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Scots and Saxons – Notes on an Unfinished Project, or: Conspicuous VerSchwendung

At this point in time, I have known Joachim Schwend for exactly half of my life. I was his student at Leipzig in the 1990s and profited enormously from the cultural transfer to Saxony of his expertise on all things Scottish. He supervised my MA thesis on the contemporary Scottish author James Kelman with his characteristic competence, generosity and good humour, and was one of the inspirations behind and readers of my PhD on another Scot, Alasdair Gray. My start as a university lecturer came when I substituted one half of him, so to speak, during his time as stand-in professor in Germersheim from 1999. When he came back to Leipzig as Professor of British Cultural Studies the following year, I was allowed to continue as his colleague and a little later won that rarest of prizes in the German academic lottery: a full and permanent post as lecturer – not least thanks to his help and support. He was also instrumental in my successfully applying for a five-month period as Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh in 2005, a position he himself had held in 1990, and his own Doktorvater Horst W. Drescher (the late doyen of Scottish Studies in Germany) before him. It is only fitting, therefore, that the following thoughts are based on my research project during that stay (though they remain tentative). Warmest thanks, dear Jochen, for your help, support and friendship over so many years – I very much hope this will also remain an unfinished project for a long time to come.

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False Starts
Next to Swabians and the Irish (about whom I cannot write with too much expertise), the most important groups of people in Joachim Schwend’s life are arguably the Scots and Saxons (who I know much more about). In a book on cultures in contact dedicated to him, therefore, an investigation of these two identities makes for a fitting contribution. But how to go about it? One obvious way to start is to look for direct contacts between the cultures in question. This does not turn out to be a very promising course, however, as I quickly noticed. While there is a lot of evidence for Anglo-German crosscurrents in literature, culture and history (cf. Kielinger 1997; Görner 2012), and occasionally either the Scottish or the Saxon context appears (as in Walter Scott’s influence on German literature and culture or Bach, Mendelssohn and Wagner’s on English music; cf. Schenkel 2010; Welz & Dellemann 2010), there are simply not enough significant direct contacts between the Scottish and Saxon cultures to make such a study worthwhile, I feel. An alternative approach could be to compare the two regions in a European context: medium-sized territories with 4-5m inhabitants, formerly independent kingdoms, now semi-autonomous entities with their own parliaments, rich in historical and cultural heritage, heartlands of industrialisation and working-class movements, deindustrialised yet future-oriented (‘Silicon Glen’ vs. ‘Silicon Saxony’), and so forth. While this perspective seems promising, there are problems here, too: Scotland harbours a pronounced political nationalism, with the Scottish National Party in power and about to take a vote on independence in September 2014, it is unambiguously seen as a nation in its own right and has a clear antagonist in England; while Saxony has no ambitions for secession, no political nationalism and only a tenuous claim to nationhood, and ‘othering’ works mostly through its integration in the bigger region of Eastern Germany (as against the West).

These were my preliminary thoughts when I started a research project on Scottish and Saxon identities in 2005. I did not really get very far with it in Edinburgh that year, but I learnt that “Sassenach” is commonly used as a derogatory Scottish term for Southerners or Englishmen and that at the end of the fifteenth century, the Scottish
poet Blind Harry, author of the famous epic *The Wallace*, called “Saxons, Scotland’s very pest” and “enemies profest” of the “brave true ancient Scots” (Hamilton 1998: 1) – both of which did not particularly help. I was clearly in a bit of a dilemma here. What I needed was a guiding spirit, a framework to bring my various interests in comparing the regions (literature, history, politics, media) into sharper focus. Back in Leipzig, I kept thinking about the topic and the issues involved intermittently, but never found the time to return to it wholeheartedly. When the occasion of Joachim Schwend’s 65th birthday beckoned and we decided on a publication with the ‘cultures in contact’ theme, I immediately saw the golden opportunity to revive the project. And while the time taken up with editorial work did not allow for a full academic paper on the topic, it offered me the occasion – and the great pleasure – of (re)discovering the range of Jochen’s publications on a variety of topics, which remains a rather well-kept secret even to his closest colleagues (a token of his exceptional modesty). In the course of this, somewhat miraculously, there arose the vision of this guiding spirit – let us call him a *multikultureller Dolmetsch* (cf. Schwend 1997) – suggesting various perspectives and approaches for such a study, and whispering resonant fragments and quotations in my ear from time to time. Above all, he suggested taking the very emphases of those publications as structural aids to the investigation by looking at the four main issues of identities, history, politics and representations, and focussing on their interrelations in both cultures. Thus, the aim would be less a direct comparison than a parallel analysis inspired by some of the core themes of Cultural Studies as practiced by Joachim Schwend. At the same time, this approach allows me to survey the majority of his publications and to present those themes and some of his recurring catchphrases to the readers of this volume – if not always in a deadly serious way. So in what follows, I will very briefly outline the parameters of such a study of Saxon and Scottish identities in a European context with the help of this inspiration. Who knows, maybe Jochen himself will be interested in actually realising this endeavour together with me in the future – this may be read as an invitation.
Enigmatic Identities – Region, Nation, Europe

“What ish my nation? Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?”, whispered the voice in my ear, and the answer came immediately: “It is an imagined community, a brand to be consumed, a glocalised salad bowl, loosening its moorings in a Europe of Regions.” Identification processes are clearly complex, mostly in transition and often enigmatic. So in this sense, the initial quote from Blind Harry is quite pertinent, after all, since it highlights the ambiguity and slipperiness of terms and concepts for regional and/or national entities and identities, and their evolution and change over time. The “Saxon” in the quote is obviously not the same as the one in the present German federal state of Saxony with which I am mainly concerned, but there is a historical link between the two. The project therefore needs to start from such an emphasis on the constructed nature of national and regional identities, on the central role played by cultural representations or ‘signifying practices’ in the process of ‘imagining communities’. It needs to take the complex interplay of different levels of identity in Europe into account. (cf. Schwend 2009c: 213) This is the background against which a study of particular (regional) identities and their comparison can be undertaken. This is also where the literary and cultural critic can contribute to the debate on pressing and topical problems of our ‘glocalising’ world. Whereas there exist many studies on Europeanisation in general and on the impact it has on particular national/regional identities (such as Joachim Schwend’s own writings on Scotland, Ireland, East Germany and Saxony – cf. 1996b; 2000c; 2001; 2006; 2007a; 2009a+c), as well as of those identities in isolation, comparative research on more than one European region is rarer, particularly so where the historical and literary/cultural dimensions are concerned. Again, Joachim Schwend has worked in this area, highlighting interrelations between English and Scottish (1992b), English and German (2000a; 2010) and Scottish and Irish (2003) discourses, especially in the field of literature. He has also been at pains to stress the legacy of the Enlightenment tradition and its values in and for Europe (with reference to William Penn or Edmund Burke, for example), thus pointing to the central significance of history (and politics) in this context. Therefore, before I return to the representation of
identities in literature and other media as one of the most interesting aspects of the topic at the end of this article, let us start with those other central issues suggested by the guiding spirit.

Hidden Histories
I can hear the voice again, whispering about “invented traditions and cultural memory, manifested in monuments, rituals and lieuux de mémoire, perpetuated and consumed through media discourses and the heritage industry. It’s all about the past in the present, about getting your history wrong.” (cf. e.g. Schwend 2003: 167; 2013)
Almost all theories on collective identities stress the role of a common perception of the past, of cultural memory. In the case of regional identities this is certainly of central importance. However, frequently the regional (hi)story is overlaid by larger national histories and often relegated to little more than a footnote. This has been challenged recently in the broader context of postmodern and postcolonial attacks on dominant ‘History’ and its deconstruction by subversive ‘histories’ from below (e.g. from the perspective of women, the working class or ethnic minorities). In the British Isles, this has resulted in a renewed interest in so-called ‘Four Nations’ perspectives on formerly Anglo-centric British history, including a rediscovery and astonishing revival of Scottish history. In Germany, recent decades have seen acrimonious debates among historians both on its more distant past (Bismarck, Nazi era) and on recent developments (GDR history, Ostalgie etc.), but also a marked resurgence of Regionalgeschichte. Such recuperative historical endeavour is clearly visible in Joachim Schwend’s oeuvre, who has worked historically almost from the start: his interests range from the medieval and Renaissance period (e.g. Schwend 1984; 1989; 1992a; 1996a; 2001) through the nineteenth century (e.g. Schwend 1985; 1996a; 2009b; 2010) to the present, in which he significantly finds the sediments of the past at every turn (e.g. Schwend 1996b; 2000c; 2001; 2002; 2006; 2007a+b; 2013). Significantly, this is always linked either to (literary) representations or to political and ideological structures influencing identity constructions.

Following this lead, there are several potentially fascinating comparisons to be made between Scotland and Saxony in this
regard. Besides the issues mentioned at the beginning, one could think of the Scottish Enlightenment and the *Sächsische Aufklärung*, Glasgow and Leipzig as cities of trade and industry, the ancient universities etc. Some recent anniversaries of significant regional historical events may serve to illustrate the potential benefits in rediscovering some of those ‘hidden’ developments (sometimes actually in plain view) and their (ab)uses in and for the present, exactly in such a parallel or comparative analysis. The obvious Scottish example in 2014 would be the 700th anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn (in which the Scots defeated the superior English troops), deliberately chosen by the Scottish National Party as the occasion for the Referendum on Independence this year. Already the Referendum on Scottish Devolution in 1997 had been set for the 700th anniversary of William Wallace’s victory over Edward I’s forces at the Battle of Stirling Bridge, even though it is to be doubted whether its success can be emulated this time around. The significance of the Wars of Independence for the Scottish national imagination is undeniable, in any case. (cf. Schwend 1992a; 2000c; 2001) And who can blame them, when large parts of their history are populated by ‘glorious failures’ (think Flodden, Mary Stuart, Bonnie Prince Charlie and Culloden). Something one could also say of Saxony with some justification. It is interesting to see how smaller regional powers with dominant neighbours (England and Prussia in these cases) often become caught in the bigger European power struggles and find themselves on the wrong side of history, so to speak. A case in point for Saxony would be the Napoleonic Wars (in which it sided with France for the most part), symbolised in the disastrous Battle of Leipzig or *Völkerschlacht* of 1813. Again, the bicentenary of this event, together with the centenary of the erection of the gigantic monument to the Battle, the *Völkerschlachtdenkmal*, in 2013 offers the opportunity to analyse the uses of history in and for the present, and in conjunction with regional identity formation. It is certainly difficult to celebrate this bloodiest battle on European soil before the First World War as a positive marker of regional and national identity, especially because the nationalist sentiment so clearly expressed in the monument led directly to the disasters of German twentieth-century history. It is not surprising, therefore, that there was a controversial debate on
these celebrations, and that somewhat ambivalently, a large-scale re-enactment of the battle coexisted with a ‘European Peace Festival’. It is unarguable, however, that such historical milestones are significant elements in the ‘invented traditions’ of regions and nations, so that a comparison of the way such battles are commemorated (Culloden and the bombing of Dresden in World War II would be further examples) can give us an insight into the different and maybe sometimes parallel structures of feeling and identity in Scotland and Saxony. Another case in point would be the highly contentious history and memorialisation of the recent political changes in both Scotland and Saxony (on the latter cf. Anna Saunders’s contribution in this volume), which leads directly to my next point.

Politics and Power

“It’s all about power and how it is distributed in societies,” I can hear the spirit whispering conspiratorially, “Hobbes, Locke and Burke discussed it, Gramsci, Orwell and Foucault were fascinated by it, Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall wrote about it continually. But it is also multifaceted, affected by (interregional) transformation processes, and significantly linked to money and consumption.” Cultural Studies was originally an eminently political project (and has remained so for many of its practitioners). Therefore, when investigating regional identities in a European context from such a perspective, one of the first questions to be asked is who are the (political) actors involved and what are the power structures underlying those identities. As Ernest Gellner and Eric Hobsbawm, among other theorists on collective identities, have claimed, such identities are always purposeful constructions driven by particular political and ideological agendas. Joachim Schwend has worked on various aspects of these socio-political themes, including the question of federal vs. devolved systems of government (cf. Schwend 2000b; 2001), the role of consumption and branding in (regional) identification processes (2004; 2007b; 2009b+c) and transformations in political and social systems due to globalisation and Europeanisation (2002; 2007c; 2009a+c). What emerges from this research, despite the emphasis on the largely anonymous forces of globalisation and consumer cultures, is a belief in common
(European, humanist or Enlightenment) values and a fundamental reliance on individual agency (on this aspect, see also the contribution by Crister Garrett in this volume). At the same time, the continued focus on historical and literary developments and precedents is obvious and clearly significant.

In this context, Saxony and Scotland offer particularly interesting examples since political power structures have experienced periodic upheavals and have often been dominated by larger (supra)national forces. In the past three decades, for example, both societies have seen major transitions, a new political structure has been (re)instituted and a whole new political class developed. It can be argued that regional identities were centrally involved and affected in these transitions, so that the (re)invention of Scottish and Saxon identities as a result of these political and economic processes offers itself for investigation. One of the parallels to be noted here, I think, is the involvement of primarily non-political actors from the civil sector, as seen in the role of the Constitutional Convention in Scotland and the church groups and Bürgerbewegung in Saxony in the 1980s and 90s. The church context may prove a particularly fascinating case study, taken its importance for both regions historically, as one of the surviving national institutions after the 1707 Act of Union in Scotland, and as a significant marker of identity in the Saxon heartland of the European Reformation. Again, Joachim Schwend has contributed to this religious theme repeatedly in his research. (cf. Schwend 1984; 1990; 1991; 1996a) Moreover, it is clear that in both regions literature and the arts have had a particularly close relationship with politics and identity. Thus, it is commonly argued that the recent political changes in Scotland were preceded by a wide-ranging cultural renaissance since at least the 1980s, and several important members of oppositional groups during the Wende in Saxony came from literary and artistic backgrounds. In fact, the particularly Saxon identity (as opposed to GDR or East German identity) was mostly upheld by literature (such as the works of the late Erich Loest) and the arts (music, painting, even Mundart culture). This broadly speaking ‘cultural’ element to the political changes in both Scotland and Saxony cannot be overestimated, as several commentators on these developments agree, so that it seems
logical to arrive finally at the centrally important question of how these identities are constructed and represented in culture and the media.

Regions Represented
Suddenly, the ghostly voice is starting to quote from Alasdair Gray’s *magnum opus Lanark* (for ‘city’ one may read ‘region’):

“Glasgow is a magnificent city,” said McAlpin. “Why do we hardly ever notice that?” “Because nobody imagines living here,” said Thaw. McAlpin lit a cigarette and said, “If you want to explain that I’ll certainly listen.”—“Then think of Florence, Paris, London, New York. Nobody visiting them for the first time is a stranger because he’s already visited them in paintings, novels, history books and films. But if a city hasn’t been used by an artist not even the inhabitants live there imaginatively.” (Gray 1982: 241)

“Literature and Nation belong together”, it says, “the imagined community is formed on the page, through representation, and then conspicuously consumed by the body politic. It is a sign and a brand, continuously shifting its meaning and developing mythical structures on the second semiological level.” Next to the political meaning of the ‘representation’ of regions outlined above, it is the representation of the region in literature, arts and media that has always interested me most, and has been in the centre of Cultural Studies’ approach to the topic, significantly including popular culture and the actual consumption of such representations. This is also Joachim Schwend’s main emphasis in most of his publications on the theme, be it on Scottish (cf. e.g. Schwend 1989, 1992b, 2000c, 2001), Irish (1995, 1996b, 2007a) or (East) German (2009a+c) identities. Increasingly, he has moved from analysing the representation of (mainly Scottish and Irish) identity in literature to investigating the complex identification processes in (transitional) societies at large, especially with reference to economic and consumer choices – such as in Ireland and Eastern Germany. One aspect of this is advertising and the tourist industry and their use and reinforcing of national and regional stereotypes. Once again, there is a clear sense here that culture, politics, history and identity are closely interlinked and must be seen together.
Against this background, one could start the investigation by looking at the representation of Scotland and Saxony in tourist brochures and on websites such as www.visitscotland.org or www.sachsen-tourismus.de. It will surprise no one that in an age of global branding of regions and ‘glocalisation’ (one of Joachim Schwend’s catchwords) these representations show more similarities than differences: for Edinburgh and Glasgow read Dresden and Leipzig, for the Scottish Highlands read Sächsische Schweiz or Erzgebirge, for Scott, Burns and Stevenson read Bach, Schumann and Wagner, for Edinburgh Castle read Frauenkirche Dresden etc. – culture and history are clearly ‘selling points’ (more or less unique) for both regions. However, there are also significant differences, which it would be important to trace and explain further, in order to arrive at a more differentiated view of the respective identity building process. Most interestingly, perhaps, both regions have a long and eminent tradition in the arts, as witnessed by the names mentioned above, among many others. However, whereas in Scotland this is often seen as a national tradition, it is rare to hear people talk of Bach as a ‘Saxon’ composer. Why is that so? Maybe it is partly to do with the competing local and supra-regional identities: people talk of Mitteldeutschland as a cultural region (something of a misnomer, from a contemporary point of view, including Thuringia and Saxony-Anhalt), and we have a Leipziger Schule in painting but not a Sächsische Schule. This goes some way to give an idea of the complexities that need to be taken into account. In this context, it would be interesting to analyse and compare depictions of regional identities in writers like James Kelman (Glasgow) and Clemens Meyer (Leipzig), both of whom depict an urban ‘underclass’ sympathetically and with real insight and have become significant, prize-winning ‘national’ (i.e. ‘British’ and ‘German’) authors. For the historical (and political) theme, one could compare Erich Loest (Reichsgericht) and James Robertson (And the Land Lay Still), maybe, and on the more popular side Sabine Ebert (1813 - Kriegsfener) and John Prebble (Culloden). What do the imagined communities constructed in these representations look like, and how do they change over time? What are the political and ideological structures in which they acquire meaning? What about similar constructions in long-running TV series representing the big
cities in both regions, such as River City and In aller Freundschaft, or Taggart and SoKo Leipzig. In any of these cases, an argument could be constructed highlighting the survival of sub-national or stateless identities through such mediatised imaginings, but the complexity and specificity of Saxon and Scottish ‘represented regions’ precisely in their interplay of historical, political and cultural identities would be the ultimate aim of such an analysis.

A Cautious Conclusion
The rest was (as yet) silence… To such an unfinished project, there can only be an open conclusion. And maybe that is the point. Robert Crawford once spoke of the simultaneous necessity to internationalise and “dedefine” both Scotland and Scottish Studies (cf. Crawford 2003). And Joachim Schwend himself has argued forcefully that “different levels of identity can be preserved in a European framework of common values.” (Schwend 2009c: 213) This is the context in which this endeavour may be situated, I hope, and he himself could perhaps be more than just the guiding spirit of it – by taking an active part in it and thus both ending and realising its ultimate VerSchwendung. Such a study would certainly profit from his expertise and at the same time help to qualify the often one-sided views on specific European regional identities. At a time when Scotland is about to vote on independence and many regions in the whole of Europe (and maybe the continent as such) seem to be in dire straits, we could do worse than investigate two or more regional identities in Europe (what about Wales, maybe, or (Northern) Ireland, or Swabia?) in such a comparative, deconstructive and yet productive way. This may as well remain an unfinished project for some time to come.

Sources


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