TEACHING ABOUT THE CELTS AND THE CELTIC REGIONS OF UNITED KINGDOM AND IRELAND

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The Celtic nations of Europe are increasingly of interest to undergraduate and graduate students at colleges and universities in North America and, indeed, the world over. Teaching about the Celtic nations of the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland seems natural for those interested in Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. However, to look at most of the literature in political science in areas such as comparative politics or UK politics not much exists on comparative treatments of the Celtic areas. What’s more, most syllabi of courses on British politics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries continued to mirror political scientist Richard Rose’s “Anglo-centric” approach in his seminal work, Politics in England (Rose 1964). The same is found in history where most treatments deal either with an Anglo-centric Britain, such as Clayton and David Robert’s A History of England (1985), or separate nation or region-specific distillations of historical information and concepts. Thus, a few class sessions (at most) in these types of courses may be spent on the Celts, their histories, political cultures, electoral systems, legislative and executive politics, and their relationships to other parts of the UK and Europe. To start helping students understand the breadth and depth of Celtic politics and history some discussions of basic concepts are important.

Concepts
Familiarizing the student in North America with concepts related to the Celtic areas of Britain and Europe is not an easy task. The idea of who the Celts are and where they came from is a difficult one both historically and anthropologically. Also, there are issues trying to use the term “Celt” to describe people living in the Celtic areas today since these areas are no longer ethnically or linguistically homogenous. Thus, you will find Asian, African, and Indian Celts who are ethnic minorities, but full citizens of the Celtic regions and states. Americans and Canadians will have a good understanding of the “melting pot” of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that has led to greater immigration to Britain and other European areas from the developing world. However, students might not fully understand the “double minority” concept and that “Celticness” as a minority orientation may be hard to fathom on top of a stronger minority identity. An example of this is the Sikh business magnate, Baron Sirdar

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Iqbal Singh, who commissioned his own tartan and bought a large castle to fully experience life as an Indian Sikh Scot (Jefferson 2011, 76).

There is some disagreement about the historical origins of the Celts as a people that emerged out of the area that conforms largely to modern-day Switzerland and migrated to the area that is modern-day Britain in 600 BC. Some have suggested Celts were in Ireland as far back as 3000 BC. Certainly, we know that Celtic-like people can be traced to various areas of the European continent and differing linguistic families are found among them (hence, the differences between indigenous Welsh, Irish, and Scottish tongues). Yet, these differences and these facts are not really enough to base an entire race of people on and this is where some differences in the literature emerge. For students, this may seem pedantic and it may be overly complicated to ferret out the differences of people groups based on language. Moreover, the conceptual limitations of using a term like “Celt” or “Celtic” is a problem in and of itself since today Celts can be found in Britain, Ireland, France, and the Iberian peninsula and the term is more transnational than national. Also, the term is based on a people group and its anthropological origins over 2000 years ago. This disconnect is not easy for students to conceptualize and they will be more attuned to modern-day terms that reflect the current geopolitics such as “Irish,” “Scottish,” “Welsh,” and “Bretons.”

Thus, getting students to understand the nomenclature in the modern study of Celtic regions and states requires some basic conceptual understanding that are found in most elementary courses in political science, history, sociology, anthropology, and the like. Those terms include such concepts as Celts, Celtic, nation, nationalism, political system, comparative politics, Scots, Welsh, Gaels, Irish, political culture, communalism, agrarian society, identity, ethnicity, race, regionalism, and so forth. A thorough explication and application of these concepts will help students begin to understand the contexts for Celtic politics and history and they will warm to seeing the areas where the Celts live and develop as very different and at times mutually exclusive from their dominant nations that neighbor them (in the case of Scots and Irish, England and in the case of Bretons, France). The main thrust of setting the groundwork for a full investigation of the Celtic areas, from a conceptual underpinning at the beginning of a course, is to not only let students become familiar with basic concepts that affect Celtic studies, but also allow students to see the conceptual limitations that affect the investigations of these areas. The historical contexts that will be investigated are fascinating, rich in detail and worth long discussions and examination ipso facto. However, allowing students to see that both political scientists and historians have given the areas of the Celts (or Celtic fringe) short shrift academically and in terms of research given conceptual biases (as mentioned above) is important to allow them to see that the study of Celtic areas has both empirical and normative components that are both positive and negative and that they actually have scientific and political ramifications. This will allow students to see that this area of investigation is not only alive and well, but that the study of the Celts is not only important, but affects how the Celts are perceived historically and today as Celtic areas press for more autonomy and recognition in academic circles and public/government affairs. For example, in 2013, Swansea University in Wales created a European Institute of Identities which produces research on European identities and it has scholars and researchers working with the European Political Science Association and scholars in North America in a “Celtic Political
Identities Network” which is trying to study and understand “contested” political identities in the European Celtic areas (not just Britain and Ireland). This network brings to the fore the importance of comparative politics as a sub-field of political science and its important role as an engine for understanding Celtic areas and people.

Comparative Politics

The study of comparative politics (a sub-discipline of political science) can help students understand the Celtic regions and states. Comparative politics allows students to see multiple contexts and vantage points through which the subjects related to the Celts can be compared, investigated in depth, and analyzed. Comparative politics includes such areas as political culture, institutions (legislative, executive, and judicial), culture (which includes both sociological and anthropological lenses), political economy, and group (oftentimes, interest groups and political parties) analysis. As stated above, the lack of comparison in Celtic politics and history is something that can be corrected in the classroom. Having students look at Celtic contexts and juxtaposing them so students can compare the various comparative areas (legislative, executive, etc) will allow them to make broader analytical judgments and then start to understand the theories that can be applied in understanding of comparative politics. Thus, grounding students first in the basics of the scientific method is required.

In just about every course I teach, I try to familiarize students with the basic ideas related to the scientific approach (not as an end, but as a means). Historians, other academicians, and scholars outside of political science will have an appreciation for helping students discern facts, understand the concept of the “theory” and its utility as a conceptual approach (or lens) as applied in making sense of Celtic politics.

The other area that is difficult for undergraduates to grasp (and less difficult for most advanced graduate students) is the understanding and application of theory. Since comparative politics is rooted in the discipline of political science’s attempt to build empirically-based theory in the 1950s and 1960s at the onset of the behavioral revolution, students can start to see how social science theory is created and applied (even if superficially) in the comparative study of Celtic politics. In my own work, I devised a model (or theory as we interchange them in political science) that helps students of Celtic politics understand the facts and contexts they are investigating by ordering facts, generalizing about these contexts, and increasing the ability to predict. This model has six assumptions that apply to Celtic political contexts. They are 1) language and race; 2) territory; 3) political culture; 4) social democracy; 5) economics; and 6) religion (Jefferson 2011, 8-10). Although these are somewhat vague ipso facto, after they are explained further they can be applicable assumptions that help us understand facts in Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Brittany, Cornwall, the Isle of Man, and other places where Celts are found today. This is but one example of a comparative model that may help us understand the Celtic fringe in British and Irish politics. Other comparative approaches are helpful and they include regional studies, modernization and development, political development, democratization, political socialization, and political economy in general. Each of these has a rich literature in the subfield of comparative politics and can be used to help students understand facets of Celtic political life.
Often in courses I will use the concept of “Google Earth” to help students understand how a model works. Google Earth is a unique digital application that allows us to see a fixed place anywhere on Earth. It not only allows us to see the bird’s eye view from above, but it can give us a three-dimensional view as well (and even four-dimensional view). It is a unique and creative tool for understanding global geography. Metaphorically, Google Earth is like a social science model or theory. It allows us to see a given context at a certain point in time and, more importantly, it is like a prism in that it refracts multiple angles and vantage points that give us a better understanding of the geographical points (streets, buildings, places, historical markers, etc) than if we just see these places outside of their rural or urban contexts. Many in North America may not know that Runnymede (the place where King John signed the Magna Carta in 1215) is not in a rural field, but in the middle of urban sprawl in the far western London suburbs today. History books don’t tell you this. Google Earth allows us to see the contemporary context and understand how Runnymede is different today than 800 years ago. My point is that a good model will allow you to see the context and some unique vectors of experience (based on the assumptions within the lens) and then make generalizations about the context that will lead to additional theory building and helping students see how the facts tie, at least in political science, tie together.

Francis Fukuyama’s The Origins of Political Order (2011) is a follow-up to (Fukuyama’s mentor) the late Samuel P. Huntington’s Political Order in Changing Societies (1968) in which Fukuyama grapples with Huntington’s institutionalization model and the concept of order building in politics. Most comparativists in political science are concerned with how political order is achieved (in societies) and how stability may or may not prevail. Thus, Fukuyama’s work helps students of multiple political contexts and societies (both western and non-western) see how political order evolves and sustains itself. He borrows heavily from sociology and anthropology in the use of kinship, tribalism, and religion (to name a few concepts); yet, he also discusses the importance of deeper normative concepts, such as the “state of nature” (and eventually the “rule of law”), in helping societies find order and evolve into states (whether authoritarian or democratic). This discussion is helpful for Celts since it can transcend time and space and provide a connecting point for ancient Celtic developments in the areas that became the UK and Ireland and connect the ancient to the modern and then to the contemporary (Fukuyama 2011).

Comparative politics is an important sub-field in teaching students about the importance of politics and history in the Celtic areas. Its methods and literature are helpful in leading students to greater analytical precision, greater in-depth understanding of the Celtic fringe, and applications of theory in the process of understanding Celtic politics. Of course, comparative politics would not be as useful without a strong historical understanding. Thus, history must be learned and applied in trying to understand the Celts and their contexts.

History

History is the bedrock of the Celtic experience. It is the foundation from which political, legal, institutional, and cultural understanding and analysis begin. In my courses, I try to give a thorough grounding of history and allow students to see the “Anglo-centric” history of the UK and Ireland and then see history from the “Celtic” perspective. Since I am not an historian, I
don’t have time to look at the historiography of understanding Welsh, Scottish or Irish history or try to lump these nations’ histories into the UK’s. And, I don’t do so in class (aside from some methodological comments), but I do believe that you do have several issues with fusing history and politics in the classroom. First, political scientists and historians do not approach their subjects the same. As stated above, political scientists see themselves as scientists. Some of us who are less “scientific” and more humanistic or historical in our approaches would still see the importance of science as a process (rather than mainly an end) and that the process is important in teaching students how to think. That said, political scientists tend to let theory drive facts (or help them order facts) rather than the other way round (as one might find most historians doing in their craft). This may cause tension between historians and political scientists, but it does yield some interesting results and some cross-fertilization that might see some divergent findings on similar topics.

Some of the generalizations that I’ve used in class in explaining Celtic history and politics include the importance of myth-like figures and national figures in class (such as Brian Boru and Michael Collins in Ireland or Robert the Bruce and William Wallace in Scotland). The latter are fascinating examples because Bruce is more politically efficacious and, in reality, more relevant for Scottish political development today, although Wallace is seen as the longstanding champion of political nationalism in Scotland and a normative importance is placed on his role in unifying political and military (guerrilla) force for other Celts such as Collins in the early twentieth century in Ireland and Owain Glyn dŵr in Wales in the fourteenth century (Jefferson 2011, 22-25).

National identity and language are of prime importance in explaining to students how the Celts evolved. Aside from the general conceptual developments related to nationalism and each region’s specific trials with attempted independence from London, helping students understand the issues related to identity and nationalism are very important. In the United Kingdom, the most complicated area for students is Northern Ireland. With its segmented politics, its myriad uses of terminology (e.g. Ulster, Republicans and Loyalists, Protestants and Catholics, etc), its confusing geopolitics (is Ulster six counties or nine? Well both, historically), its many groups and political parties, and, today, the European Union’s role in attempting to bring convergence with the Republic in the south and the six counties of the north. What’s more, historian Paul Ward has discussed another important overlay related to political identity in Northern Ireland: the concept of Britishness. Ward argues that Britishness in Ulster goes back to the eighteenth century and prior where Protestantism affected the development of a unique “British” (rather than English or Northern Irish or Irish) political culture (Ward 2004, 158). Thus, another layer of complicated Northern Irish identity is seen alongside the Catholic and Republican parts of the region’s complicated identity.

Although you have these multiple identity issues in each Celtic area (including the Irish Republic where Irish Protestants dating from the seventeenth century still exist), the complexities of the languages used in Northern Ireland (Ulster Scots, Gaeilge, English, etc) and the institutional complexities of devolution since 1972 and the complex proportional representation (PR) system (with its single transferable vote form of PR) all will have students’ heads spinning if instructors do not take the time to discuss elements of the Northern Irish socio-political context in piecemeal fashion.
Another important component of teaching about the history of the Celtic areas is applied exercises. Some suggestions include having students use primary source documents (which may include parliamentary/legislative bills, political party manifestos, speeches, and historical documents) and explain why they are important and what they tell us. First-person interviews (in-person or via email) with people from the Celtic areas may help students familiarize themselves with the people, cultures, and history of these lands. Watching British parliamentary “Question Time” on C-SPAN or following the regional news on the BBC television channels or regional BBC websites will help students acclimate themselves to the Celtic contexts they are studying. Like any historical or comparative investigation in a course, familiarizing students with the geography of the Celtic regions is extremely important and familiarity with topography, capitals, economic and cultural sites, etc will help bring the Celts alive to students. Finally, we consider the Celts and the Celtic areas of Britain and Europe in a broader transnational context.

Transnational Celtic Developments
The future of the study of Celtic politics and history (as well as Celtic studies in general—which are also concerned with literature and languages from the Celtic areas) will become more transnational and allow students to “connect the Celtic dots” across Europe and the world. Indeed, the Celts are a British and European phenomenon, but their impact politically, economically, socially, and culturally are now felt in every corner of the globe. Some five million Americans are descended from the Scots. Around 25 million Americans are descended from the Irish. Not only is the study of the Celts important for genealogical purposes, but the connecting points for entire groups of people in multiple countries (especially North America) make it mandatory. What’s more, the increasingly globalizing political context in Europe which sees the European Union (EU) playing an important role in the social, economic, and political development of the continent, now sees Celtic regions and states (such as Scotland and Ireland) taking their cues not from London, but increasingly from Brussels. So, what was once an academic exercise and a theoretical discussion is no longer the domain of academics alone. Supranational organizations (like the EU) have fostered the development of regions and helped to increase regional identity. This, in turn, has allowed the Welsh, Cornish, Scots, Irish and others (Catalonians, for example, in Spain) to push for greater recognition of their cultures and their indigenous languages. It has also led to a kind of functionalism (in the use of the international relations theory propounded by political scientists David Mitrany and Ernst Haas) that sees Celtic regions and states connecting in “non-political” ways through greater economic and social activity and Celtic regions cozying up to areas outside their main sphere of influence (Haas 1964; Mitrany 1976). For example, today, Edinburgh airport sees 11 of the 26 airlines that operate there flying from Scotland to Norway, Denmark, and Sweden. This is a reconnection via functional means to the 1000 year-old Viking-Celt linkages that suggest that Scotland’s future may be as much linked to the Scandinavians as it is to the English to its south. Flights from Edinburgh also go to Belfast, Shannon, Galway, Cork, and Dublin. This confirms that a Celtic connection has also “functionally” increased in the airways between Scotland and Ireland (and Northern Ireland) (Jefferson 2011, 210).
The increasing transnational nature of the Celtic nations’ development has not surprisingly led to more discussions in Britain and Ireland of separation from the UK. The talk of political separation, devolution, and independence is highly charged and can be quite normative. Yet, the benefit of looking at these trends from a North American point-of-view is that a detached and objective treatment of the pros and cons of devolution or independence can be discussed. Certainly, exposing students to political parties’ manifestos on independence is a good idea. Let them see the nuances (Liberal Democrats favoring devolution and being the most consistent on devolution over time versus the back-and-forth position historically of Labour on devolution versus the differences between parties by region versus the national party’s position on these issues). Discuss the break-up of Britain as a real possibility and why it has not happened yet and perhaps make a comparison with regionalism in the United States historically and how a federal system might handle independence movements versus a unitary system (like the UK’s). Another good example for comparison is the dilemma of Quebec in Canada and how that system handles its different provinces via balancing federal-unitary principles in Canada. These will help students see that change has been afoot in the Celtic areas since the late twentieth century and, yet, the nature of the political systems may not lead to the kind of radical change hoped for by nationalists.

Interestingly, the change may not come from within the systems, but from outside the systems. Political scientist Anne-Marie Slaughter has argued that the world is “collapsing” into greater order (Slaughter 2004). Her argument which goes squarely against the debate in political science in the 1950s and 1960s that world government was coming and that a new global order was leading to a world parliament, simply says that “networks” along mainly functionalist lines (education, law, business, culture, etc) are developing and that all professionals and workplaces are now engaged in these global networks and that they will continue to weave technical, professional, and social life together as time moves on. Thus, regions may see their identities change and, as stated above, entire industries (like the airline industry) may help move regions like the Celtic ones in one direction while the dominant state structures move in other directions. Thus, a post-state-centric world may evolve in which supranational organizations link states, regions, and non-state actors together and small regions and states coalesce in ways that may not have been seen before. The Celtic regions and states may not be immune from this and, amazingly, the peaceful evolution of these things means that Celtic areas may become more sovereign and autonomous without the kind of effort that has been presupposed for decades by hardworking and ardent political nationalists.

Of course, here theory does become important and the large amount of research done on the EU and its supranational evolution is helpful and the work of political scientists Gary Marks and Liesbet Hooghe (and their multi-level governance theory) and others seems to help us find ways of explaining these empirical developments in a globalizing time and space (Marks and Hooghe 2001).

Conclusion
Teaching about Celtic politics and history, as well as Celtic studies in general, is a grand endeavor. Ideally, courses on the Celtic areas and peoples alone would help students see these areas for what they are and understand the nuances of the social, political, cultural, and
economic developments in them. Understandably, time and resource constraints may not allow instructors to teach entire courses on the Celtic areas of the UK and Ireland (or other European Celtic regions). Yet, this essay has attempted to demonstrate that it is important to give full attention to the Celts and their rich histories and contexts. In many ways, the Celts have become more important in the UK and Europe in the past 50 years. Their political salience has grown and their identities have crystallized as their demands and the importance of their nations have come to the fore in European and global affairs.

References


