequence of these energy insecurities.

The foundations of British (and, particularly, Scottish) oil interests predated North Sea discoveries. Scotland's shale oil industry started producing on an industrial scale in the mid-nineteenth century and continued to operate until 1962 (Kerr, 1994: 90; McKay, 2012: 228). During World War I the part-government owned Anglo-Persian Oil Company, the forerunner to BP, swallowed the conglomerate Scottish Oils which combined the five surviving Scottish shale firms. Scots nevertheless continued to hold a significant role within this multinational entity. Scotland's Burmah Oil, founded in nineteenth century Glasgow, also became the principle private shareholder in BP, a position it retained until 1975 (Corti & Frazer, 1983: 16).

The UK's peculiar post-colonial trajectory would have subsequent policy consequences. Compared to the parallel case of Norway (Alt, 1987; Cumbers, 2012), Britain's oil policy was marked by significant private interests with overseas ventures to defend. Offshore drilling required states to enforce property rights over the seabed. Drawing on the UN Convention on the Continental Shelf, the British government effectively nationalised the UK Continental Shelf (UKCS) through legislation in the mid-sixties (Kemp, 2012b). But the prospect of a vertically integrated nationalised oil company met strong resistance from both the oil majors and the Treasury and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). State control threatened Britain's broader oil interests, since Britain relied on private (or semi-private) business concerns to meet its oil security needs abroad. A UK nationalisation, insiders feared, would set a dangerous precedent and encourage Middle Eastern governments to respond in kind, hitting companies like BP and Shell; thus, the Treasury and particularly the FCO considered it ideologically

dangerous to use licensing coercively to dictate terms to oil companies (e.g. Kemp, 2012b: 259). This also explains why the UK found it difficult (especially in the early stages) to insist that British companies, whether public or private, had majority shares in exploration and extraction (Kemp, 2012b: 34). The Cold War mood of geopolitical emergency, which often centred specifically on oil (e.g. Robb, 2012), encouraged the UK to extract the North Sea's resources as quickly as possible. However, Britain's existing technological and capital base was too weak to achieve this without American capital and expertise.

North Sea oil's discovery occurred during the passage of Atlantic dominance from Britain to America. Control of oil supplies was crucial in this new regime of "Atlantic Fordism" (Lipietz, 1987; Van der Pijl, 2014), and Ford himself symbolised the motor car and the highway as much as the work culture of the factory (Urry, 2005: 25-6). Global crude oil supplies doubled in the five years following World War II (Odell, 2013: 11). The geographical effect was to move oil production's centre from a secure location – the United States – into the Middle East, where Western dominance was being challenged by Communist parties and nationalists. The extent of the West's dependence on this region needs stressing. Although America's oil production grew rapidly in the post-War era, their share of world production fell from 64 percent to 22 percent. The cause of this proportional decline was the Middle East, where production grew from 1.1 million to 18.2 million barrels per day (Yergin, 2011: 500). Mohammed Mossadeq's 1953 overthrow, in Iran, one of two leading Middle East oil producers, reflected the Cold War's petrochemical realism. As one historian notes, this "post-war petroleum order" involved occasional conflict – e.g. over Suez – but also strong cooperation between America and Britain (Citino, 2002: 161-2).

The British offshore industry thus came under the influence of two overlapping imperial regimes. One was the longstanding interests of British oil companies who aggressively guarded their close ties to the Treasury and were engaged in ideological battle with Third World nationalists. The second was the American corporations who dominated offshore technology. Their turn to offshore drilling in Europe, an expensive business in a nightmarish environment of high winds and huge waves, also arose from fears about new confidence in oil rich Third World states. Although Scotland's industry emerged from a reaction against post-colonial nationalism, Scottish nationalism drew implicitly on the same notion of popular sovereignty over natural mineral wealth.

However, so, too, did left-wing British nationalism as epitomised by Tony Benn, Labour's Energy Minister in the mid-1970s. The "Bennite" current within the Labour Party would represent a distinctive combination of anti-establishment socialism filtered through British traditions of parliamentary sovereignty; Benn himself, as Energy Minister, would allocate a central role for North Sea oil in achieving the renewal of the British economy, a view which brought him into regular conflicts with established oil interests (see e.g. Kemp, 2012a). Indeed, if the UK state's response to oil was partly a consequence of geopolitical anxieties which had helped provoke the 1970s economic crisis, it was also marked by domestic anxieties about class struggles from below, and the influence of leftism within the British Labour Party. For moderates in Labour, North Sea oil presented the prospect of a peaceful resolution to the economic crises, balance of payment problems and industrial disputes that marked British development in the seventies. Prime Minister Harold Wilson's electoral calculations were thus strongly shaped by calculations about when North Sea oil would come on stream (Toye, 2002). Labour's response to the North Sea oil issue was shaped by its positioning between two major moments of nationalisation (post-1945) and privatisation (post-1979). In turn, experiments such as the British National Oil Corporation (BNOC) reflected efforts by the British left to address the perceived weaknesses of state-owned monopoly firms (Holland, 1972, 1976; Toye, 2002). In a climate of economic crisis that centred on energy insecurity amid the rise of Third World nationalism, the influence of Benn as Energy Minister assumed geopolitical significance. Notably, some US officials were willing to promote the SNP as a counterweight to the left-leaning British nationalism represented by a potentially Bennite Labour Party (Harvie, 1994: 93). Marxist researchers have thus argued that North Sea oil was central both to the horizontal and vertical struggles over the British state; and that Scottish nationalism functioned to weaken the internal risk posed by Bennism (e.g. Foster, 2005; Foster et al., 2013).

Conversely, Scottish nationalist narratives over North Sea oil tend to centre on conflicts between British and Scottish interests. This claim is perhaps best epitomised by the controversy over the McCrone Report, a secret civil service memo issued in 1975, which was uncovered in 2005. The Report suggested that Labour governments knew the veracity of SNP claims regarding the value of North Sea oil. Indeed, McCrone suggested that “The advent of North Sea oil has completely overturned the traditional economic arguments used against Scottish nationalism” (McCrone, 1975: 16). Labour figures from the time have also conceded that Labour deliberately downplayed oil’s significance, fearing a Scottish nationalist backlash (e.g. Rhodes, 2013). McCrone himself denies nationalist claims of conspiracy – “It was never hushed up” – but admits “I couldn’t publish it: I’d have been drummed out of the civil service straight away if I had” (interview with Gavin McCrone). However, McCrone has suggested that the reason for secrecy was more about the Labour government’s commercial negotiations with oil companies. The report’s existence nonetheless testified to internal anxieties about how oil would reshape territorial politics within the UK, particularly in the context of the UK’s experience of regional industrial decline, centred in areas furthest from the London metropolitan zone. The actors responsible for British state management were thus conscious of the risks as well as the opportunities of oil.

In contemporary terms, North Sea oil is commonly remembered as an episode in the history of Scotland. Conversely, the above suggests that Scotland’s experience of oil was shaped by wider forces: Western fears of the emerging OPEC cartel; the conflict between claims for British sovereignty as against the commercial and geopolitical realities of Atlanticism; and the domestic challenge of class struggles centring on the threat of Bennism. As Phillips notes, “If it was not, in fact, Scotland’s Oil, then neither was it quite Britain’s Oil, with major oil corporations pushing hard to minimise the ground they were obliged to concede to the new government from 1974 onwards” (Phillips, 2008: 162). These factors can be obscured, partly because British officials tend to downplay the central role of oil. Thatcher’s memoirs barely mention the topic, yet, during her first term in government, thanks to a hike in oil prices caused by the Iranian crisis, North Sea revenues at one stage accounted for 4.75 percent of British Gross Domestic Product and 8 percent of taxation income (Harvie, 1994: 289). Claims for Scottish autonomy played a complicated role in these wider proceedings. Scottish nationalism in the 1970s attracted sympathy from American conservative officials as a potential bulwark against the British left; and scepticism where it raised threats to property rights and corporate interests (Harvie, 1994: 93). Thus, in what follows, the paper presents first the wider debate about regional-national conscious and class-based political agency; before considering how outright nationalists addressed these problems, exposing, in turn, debates about the meaning of national sovereignty in developed capitalist economies.

THE NEW LEFT IN SCOTLAND: OIL, ALIENATION AND EMANCIPATION

In the 1970s a young generation of intellectuals emerged with new perspectives on the Scottish working class’s relationship to the national question. Their views were broadly inspired by the New Left, the intellectual trend of those who were non-aligned in the Cold War, pro-liberation, and aligned to the working class against capitalism. One piece of evidence for Scotland’s New Left influence is the long-observed popularity of Antonio Gramsci (Hearn, 2000: 21; see also Calder, 1994: 238). This movement confronted the question of how to reassert working class agency and the local politics of liberation amid a new period of transnational capitalism. Nothing epitomised that question in Scotland like the rude intrusion of American oil companies, “the arrival in Scotland of international capitalist imperialism at its most robust and unreconstructed” (Harvie, 1994: 245). This coincided with, and helped inspire, a new interest in the Marxist-humanist concept of “alienation” (Mészáros, 1972) which proved influential on the margins of Scottish intellectual life. The best expression of these themes arguably emerges in John McGrath’s popular play *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black Black Oil*, which drew parallels between North Sea oil and the Highland Clearances, and suggested that the exploitation of Scotland’s resources paralleled “Third World” experience:

In other parts of the world – Bolivia, Panama, Guatemala, Venezuela, Brazil, Angola, Mozambique, Nigeria, Biafra, Muscat and Oman and many other countries – the same corporations have torn out the mineral wealth from the land. The same people always suffer. Then it was the Great Sheep. Now it is the black black oil. Then it was done by outside capital, with the connivance of the local ruling class and central government - and the people had no control over what was happening to them. Now it is being done by outside capital, with the connivance of the local ruling class and central government (McGrath, 1974: 32-3).

McGrath's critique is notable because, despite the presence of a colonisation metaphor linking the Highland Clearances to the North Sea oil discoveries, there was no overt "nationalist" motive behind the play. Jackson observes that "though the political intent behind the play was socialist, it was certainly possible to construe its tales of successive waves of exploitation of the Highlands by capital and the British state in more nationalist terms" (2020: 98). Nonetheless, the play criticises Scottish nationalism for confusing national interest with class interest, and parts of it reflect an ongoing socialist interpretation of class politics which is actively counterposed to nationalism. This highlights the possible overlap of themes: an imaginative tension between the alienation effect of being "colonised" by external forces, and the prospects unleashed for popular agency and resistance, was not peculiar to outright nationalism. The theme had a broader cultural resonance in Scottish politics which also reshaped the Labourist imagination of organised interests, in anticipation of devolution.

In the non-fiction genre, *The Red Paper on Scotland*, edited by Gordon Brown, perhaps best epitomises how New Left thinking was reshaping Scottish ideologies. Notably, the text features a spectrum of left-wing perspectives on the national question, ranging from moderate unionists like Brown to outright nationalists such as Nairn. However, there are significant points of agreement. Firstly, many authors reference themes of colonisation, often drawing from neo-Marxist or world systems analysis. Brown, for instance, quotes approvingly from a Business Scotland article claiming foreign ownership was making Scotland "akin to a colony". "Scotland in calling for jobs at any price for the past ten years has been engaged in turning its economy into one akin to that of a colony, i.e. one with a high level of external control, absentee decisionmakers [sic] and subsidiary technology" (quoted in Brown, 1975: 13). For those affiliated with Scottish Labour or left unionism, the theme of colonisation was less about suggesting commonalities with Third World nationalism, than about suggesting the pragmatic limits on outright independence. Linking the oil experience to a broader trajectory, wherein post-colonial Scotland had lost much of its indigenous business ownership, the political conclusion centred on redistribution from London, anchored by new prospects for Scottish democracy.

A second common theme was the paradoxical role of oil capitalism in restoring a sense of agency to Scottish politics. For Brown, "For the first time since the Union, oil and the political response to it has swung the balance of influence within Great Britain in favour of Scotland, giving the Scottish Labour Movement in particular a new bargaining power (Brown, 1975: 8). For Nairn (1975: 22), "largest, most aggressive and most international form of capitalism" had given Scotland a "comprehensive-enough agency" to restore its independence, for the first time in modern history. In previous eras, both authors suggest, autonomous thinking in Scotland lacked the "bargaining power" or a "comprehensive-enough agency" to impose social change on its own terms. Scotland's radicalism took above all a literary form, in figures like Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Norman Buchan, Hamish Henderson, and Hugh MacDiarmid. Communism, which inherited syndicalist and other native radicalisms that had once belonged in the Independent Labour Party (ILP), also had some influence on Scottish ideas (Knox, 1999). Although its electoral impact was negligible outside Fife, it made some impact on trade unionism, both at grassroots and at bureaucracy level. At the UK Communist Party's height, an estimated quarter of its membership was located on Clydeside (Kerevan, 2010). However, despite Communist support for devolution, their conception of interests continued to reflect the "British road to socialism".

Offshore oil, arguably the most predatory and technological industry of the age, therefore acted as an energising intrusion into Scottish life, inviting a critical standpoint on Scottish "backwardness". The effect for Labourists,

leftists and SNP sympathisers was that economic dependence becomes less a question of geographical and historical accident, and more a matter of misused resources. This meant that Scottish agency, the choices made by political actors, could be meaningful in new contexts. For this reason, much of *The Red Paper* departs from established concerns with class-based or even regional redistribution, to explore themes of consciousness and freedom. Gordon Brown presents this as a return to themes lost from Scottish Labour politics after the ILP's collapse and the subsequent top-down experience of post-war social democracy: "More than fifty years ago socialism was a qualitative concept, an urgently felt moral imperative, about social control (and not merely state control or more or less equality). Today for many it means little more than a scheme for compensating the least fortunate in an unequal society" (Brown, 1975: 8). Although Scottish Labour continued to imagine redistribution in British terms, there was nonetheless a marked shift to themes of alienation and emancipation.

This humanism, which reflects the New Left currents of the time, likewise transcended the constitutional divide. Several Red Paper authors refer to themes of individuals' sense of being controlled by "blind social forces". Jimmy Reid's rectorial address at the University of Glasgow – which remains among the most famous speeches in Scottish history – is also titled Alienation. Reid emerged directly from the Scottish Communist tradition of shipyard industrial organising, but would subsequently transition through Scottish Labour to the Scottish National Party. The speech, given in the aftermath of the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders' work-in, similarly reflects on the couplet wherein North Sea extraction represents the theme, and stands in symbolic contrast to claims of popular sovereignty: "The untapped resources of the North Sea are as nothing compared to the untapped resources of our people" (Reid, 1972: 10-11).

Alienation is the precise and correctly applied word for describing the major social problem in Britain today. People feel alienated by society...Let me right at the outset define what I mean by alienation. It is the cry of men who feel themselves the victims of blind economic forces beyond their control. It's the frustration of ordinary people excluded from the processes of decision making. The feeling of despair and hopelessness that pervades people who feel with justification that they have no real say in shaping or determining their own destinies (Reid, 1972: 5).

Brown (1975: 8) similarly refers to "working people's frustration with and refusal to accept powerlessness and lack of control of blind social forces which determine their lives", and Burnett (1975: 120) to "increasing working class awareness that a man as a worker is more than a mere wage slave, that he is both a producer and a creator with traditions and achievements behind him which show the abilities of his class in a creative and expansive sense, is of vital importance". A common theme is thus an equation between the individual working man – with an implied gender particularity – and the national community, each faced with an increasingly abstract and extractive global capitalism, but also an increasingly bureaucratic and indifferent state: even in Reid's speech, delivered while he remained within the Stalinist Communist Party, there is an equation of the local with spiritual authenticity.

North Sea oil is often framed both as the instigator of these debates on freedom, and an occasion for discussing the most radical experiences of alienation. For Reid, the metaphor of oil functions as a contrast to the wasted "potential" of unemployment in regions facing structural economic decline. For McGrath, the experience is one of persistent alienation experienced by local populations ruled by absentee owners and managers. For Nairn, the irony of oil is that the most brutally extractive of capitalist industries serves to unlock a dormant national consciousness; for Brown, it serves to reawaken a lost species of working-class Labourism, centred more on emancipation than on top-down social engineering. In all such cases, the underlying problem is relating the experience of emerging geopolitical and geo-economic forces (and crises) to the prospects for conscious intervention in national politics, through or on behalf of a working class acclimatised to top-down, post-war regional policy initiatives.

PRAGMATIC NATIONALISM AND OIL

There is a longstanding debate about the role of economic factors in powering nationalist movements, reflected, for instance, in the debates between Gellner (2008) and more identity or ethno-symbolist approaches to the study of nationalism (Smith, 1986). However, relative to others in Western Europe such as the Basque Country, Catalonia and Ireland, the Scottish case has been defined by the absence of an explicit agent of national oppression. Nationalist activists might, at various points, have appealed to themes of English imperialism in Scotland. Nonetheless, many nationalists have rejected these claims, and acknowledged that anti-English appeals lacked popular resonance in a society with a still-established sense of British loyalties. Similarly, despite the provenance of cultural themes of colonisation on Scotland's literary fringe, modern Scotland has never possessed the type of ethno-linguistic divide that helped shape nationalism in other Western European contexts. The absence of such motivating factors is acknowledged in the concepts Scottish nationalists use to frame their objectives. McCormick thus distinguished "existential" nationalism (claims that a national must be independent, irrespective of circumstances, to express its deeper character) from "pragmatic" nationalism, which stresses the rational assessment of political-economic benefits. Scottish nationalism also frequently invokes a contrast between "civic" and "ethnic" nationalism (e.g. Green, 2014; Paul, 2020). Such concept-building reflects both the need for moral differentiation (civic and pragmatic are regarded as less problematic than their converse), but also the peculiarity of seeking national independence without an overt appeal to national liberation.

However, prior to the North Sea discoveries, the pragmatic case for independence suffered from central weaknesses. Before oil, Scotland, with a GDP per head 88 percent of the British average (McCrone, 1999: 31), and significantly higher public spending, was "dependent" on Britain, and while more devolution could work financially, full independence seemed unaffordable. Some Scottish nationalists had tried to refute these problems. James Porteous had claimed in 1947 that Scotland was effectively subsidising the rest of the UK through taxation (Porteous, 1947). The SNP repeated this claim throughout the 1960s, claiming that Scots subsidised England by anywhere between £30 million and £120 million per year (Harvie, 2004: 130). The heresy was taken sufficiently seriously to prompt some of the first research into Scotland's national accounts. Kenneth Alexander's 1968 study of Scotland's balance sheet was one such example (see also Stewart, 1969). But the most decisive rebuttal came from McCrone (1969), the Oxford economist who would become the Scottish Office's first senior economic adviser. Nationalism depended on economic disaffection, but was perceived to lack a serious economic programme, and was thus subject to the electoral cycles of protest votes and incorporation. This was why oil's intervention proved so important. As the *Economist* noted in 1974, "[Scottish] Nationalism has tended to advance and recede with the British economic pulse; oil may now be a more permanent factor" (quoted in Harvie, 1994: 119). This point is also noted by nationalists themselves: "When oil in commercially attractive quantities was discovered in the Scottish province of the North Sea at the end of the sixties, the onus shifted to the opponents of independence to demonstrate why an independent Scotland with control over the oil would not be better off" (Maxwell, 2013: 55).

As discussed, Nairn is among the younger generation for whom North Sea oil was decisive in shaping their turn towards nationalism. Much of the *Breakup of Britain* reflects on how these post-oil claims for Scotland link to the wider history of nationalist movements. "The impact of the oil industry on Scotland and of the U.S. multinationals on the French midi is provoking a new Scottish and Occitanian separatism; but, to a greater extent than is realised, this is a sui generis phenomenon which should not be assimilated to classical European or Third World 'nationalism' at all" (Nairn, 1981: 128). Nairn did allow that Scottish neo-nationalism had similarities to nineteenth and early twentieth century forms, because it was spurred by the threat posed by a foreign "invader": the US oil companies. However, having already reached industrial modernity, Scotland's path would be different, and above all complicated by the EEC and trans-nationalism. Nairn notes that nationalist ideologies usually deny the role of historical accident, and he went furthest of all the nationalist thinkers in emphasising contingency. For Nairn, the qualitative shift in Scottish expectations in the 1970s had roots in a chance discovery – oil in Scottish waters – alongside a longer-term cause, British imperial decline.

Nairn was not alone in attempting to define Scotland's post-oil nationalist movement in the broader history of nationalism. Another example is an edited collection by Stephen Maxwell, the Scottish nationalist intellectual strongly associated with the successful 1974 election campaign, on the links between Scotland and Third World development (Maxwell, 1982). Maxwell acknowledges that Scotland's experience differs, since Scotland had been a key participant in the British Empire. His case thus rests more on the contemporary experience of America's multinational corporations, and how Scotland's experience, epitomised by the North Sea industry, can provide lessons for others. In some respects, this theme parallels growing interest across the emancipatory left in the spatial unevenness and "new state spaces" of American-led globalisation, in an era defined by the end of formal colonisation but also the crisis of Third Worldist efforts to achieve sovereignty over economic resources. Experiences of "dispossession" and "imperialism" are not necessarily exclusive to formal colonisation, and may highlight a broader logic within capitalism. Indeed, many geographers and social scientists have focused on how America's contemporary form of capitalist world control does not require formal political domination of markets (Harvey, 2003; Smith, 2003). Often, that experience of multinational corporate control is explained through colonial metaphors, where privatisation, for example, is compared to theft by a colonising power, as with Harvey's concept of "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey, 2003).

For Maxwell, Scotland's weakness against private oil companies was paralleled by the risk of an overmighty state. With independence, he argued, revenues would allow for a huge expansion of government spending; indeed, oil taxation would be so large as to overwhelm the "mixed economy" (Maxwell, 2013). The result, he suggested, could be top-down government control trampling over citizen autonomy. With reference to Boltanski and Chiapello (2003), there is evidence here of elective affinities between the New Left and the New Right, with common fears of big government and big corporations, and the stress on local agency as an inherent moral good. Left-wing nationalism, while looking to the working class for support, continued to draw upon the older imaginary of nationalism, the small man crushed between the bigger forces of history, and the search for psychic compensation against modernising forces (Davidson, 2000; Williams, 1981: 279-80).

This may be demonstrated with reference to capitalist and right-wing Scottish nationalism. Their forces also grew in response to oil: commercial leaders including the second Sir Hugh Fraser switched to the SNP on economic grounds. Fraser donated money to set up the Fraser of Allander Institute, named for his father, at the University of Strathclyde. David Simpson, a supporter of nationalism on free market grounds, became its first Director and took up a chair at Strathclyde. Simpson, like the nationalist left, recognised the pivotal role of oil:

The principal factor in the movement towards self-government appears to have been the replacement of a British by a Scottish identity, a process similar to that which can be detected in such countries as Australia, New Zealand and Canada. But in Scotland the movement was contained by the fear that independence would mean a serious fall in the standard of living...The discovery of oil has virtually abolished this fear, and with it the principal political constraint on the movement towards independence (Simpson, 1976: 60; *my italics*).

From a pro-market perspective, Simpson also highlighted a similar danger to Maxwell: the threat of an omnipotent Scottish state. "Since I presume that all but a few diehard Stalinists would agree that the concentration of the ownership of assets in the hands of the state is a dangerous thing, steps would have to be taken to see that the ownership of these resources was ultimately dispersed throughout the community" (Simpson, 1976: 62). Right-wing and left-wing versions of oil fuelled nationalism thus contain similar dilemmas, with class agency being the main variable. In this era, Maxwell and later his allies in what became the 79 Group put greatest faith in the Scottish working class as the agents of Scottish social renewal. Later, there is notable shift in emphasis, with the evangelical force of left nationalism increasingly focused on "civil society" and, in Maxwell's case, the so-called Third Sector (2013). Right-wing nationalism faced another dilemma: should oil wealth fund tax cuts for existing (and arguably "failing") Scottish capital, or would the energy of revival come from elsewhere? Again, there is a detectable shift in

later decades, with greater emphasis on more nebulous forces like inward investment and “enterprise” from below. Oil glued these disparate agendas together, allowing both Maxwell and Simpson to insist that oil's benefits must be transferred from the state “to the community”.

There was thus consciousness, across a spectrum of Scottish politics, that an accumulation of geopolitical and geo-economic accidents (oil discovery) and structural trends (imperial decline, third world nationalism, centralised ownership) had generated new prospects for regional-national agency. In turn, this posed ethical dilemmas of how to relate to circumstances that were both accidental and rooted in the alienating effects of top-down state control and corporate-imperial power. This does not depreciate the importance of factors that pre-existed oil discoveries, and also formed foundations of Scottish national consciousness: for instance, communitarian, local-democratic and Labourist traditions (e.g. Jackson, 2020; Paterson, 2002). These factors, which powered the pre-history of SNP electoral breakthroughs, were nonetheless re-centred by two factors: the possibility of an imaginative break from “dependency”, given the possible tax revenues; and the need to reimagine national agency, not just within a British (or even British imperial) context, but also within and against the emergent powers of transnational capitalism.

AFTERMATHS

The initial efflorescence of post-oil theorising on the Scottish national question was followed by impediments. Firstly, the failure of the devolution referendum of 1979 suggested, despite the impact of oil on Scottish intellectual life, the limitations of Scottish national consciousness and the ongoing strength of appeals to British national solidarity. Secondly, the Thatcher government inaugurated the end of state support for industries and a vast process of privatisation. Together with the impact of North Sea oil revenues, this helped usher in rapid deindustrialisation and unemployment in regions dependent on manufacturing, such as Scotland. Particularly given the parallel with Norwegian development, the contrast between the hopes of oil and the devolution referendum, and the reality of Thatcherism, would have longstanding implications for Scottish national consciousness. Conversely, after the peak in oil revenues under Thatcher, the relative role of oil within a UK or even a Scottish context has somewhat declined (e.g. Foster et al., 2013): in this respect, it no longer forms a clear marker wherein an independent Scotland would be “overdeveloped” by contrast to the remainder UK.

In retrospect, the most concrete immediate impacts of oil were to institutionalise Scottish economic development and national statistics, partly in response to nationalist pressures and perceived injustices. The Scottish Development Agency (SDA), a state-run group, would replace the Scottish Council (Development and Industry) (SCDI) as the dominant forum and agenda-setter on issues surrounding the Scottish economy. The name, and the concept, of SDA arose in a White Paper on North Sea oil (Kemp, 2012b: 312-13). Similarly, despite the failure of Scotland's first devolution referendum, Westminster delegated more powers over spending and the economy to the Scottish Office (although see Mitchell, 1990: 99), which again reflected debates about oil. Spending by Scottish (and other regions) came under the jurisdiction of the Barnett Formula. This was devised in the runup to the 1979 devolution referendum to adjust Scotland's share of public spending based on changes in population. It remained (secretly) in place until it was discovered in the early 1980s. Both Barnett and the SDA were compromises amid debates about precisely how greater Scottish (administrative or political) devolution should be funded by oil. They aimed to reconcile full Treasury control over oil funds with perceived “justice” for Scotland. A later development was the institution of Government and Expenditure and Revenue for Scotland (GERS), which remains the main statistical assessment of Scotland's dependency, or otherwise, on the UK. In essence, the threat of oil-inspired Scottish nationalism ushered in reforms to economic management, which in turn would assume democratic characteristics under the process of UK devolution.

Conversely, contemporary Scottish nationalism continued to refocus on efforts to demonstrate the pragmatic economic benefits of independence. While much research centres on its post-1980s slogan of “independence in Europe” (e.g. Jackson, 2020), in practice much of Scottish nationalist adaptation to globalisation depended on oil

revenues. Much of this consisted of detailed statistical arguments about GERS (Cuthbert & Cuthbert, 1998, 2001, 2011; Wilson, 1997). But the central claims were of grievance and injustice, centring on Scotland's experience of unemployment and deindustrialisation under Thatcher, and the wasted opportunities of oil, in contrast to Norway. During the peak phase of devolution (1999-2007), SNP manifestos are just as likely to mention the prospects of a Norwegian-style oil fund as to present a case for Scottish membership of the EU. Even as late as the 2014 referendum, the Scottish Government's (2013) White Paper for independence lists control over oil as one of ten unambiguous benefits of independence. At this stage, there is no consideration of the environmental limits of oil production. The focus instead is the history of Westminster mismanagement, and the prospects for further exploration and exploitation under independence. Such themes occupy as much space in the White Paper as the theme of independence in Europe.

An independent Scotland can invest our oil wealth for future generations. By value there is estimated to be as much North Sea oil still to come as has already been extracted...It is estimated that there could be up to 24 billion barrels of recoverable oil and gas remaining in the North Sea with the potential for production to continue for decades to come... we have no plans to increase the overall tax burden on the oil industry...For the sake of future generations living and bringing up their families in Scotland, we must not lose out on the opportunity that these remaining reserves provide (Scottish Government, 2013: xii; 88).

North Sea oil thus remained part of the foundation of contemporary Scottish nationalism, economically but also ethically, in mounting a political-economic foundation for complaints of waste and misuse of national resources. Such claims were explicit in the more populist nationalist cases for independence: "The extent of Scotland's wealth after the discovery of North Sea oil in the 1970s was so great that successive Labour and Conservative governments hid it from the Scottish country" (Wings over Scotland, 2014: 10). Conversely, left-unionist accounts centred more on themes of depletion and thus Scotland's renewed dependency on the economic dynamism of the City of London. These accounts form a continuum with the post-oil UK unionism highlighted above: Scotland's weakness against the forces of globalisation highlights the safety and security of the status quo, but also the prospects of class-based mobilisation centring on the new wealth centres of financialised British capitalism. Many unionist critiques of Scottish nationalism, including those of the Better Together campaign, centred on Scotland's financial "dependence" on volatile oil prices. In turn, nationalists have been forced to define oil largely as a "bonus" to post-independence finances, for investment in a Norwegian-style oil fund. In this respect, the constitutional divide has continued to map onto the qualitative divide introduced by the disruptions of the 1970s.

Nonetheless, the most recent phase of Scottish nationalism has seen a new, more troubled moral relationship with the prospects of oil. The past grievances and future possibilities of mineral extraction are modulated in cases for economic independence. SNP rhetoric is markedly cautious: "any government support for the oil and gas sector in the North Sea will be conditional upon the industry contributing to a sustainable, secure and inclusive energy transition" (SNP, 2022). The official discourse has been of "just transition", centring on achieving social benefits from the new green consensus. Equally, the extant economic programme for independence, the Sustainable Growth Commission (2018), presents a more nuanced picture. There is an acknowledgement that North Sea revenues are "windfalls": that scarce natural resources are "bonuses" which cannot form a permanent foundation for independence and should not form part of ongoing revenue calculations. But the report also concludes, "Recent investments in the North Sea and the recovery in oil prices suggest an independent Scotland should be able to reap the long-term benefits of oil revenues for many years to come if they are stewarded sensibly" (Sustainable Growth Commission, 2018: 35). In these respects, though the relationship is increasingly troubled, North Sea oil remains a condition of possibility for Scottish independence, albeit one supplanted, discursively, by a focus on green energy possibilities (Gibbs, 2021). The dilemma, for contemporary Scottish

nationalism, will thus lie in replacing the qualitative and quantitative function of oil revenue in their discourses. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the SNP was able to combine an individualist, competitive-neoliberal claim for growth economics – centred on imitating Ireland's "Celtic Tiger" – with claims of redistribution and higher public spending (e.g. Davidson et al., 2010). In essence, claims about oil revenues helped the SNP to resolve the contradictions in centre-left "progressive neoliberalism" (Fraser, 2019) by emphasising both elements without forcing the contradiction between those elements. It is unclear that prospective green energy revenues could play these imaginative functions.

CONCLUSION

North Sea oil has been central to both the pragmatic and the ethical case for Scottish independence. In this sense, it has continued to form part of nationalist adjustment to the unique challenges of post-colonial, Western European nationalism within an advanced capitalist state. This research began by examining how Britain's particular geopolitical history with the oil industry and deep-seated fears of Third World nationalism shaped Treasury strategies towards the North Sea. However, these new geopolitical relationships had a complex effect on the internal class and territorial politics of the British state. Organised fractions of Scottish politics looked to oil to achieve a new agency, for the national unit and for their own organised interest groups. Some, including nationalists but also their opponents, also framed the experience as one of "colonisation". The link between an experience of the alienation of national wealth, and potential for liberation, reflected the provenance of "Third Worldist" themes and politics, which, in turn, via OPEC, had helped precipitate the crisis of capitalism which sharpened the question of control of oil revenues. Many of these themes would recede from Scottish and British politics after the failure of the 1979 Devolution Referendum and under the influence of Thatcherism. Nonetheless, they left a measurable imprint on Scottish culture and consciousness of nationhood.

These findings have broader relevance in theorising the effects of super-profitable extractive industries on nationalist and territorial politics. Nairn's (1981) examination of the impact of uneven development on national consciousness, which centred on Scotland and Western Europe, would influence the development of nationalism as a focus of academic research. It demonstrated that, in the experience of industrial decline, already developed capitalist regions may experience dynamics of (under)development that raise parallels with the shocks of transition to capitalism, as with Scotland's intrusive experience of Americanised, oil-based hyper-capitalism. By extension, this raised possible parallels with Third Worldist demands for self-rule and autonomy, a theme that has persisted in elements of the Scottish cultural *avant garde*, which stressed links between nationhood and the alienated experience of social class. The implausibility of comparing post-colonial nations to Scotland, with its leading role in the British Empire, was often frankly admitted. But this raises the prospect that the end of official colonialism had brought the end of protection from the winds of global competition, and thus new experiences of class-based alienation.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest that could be perceived as prejudicing the impartiality of the research reported.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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