The Role of Cymraeg in Shaping Welsh Identity

Abstract

The present day world once again raises the question of national identity, especially in places where migration or more nationalistic policies have caused visible social implications. In Wales, for long, this issue appeared to have been marked by a strong reference to the Welsh language and the importance of having an ethnic Welsh identity. However, since the decline of Cymraeg (the Welsh indigenous language) and new social developments in the last two centuries, the notion of Welsh identity has required a reconceptualization to face up to new realities. The following article attempts to indicate to what extent the Welsh language was and still is part of the essence of Welshness and what other factors affect the understanding of Welsh nationhood presently.

The question of identity encompasses numerous issues including language, culture, or politics to name just a few, as it draws on the work of a variety of disciplines, i.e. anthropology, history, linguistics or sociology. At the time when the world becomes more globalised, asserting one’s identity becomes equally relevant as in the past, when nations decided about their borders, statehood and attributes. In the British context, with its evolving regional devolution, Wales and its identity ride high on the agenda. The country’s complex past and paradoxes seem to have entered into new grounds and be heading towards new developments and loyalties.

To present how the people identify themselves with their own place, language and culture, the article sets out to concentrate mainly on one vital topic – Cymraeg [‘the Welsh language’] and some of its facets which, beside culture, religion, history, or politics, have impacted and re-evaluated the issues of Welsh identity. It attempts to look at the issue in some distinct stages, i.e. how the rising English dominance affected the Welsh language leading to its decrease; how the local forces, be it religious leaders or activists, fought to maintain its significance and, finally, how its revival and status are seen in the present-day Wales. To do so, the paper builds on the body of historical accounts, on language-related developments as well as on the data provided by the British and Welsh statistical institutions and researchers examining the current position of the Welsh language and its speakers.
1. Language and National Identity

To understand the role of a language in establishing and maintaining national identity, one needs to realise how complex the notion is. For Joseph (3‒5), there are at least three apparent meaningful paradigms of the concept: one involving an individual and a group; another one – real persons and fictional characters; and finally – oneself and the others. However, within each of those dimensions, be it oneself and the others or individuals and a group (a nation), there are distinct differences. Group identities, for example, are more abstract than individual ones although they do not exist separately. If individuals construct their identity though their own experience as something unique and in contrast to somebody else, then group identity, as an abstraction, finds its manifestation in ‘concrete’ individuals nurturing their sense of belonging. Only then, does the reciprocal tension between the two kinds of identities result in an overall concept of ‘identity.’

Similarly, Weedon sees identity as a derivative of the ‘self and the others’ paradigm. If it is to be understood as “a limited and temporary fixing for the individual of a particular mode of subjectivity of what one is,” then its plural instances might be perceived as those inherent in the wider discursive field that give individuals “a singular sense of who they are and where they belong.” These plural instances arise from the process in which individuals become recruited to specific meanings and values through a range of social practices: state rituals, education, media, or sport that encourage one’s identification (19). Being subjected to such identification, people try to self-recognise themselves in relation to those who they believe they are not.

Given its contrastive character, identity can therefore be said to be rational. It defines its integral elements in relation to the difference between polarized binary oppositions of what counts, for example, for Welsh and what sets it apart from English or British. National identity can also be defined as an exclusive affinity between a nation and the others. Then, the contrasts in play, despite the shared problems or visible similarities, are more likely to come to the fore. They are next described by narratives that most often appeal to ideals of a shared culture, history or place. The most obvious indication of such a shared identity is a common language which is often assumed to signify common roots and origins. Other elements, be it monuments, rituals, symbols, or customs, come along to construct a nationhood (Weedon 20).

It might thus be justified to say that any national language is involved in the intricate relationship with a national identification but, as in the case of an individual and national identity distinction, it is a two-way process. Most often the two are inseparable as languages shape national identities and vice versa. There are no universals in this mutual dependency though. National languages are not given but to a great extent constructed as part of ideological work in building a nation. For instance, while nationalistic ambitions helped the Welsh language to
survive and coexist with English and develop through a rivalry with its dominant
neighbour, it did not happen in the case of Scotland’s two languages – Gaelic and
Scots, where their eternal combating helped English to prevail (Joseph 94). Still,
a language most definitely affects both individual and group identities through
common experience. It is one of those variables that are at the root of what counts
as national identity.

Any modern state can be seen as a historically made reality that is purposively
constructed to mobilise commitment through its national ideology (Smith 77).
Countries like Wales are no exceptions, especially when they wish to loosen their
historical ties with the so-far dominant entities. With its ancient heritage, ethnic
groups and their loyalties, Wales has produced a number of complex relation-
ships and systems that had been traditionally based on its indigenous language,
culture and as well as some form of hostility towards everything that connotes
Britishness. In the last few decades, these traditional modes have seemed to fade
away giving way to new developments.

2. The Land, the People and the Language

As in many other areas or states colonised by the dominant neighbours, Wales’s
legacy has drawn on the differences from the others in the course of its past
experience. Originally, Welsh identity emerged from the Celtic Britons after the
Romans’ withdrawal from the Isles in the 5th century. Its story is a history of people
[‘y gwerin’], who are said to have come into existence as a separate Brythonic
group in the sixth or seventh century, and not their political and cultural leaders
– petty chieftains, unable to exercise hegemony over their own territory. When in
1282, some key Welsh leaders backed Edward I, part of the land was subsumed
into England. Two years later, in 1284, The Statute of Rhuddlan was issued, under
which all new laws established in Wales were in the fashion of those in force in
England. The last native ruler’s efforts, Owain Glyndŵr’s, to restore independ-
ence in the early 15th century were brief and insuffi cient to change Wales’s fate.
Consequently, the whole of its territory was conquered by England and incor-
porated within its legal system. Henceforth, the joined histories of England and
Wales have been marked under by the laws of The Acts of Union from 1536 and
1542 (Ford 15–16).

Having established its own law, the English would successively rid the offices
of local clerks and impose the authority of Church of England. Seemingly, the
basis of the statehood was secured. The legal system installed an administrative
structure to ensure a close relationship between the Welsh lords, Norman magnates,
and the English Crown. However, the peripheral location of Wales’s territory,
communication and transport diffi culties or low agricultural activity with time
left most of the south and west of the region in the hands of senior marcher lords,
who established their semi-independent fiefdoms (Ford 13‒14). Their unchecked tenures and powers let Wales preserve much of a distinct local identity, which continued to exist in matters of language, culture, and religion until the growth of Nonconformist attitudes in Wales in the 18th century. The movement, which was in all assertively Welsh, counteracted the neglect of the local matters by Anglican bishops and clergy, ultimately strengthening the Welsh language and the faith. By the time Christmas Evan, the greatest Nonconformist preacher, died in 1838, new Wales had been born with Dissent central to its existence. This was clearly visible in the religious census of 1851, which proved that the Established Church had lost out to the chapels. Welsh gained much in the process as it dominated among the local people, in contrast to English, the language of the alien hierarchical church, government, and its class (Morgan 2008, 115‒116).

Welsh also flourished in Baptist colleges which sprang up in the second half of the 19th century under the Baptist Union of Wales, the organisation instigated in 1866, which linked churches, associations, educational councils, and many more under its wings. Its most accomplished theologians and activists, like minister John Jenkins, popularised the Welsh language and culture taking pride in their native tongue, its beauty, rich literature, and antiquity (Morgan 2008, 117). In the field of education, a similar line of developments could be observed. Welsh clergymen would seek support for publishing materials in Welsh arguing that the native language was the most effective way of teaching local peasants and servants their duty. Besides, they opposed the use of English in Welsh charity schools, as Welsh was cheaper and more efficient than the foreign language, i.e. English, which took too much time to little purpose (Humphreys 80).

Due to the clergymen’s numerous efforts, Wales, as one of those peripheral ‘Celtic’ regions of the British Isles, managed to keep its native language to some meaningful extent even though politically the country would seem to be the most integrated with England (Ford 11). There were also those who perceived the relationship as symbolic and mutually beneficial but still believed to have been dominated by England, which impacted Wales’s distinct identity negatively. It seems undeniable though that some sort of linguistic and cultural unity had been perpetuated from the earliest of times till the end of the 18th century, when new challenges awaited the country. Wales was on the eve of new developments that were to undermine its relative uniformity and identity based, to a great extent, on its rural, communal character and linguistic heritage.

3. The Decline of Welsh Uniqueness

The most significant inroads into the mutual relationship between the Welsh culture, including the language, and the superficial state-imposed dominance were visible since the 18th century onwards. On the one hand, processes such as
industrialisation, with an influx of migrants and the development of the national organisations and institutions, i.e. the educational system or political parties, went ahead undermining the indigenous language, religion and sense of nationhood. On the other, the Welsh themselves would more willingly reject their language and culture to benefit from the Victorian progress. All this had its implications in the forming of dual and competing allegiances, i.e. to Britishness and to Welshness (Morgan, 2008, 117‒118).

The industrialisation process began in the early 18th century in the south Wales, with an influx of labour coming from neighbouring England and Ireland. As a consequence, the structure of the Welsh population rapidly expanded around the coalfields and the associated industries. Its two-thirds soon concentrated in the towns and cities of the south, leaving the rest, predominantly rural part of the population in settlements away from coastal resorts, few of which extended fifteen thousand people (Day 64). This helped turn large areas of Wales into an English-speaking region and dilute the indigenous identity (Weedon 90).

The next significant wave of migration took place in the early 1900s, when the south and east of Wales started to be populated by foreigners. However, there still remained some districts, called Heartland Counties, like Anglesey, Cardigan, Carmarthen, Merioneth or Caernarfon, which were overwhelmingly monoglot. According to the statistical evidence, provided by the Office for National Statistics, almost all of their inhabitants – 90% or more, would speak only Welsh (Ford 113). Still, as the author further concludes “Welsh had retreated to a heartland,” as sometimes it took only a twenty-mile journey to get from a monoglot Welsh community to the one where hardly any one understood Welsh (Ford 61).

Further, in successive decades, due to the rise of distinctive working communities, Wales started to come under the influence of political entities, be it the Liberal Party and the radical movement in the 19th century or the Labour and Conservatives during most of the 20th century. Their mutual contacts produced new class allegiances, different from those to the indigenous organisations. The successive political developments transformed the country by creating multiple identities, sometimes conflicting ones, transcending the former dominant Welsh vs. English (British) division.

The Anglicisation of Wales was especially visible in the field of education. The process was compounded in the second half of the 19th century after the Royal Commission into the state of education in Wales prepared its report which blamed the backwardness of the Welsh people on their adherence to the Welsh language. Accordingly, the report, published in the so-called ‘Blue Books’ in 1847, outlawed the use Welsh in state schools. It was soon dubbed Brad y Llyfrau Gleision [‘The treachery of the Blue Books’], as most of its findings were based on the Anglican clergymen’s opinions. In due course, however, large parts of Wales lost their Welsh-speaking character as well as their oral traditions that were maintained by native speakers (Weedon, 91). Also, the secondary education, which had already
been made compulsory in the 1870s, was introduced along the English lines (Morgan 2008, 118). By the end of the 19th century it was obvious that Wales had undergone a fundamental social and cultural change.

The tensions around new educational policies led to the basic ambivalence which afflicted the Welsh opinion at that time especially visible in higher education. When the University of Wales was founded by the Royal Charter in 1893, it took the responsibility of a single federal institution supervising local colleges. Initially, each college developed their own distinct Welsh national identity in response to local pressures. However, they were “all modelled on Oxbridge style curricula,” although the local need was met as the Welsh language and history were included within their syllabi (Gay 63–64). Further, despite the fact that the university gave the Nonconformist youth an opportunity for higher education denied to them in Oxbridge, it also introduced them to “potentially troubling trends of critical thought,” including Darwinism and or new philosophical trends (Morgan 118). This resulted in a conflict between the traditionally-minded Welsh academics and those advocating openness and personal growth.

Besides, some Welsh landowners, richer gentry or even poorer men’s sons had a chance to continue their education in Jesus College, in Oxford, which due to its founding charter that insisted on the Welsh intakes, election of its Principles from among Welsh descendents and competitive scholarships, recruited predominantly Welsh students. Ultimately, the College, also known as the Welsh college, enabled many Welsh school graduates to gain BA degrees or fellowships. There was even the Jesus Professorship established for those specialising in Celtic studies, although there is no evidence whether the Welsh language was used at the college, or to what extent (The Welsh College). Most definitely, the presence of Welsh youth in England and their links with family communities added to the conflicting sets of allegiances.

Thus, the ambivalence which had burdened Welsh national consciousness since the ‘Blue books’ controversy, started to manifest itself even more sharply. Some Nonconformists revelled in the new opportunities offered to them by the university courses. Others became even more tenacious trying to preserve those linguistic values and culture which had been once enshrined by the chapel. The implications of such dual loyalty to Britishness and to Welshness led to further tensions which, in time, became unbearable. As Morgan stresses, people felt in a way obliged to choose between the two. For many, it meant rejecting Welsh culture as mediocre and lacking in prestige (2008, 117–119).

Moreover, the Welsh language’s loss of its status in the academic world coincided with new challenges in Welsh churches. An influx of English migrants into the industrialised valleys of the south and along the sea-board of the north, made clergymen cater for the changing communities. Consequently, more and more churches and chapels in south Wales switched to English (Morgan, 2008, 119). The decline of Christianity, most notably of Welsh-speaking Nonconformism, went
hand-in-hand with the decline of Christianity itself. As the secularising processes compounded, “Welsh yielded to English” in most areas of daily life becoming restricted in its use at home and neighbourhoods (Llywelyn 52). The natural links between being Welsh-speaking, Christian or feeling tied to the indigenous culture were disappearing.

4. Reviving Welshness and the Language

The Welsh answer to the progressing modernity associated with the British took the form of a bold attempt to invent or revive the indigenous Welsh tradition. Starting from the 18th century, with the demise of much traditional culture, the expatriate London Welsh activists and scholars effectively reinvented several Welsh ideals which are still identified with popular images of Welshness nowadays. As Morgan notices, they “rediscovered the past, historical linguistic and literary traditions, and where these traditions were inadequate, they created a past that had never existed. Romantic mythologizing went to quiet extraordinary lengths in Wales, leaving a permanent mark on its later history” (1983, 43–44). Among the numerous re-discovered cultural phenomena were, for example, such well-known phenomena as the Eisteddfod, a yearly festival of poets and musicians; or the neo-Druidism, a form of religion promoting harmony and worship of nature. Both had their ancient or medieval precursors in the form of the Iron Age priest-hood and medieval meetings of artists (Weedon 92).

The Welsh language was also among the new area of focus proceeding from the 18th century onwards. It was celebrated through the creation of heroic literature with its national heroes originating in the medieval period. These writings casted Wales as a land of song, a distinctive national costume and flag, reimagining it as a territory of the harsh but beautiful Welsh landscape designated, for instance, for playing rugby (Weedon 92). In each case, Wales was marked as unique in opposition to England and Englishness, in defiance of its national and ethnic character.

Aspects of this re-invented tradition are still visible in the museums, heritage or tourist sites. Welsh institutions project its country’s heritage drawing on history and national identity typical former centuries. By doing so, they define the Welsh in terms of those narratives that identify them through the prism of their ancient roots and origins pre-dating even the Roman times (Weedon 92). In popular imagination, Wales is supposed to trace its origins back to Celtic culture, language and religion. For example, the Museum of Welsh Life at St Fagans, the most popular tourist attraction in Cardiff, in its promotion materials defines the country as follows: “[t]hough small, it is with a positive identity and its own widely used language, a diverse landscape with rugged mountains, trout-filled rivers, smooth rounded hills and peaceful pasture” (Weedon 93).
Also, the National *Eisteddfod*, held in a different location every year, took the task of promoting the land’s culture and language seriously. Since 1950, according to the strictly followed all-Welsh rule, the official language of the festival has been Welsh, even on its administrative premises. Despite the initial concerns, the rule has not diminished interest in the event. Quite contrary, it has become one of the most prestigious Welsh cultural gatherings even when held in predominantly English-speaking areas. By comprising the domains of drama, casual arts, music, and literature, it appeals to various communities, the elderly and youth. In fact, the National *Eisteddfod* is the pinnacle of numerous local *eisteddfodau*, held throughout the year in the whole country, which helps to maintain the language and revitalise interest in the indigenous culture (Jones 2002, 591‒592).

However, such narrow and exclusive definitions of Welshness, grounded mainly in ancient Celtic roots and language skills, automatically exclude all others, even Welsh-speaking persons who settled along the South Wales coast in the past and live in industrial and mixed Welsh communities (Weedon 93). Further, it seems that such projections made sense a century or two ago as they appealed to all those who knew Welsh, attended Welsh religious services or Sunday schools. Then, the churches would “bear the responsibility for safeguarding the national tradition and culture,” narrowly defining the Welsh language as a holy one – “the language of poets and prophets” (Jones 1982, 224). Since the end of the 19th century onwards though, establishing too close a bond between language and identity turns out in many ways to be a fatal path, as the majority of the population ceased to speak the language. Whereas in 1891, 54,4% would be classified as Welsh speakers, in 1961, the number would fall to 26%, and in 1991 to just 19,7% (Focus on Wales, 5).

Losing their language, people would simultaneously lose their connection with the past, be it the religious one or the one understood as a sense of national identity. Another consequence of the language skills loss was that the Welsh language yielded to English in most areas of the country’s life, including worship, administration, education, or culture (Llywelyn 52). Many would claim that it became the victim of British imperial power. However, as Ford emphasises, this conventional narrative is wrong. In his understanding, there was no state-centred far-flung British policy to annihilate the language beside promoting English at schools or offices. The choice between Welsh and English was pragmatic rather than principled. As the language of the indigenous people, Welsh was for long an essential means of communication or worship; however, in other areas, i.e. governmental or legal spheres, it was becoming useless and inferior (5). No wonder, *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* put its infamous entry in 1888 which read: “For Wales see England.” As Edwards underlines, the Welsh themselves showed too much ignorance of their own country and their “weakened sense of a collective past,” which was not only due to the lack of national institutions (215).
The organisation which endeavoured to revive the national sentiment and reverse or slow down the process of diminishing tradition was the Welsh political party, Plaid Cymru (1925). It was established on Christian humanist principles by the architect of modern Welsh nationalism, Saunders Lewis, who could transform loose patriotic feelings, words and actions into an organisation (Fishlock 74). This form of modern political nationalism, from its very beginnings until the 1970s, continued to identify Welsh nationality with Christianity as it was affected mainly by Welsh writers representing the nationalistic party or their supporters. Their sentiments however were far more typical of the rurally raised Welsh-speaking intelligentsia of the west and north Wales origin (Llywelyn 52).

The way Plaid Cymru evolved was inextricably linked to the language issue. For long, the party was associated with a romantic and idealized view of the past and the traditional ethnic approach to the question of Welshness. Such an attitude to running politics, helped its leader, Gwynfor Evans, become the first ever nationalist Westminster MP in 1966. However, the party itself was seen as ‘too local and past oriented’ and therefore off-putting to many voters. Still, while being represented in the Commons, it managed to incorporate into numerous governmental materials much focus on distinctive Welsh ‘communities.’ The notion was controversial and much criticised for conveying a misleading portrayal of Wales – the land of warmth and social inclusion (Day 67), but it managed to serve its ideological purpose promoting Wales as, “a nation with a unique history which produced a distinct social organisation” (Williams 1978, 3). Having little room for any manoeuvre in the British national agenda dominated by two main political parties, Plaid Cymru stuck to the local matters. For example, in 1982, together with the Welsh Language Society, it led to the establishment of the world’s only Welsh-language TV channel (S4C). Overall, the party itself had never managed to register strongly and consistently at polls, but it breathed much needed nationalistic feelings into the public life (Jenkins 294‒295).

Indeed, much emphasis of the research conducted on Wales from the 1950s onwards focuses on community studies. i.e. agricultural work, kinship relations, religious organisation or the Welsh language. That could confirm some kind of a normative endorsement of Welsh values, which contrasted with modern developments brought about by changes in technology and communication, largely emanating from England (Day 65). Besides, the purposefully sustained affirmation of the Welsh past often led to a condemnation of urban-industrial conditions and their values. Such a perception of modernity also echoed in more openly nationalistic Welsh politics, subsequently leading to the impression that the social order was under attack (Day 64‒65). To some extent, this could be understandable, as Wales had never shared the same degree of unity and cooperation with England as Scotland did in the past. Due to its historical, social divisions and separateness, the Welsh lacked political and national cohesion. As Edwards ironically stresses, “[they] were too decentralist to unite” (215).
Perceiving Wales as decentralised, a community bound nation found its embodiment in a famous schema produced by political scientist Dennis Balsom, who claimed that Wales could be divided into three main language areas, which would at the same time stand for their self-identification. Using polling and electoral data, he argued that there was ‘British Wales,’ the eastern part of half of Wales with the Cardiff area and Pembroke in the extreme south-west, which was oriented towards wider identification with Britain and British identity. People living in the zone spoke English and no Welsh. Next came ‘Welsh Wales’ incorporating the rest of the south-east, including the valleys. Its population would identify themselves as Welsh but generally did not speak the language. Finally, there was an area known as *Y Fro Gymraeg* ['the Welsh speaking area'], covering mainly the western half of Wales, where people would identify with Wales and also speak the language (1985, 1–17).

It was *Y Fro Gymraeg* that was seen as the stronghold of language, religion, culture and song. The more modern zones would, to a smaller or greater extent, exhibit mixed loyalties and complex identification patterns in terms of tradition or political loyalty. This frame still maintains some validity in discussions on contemporary Welshness, although the simplistic identification of people with the language skills and thus national identity appears insufficient (Osmond 2009, 4–5).

The key issue in the viewpoint of communities under pressure was the Welsh language and its status. With a decreasing proportion of the population able to speak Welsh, which fell from 50 to 18.5 per cent between 1911 and 1991, fewer communities were inhabited by a Welsh-speaking majority, and the territory of Wales within which Welsh was used as an everyday means of communication diminished (Day 65–66). This decline represented a loss of an authentic Welshness, associated with habits, customs and ways of thought. Nostalgia for the past was still visible, for example, in Aitchison and Carter’s view, who insisted that being “Welsh, in a meaningful way, a person must speak, or at least understand Welsh. Otherwise he is she is no more than somebody dwelling in a defined area called Wales” (3). By the end of the 20th century, such an attitude posed a serious question about the ethnic identification for more than 80 per cent of the population who did not use the language.

To some extent, the notion of communities was still viable in Wales even in the 20th century. With its communication difficulties and comparatively isolated areas, self-sufficient and even inward-looking, Wales could still be perceived as a set of distinguished well-knit units which would identify themselves with smaller rather than larger entities. This tendency seems alive and visible even nowadays, in Wales’s closer identification with a neighbourhood rather than town, and its outward policies in Europe opting for stronger regional than national affiliations (Henderson 249).
Beside the developments characterised above, the 20\textsuperscript{th} century saw numerous events that would both endeavour to safeguard the status of the weakening Welsh, but also build up the sense of nationhood through other essential developments, including institutions. Their establishment was favoured both by Conservative and Labour governments, which promoted a build-up of a civic national identity in Wales. The policy created increasingly proto-state feelings and Cardiff, which was officially designed as the capital city in 1955, provided “a sense of focus and unity” in the geographically divided nation (Fishlock 139). Soon, other institutions followed: The Welsh Office was created in 1964 and the Welsh Development agency founded in 1976. Numerous bodies sprang up including the Welsh Arts Council, the Sports Council for Wales, the Wales Tourist Board, the Welsh National Opera, etc. Although Wales had never experienced a constitutional convention like Scotland did, these creations helped to form and develop a sense of distinct nationhood based on unity (Fishlock 163).

Founding all these institutions may have even gone some way towards making the Welsh shape a more modern identity within the British statehood even though most of them functioned as ‘quangos’ or quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations. Being run by appointees or co-opted members in unelected bodies, they were unaccountable to the Welsh electorate. Therefore, they met with some specific mistrust during the long period of Conservative government (1979–1997), which was especially distinct during the miners’ strike in the 1980s. The resulting democracy deficit led to a new understanding on the part of the people of Wales, who felt that they needed control over Welsh life to overcome “the political, industrial and economic traumas of the Thatcherite years” (Williams 2000, 241).

The solution to the growing dissatisfaction with the political dependence appeared already in the late 1970s, when a new kind of national sense of identity was forwarded with the ideas of devolution first introduced by the Labour Party, who in a way promoted a constitutional reform of Britain wishing to save their seats in Wales. The vote for the National Assembly in 1979 was the first test checking how the Welsh understood their national identity. Asked to determine whether they saw themselves as British, Welsh or English, the respondents voting ‘yes’ (76\%), in their majority, identified themselves as Welsh, whereas 19\% claimed they were British (Foulkes, \textit{et al.} 210). However, the referendum was rejected by a majority four to one at a very low turnout below 12\% of the population (Bogdanor 90).

What was interesting about the vote was that among those who declared themselves as Labour supporters and also identified themselves as Welsh, only 33\% were in favour of the proposal. The result showed that class solidarity was often stronger than the Welsh national identity (Foulke \textit{et al.}, 210). It also demonstrated how instrumental the Labour Party was in treating Welsh national matters,
when its own members sabotaged devolutionist aspirations of the nationalists (Jenkins 296). Finally, it exposed the British national politics’ interference with the local matters as the fears concerning devolution entailed an array of undesirable consequences: the break-up of Britain, the domination of Welsh speakers or of Anglophones in Cardiff. As Humphreys asserts, the result was an ironic twist in an apparent resurgence of Welshness and proved that Wales was in fact the battleground of the British parties, a “little Britain” (226).

However, by the time the next referendum was held in 1997, the people of Wales had elected candidates exclusively from the parties that advocated some devolution settlement. The vote for the establishment of the Welsh Assembly was narrowly won, but Wales was afforded powers which set it apart from England as an autonomous entity. Finally, it had some means to begin developing a civic culture of its own. It was also discovered that ‘yes’ votes, in their majority, came from the western Welsh speaking areas, and the former Welsh-thinking industrial valleys. Much support for the Assembly was shown by young people, as those under 45 voted ‘yes’ in the proportions of 3:2, – which reflected demographic, economic and psychological changes (Osmond 2007, 20). This new branch of Welsh citizenship seemed to produce some shared basis for the nation’s identity well into the 21st century. Whereas in the past Welshness had been a social and cultural phenomenon, with all the new developments, it was becoming a civic and political reality within the context of a devolved and perhaps ultimately federal British state (Morgan, 2008, 231). A vote in confidence for Wales and Welshness and an affirmation of a new Welsh identity is visible in the regular polls outcome for members of the Welsh parliament (1999: 46.4%; 2003: 38.2%; 2007: 43.5%; 2011: 41.5% and 2016: 45.6% (Rallings and Thrasher 7).

One of the outcomes of the Assembly’s establishment is that the issue of Welsh identity has become a question raised on a daily basis by those present in the institution. Besides, it does not concern language or culture alone but a number of administrative, social or political matters. Being involved in running its own country, the parliament has had to establish its own legitimacy on different grounds (Scully and Jones 10–11). One of the basic dilemmas has certainly become how to talk about the Welsh and their identity at times when the criteria of language skills seem insufficient. Such aspects had never arisen in case of Scotland as Scots’ national identity was manifested in the presence of its institutions recognised already in the 19th century. Besides, the indigenous language was never a major issue in Scotland’s demand for power and home rule (Jones 2008, 16).

Simultaneously, as the new institutional trends were affecting the Welsh and their nationhood, numerous attempts were taken to maintain or improve the status of the language itself. Modern consciousness of its significance as an identity marker was aroused for the first time by poet Saunders Lewis, who his lecture in the 1962 BBC radio broadcast entitled Tynged yr Iaith [‘The fate of the language’] warned that its decline would weaken the Welsh identity. The broadcast
was a landmark in the modern Welsh history and sprang a movement battling for the language. It led to the forming of the Welsh Language Society, whose activists were able to stir consciousness of the Welsh and make their language once more a major social and political issue (Fishlock, 73). His follower, Ronald Stuart Thomas, a poet and staunch supporter of Welsh nationalism and admirer of the Welsh countryside, culture and tradition also lamented at low status of the indigenous language, which, as he noticed, was the outcome of the Welsh apathy and insufficient resistance to the alien English (Davis, 18).

Beside the great nationalists’ efforts, the growth in the civic awareness and national identity seems to have been reinforced by the political autonomy and cultural influence coming from the outside. In 1992, Britain ratified The 1992 Council of European Charter catering for regional or minority languages. Accordingly, the Society’s attempts quickly resulted in passing two laws, i.e. The 1993 Welsh Language Act and The 1997 Welsh Language Act, both protecting the language by giving it parity with English by making it, for instance, an obligatory subject in schools. Therein, despite some complaints about the language’s uselessness or some hostility towards the Welsh speakers seen as a self-appointed elite, the snobs, who reserve favours within Welsh institutions for their own minority (Jones 2008, 18), the recent increase in the numbers of persons who can speak, write and read in Welsh to 21% in 2001 and 21,3% in 2011 respectively (Welsh Language Skills, UK Office for National Statistics) seems to indicate a reversal of the decline.

Definitely, the language revival is due to all the efforts made by the Welsh Language Board, the Welsh Assembly’s language promotion programme Iaith Pawb [‘language for all’] or the activists, who saw Welsh as an added value in understanding one’s identity. Their endeavours were followed by official laws, i.e. The Government of Wales Act of 2006, which insisted on public bodies taking on the responsibility of catering for such initiatives as granting new language projects, implementing bilingual skills strategy, encouraging internal use of Welsh, providing support for staff and many more (Welsh Language Scheme, 6–7). Next, from 2011, basing in part on the Welsh Language Society proposals, the Assembly passed The Welsh Language Measure, which not only established the Welsh language as an official language of Wales but also introduced the Welsh Language Commissioner to promote and facilitate the language use. Duly, the Welsh language, as the only native language of the Isles, was granted official status, which made it de jure official in Wales and any part of the kingdom (Welsh Language (Wales) Measure, 2011).

By and large, the notion of identity, or rather identities in Wales, which had once been caught predominantly in issues of religion and language, seems to have given way to some kind of a new consensus visible since the end of the 1980s. The divisive character of the former understanding of nationhood, community and divisions within the Welsh society, has yielded to a new, more collective
identification. The Welsh are not defined merely through the prism of their shared communal experience, religion or indigenous language but rather by reference to the institutions which they abide to and their influence, where language itself is seen as an added value (Carter 2010, 140). As Williams notices, the new identity lacks the ethnical or political underpinnings that marked the Welsh life for the last two centuries and seems the only possible alternative (2000, 240). Interestingly, the conclusion appears credible as the research conducted in Monmouthshire, an area on the English border, recorded a growing number of those who identify themselves as Welsh. In 1997, 42.9% of the respondents saw themselves as ‘Welsh’ or more ‘Welsh than British’ but, by 2001, this figure rose to 48.1% and in 2003 – 50.9% (Royles 159). Thus, the figures may seem indicative of an increasing and assertive sense of Welsh national identity.

However, if this new identity is to accommodate all those who live in Wales, the notion has to be pluralistic and inclusive. It has to be based on the concept of citizenship rather than the formerly valued attributes like ethnicity or well-grounded assumptions of what Welshness stands for. This seems to be understood even by the staunch defenders of traditional Welsh values and beliefs. Plaid Cymru, presently in opposition with its 12 seats won in 2016, used to serve as a junior Labour coalition partner in the National Assembly in the years 2007–2011. It had to cater for all policies that concerned Wales’s future, including what Davies, the Labour’s first post-devolution Secretary of State for Wales, once advocated. He claimed that, to move forward and stop being divisive, the new Welsh identity had to become more inclusive. The devolution process, being a dynamic constitutional mechanism, seems to guarantee that (6–7).

Accordingly, the recent developments and electoral shifts explain why and how language ceased to be a prime indicator of Welshness. Roots and origins still play a vital role in how people identify themselves, but modern Welsh identities encompass both those raised in the Welsh language, English-speaking Welsh as well as long established mixed-race communities, mostly located in the south especially in Cardiff and Newport (Weedon 90). Further, new findings indicate that the Welsh themselves contest the notion of the former ‘imagined communities.’ They do not see themselves as nationalists and often do not attach particularly much attention to the country’s history. However, as modern research shows, they share a strong emotional bond with their land, sport or music although without a precise specification of what contemporary Welshness stands for. Being Welsh more and more often tends to connote one’s identity, an internalised sense of the self undergoing a constant change and negotiation, rather than the place of origin (Jones 2008, 21). It appears that Wales’s experience on the margin of the Isles has, to a large extent, contributed to the shape of a distinct national identity, which in the modern times assumes new forms still not ultimately defined.

This re-shaping and redefining of Welsh distinctiveness is also seen in the world of culture, which partly reacts to new political circumstances. In a way, its
regeneration follows the political rebirth and, although the new national awareness still derives from “the needs of differentiation from the dominant neighbour,” there is a simultaneous growth in Welsh people’s self-confidence and a wider change in perceptions of their nationality (Lord 9). It is hoped that the twenty-first century will successfully transcend the former social divisions resulting from the language criterion.

Conclusion

Raising the question of what Welsh identity is and what shapes it might lead one to the following conclusions. It seems that the 20th century developments, institutional creations, and the devolution itself, with the establishment of the national Assembly for Wales, have helped the Welsh to move towards a more inclusive sense of the self. This institutional reinforcement of Welsh aspirations did not come out of nothing. It owes much to the efforts of all clergymen, activists, nationalists or admirers of Welshness whose involvement brought tangible results. Were it not for their joint aspirations and concerns, Wales would be in a different position now, definitely less distinct. The Welsh language would not have gained the official status and the number of its speakers would most likely continue to drop. Still, the identity which formerly would narrowly specify Welsh attributes in terms of language and culture has shifted towards a more complex notion with different conceptualisations and multiple sub-identities. Side by side the nationalistic identity, there exists a growing civic-nation consciousness. The creation of an all-Wales institutions, whose powers are successively increased by Westminster, transform the country into a more modern one with new roles to play in social, cultural or political spheres. Simultaneously, it seems wrong to assume that Wales has totally abandoned its attachment to its former traditional homogenous identity based on culture, religion or language. These factors still count but Welsh identity is becoming more diverse, fragmented and multi-faceted. An increased assertion of Welshness, understood as a ‘civic’ and not ‘ethnic’ belonging as well as an enhanced loyalty towards Cardiff may bode well for Wales in the future.

References


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