



SOCIAL DISTINCTIONS AND NATIONAL UNITY: ON POLITICS OF NATIONALISM IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ICELAND

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'People have sometimes debated', wrote the Icelandic historian Jón Jónsson Aðils in 1910, 'whether patriotism is an affection for the country itself or an affection for the nation that inhabits the country'; in other words, if it was a feeling for the natural habitat of the nation, or a collective identity of the group. This debate was largely irrelevant, he asserted, as patriotism was both at the same time. It is a natural instinct, he wrote, 'people love both [country and nation] unconsciously and instinctively, by a deep and mysterious impulse, which originates in a rigid natural law, in a basic nature that is common to all'.¹

In his statement, Jón Jónsson expressed an opinion that nationalists of all denominations have had in common. Advocates of Breton nationalism today, to take but one example, view their efforts as directly descending from the anti-feudal uprisings of the early modern period, carrying on a nationalist tradition in Brittany that has survived a union with France of almost half a millennium.² The problem with this view is, however, that it moves nationalism beyond historical or sociological analysis into the realm of social psychology. Nationalism is not a historical construct, if the argument is followed, as it is only a collective action based on a general discovery of an unconscious feeling, altruistic in its intentions, which has preservation of cultural identities and a recovery of natural political rights as its primary goals. But even if nationalism has proven to be one of the most powerful sources of political mobilization for the last two centuries, creating havoc for established states and constantly messing up the world order, it has never been defined or predicted in a satisfactory manner. Some nations have, indeed, come into existence through an assertion of collective identities, based on criteria such as history, language, or traditions, rejecting—sometimes successfully, sometimes not—the political domination of a 'foreign' power and calling for what they term as their indisputable rights. At the same time, other population groups with equal claims for nationhood have failed even to 'discover' their national identity and have been thoroughly integrated into larger national units.

Rather than branding this as a betrayal on the behalf of the potential nations to their 'true self', we have to abandon the nationalist line of thought altogether. A nation has no inherent rights, and it has, in fact, no definite, predetermined borders. To understand the context, power, and process of nationalism, we have to reject its own mystifications—or, what Terry Eagleton has named the metaphysics of nationalism³—created and sustained to legitimize and rationalize a political contention that is based on interests or ideological beliefs that have more to do with

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history than with collective psychology. Thus, I tend to agree with students of nationalism who deem it to be a social organization, based on historical and cultural premises, used either to make new claims for social authority or to preserve old power structures and social processes. Seen in this way, 'nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness', to use the words of Ernest Gellner, as 'it invents nations where they do not exist . . .'⁴ That is, nations are 'imagined communities',⁵ often originating in the thoughts of an elite, which will never be more than isolated ideas unless they find resonance in the interests (however perceived) of the potential nation.

Nationalism, as a principle of political mobilization, has always drawn its strength from the fact that we tend to remove the nation from its historical context. It projects its vision of a world divided into separate groups, united around symbols like language or common history, onto a world that has only a vague notion of this kind of social distinction. In this way, the nation is taken for granted; it becomes an empirical fact rather than serving as a subjective social category. This has had an immense political importance, because, as the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu points out, our 'systems of classification' or our 'categories of perception' (the words we use to describe the social reality) are not simple reflections of the social structure, but construct the social reality just as much as they describe it. Thus, he maintains, all political struggle is essentially 'a struggle to impose the legitimate principle of vision and division . . .'; or, he continues, 'to change the world, it is necessary to change the way in which the world is made, that is, the vision of the world and the operational practices by which groups are produced and reproduced'. For this reason, it is crucial for all social dominance to make the strategies of reproduction and social perception seem 'natural' for the society in question. Social classification, although it is often perceived as an empirical rendering of society, and the systems of social reproduction are, therefore, always highly political, even the central themes of all political struggle.⁶

Few systems of social classification have influenced our lives as much as the system of nations and nation-states. In the world of nations, national interests are meant to take priority over individual and class interests, at least in times of intense mobilization along national lines. For a citizen, it is a moral duty of the highest order to defend and further the interests of his or her nation; the national welfare is put above personal gain. Thus the power to define the national interests, to delimit the national culture, and to draw the boundaries that either separate one nation from another or divide the nation into social groups, is a major source of political authority in the contemporary world.

It is on these propositions that we have to base the study of the rapid and thorough changes in Icelandic political culture in the course of the nineteenth century. After centuries of complacent partnership in the Danish monarchy, political nationalism prevailed in Iceland in the late 1840s, calling for an autonomous polity for the island. For Icelandic nationalists, this development signifies the awakening of a slumbering national spirit—*Volkgeist*—and does not require an explanation beyond the genealogy of the ideas that shaped it. These ideas are commonly traced through the writings of a group of intellectuals, usually beginning with the eighteenth-century naturalist, poet, and government official Eggert Ólafsson, and leading to the nineteenth-century nationalist hero, the

archivist Jón Sigurðsson. As the sounds of their trumpets rang, the walls that hemmed in the Icelandic nation, impeding its intellectual development and economic progress, finally crumbled, enabling the invigorated nation to reenter the route of prosperity—or so contends the nationalist hagiology.

The nationalists' domination of the Icelandic political discourse propelled their logic into a predominant position.⁷ The struggle for self-determination and preservation of the national culture was the real issue of Icelandic politics, they argued, calling for ideological unity and placing heavy emphasis on the self-righteous nature of their effort. Autonomy of some sort was the nation's destiny, its definite right and a necessity for its economic and cultural maturation. According to the nationalist myth, this struggle was noble in itself, fought for the sake of all members of the Icelandic nation. But behind the rhetoric lurked deep divisions in the nationalist movement based on ideological preferences and class interests.⁸ On the surface, the definition of the Icelandic nation posed no problem, because it was to comprise all those who were bound together by the invisible bonds of a common Icelandic language and culture. But as a political category, the Icelandic nation was perceived as a much narrower group, excluding almost all but peasants⁹ and government officials from participation in the political process. This classification was significant not only as it gave an obvious preference to the social groups that held full citizenship, but also as it legitimized and institutionalized the inequalities in the division of capital (economic or symbolic) in Iceland and reinforced its rigid systems of social reproduction. Here I want to put nineteenth-century Icelandic politics in its context, analyzing the complex interplay between political ideologies and the system of social distinctions in an emerging nation. This case demonstrates how difficult it is to construct general theories on nationalism, because while nations are constructed categories, they also have become a crucial factor in our construction of the world. Therefore the question is not 'whether nationalism is an ideological construct or a basic anthropological phenomenon',¹⁰ as successful nationalism must seem to be both at the same time.

THE IDEOLOGICAL ORIGINS OF ICELANDIC NATIONALISM

In the French Revolution the 'modern nation' was born, both in the abstract and concrete meaning of the term. As the people of France abolished the corporate state, suppressing the system of three orders and dismantling the boundaries that cut the realm into regional entities, the diverse amalgam of provinces and social groups that made up the state coalesced at last into one whole: the French nation. Moreover, with the first written constitution of France in 1791, the absolute king had to relegate his sovereignty to the collective body of citizens, thus making France a nation-state. 'Sovereignty is one, indivisible, inalienable, and imprescriptible. It belongs to the Nation; neither a section of the people, nor any individual, can assume its function alone', the constitution proudly declared, echoing the thoughts of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and other *philosophes* of the Enlightenment.¹¹ Hence, king and god were to be the servants of their former subjects; the absolute laws of the deity had to yield to the common will of the people.

The new political theory proved to be seductive, as desperate attempts to turn the clock back to the absolutist past were largely unsuccessful—not only in France, but also over most of Europe. To Iceland the new political ideas spread through Denmark with the writings of students and intellectuals living in Copenhagen at the time. For the intelligentsia, it was the nationalist and democratic movements of Europe that kindled ‘the love for liberty and love for their fatherland and nationality’, as the nationalist politician Jón Sigurðsson wrote in his elegy for his precursor, Baldvin Einarsson.¹² In 1848, as Danish absolutism was at its last gasp, the Icelandic intellectual vanguard in Copenhagen rejoiced, predicting that ‘soon would the glow on the mountain peaks, shine in the morning of freedom’, as the Icelandic poet Gísli Brynjólfsson put it so eloquently.¹³ But, whatever influence these men had on public opinion in their fatherland, their countrymen had no choice but to rethink the relationship with the Danish monarchy. With the resurrection of the Alþing as an elected advisory body in 1843,¹⁴ and the convocation of a Constituent Assembly in 1848, the population of this distant ‘province’ was thrust into an unforeseen and unprecedented political whirlpool; a choice had to be made: either to become members of a Danish nation-state or to clearly demarcate the political boundaries of the Icelandic polity.

For most the choice was simple in itself: the population in Iceland formed a sovereign nation on its own, and therefore it could never become a constituent part of the large pool of Danish citizens. Language, history, and literary traditions were a basis for an Icelandic national culture, separating Icelanders from all other nations. From the beginning, there was no interest in Iceland for any formal participation in Danish assemblies, even not among the high officials of the Danish crown in Iceland. Social and geographic distance made all active interaction in this field between center and periphery impossible, they reasoned; if the assembly was to contribute to enlightening of the public spirit, then Iceland had to have one of its own.¹⁵ For others, Iceland had a self-evident right to its own parliament, not least because ‘Iceland has kindled the light of learning in the Nordic countries’, as Tómas Sæmundsson, the nationalist clergyman and essayist, wrote in 1841 on the occasion of the restoration of Alþing. Icelanders were simply not Danish, and they had both the right and duty to preserve their traditions and culture. Anyway, the king knew, that ‘it will be of little honor for his state to eliminate the Icelandic nationality’, Tómas Sæmundsson argued, and therefore he was bound to exempt Icelanders from participation in Danish assemblies.¹⁶

Thus the subject of Icelandic politics was set from the beginning. The relations with Denmark were the pre-eminent issue: as soon as one step was taken toward an autonomy of the Icelandic polity, the fight for the next commenced. Moreover, this struggle was considered a sacred duty, beyond compromise and reason, and gave the one who best defined its end or means almost a saintly status. For this reason, politics in Iceland remained, at least for decades after the first introduction of democracy in the island, a contention for the leadership in the nationalist movement, or a competition for the most convincing definition of the nationalist demands. Internal unity was an integral part of the political process, both because those who ‘betrayed’ the sacred goal, or offered to give up the slightest part of the sovereignty of the nation, excluded themselves from continued participation on politics. Furthermore, because national interests were thought to be for the common

good, and above the petty concerns of individual citizens or social groups, the room for political organization was left extremely narrow.

In spite of this (and partly because of this), Icelandic politics were a complex and constant dialectic between discord and unity. Thus, Jón Sigurðsson, the long-time leader of the nationalist movement in Iceland,¹⁷ began his career as an ardent liberal, fighting for Icelandic autonomy and individual liberty on the same grounds. In his opinion, a nation, just as an individual, had to be free from external control in order to develop in a rational manner; that is, individual liberty and national freedom were not two separate goals, but two sides of the same coin. Thus, economic liberty was to be the basis for economic progress in Iceland as elsewhere, while political liberty would arouse public interest in good government.¹⁸ The bulk of the nationalists, however, demonstrated little interest in individual liberty—they often saw individual and national liberty as two distinct and sometimes mutually exclusive concepts. For them, nationalism was not to be a catalyst for social change, but rather a vehicle for the preservation of the existing Icelandic culture and economy.

In part, this division of Icelandic nationalism reflects tensions that have always plagued nationalism, and then both as a theoretical construction and as an organizational principle. In response to the defeat in the Franco-Prussian war, the French historian Fustel de Coulanges contrasted the 'modern' nationalism of France with the one advocated by the emerging German nation-state; the French nation was formed by free consent, he argued, ('a nation of consent, willed by itself', Ernest Lavisse called it¹⁹) without any need for a unified culture or language, while the Germans based their national principle on a common ethnicity. Thus, the French nation was 'democratic', or 'western', while the Germans clung to 'autocratic' and 'eastern' national principles.²⁰ Similarly, French nationalism was itself for a long time born between two ideological tendencies, that is, the liberal-revolutionary tradition of the Left, and the corporate-conservative tradition of the Right.²¹

Thus the framework of Icelandic politics was, to a large extent, decided by a political development exterior to the country itself. It was the general restructuring of the European state system that set the political process in motion, and the response was, to a certain degree at least, an Icelandic adaptation of imported ideologies. We should not, however, push this comparison too far. Icelandic nationalism was idiosyncratic in its form, as all nationalisms are by nature. As it is largely a politicalization of cultural differences, nationalism of one population group is never identical to nationalism of another. Icelandic political culture will therefore not be understood with reference to 'foreign' ideas alone, since it was shaped through a constant interaction between these ideas and native social practices; that is, the political culture was a translation of an abstract ideological discourse of politics into the concrete language of culture.

INDIVIDUAL, CLASS AND NATION: POLITICS AND CULTURE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ICELAND

In 1853, the Alþing passed a proposition for a new law concerning the right to vote in parliamentary elections. The resolution did not have any weight in itself, as

the Danish king still retained an absolute legislative power in Iceland, but in the end the will of Alþing prevailed almost to the letter. Moreover, the resolution had a clear theoretical importance, because with it Alþing delimited the political nation in Iceland; that is, it defined whom this representative body was to represent. The message of the Alþing was clear. In politics the Icelandic nation was not to be based on cultural criteria, as neither language nor a common history was considered when the parliament meted out political rights. Rather, the nation was to be a hierarchical construction, where social positions determined the actual rights of individual citizens and served as a basis for political conceptualization. Thus, the resolution was, at the same time, democratic and autocratic in its orientation, granting some social groups practically unlimited franchise, while members of other groups had to fulfill stringent conditions to qualify for the right to vote.²²

The real core of the Icelandic nation, according to the parliamentary resolution, was the farming class, to which the representatives counted all those who farmed independently and were affluent enough to contribute something to their respective communities. To this peasant kernel, the parliament added without much reservation, all officials of the crown and those who had received the equivalent of university education. For this part of the Icelandic nation, the new regulation meant a clear expansion from earlier laws that had put high property restrictions on all participants in the political process. The reason for this liberality, stated a report from the parliamentary commission selected to write the resolution in 1853, was the firm conviction that 'intelligence, experience, and knowledge of the various conditions in our country does not at all go hand in hand with, nor is inseparably united with, ownership of land or other forms of wealth'.²³ The Alþing was much more parsimonious, however, in its allocation of democratic rights to other social groups in Iceland. Women and all 'dependent' men (that is, above all, servants) were denied the right to vote out of hand, regardless of their age or wealth. Furthermore, the so-called 'bourgeoisie' (*kaupstaðaborgarar*) could only vote as long as they paid a certain amount of money in taxes. For fishermen and cottars, the rules were more stringent still, as all but the wealthiest members of these social groups were totally disenfranchised.²⁴ Thus, Icelandic democracy was to be of many layers, with legal equality for male peasants and officials, but severe restrictions for other groups—and then cottars in particular.

The resolution of 1853, which the parliament endorsed again almost unaltered in 1855, was not a sudden burst of conservatism, but totally in line with the ideology that had dominated Icelandic social discourse for centuries. For one thing, Iceland was viewed as a peasant society *par excellence*, dominated both in numbers and economic power by the peasant class and their subjects. This was commonly noted in social commentaries of the time, which usually divided the nation into peasants and officials only; in the same way as 'it has been reckoned from time immemorial', wrote, for example, Magnús Stephensen, the influential judge and publicist, in 1820, 'I deem there are three Estates in this country, namely: the Office-holder-, Clerical-, and the Peasant-class'.²⁵ In this classificatory system there was no room for either cottars, servants, or day-laborers, although they certainly outnumbered the officials by far throughout the nineteenth century. Thus, the voting legislation reflected the social taxonomy (rather than the social reality),

giving rights to those who were acknowledged members of the Icelandic political nation, while excluding others as much as possible.

The relation between social perception and social reality was even more complex, as the development of the socio-economic system in Iceland had been tightly regulated for a long time. Most importantly, for centuries the Icelandic elites had attempted to bar the growth of an independent working class in the country, which had, in turn, hindered the development of its fisheries and contributed to the total economic dominance of agriculture.²⁶ The two basic pillars of this enforced peasant economy were, first, a provision that ordered all those who did not head a household to hire themselves as servants on annual contracts. Second, the laws prohibited free migration toward the sea, as all those who wanted to form new households had to have a plot of land to farm at their disposal.²⁷ As a result, the individual did not have much room for improvisation; it was, in fact, very difficult for others than peasants and officials to procreate or to lead a family life, at least if they wanted to live in accordance with the law.

If this system is interpreted, as it often has, from the view of its economic or social functions, then the most obvious explanation for its rigidity and remarkable tenacity would be the fact that it fitted neatly the economic needs of the very elites that traditionally controlled Icelandic society and legislation. The system of 'social control . . . provided the farmer with cheap labour', postulates Gísli Gunnarsson in his fine study of the monopoly trade in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Iceland.²⁸ '[I]mplicit in the law and the legislation dealing with legally defined classes of cottars, lodgers, boarders and servants', writes Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson about the same law codes, 'was a desire to ensure social discipline, and prevent vagrancy, guarantee farmers a steady supply of relatively cheap labour, prevent paupers from marrying . . . : in general to maintain the existing social order'.²⁹

In my opinion, however, a functional interpretation of the social legislation and the related political discourse tends to both exaggerate and underestimate the influence of these law codes. On one hand, it would be wrong to see the social legislation simply as a conscious effort to preserve a certain social structure, or, indeed, as an effective tool for social control. The peasant members of the Icelandic parliament often used lack of servants as a rationalization for the continued application of the social legislation, so much is true, but it is not clear that the rules secured an abundant supply of cheap labour,³⁰ nor was there any direct link between the fluctuations in the political discourse and the availability of servants on the labor market.³¹ Anyway, rules of social domination will never serve their purpose unless they are internalized by those whom they are to dominate; that is, unless they are recognized as 'just' or 'natural' by, not only the 'upper classes', but the majority of the members of the society in question. That is to say, stricter legislation, explicitly written down in legal codes, does not necessarily mean a tighter social control; often, on the contrary, it implies a challenge to the implicit and unwritten rules and strategies that have dominated society in the past.

On the other hand, I would contend that social legislation, seen as an ideological expression rather than a set of normative regulations, had a much wider connotation than its economic functions would indicate. Thus the laws were a constituent part of what Pierre Bourdieu calls 'strategies of reproduction', or the rules and practices that enable the dominant classes to preserve their predominance.³¹ In this respect,

the rules of social regulation set the framework for a rigid system of socialization, where individual choice of occupation was strictly limited to designated social trajectories, in a pattern people felt had remained unchanged through the centuries. In this system, as I have demonstrated elsewhere,³³ a person's life was divided into separate and well defined periods, each corresponding to the age and maturity of the person in question. Born into peasant families, children were to work for their parents at least up to the age of confirmation (around the age of fourteen), after which they could either enter other peasant households as servants, or remain under parental authority in their childhood homes. At a marriageable age, usually somewhere between 25 and 35, people generally married and formed their own households, provided that they had control of a farm. For many, this was the last stage in the life-cycle, while of those who lived long enough to retire, the majority spent their last days in the household of their married children.

This life-cycle system was, of course, not in any way particular for Iceland, as it was similar to those that characterize most other peasant economies in the western world. What makes the Icelandic peasant system peculiar, though, was the almost religious adherence to its principles, or the resolute belief in the benefits it had for each individual and the society in general. For a person to become a man/woman, it was considered imperative to spend some years in farm service, where an individual learned the skills of farming, the need for frugal living, and the necessity of incessant toil for his/her moral and economic well-being.³⁴ In other words, service was perceived as a part of the process of socialization—a direct and logical continuation of childhood—rather than strictly an economic activity; it was a necessary part of the production of a new citizen, serving a similar role as the school system in 'modern' societies.³⁵ In accordance with this idea, servants were treated as children, irrespective of their age, maturity, or physical stature.³⁶ This was only possible because, according to the idealized model, all peasant sons became peasants in the end, thus making peasanthood synonymous with adulthood—at least for those who did not enter the administrative elite.

The Icelandic nation, at least as it was defined by the majority of those who represented the nation in the early days of its parliamentary politics, was a complex phenomenon. It was certainly not to be a self-declared union of equal individuals, as it strove to preserve and strengthen the hold that specific groups had on the social processes. Neither did it pretend to speak in a uniform voice for all those who belonged to the cultural nation, although the political demands of the nation could only be legitimized with reference to its cultural character. We have to look at politics in their context, however, but not as a social field distinct from society, or as a revelation that demonstrates the road toward salvation. This is to say, political culture in Iceland was, as political culture always will be, subject to the rules and processes that dominate the culture in general.

NATION, STATE, AND HABITUS

Nationalist politics are always conducted in a bipolar space. This is an essential part of its logic, as the unity of one nation is only sustained as long as its members perceive their existence in opposition to all others—where, preferably, one nation

or group of nations stand out as the archenemy, or the main source of all corruption. In all of its individual multiplicity, the population group we name (and is named by itself) a nation, coalesces into one soul, into one being, consecrated by its symbols and traditions—invented if need be. Thus, a person's individuality is submerged in the collectivity; we become parts of the unity, both in body and mind. Nationalism is, therefore, politics of difference for the sake of sameness; that is, the way in which a particular nation differs from all others serves as a basis for a common identity among the group of individuals that has these distinctive traits in common.

In spite of its nature, nationalism is commonly seen as a necessary path toward a universal union, where national differences will be supplanted by an international sameness. This is the Marxist irony, argues Terry Eagleton, as the victimized have to go through a nation (as well as class) in order to reach the 'other side', or the classless (and nationless) society where 'the abstract universal right of all to be free, the shared essence or identity of all human subjects to be autonomous', will be truly honored.³⁷ For the 'bourgeois' theories of modernization, the nation serves a similar purpose. It is useful at the present, and was even more so in the past, as an integrative principle in times of social reconstruction, and as a framework for expanded political rights for individual citizens. In the modernizing utopia, the basic unit of society is however the rational individual, unfettered by other commitments than those which stem from his or her own conscience. In the long run, the theorists of modernization maintain, national boundaries (cultural as well as political) restrict free communication between regions and population groups, obstructing the 'rational' division of labor in the world. Therefore, ultimately they must be abolished—if they will not wither away by themselves in the 'irreversible process of modernization'.³⁸

Whatever we see as the final goal of nationality, or indeed if it has any ultimate goal at all, it is clear that the interplay of sameness and difference tends to blur the internal distinctions of the national group, at the same time that it exaggerates the dissimilarities between nations. In this, it both legitimizes internal social structures and inequalities, and emphasizes the sacred right of the collectivity to self-determination. To use Iceland as an example, the struggle for national liberty was employed to preserve a system of personal coercion; in other words, in the name of national freedom, one class of citizens attempted to deny other classes (cottars and day-laborers in particular) the right to legal existence. Thus, the construction of an Icelandic nation was much more than either a reaction to 'foreign' domination, or a creation of a framework for democratic politics, although these goals were certainly among the main motivating principles behind the nationalist movement.

We should not, though, look at Icelandic nationalism, any more than social ideology in general, as a delusion devised by the upper classes, either in the form of 'landowners' or 'large farmers', to maintain social prominence. Nationalism sought its strength in the fact that it adapted well to the political conditions in the country, and this was the main reason for its prevalence in the political discourse in Iceland. What gave the nation its coherence and what made it possible for different social groups, that often had conflicting economic interests, to profess a collective identity was not only the language and history they shared, but also the

logic of social practices which they had in common. This logic was contained in what Pierre Bourdieu calls *habitus*, or, as he defines it, the 'systems of durable and transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as generative principles and as organizers of practices and representations . . .'³⁹ What he means by this is that practices that form the objective reality are not a series of random accidents, but are decided by unconscious rules and mental structures that determine the actors' perceptions, appreciations, and actions. Thus, the *habitus* defines what people find 'normal', or the limits of the possible, making people's deference, tastes, and choices look as if they are natural, instinctive, and free from constraint. Furthermore, the social order is as much part of the cultural practices of those who are dominated as those who dominate; that is, it is part of the *habitus* of both groups. Through direct inculcation, a 'symbolic violence', to use Bourdieu's own terminology, or a passive internalization of the dominating values of society, the social rules become part of each person's perception and self-appreciation which, in the end, make the great majority of people of the dominated classes submit to the domination.

For Bourdieu, the *habitus* is never a static construct, but always as much the child of historical practices as the generator of social behavior; thus, the 'objective structures are themselves products of historical practices and are constantly reproduced and transformed by historical practices whose productive principle is itself the product of the structures which it consequently tends to reproduce', to quote Bourdieu's words directly.⁴⁰ Behind the opaque language of the social theorist is the realization that social action is shaped in an endless dialectic, both between past and present, and between *habitus* and objective reality. Moreover, as social structures are not only produced, but have to be reproduced, they change constantly through the inevitable passage of time. For this reason, it is imperative for all dominating groups or principles of domination to retain firm control over the system of social reproduction; in a sense, to guide historical development through the way in which we read history. In France, to take one example, the political feuds during the late nineteenth century between Left and Right, between the secular Republic and the Catholic Monarchy, focused on the school system, because both sides understood perfectly that the system of socialization is the key to future dominance. Through the malleable and open minds of the young, State and Church wanted to shape the future of French society, inculcating obedience either to the Republic or to God.

In Iceland, we can discern similar tendencies in the political discourse, although there the almost total lack of political contention made it a monologue rather than a dialogue. Up to the nineteenth century the Icelandic social system had been a relatively self-contained unit, isolated both by its geographic distance from the European continent, and by its well defined borders. Moreover, its connections with the external world were tightly controlled and consciously separated from its internal affairs.⁴¹ The administration, in spite of the fact that it represented the Danish crown, was fairly independent of the central government, in part because of how remote the periphery was from the center, but also because the barren island hardly gave much opportunity to enrich the coffers of the government in Copenhagen. Thus, to a large degree Icelandic social legislation and customs developed independently and without an active involvement on the part of the

government, although laws needed a royal endorsement in order to be valid in courts.

In nineteenth century, this situation was challenged from various directions. Progress in transportation facilities helped to tie the country ever more closely to international trading networks, enhancing its opportunities for exports as well as imports. The increasing capacity of the state, in conjunction with novel ideologies in government, also threatened the established channels between the periphery and the state center. While this directly undermined the structure of authority in Iceland, it also opened up the possibility of further involvement by 'foreign' institutions in the periphery. Finally, the dissolution of social corporatism in Europe, and a concurrent rise in the belief in individual freedom, contradicted many of the basic axioms of the Icelandic *ancien régime*.

There was, however, no dramatic growth in direct state interference in Icelandic internal affairs during this period. Most of the energy in the legislative and administrative fields was spent in the search for the future place of the periphery in the Danish monarchy, while the government spent little effort to modernize either the Icelandic social processes or the economic base. The tension between state and local communities in Iceland was growing, however, with different opinions on individual liberty and regulated social control as the main sources of discord. In these debates the government generally emphasized the economic and social rights of the individual while the Icelandic parliament sought to support and strengthen the legal basis of the system of social reproduction—which in practice meant to enforce the life-cycle of a crumbling peasant economy. In the absence of the usual 'positive' checks of famines or pestilence—to use the terminology of Thomas Malthus—Iceland underwent a continuous, and sometimes rapid, demographic growth throughout most of the century, passing the 50,000 mark in the mid 1820s for the first time since the beginning of the eighteenth century. This put ever more strain on the peasant economy, as scarce resources in agriculture made it difficult to stem the migration toward the sea and the concurrent growth in the fisheries.⁴² For the rigid social system to survive, population growth had to be slowed down, or at least the government had to actively enforce the rules of social order.

This was exactly what the state declined to do. In the name of individual rights or humane administration the government refused to sanction marriage laws that would have required prospective couples to have land to farm in order to receive permission to enter matrimony. Similarly, it forced Alþing to move the labor legislation in a more liberal direction, thus expressing doubts about the rationality and legality of the traditional life-cycle system. Thus, if the social order was to remain intact, with the 'peasant class' as the dominating force in society and politics, then 'Icelanders' (*viz*, the political nation, or, in essence, this same peasant class) had to achieve hegemony over the legislative processes. In this sense, the nation was neither a route toward the Marxist 'other side', nor toward the universal sameness of modernization, but rather a framework for the preservation of what made the Icelandic nation a nation, that is, a preservation of the social structure and processes that were distinctive for this population group.

These conditions shaped the political culture in nineteenth-century Iceland. In a sense, what happened, as so often in political crises, was an alteration of what

Bourdieu calls *doxa*, which he defines as the 'universe of the undiscussed (undisputed)'.⁴³ Social norms, which before had been taken for granted, as natural or a 'common sense', were suddenly questioned and challenged. Most importantly, this development undermined the principles of social reproduction in Iceland, thus challenging the whole structure of social classification and dominance. In response, the peasants wanted to reaffirm their position, transforming the *doxa* into *orthodoxy*, or to 'say what before had gone without saying'. As a group threatened both socially and economically by the growth of new modes of production and reproduction, the peasants sought recourse in history, celebrating the traditions and rituals of the past, since they could expect nothing of the future.⁴⁴ It was for this reason that the prominent element of Icelandic nationalism was socially conservative, calling for the preservation of the old Icelandic order. When it became clear that *laissez-faire* attitudes of the state would ruin the Icelandic social structures, the most obvious response was for the declining social groups to request a full control over legislation, while they reconfirmed their own symbolic hegemony in the country itself.

Nationalism served as a natural principle for a political mobilization that had the conservation of the old Icelandic order as its main goal. As Iceland was a 'peasant society', the interests of the peasant class were the national interests, and the national culture was essentially a peasant culture; the countryside and the peasantry preserved the language and mores of the Icelandic nation, while the towns and fishermen represented foreign corruption and moral degeneration. The construction of an Icelandic nation, based on the cultural practices of the peasantry, did not, however, halt the dissolution of the peasant economy. Not even an ultimate victory in the political struggle, finalized in a total independence in 1944, changed the direction of the socio-economic development in the country. Thus, for the last century or so, the country has passed through a modernization process, which is in most respects analogous to the experiences of other countries in the West. Gradually, agriculture has lost its economic prominence, with industrialized fisheries taking its place as the primary source of wealth in the country. The countryside and peasantry still hold a central position in the Icelandic self-perception, but the peasant ideology has lost its hold over the process of social reproduction. The main reason for this development lies in the fact that the social orthodoxy never replaced the *doxa*; in other words, explicit legislation could not preserve social distinctions and practices that had lost their legitimacy in the unwritten rules of common sense.

On the surface, the Icelandic experience lends support to the Marxist as well as the liberal teleology, both of which would claim the modernization in Iceland to be one step forward toward a world absolved of the predicaments of formal distinctions in classes and nations. Thus it may seem as if political discourse took place in a void, that it was unconnected with economic development in Iceland—or, at best, that it was a belated replay of the relentless modernization of the infrastructure. In my opinion, the political history of nineteenth-century Iceland should rather be seen as an example of the interaction between politics and economy, between ideology and structures of production. The astonishing tenacity of the Icelandic peasant economy rested on its ideological hegemony, or on the systematic effort to make it appear as the natural economic structure in Iceland.

According to its self-image, which was cultivated through its cultural practices, Iceland was a peasant society, and could not be otherwise. Independent fisheries were discouraged, as they counteracted this image, although fish was acknowledged to be one of the main resources of the Icelandic economy. The myths that legitimized the economic system, exonerating it from its shortcomings by blaming them on ecological conditions or foreign merchants, have even survived in the historical consciousness in Iceland up to this day. Thus, Icelandic historiography has explained the demographic stagnation of eighteenth century with reference to some built-in Malthusian ceiling, set by nature, and an irrational trading system, forgetting that this was a direct result of a social system that did not allow for full exploitation of its economic resources. But just as the peasant economy needed the image for its hegemony, the image had to represent society convincingly in order to convince. Iceland was indeed a peasant society, with little economic activity outside the sphere of agriculture, thus endowing the social taxonomy with an empirical basis. In nineteenth century, however, the divergence between representation and reality became ever more conspicuous, as 'urbanization', if that word can be used for the growth of squalid fishing villages by the Icelandic coast, slowly wrecked the image of a uniform peasant society. As the promised land of peasanthood became an impossible dream for a growing number of Icelanders, the rules of the old order turned into oppression and were simply not heeded.

As strange as it may seem, Icelandic political nationalism came into being at a time when the Icelandic nation was becoming more and more arbitrary as a social category. Thus, as the peasant economy lost its hegemony, so did the (imagined or real) internal sameness of the Icelandic society disappear. Similarly, at this time development in communication networks pierced the boundaries that had preserved the Icelandic distinctiveness, decreasing the differences between Iceland and the rest of the world. Icelandic reality was, therefore, under increasing influence from what took place beyond its borders, both in material and intellectual matters. But, as the concept of the Icelandic nation has lost some of its objective content, it has only grown stronger as a source of a political distinction. In a sense, it has become the new doxa; we do not have an opinion on whether we are Icelandic or not: we are so (or not so) by the nature of things, and by our own nature.

CONCLUSIONS: POLITICAL HISTORY OR HISTORICAL POLITICS?

The rise of social history to a dominant position in historical discourse relegated the history of politics into a secondary position in the academic field. As historians began to look at long-term developments, they had little patience for the narrative practices that had dominated the political history in the past. In the incessant flow of the historical process, the minor events of the *histoire événementielle* seemed to be without much consequence. In order to study history, it is, however, impossible to ignore politics, at least as long as we include all struggle for power in that concept. Thus, there has been an inevitable renaissance in political history in recent years, while historians have abandoned the *longue durée* for time spans that are not as difficult to fathom.

But whatever the future role of politics will be for the historical profession, it is imperative to understand that a renaissance should never be a resurrection. The critique of the narrative political history, at least as this history was conducted in the past, has certainly been legitimate and the 'new' political history has to learn from the mistakes of the 'old'. First, a 'good' history will never be again an accumulation of relevant, or not so relevant facts, but rather an analysis of social processes and practices. Thus political history will have to go beyond the field of politics proper, putting political debates and events into their social and economic context. Second, political history has to view itself as separate from the field it studies; that is, it has to become truly political history rather than historical politics. The role of history is not to legitimate social distinctions, but to make explicit the way in which they are structured and how they function.

The study of emerging democracy and national identity in Iceland is no exception to that rule. History played a large role in defining the Icelandic nation and in determining its rights and boundaries. Legitimation of political rights and paradigms for good government were sought in the past, placing Icelandic historians at the center of the political field. History in this sense was, more or less, to play the tune of politics; to confirm the certainties of the nation-building, but never to express doubts about the process as such. Now, as the nation-building process is reaching a new phase, it is essential to re-evaluate the way in which we construct the world, or the way in which the world constructs us. But if this is to be, Icelandic political history has to cease to play the game of historical politics. Or, to paraphrase the French historian François Furet, *la lutte pour l'indépendance islandaise est terminée*—the struggle for Icelandic independence is over.

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NOTES

1. Jón Jónsson, *Dagrenning* (Reykjavík: Sigurður Kristjánsson, 1910), p. 10.
2. Cf. Yann Fouéré, *Histoire résumée du mouvement breton du XIXe siècle à nos jours 1800–1976* (Quimper: Éditions Nature et Bretagne, 1977), p. 13. See also Michel Nicolas, *Histoire du Mouvement Breton* (Paris: Syros, 1982), pp. 26–29, and Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, *Old Provinces, Modern Nations: Political Responses to State Integration in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Iceland and Brittany* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Cornell University, Ithaca, 1991).
3. Terry Eagleton, 'Nationalism: Irony and Commitment', in Seamus Deane, ed., *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p. 28.
4. Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1965), p. 168.
5. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 1991).
6. Pierre Bourdieu, 'Espace social et pouvoir symbolique', in *Choses dites* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1987), pp. 147–166.

7. The Icelandic struggle for independence from Denmark started around mid-nineteenth century and ended with the foundation of the Republic of Iceland in 1944.
8. With the term 'class' I mean a social group of 'biological individuals that, being the products of the same objective conditions, are endowed with the same habitus'; see Pierre Boudieu, *Le sens pratique* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1980), p. 100 and *passim*.
9. I use the term 'peasant' to translate the Icelandic word 'bóndi' into English, although these two terms are not entirely interchangeable. The economic status of the Icelandic 'bóndi' was similar to members of the European peasant class, but in Icelandic the term had none of the negative connotations that words like 'peasant' had in English or 'paysan' in the French language; see Richard Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1874), p. 74.
10. Cf. Aviel Roshwald, 'Untangling the Knotted Cord—Studies in Nationalism', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 24 (Autumn, 1993), p. 294.
11. Jacques Godechot, ed., *Les Constitutions de la France depuis 1789* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1975), p. 38.
12. Jón Sigurðsson, 'Ágrip af ævi Baldvins Einarssonar', *Ný félagsrit* 8 (1848), p. X.
13. 'Stökur', *Norðurfari* 1 (1848), p. 88.
14. *Alþing* was the name of the old assembly that met every year from 930 to 1799 on Þingvellir, a place not far from the present capital of Iceland, Reykjavík. During the Commonwealth period (930–1262) the assembly served both as a legislative body and the highest court in the country, but by the time it was abolished it had lost all of its legislative functions.
15. Cf. Aðalgeir Kristjánsson, *Brynjólfrur Pétursson, ævi og störf* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1972), pp. 152–162.
16. Tómas Sæmundsson, 'Alþing', *Þrjár ritgjörðir* (Copenhagen: 17 Íslendingar, 1841), p. 74.
17. Using the term 'movement' in this context is somewhat a misnomer. As nationalism faced no organized opposition in Iceland, the nationalists presumed that they spoke for the potential nation as a whole—and thus it was unnecessary for them to organize themselves into a formal movement apart from the nation as such.
18. On Jón Sigurðsson's political philosophy, see Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, *Old Provinces, Modern Nations*, pp. 92–100 and 'Íslensk þjóðfélagsþróun á 19. öld', in G. Hálfðanarson and S. Kristjánsson, eds., *Íslensk þjóðfélagsþróun 1880–1990. Ritgerðir* (Reykjavík: Félagsvísindastofnun og Sagnfræðistofnun, 1993), pp. 9–58.
19. *Histoire de France contemporaine depuis la Révolution jusqu'à la paix de 1919*, vol. 9 (Paris: Hachette, 1922), p. 511.
20. Fustel de Coulanges, 'L'Alsace est-elle allemande ou française? Réponse à M. Mommsen, professeur à Berlin,' in Fustel de Coulanges, *Questions historiques* (Paris: Hachette, 1893), p. 511. Cf. Bernard Pélouille, 'Retour à une sociologie de la nation française,' in Pierre Bidart, ed., *Régions, nations, états* (Paris: Publisud, 1991), pp. 13–37. In fact, the Third Republic was less democratic in this respect than the theorists pretended; at least it did systematically eradicate the linguistic heterogeneity in France.
21. See Raoul Girardet, *Le nationalisme français* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), pp. 11–20.
22. See *Tíðindi frá Alþingi Íslendinga* (1853), pp. 975–982.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 396.
24. Of the 140 cottars who lived in Reykjavík 1855, maintained the representative for the town, only 5 would have fulfilled the qualification, see *Tíðindi frá Alþingi Íslendinga* (1855), pp. 182–183. It was rather reluctantly, in fact, that Alþing enfranchised even this limited number of cottars.
25. *Ræður Hjálmars á Bjargi fyrir börnum sínum um fremd, kosti og annmarka allra stétta*

- og um þeirra almennustu gjöld og tekjur (Viðey: Published by the author, 1820), pp. 8–9.
26. See for example Gísli Gunnarsson, *Monopoly Trade and Economic Stagnation. Studies in the Foreign Trade of Iceland 1602–1787* (Lund: Ekonomisk-Historiska Föreningen, 1983), pp. 13–25 and Gísli Ág. Gunnlaugsson, *Family and Household in Iceland 1801–1930. Studies in the Relationship Between Demographic and Socio-Economic Development, Social Legislation and Family and Household Structures* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1988), pp. 90–118.
 27. Under pressure from the Danish government, the laws were modified in the 1860s. They were, however, not totally abolished or neglected until this century. Cf. Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, *Old Provinces, Modern Nations*, pp. 56–69, 101–133, and *passim*.
 28. Gísli Gunnarsson, *Monopoly Trade and Economic Stagnation*, p. 21.
 29. Gísli Ág. Gunnlaugsson, *Family and Household in Iceland*, p. 92. Cf. also G. Ág. Gunnlaugsson, *Því dæmist rétt að vera. Afbrót, refsingar og íslenskt samfélag á síðari hluta 19. aldar* (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun, 1991), pp. 48–54.
 30. Some pointed out, for example, that it would have been much more advantageous for the peasant to employ day-laborers during the periods of the year that he had any real use for them, or spring through fall, than to hire servants for the whole year, leaving them idle a good part of the winter. Cf. Jón Jónsson, 'Um húsfólk og hjú,' The National Library of Iceland, Manuscripts, ÍB 380 4^o. See also, Hermann Jónasson, 'Athugasemdir um heimilisstjórn, vinnumennsku og lausamennsku,' *Búnaðarrit* 2 (1888), pp. 62–95.
 31. See Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, *Old Provinces, Modern Nations*, pp. 117–121.
 32. See, in particular, P. Bourdieu, *La noblesse d'État. Grandes écoles et esprit de corps* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1989), pp. 373–427.
 33. Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, *Old Provinces, Modern Nations*, pp. 47–66, and 101–133, and 'Íslensk þjóðfélagsþróun á 19. öld.'
 34. The best demonstration of this opinion is, perhaps, the first volume of Baldvin Einarsson's periodical, *Ármann á Alþingi* (1829). There the editor describes, in a long fable, the advantages of the farm-service over the day labor.
 35. Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, 'Börn—höfuðstóll fátæklingsins?' *Saga* 24 (1986), pp. 121–146.
 36. Loftur Guttormsson, *Bernska, ungdómur og uppeldi á einveldisöld. Tilraun til félagslegrar og lyðfræðilegrar greiningar* (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun, 1983), *passim*. As he points out, it happened often, however, that the servants failed to confirm to the model, causing incessant complaints by social commentators about the lack of discipline among the Icelandic servant class. *Ibid.*, pp. 195–197.
 37. Terry Eagleton, 'Nationalism: Irony and Commitment.'
 38. See Arend Lijphart, 'Political Theories and the Explanation of Ethnic Conflict in the Western World: Falsified Predictions and Plausible Postdictions,' in Milton J. Esman, ed., *Ethnic Conflict in the Western World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 46–64.
 39. Pierre Bourdieu, *Le Sens pratique*, pp. 88–90 and *passim*. See also his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 78–87, and 214, note 1.
 40. *Outline of Theory of Practice*, p. 82. Translated by Richard Nice.
 41. Cf. Gísli Gunnarsson, *Monopoly Trade and Economic Stagnation*.
 42. See, Gísli Ág. Gunnlaugsson, *Family and Household in Iceland*, pp. 17–49 and *passim*, and Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, *Old Provinces, Modern Nations*, pp. 134–144.

43. On doxa, orthodoxy, and heterodoxy, see P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, pp. 159–171.
44. P. Bourdieu, *La noblesse d'État*, p. 395. Cf. also *La distinction* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979), p. 124.