

## **The Cornish paradox: ethnoregionalism in a hybrid territory**

**ABSTRACT:** This article addresses a gap in the literature on nationalism, the case of Cornwall. Cornish ethnoregionalism presents a paradox; a minority nationalist movement that has sustained itself politically for more than a half a century, culturally for more than century, yet one that has achieved little electoral or policy success. It is argued here that Cornwall has been conceptualised hitherto too rigidly within one of two paradigms – as a Celtic country or as an English county. Instead, recognising this hybridity allows us to extend Lieven De Winter’s work on European ethnoregionalist parties to explain both the weakness of Cornish ethnoregionalism and its persistence, albeit at relatively low levels of activity. By investigating the Cornish case theory on ethnoregionalist parties is applied comparatively, leading to the conclusion that utilising a number of perspectives at differing scales opens out our understanding of concrete cases of minority nationalism.

### **Introduction**

More than two decades ago Hechter and Levi pondered why, ‘in an area of Celtic nationalism in the British Isles there should be so much of a Welsh problem yet so little of a Cornish one’ (Hechter and Levi 1979: 262). However, despite a flowering of scholarship on ethnoregional movements, there has been sparse academic discussion of the Cornish case since Hechter and Levi wrote these words. This is perhaps understandable if we were to accept the view of Gibbon (1993: 64) that, while the Welsh and Bretons remain distinct groups ‘others such as the Cornish have disappeared’. This neatly solves Hechter and Levi’s dilemma. If there is no such identifiable cultural group as the Cornish then there can be no nationalism based on that group. But things are not quite so simple. Although Cornwall and Cornish nationalism experiences a ‘categorization problem’, occupying diverse and in some ways contradictory conceptual spaces, a Cornish nationalist movement exists. This movement has contained most of the features commonly associated with European minority nationalist movements (Deacon et al 2003). Nevertheless, it has failed to achieve either electoral or policy success. This article addresses this paradoxical case – a sustained ethnoregional movement which has attained only intermittent visibility.

Through investigating this forgotten case we are able to respond to calls to test general theory on nationalism against individual accounts by constructing theoretically informed comparative histories (Halliday in Özkirimli 2000: 233). And to do this we now possess a far better set of conceptual tools than were available to Hechter and Levi. General theories of nationalism, whether ‘primordialist’, ‘modernist’ or ‘constructivist’, have now attained a sophisticated level (Özkirimli 2000). But, operating at a relatively abstract level, these offer only modest explanatory power if we seek to explain the details of specific ethnoregionalist movements (Lecours 2000). In contrast, the detailed body of work on ethoregional political parties brought together by De Winter and Tursan (1998) makes use of more intermediate variables, focussing on ethnoregional political parties as agents of ethnic mobilisation. This adopts an opportunity structure approach, explaining their relative success or failure in terms of a capacity to accumulate political resources.

After establishing its relative strength, this article applies De Winter and Tursan’s opportunity structure framework to Cornish nationalism, allowing us to establish some possible reasons for lack of success. The analysis then broadens out from this theoretical base, introducing other perspectives before concluding that, in order to understand a specific case of ethnoregionalism, a combination of approaches at different scales of explanation are required. Indeed, the narrower the case study the more essential it is to provide a wider analytical frame. But first we must explain the conceptual confusion that surrounds Cornwall. This article thus begins by identifying the ways that Cornwall and Cornish nationalism has been approached by academics.

### **Cornwall and Cornish nationalism**

Hechter and Levi assumed that Cornish nationalism was part of a general ‘Celtic nationalism’. This is one academic reading of Cornwall - Cornwall as a (Celtic) nation. However, there is another - Cornwall as an (English) county. Hitherto, Cornwall has tended to be read from one or other of these two perspectives. This bifocal perspective helps to explain the bewildering variety of conclusions about this regional nationalism. In contrast, the contention here is that the hybridity of

Cornwall's historical experience and its role in producing a case that is neither unambiguously Celtic nor just an English county has been under-recognised. Only by addressing this hybrid experience explicitly can we reach a better understanding of this particular case.

Cornwall's origins as a British kingdom and the presence of a widely spoken Celtic language into the 18<sup>th</sup> century have brought it to the attention of historians. Echoing primordialist views of nationalism there has been some discussion of a distinct medieval and early modern ethnicity (Hasting 1997: 44; Robbins 1998: 8-9; Stoye 2001). However, the decline of Cornish as a vernacular language is viewed as having undermined the ethnic distinctiveness of its people. According to this reading, separate ethnicity faded as Cornwall moved into the modern period, a process accompanied by Cornwall's re-branding as an English county. For Hechter, this early folding 'into the expanding Tudor ... state [meant that] no concept of national self-determination was readily available to help their elites mobilise peasant resistance'. Yet minority nationalisms 'came back to haunt both Britain and France', being adopted in territories like Wales and Brittany (Hechter 2000: 92). Cornwall's history had provided the resources for a similar adoption.

Ward-Perkins (2000: 521) claims that Cornwall 'remains the one part of England where not all indigenous inhabitants automatically describe themselves as "English"'. But the word 'remains' is misleading. This may not be the lingering reminder of an older relict identity. It could be the outcome of an ethnoregional identity renewed in recent times. Both Eric Hobsbawm and Tom Nairn raise this possibility. Hobsbawm, contrasting Cornwall with the north of England, has remarked that 'the Cornish are fortunate to be able to paint their regional discontents in the attractive colours of Celtic tradition, which makes them so much more viable' (Hobsbawm 1992: 178). Meanwhile, according to Nairn, 'the sole other alternative [to regionalism in England] would be the Cornish case – claiming or coining national credentials in order to underwrite equal status' (Nairn 2000: 187). Nairn argues that Cornish nationalism was 'simply ignored by traditional all-British political reflection – too insignificant to figure, as it were, in its dazzling image of greatness and global reach' (Nairn 2000: 14).

Cornwall as a (Celtic) nation may have exerted an occasional attraction on historians (see also Vernon 1998) but, simultaneously, its administrative status renders its nationalist movement indistinct, invisible, even inconvenient, to many social scientists. The more common paradigm here is Cornwall as (English) county. Thus Alan Butt Philip sees Cornish identity as an example of a 'local' identity, 'typically to be found in counties such as Somerset, Cornwall or Durham, which reflect administrative (and socio-cultural) divisions which go back 1,000 years (Butt Philip 1999: 35). The insistence that Cornwall is merely a 'county' identity undercuts the space available for conceptualising its ethnoregionalist movement. Consequently, the actual existence of a political movement calling for devolution, or of an identity that might insist on defining itself as more than a county identity, is rarely addressed from this perspective. Cornwall becomes an 'inconvenient periphery' (Payton 2002) or even an embarrassing periphery as claims for the existence of a Cornish national identity are vigorously rejected. Thus Crick has written: 'once I read "Cornish" [in the nationality column of a hotel register] but I suspected, correctly, that it was a wag and not a nut' (Crick 1989: 23). Such comforting assumptions indicate that Cornwall occupies an intriguing and difficult conceptual space.

References to Cornwall in the footnotes of the literature on nationalism and regionalism often owe more to dominant assumptions about territory, place and 'Celticity' than they do to the actual empirical details. In 1951 the organisation *Mebyon Kernow* (MK) (Sons of Cornwall) was formed with a set of cultural demands that included furthering the acceptance of the idea of the Cornwall as one of the six Celtic nations. From 1951 to the mid-1960s MK remained a small cultural and economic pressure group, with attempts to preserve and publicise the Cornish language and other Cornish 'traditions' uppermost. This began to change in the mid-1960s when it entered the electoral arena, first fighting local elections and then a Parliamentary seat in 1970. By 1979 a relative high point of electoral intervention was reached. Reflecting the fortunes of ethnoregionalist parties elsewhere, MK experienced a decade of doubts and uncertainty about its direction in the 1980s. Like Plaid Cymru it opted for a leftist position in this decade, a trajectory begun during the 1970s (Lynch 1995; McAllister 2001). In the 1990s electoral activity again increased and the party settled down to a less troubled period when it concentrated on

electioneering. The transition to a political party was apparently complete (Deacon et al 2003).

### **MK in comparative perspective**

MK is only part of a wider ‘movement’ that includes a variety of cultural and political pressure groups. But, here we concentrate on the support for political ethnoregionalism in Cornwall by plotting the electoral performance of MK. Table 1 compares the results of MK with those of the SNP and Plaid Cymru at parliamentary elections, the normal frame of analysis. It is immediately apparent that MK’s performance is dismal, the party failing to score more than three per cent even at its best election in 1979. It has also never managed to contest all five Cornish constituencies. At this level MK is, for all intents and purposes, electorally invisible. But there are other levels and other comparisons that can be made.

*Table 1: Mean percentage vote of candidates at parliamentary elections*

	MK (number of candidates)	Plaid Cymru	SNP
1970	2.0 (1)	11.5	11.4
1974 (Feb)	1.5 (1)	10.7	21.9
1974 (Oct)	0.7 (1)	10.8	30.4
1979	2.9 (3)	8.1	17.3
1983	1.2 (2)	7.8	11.8
1987	no candidates	7.3	14.0
1992	no candidates	9.0	21.5
1997	0.8 (4)	9.9	22.1
2001	2.1 (3)	14.3	20.1

Source: calculated from Deacon et al 2003; Henig and Baston 2002; Lynch 2002; McAllister 2001.

‘Second-order’ elections such as those to the European Parliament are cited as opportunities providing a political space for ethnoregionalist parties (De Winter and Cachafeiro 2002). Indeed, the first such election was the occasion of one of MK’s

most successful results. In 1979, its candidate, Richard Jenkin, won six per cent of the vote. But MK fought this election on boundaries that included three non-Cornish parliamentary constituencies. Allowing for this, the MK vote equated to 9.5 per cent, not that far behind the Plaid Cymru score of 11.7 per cent in Wales. But 1979 was to prove a false dawn for Cornish nationalism. In stark contrast to Scotland and Wales, at the Euro-elections in both 1989 and 1994 MK's support reverted to a very low level.

*Table 2: Mean percentage vote of candidates at European elections*

	MK (adjusted for non-Cornish constituencies)	Plaid Cymru	SNP
1979	9.5	11.7	19.4
1984	1.6 (Cornish Nationalist Party candidate)	12.2	17.8
1989	3.0	12.9	25.6
1994	2.1	17.1	32.6
1999	no candidate	29.6	27.2

Source: as Table 1

Logically, ethnoregional identities are more likely to be expressed in regional elections (Hamann 1999) and the elections to the devolved Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly would seem to bear this out. Cornwall has no similar democratically elected body, but there is a local government body, Cornwall County Council, that matches its territory. MK candidates have appeared at this level since 1967, although the party has never been able to contest more than a quarter of the available seats. However, the number of candidates does reflect the widely observed two 'waves' of ethnoregionalist electoral activity (Letamendia 1997), declining in the late 1980s and re-emerging during the 1990s. In terms of votes won, the party does considerably better at this level, succeeding in electing one councillor in each election from 1985 to 1997. But local government elections in Cornwall are not fully party-politicised. The mean vote of MK candidates is therefore inflated by those instances where it is not

opposed by Labour or the Liberal Democrats. If we ignore straight fights with Conservatives or Independents and isolate those contests with at least two opponents the MK vote is as shown in Table 3.

*Table 3: Number of MK candidates and mean percentage vote in contests with at least three candidates, Cornwall County Council elections*

	candidates	Mean vote in contests with three or more candidates (N)
1977	7	14.8 (5)
1981	14 (including 5 CNP)	13.8 (12)
1985	5 (including 2 CNP)	10.5 (3)
1989	3	12.7 (2)
1993	7	8.5 (4)
1997	13	10.1 (11)
2001	21	12.1 (21)

At this level there is clearly more support. Although, in a first past the post system, this is insufficient to gain councillors, under a proportional voting system MK would be consistently represented at the local government level. Overall therefore, when compared with the SNP or Plaid Cymru, MK has performed very poorly in the electoral arena, failing to achieve a breakthrough. Nevertheless, it has maintained a sustained though not comprehensive, presence at elections at all levels and its voting support is comparable with most fourth party interventions in England. While admitting it is ‘a long way from being the equivalent of the SNP or Plaid Cymru’, Henig and Baston (2002: 50) conclude that ‘it is a serious and committed presence on the Cornish scene with potential for growth’.

Moreover, another comparison can be made. Breton nationalism has received considerably more academic attention than that of Cornwall. In the 1970s accounts tended to treat Breton nationalism as if it were equivalent to that of Scotland, Wales, the Basque Country or Catalonia (Reece 1977). This gave way in the 1980s to a more critical perspective (Keating 1985; Rogers 1990). Nevertheless, overly simplistic

summaries of Breton nationalism can still be encountered, for example in the assertion of ‘growing levels of popular support for nationalism in Brittany, Quebec, Scotland and Wales, among other regions, from the 1960s onwards’ (Thompson and Fevre 2001: 310). In electoral terms at least this overestimates the support received by Breton nationalism.

In 1963 the Union Democratique Bretonne (UDB) was formed and quickly became the principal Breton ethno-regionalist political organisation, gaining municipal councillors in 1977 as part of a Union of the Left. At the same time it began to contest elections to the French Legislative Assembly. Although a more explicitly socialist party from its inception, the UDB’s move into electoral politics closely paralleled MK. Indeed, the more radical wing of MK had considerable contact with the UDB in the later 1970s and early 1980s. In the 1980s, however, the UDB found it increasingly difficult to carve out a space for itself as its former Socialist Party allies took over the reins of government. The UDB discovered that it was unable to influence government policy and yet also incapable of emerging as a credible political force. Its membership fell from over 2,000 at its height in the late 1970s to 800 by 1983 (Rogers 1990). Like MK, the 1980s was a difficult decade for the UDB and strategy shifted as the party made overtures to ecologists, cultural activists and others. While the UDB faced more rivals as the Breton movement began to fragment, like MK it survived the 1980s and continues to be the most active electoral component of the Breton ethno-regionalist movement.

If we compare the votes gained at state-wide elections by the UDB with those of MK a very similar picture emerges.

*Table 4: Mean votes and number of candidates at parliamentary elections*

Year	MK	Year	UDB and allies
1970	2.0 (1)		
1974 (Feb)	1.5 (1)	1973	2.2 (5)
1974 (Oct)	0.7 (1)		
1979	2.9 (3)	1978	1.9 (17)
1983	1.2 (2)	1981	2.2 (16)

1987	no candidates	1986 and 1988	no candidates
1992	no candidates	1993	no candidates
1997	0.8 (4)	1997	2.0 (24)
2001	2.1 (3)	2002	1.5 (36)

In addition, although there have been regional elections in France since 1986, so far the UDB and its allies have been unable to surmount the five per cent bar necessary to gain seats. In cantonal elections, the most directly comparable with County Council elections in Cornwall, 53 Breton regionalist candidates in 2001 (contesting around 40 per cent of the available seats) won a mean 4.6 per cent of the vote, no improvement on the 5.6 per cent mean vote of its 34 candidates at the height of the first wave of ethno-regionalism in 1979 (Loughlin 1985).

Such levels of electoral support are the same or lower than those achieved by MK. Proportions of the total vote might not, however, be the most appropriate comparative measure. Gordin proposes an Index of Electoral Success (IES), which compares the votes won by ethnoregionalist parties with the votes obtained by the leading party in the region. For Gordin this has the advantage of yielding ‘a comparative measure at the cross-national level, which is independent of the number of contenders and population size’ (Gordin 2001: 156). Applying this measure to recent elections in Cornwall, Brittany, Wales and Scotland, we see in Table 5 that both the UDB and MK’s IES at parliamentary level is very weak, when compared with that of Plaid Cymru and the SNP. At local government level, however, the IES for MK is considerably higher than that of the UDB.

*Table 5: Index of Electoral Success*

	Parliamentary elections		Pmt//Assembly/ regional elections	Local elections
	1997	2001		
MK	0.02	0.05		0.32
UDB	0.05	0.03	0.09	0.12

PC	0.18	0.29	0.86	
SNP	0.48	0.45	0.81	

We can now revisit Hechter and Levi's implied question. From the perspective of Cornwall as a (Celtic) nation the weak performance of MK when compared with Plaid Cymru and the SNP reinforces the view that Cornish regional nationalism has failed. MK remains confined to the margins of electoral visibility, unable to achieve a total coverage in terms of its electoral interventions. Thus, from this perspective we need to explain that relative failure. However, the example of another 'Celtic' case study, that of Brittany, suggests that such failure is not limited to the Cornish ethnoregionalist movement. On the other hand, from a perspective of Cornwall as an (English) county, the very existence of Cornish ethnoregionalism should be a puzzling anomaly. Its persistence over the past half-century is itself a phenomenon that requires explanation, as no county or region of England has given rise to anything similar.

### **The opportunity structure of Cornish nationalism: external determinants**

For De Winter and Tursan (1998) the ability of ethnoregionalist parties to mobilise and to succeed depends, on a series of external and internal determinants making up their 'opportunity structure'. Foremost among the five proposed external determinants is the relative strength of the regional identity. Hearl et al (1996) have argued that the most important factor in explaining the success of regional nationalism is the presence of a widely spoken regional language. However, the relative success of the SNP and the Lega Nord casts doubt on this. For De Winter and Tursan (1998: 216-17) language is instead part of a general feeling of belonging. It is this broader level of regional identification that correlates with levels of voting for an ethnoregionalist party. In the case of MK, the most crucial determinant is often deemed to be the resources supplied by the cultural identity. There has been a tendency to repeat the assertion that Cornwall is a region with a 'rather weak sense of identity' (Guiberneau 2001: 17). Others go further. For Shaw (1991: 226) there is 'no distinctive Cornish identity', the 'original' Cornish identity having been undermined. But it is not clear what evidence these assertions are based on.

There is a circular argument here. The weakness of the ethnoregionalist party, which ‘oscillates around the threshold of political visibility’ (Stanyer 1997) is taken to prove the weakness of cultural identity. In turn, a weak ethnoregional party cannot mobilise the ethnoregional identity. However, the view that the weakness of Cornish ethnoregionalism is a simple function of the ‘weakness’ of its identity has a number of problems. First, actual survey data on the strength of identity in Cornwall is lacking, although there are some indications that the sense of belonging to Cornwall as a territory is notably stronger than the norm for administrative counties in England (MORI 1994; MORI 2003). Second, the work on nationalism would suggest that identities are malleable, fluid and provisional (Thompson and Day 1999: 39). Identities can change and identities are made. Permanent and continuing ‘weakness’ can therefore never be taken for granted. Finally, the assumption that there is a simple link between the strength of identity and ethnoregional party support may not be so clear-cut. Here, the Breton comparison is instructive. As we have seen, the Breton ethnoregionalist movement is, in terms of its electoral support, no stronger than the Cornish. Yet most observers recognise a distinctive Breton identity, involving a ‘powerful sense of attachment to a physical territory and its looks, as well as a sense of sharing, however, diffusely, in a way of life’ (Timm 1999:119; Le Coadic 1998). As in Brittany, a distinctive, if subtle and diffuse sense of Cornish ‘difference’ may exist yet not give rise to an electorally successful ethnoregionalist party.

Other external resources clearly have a part to play in the relative failure of Cornish nationalism. In the Cornish case the electoral system seems to be an obvious constraint. Unlike the SNP and Plaid Cymru, MK did not succeed in breaking through in the crucial decades of the 1960s and 1970s. When, during the 1980s and 1990s, the main parties expanded their interventions in local elections and other competitor parties arrived, difficulties were compounded. Yet the other three ‘external’ resources noted by De Winter – demonstration effects, Europeanization and critical events - have not acted as obvious constraints. MK’s ‘oscillations’ strongly correlate with the two waves of ethnoregionalist party activity. Its fortunes therefore benefit, albeit at a low level, from demonstration effects. Similarly the process of European integration provides another space for Cornish ethnoregionalism. European Objective 1 structural funding in 1999 resulted in the re-drawing of the European regional map and the

recognition of Cornwall as a Level II European statistical region. This gave Cornwall more visibility within Europe. From another institutional direction, the existence of European Minority Rights and Minority Language Charters has opened up a new arena for pressure group activity, focusing on the Council of Europe. In contrast, in 1999 the adoption of proportional representation in very large constituencies for Euro-elections in the UK closed down that particular electoral space. Finally, critical events remain an unpredictable resource, although they help to explain the timing of the appearance of Cornish regional nationalism. In the mid-1960s proposals for large-scale population transfers of Londoners to 'overspill' estates in Cornwall triggered a growth in MK's membership and its subsequent leap into electoral politics.

Other, external constraints may be identified if we look to what Gordin (2001) calls 'additional context factors'. First, Giordano (2001) has called attention to the link between economically buoyant regions and 'relatively strong regionalist political parties', using Flanders, Catalonia and northern Italy to illustrate his point. As Cornwall's qualification for EU Objective 1 grant aid implies, its economy has been anything but buoyant, marked by under-unemployment and the lowest wages anywhere in the UK. Yet, the Cornish paradox is that, in contrast to other 'depressed' areas, in-migration to Cornwall fuelled by 'quality of life' aspirations and a mass tourist industry and facilitated by the house price differential between Cornwall and the south east of England, has run at relatively high levels since the early 1960s. High levels of in-migration, though credited with triggering a revival of 'Cornishness' as people looked to what distinguished them in a period of rapid social change, have also changed the demographic profile of Cornwall. By 2001 probably only around a half of Cornish residents had been born or brought up in Cornwall, a situation similar to the Isle of Man, where it has been claimed that immigration in the 1980s weakened Manx cultural traditions and was a factor in a muted nationalist response (Prentice 1990).

However, political factors may be more relevant for explaining the political weakness of Cornish ethnoregionalism. In the 1980s Studlar and McAllister (1988) asked whether Liberal/Alliance and nationalist voters were part of a general Britain-wide protest, on the basis that Scots and Welsh nationalist voters resembled those for the Alliance. Other studies have noted the negative correlation of SNP and Liberal Democrat voting support and the strong protest element in the SNP vote in the 1970s,

a protest vote that, in some circumstances, could also find a home with the Liberal Democrats (Lutz 1990; Levy 1995). Arguing back to Cornwall from this evidence a key factor constraining the growth of MK has been the presence of the Liberal Democrats. Potential protest voters in Cornwall have always had the credible option of the Liberals, even in the 1970s the clear alternative to the Conservatives in three of the five Cornish constituencies. In the later 1960s, when MK still allowed dual membership with other parties, Liberal MPs and other Liberal activists were prominent members. Indeed, in 1968 Liberal Constituency Associations were reported to be 'investigating the political and economic implications of independence' and considering a bill demanding independence for Cornwall (Tregidga 2000). Liberal Democrats in Cornwall continued to play a local card in the 1980s and 1990s, appealing to a 'fair deal for Cornwall' in their electoral rhetoric. The anti-metropolitanism of the Liberal Democrats both obscured the distinction between it and MK and attracted those voters who wanted a credible chance of electing an MP. It also means that in Cornwall MK has always found it difficult to retain activists ambitious for office. The Liberal Democrats offer a potential home for such people, the most prominent recent example being Andrew George, MP for St.Ives. Ethnoregionalist party relationships with 'mainstream' parties also explain the difficulties of the UDB in Brittany in the 1980s. Here, a regionalist orientated Socialist Party played a role similar to that of the Liberal Democrats in Cornwall, siphoning off potential nationalist voters and UDB activists (Keating 1985).

### **Internal determinants**

External opportunities require internal resources in order to be translated from potential facilitating factors to agents of success. Regional elites and ethnoregional leaders wed symbols of group solidarity to issues of redistributive justice or self-determination (O'Sullivan See 1986: 32). Here, the internal resources of ethno-regionalism become more crucial. These include leadership resources, party organisation, voters, strategy and media and links to broader regional networks. Leadership resources are viewed as a crucial factor; De Winter notes the role of charismatic personalities such as Jorde Pujol in Catalonia, Umberto Bossi in Northern Italy and Gwynfor Evans in Wales, who played a crucial role on sustaining and

publicising their parties (De Winter and Tursan 1998: 222). MK has produced no leader of the same stature. Significantly, while the leadership of the SNP has included a number of private sector professionals (Lynch 2002: 4), this group has not been present in MK. In contrast four of the eight MK leaders since the mid-1960s have been teachers and lecturers, and the core activists are more likely to come from lower levels of public sector employment.

The second internal determinant is the strength of party organisation. De Winter (1998: 226) observes that the relationship between electoral success and ethnoregional party membership is actually very weak but that many such parties are vulnerable to factionalism. The ability of the party organisation to contain such factionalism thus becomes an important resource. MK's party organisation has never been able to support a persistent organisational presence in all Cornwall's urban areas or raise the money necessary either to fight large-scale election campaigns or to employ full-time organisers. The result is a shifting geography of activity, as electoral interventions and branch presence fluctuates depending on the variable energy of voluntary activists. In this respect MK remains stuck at an organisational level reminiscent of the SNP in the 1950s (Lynch 2002: 64-91). Nevertheless, MK has avoided a great deal of damaging factionalism.

In Catalonia Moreno et al (1998) discovered that expressions of Catalan identity positively correlate with higher social class and De Winter proposes that a further internal determinant is the potential voting support for the ethnoregionalist party. If the success of an ethnoregionalist party depends on the presence of younger, well educated voters attracted to post-materialist values, as much of the literature suggests, then this is one internal resource relatively less available in Cornwall. The absence of a university in Cornwall has led to a pattern of net out-migration of better qualified school-leavers. In addition, a paucity of professional jobs plus the competition produced by a large counter-urbanisation stream of middle aged and well qualified in-migrants mean that it is extremely difficult for those who leave for higher education to obtain work in Cornwall (Perry et al 1986).

Another internal resource available to ethnoregionalist parties is that of strategy and media. Newman (1996: 10) introduces a typology of ethnoregional ideologies,

depending on the socio-economic groups to whom appeal is made. In the 1960s the party adopted a formally 'classless-inclusive approach', appealing simultaneously to all social groups. However, in practice this has often looked more like a 'selective-protective' ideology, laying greater emphasis on the interests of groups suffering most from modernisation, such as the declining mining and quarrying industry, fishermen and small farmers. MK's electoral appeal has not been enhanced by its failure to engage with a 'selective-developmental' ideology, appealing to thriving new occupational sectors. But there remains a problem of transmitting the message to these sectors. One internal resource that MK clearly lacks is media coverage. No print medium matches the territory of Cornwall. The local daily press - the *Western Morning News* - is printed outside Cornwall and covers Devon and parts of Somerset and Dorset as well as Cornwall. Meanwhile, the weekly press fragments Cornwall into a series of market areas, feeding a parochialism induced by a dispersed settlement structure. Conversely, although there is a BBC local radio station, the all-important television channels are based on a geographical template that includes Cornwall within a much larger market.

De Winter's final internal determining factor is the ability of the regional party to link into broader regional networks (see also Newman 1994). Initially, MK grew out of a wider Cornish cultural revivalist movement. While its base in this social movement helped to guarantee a certain longevity, the Cornish revival remained for most of the twentieth century a small sub-culture within Cornwall. Its bardic trappings and Celtic borrowings, including a Cornish kilt, were regarded as somewhat esoteric by much of Cornish society, and the connection to Cornwall's historic identity, shaped more by rural industrialisation associated with mining, by nonconformity and emigration, was always a tentative one. However, to some extent, cultural change in Cornwall since the 1980s has blended the icons of the Cornish revival with other practices, such as music and sport, thus partly integrating the revivalist sub-culture into popular culture. At the same time MK's links with cultural revivalism have loosened, although it has not embedded itself in other regional networks. This introduces a crucial institutional constraint facing Cornish ethnoregionalism.

## **Institutions**

Lecours (2000) has called for the explicit employment of historical institutionalism in isolating a political opportunity structure outside the social movements under investigation. This, he claims, helps explain the timing and intensity of ethno-regionalist movements, which are 'heavily dependent upon their institutional environment' (Lecours 2000: 12). Structural opportunities then combine with 'movement entrepreneurs' who connect the identity with situations and events defined as unjust. To an extent Lecours' approach overlaps with De Winter's external and internal resources. But it opens out the political opportunity approach so that it becomes more sensitive to the institutional context outside the political sphere and to the broader role of elites in the region, and not merely those leading the ethnoregionalist movement.

By alerting us to the context of wider institutions and elites, Lecours' approach isolates important factors in the weakness of Cornish ethnoregionalism. Adopting the concept of 'institutional thickness' (Storper 1997) Giordiano has argued that 'a political regionalist project can gain much greater legitimacy and importance if it is able to embed itself among dominant local and regional, economic and civic institutions' (Giordiano, 2001). However, Cornwall since the 1960s has been subject to a process of de-institutionalisation, as both public and private sector institutions formerly organised on a Cornish territorial basis have been merged into wider administrative organisations based on either Devon and Cornwall or on the Government's seven county planning region of the South West. Such re-centralisation has opened up an institutional vacuum in Cornwall. Thus, there are precious few Cornish institutions left in which an ethnoregionalist movement might embed itself.

Re-centralisation and the flight of institutional headquarters and decision making eastwards also helps to produce a weak civil society in Cornwall. There are now very few non-governmental and quasi-governmental institutional bodies organised on a Cornish territorial basis. This contrasts starkly with Scotland, where the pervasive civil society generates a sense of unity and consensus (Hearn 2002). If we add the absence of Cornish-based media or a university we have all the ingredients for an

‘institutionally-thin’ region, one which lacks the resources necessary for generating strategic and critical debate about its economic and social direction. The absence of such institutions means that decision-making becomes subject to a process of fragmentation and competitive parochialism at the local level, whereas strategic direction is removed upwards to peak ‘regional’ institutions. Local elites are then pulled into a centralised level of decision-making and networks based on Bristol or Exeter, over a hundred miles distant from Cornwall.

Focusing on the broader institutional and elite context Lecours’ approach has allowed us to pinpoint further factors constraining Cornish ethnoregionalism. However, in view of Cornwall’s peripheral location in wider institutional networks, we must shift our focus both outwards onto institutions and networks based elsewhere – but at the same time not lose sight of the cultural underpinnings of Cornish identity.

### **Categorizing Cornwall**

Ethnic identities are categorized as the result of an ongoing interaction between internal and external definitions (Jenkins 1994). In terms of the latter, wider structures of governance, of power and authority relations are crucial. Here, broadening out Lecours’ historical institutionalist approach to encompass the institutions of the new regionalisation in the South West, we can identify a wider context that constrains Cornwall’s ethnoregionalist movement. Institutions shape individual goals and preferences. The construction of a bank of institutions based on a supra-Cornish territorial scale structures both career paths and the perceived boundaries of the possible for elite groups in Cornwall. The growth of such formal institutions also lock into place ‘path-dependencies’ as they act as entrepreneurs for a certain definition of regionalism. By defining one scale as ‘the region’, other lower scales of activity are, perforce, ‘local’, with all the connotations of that term. Thus institutions are more than constraining structures; they are ‘normative vessels’, carrying understandings and establishing ways of doing things, and providing ‘cognitive scripts, categories and models’ (Hall and Taylor 1996: 948).

The re-centralised institutions of the South West region therefore have considerable implications for the choices and constraints that structure the Cornish ethno-regionalist movement. Most important, they reinforce and reproduce a categorization of Cornwall as 'local', one that leaves little space for an ethno-regionalist movement. The consequent difficulties in bringing this inconvenient periphery to public attention were neatly illustrated in the central government response to the Cornish Constitutional Convention, a campaign that emerged in 2000 to demand an assembly for Cornwall in the process of English regionalization (Sandford 2002). Despite collecting 50,000 signatures in support of an assembly and encouraging more people from Cornwall to respond to government consultation exercises than did from all other regions combined (*Western Morning News* 17 October 2002) this campaign was studiously ignored by the UK Government's White Paper on Regional Government (DTLR/Cabinet Office 2002). Moreover, the Government's regional template acts to reinforce the hybridity of local culture in Cornwall, confirming an ambiguous context for Cornish nationalism.

People do not have a fixed, unshakeable identity. Instead, dual identities are widespread. For example, in Spain a sense of self-ascribed local or ethno-territorial identity co-exists with state identities produced by political integration and state-building to produce a 'compound nationality' (Moreno et al 1998). Territorial identities 'nest' along a hierarchy of scales and the salience of any one scale will vary depending on the social context (Herb and Kaplan 1999). Such 'nesting' in Cornwall is already perhaps more complex than elsewhere, even without the complication of a South West region. In Cornwall there is the added scale of Englishness. Just as Englishness has been expressed through Britishness (Wellings 2002), so has Cornishness sometimes nested within Englishness. The very obviousness of Englishness (Colls 2002: 2-3) also makes it an enigma (Kumar 2003: ix). As a consequence ideas of Englishness in Cornwall – whether taken for granted in the Cornwall as (English) county paradigm or hastily passed over in the Cornwall as (Celtic) nation paradigm - have been even less researched than ideas of Cornishness. Nevertheless, English imaginations are reproduced both by Cornwall's contemporary administrative and institutional status and by the presence of large number of migrants, mainly from the south east of England, who bring their national imaginings with them.

In France and Spain, the greatest regionalist success has been associated with societies experiencing the most disruption and disintegration (Loughlin 1985; Blinkhorn 1994). Brown (2000: 77) also argues that nationalism is generated by 'diffuse feelings of insecurity and uncertainty'. But in Cornwall the ethnoregionalist movement has competition when attempting to tap such uncertainty. An undertow of English nationalism provides a potential alternative in the shape of the neo-populist right, driven by feelings of insecurity which, in the UK, manifest themselves in such things as fear of asylum seekers, racism, support for fox hunting and anti-Europeanism. It may be no coincidence that the Referendum Party in 1997 achieved some of its highest votes in Cornwall, while the United Kingdom Independence Party and pro-hunting campaigns alike continue to receive the support of small but vociferous minorities.

However, things are not quite as clear-cut as this suggests. The boundary between Cornishness and Englishness is porous, with Englishness structuring Cornishness but Cornishness also influencing Englishness. Just as in Brittany, the black and white Breton flag – the *Gwenn ha Du* – is carried on virtually all demonstrations and public rituals (Gemie 2001), it may be significant that in Cornwall the St.Piran's flag now appears a *de rigueur* accessory at demonstrations of all kinds. These extend from those against war in Iraq through local campaigns to prevent hospital closures to marches in London organised by the Countryside Alliance. Cornish flags, only a decade or so ago confined almost solely to demonstrations in and around the Cornish ethnoregionalist movement, are now in common use and have even been approved as the official logo for Cornish tourist sites. Such recent 'banal flagging' (Billig 1995) might suggest that this explicitly Cornish symbol, formerly confined to the Cornish cultural revival, is becoming more embedded in local culture.

## **Conclusions**

This article has argued that the marginal work on Cornwall has suffered from over-rigid categorization, failing to perceive the details of the Cornish case and succumbing to easy stereotypes. Instead, the comparative history of Cornish

nationalism reveals a paradox – a sustained ethnoregionalist movement that is unable to achieve electoral or policy success. How far has an opportunity structure approach helped to unlock this paradox? The timing, the claims and the low level of institutionalisation of Cornish political nationalism in the wider political system can all be partly understood by a comparative analysis of its external and internal resources available to it. In particular, the electoral system plus the internal factors of strength of party organisation, media coverage and voters have not allowed MK to connect a sense of difference to wider grievances based on either territory or ethnicity. As an ‘ethnic entrepreneur’ it has not succeeded and in consequence has become marooned in an electoral void, able to maintain itself in existence but unable to sustain a credible competitive challenge to the three mainstream political parties.

However, analysis needs to re-focus on a broader scale in order to explain both why the Cornish identity does not unproblematically translate into support for regional nationalism and why the internal resources available to it are comparatively limited. Here, a historical institutionalist approach that moves beyond the territory of Cornwall to the constraints posed by attitudes of the central state, Cornwall’s institutionalisation into a wider government region and the consequent poverty of local civil society is essential in order to take us further. This provides another crucial limiting factor constraining Cornish nationalism through structuring ways of imagining Cornish identity which in this discourse becomes a local as opposed to a regional (or national) identity. By expanding our focus not just towards a different scale but away from the political and onto social and cultural terrains, we discover additional constraints on Cornish nationalism. Notably, Cornwall’s administrative history as part of England and the large-scale demographic changes of recent generations combine to produce an imagining of Englishness within Cornwall. On an individual level this might co-exist with identities of Cornishness. But, at certain times in certain contexts, it can act as a competitive imagining, providing another pole of action for resentments and insecurities.

It is not, therefore, some absolute ‘weakness’ of cultural identity that underlies MK’s limited electoral success but the way that identity is imagined and the context of that imagination. Indeed, the argument here has been that there is no simple or automatic link between strength of identity and political ethnoregionalism. The more crucial

factor in Cornwall is the way the territorial identity competes with other national identities and the ambiguous political meanings it carries for people. To investigate this further requires a lower level of analysis, focusing on the micro-sociology of the Cornish identity and the way it is utilised in routine social practices, with comparative analysis to show why, in some places and in some contexts, ethnoregional identities are transformed into successful political movements and in other places they are not. The Breton case, where Rogers (1996: 551) concludes that 'ethnic consciousness may not always be displayed through allegiance to highly visible nationalist organisations but by means of other indicators ... [participants] may have no specific political project at all' suggests that Cornish ethnoregionalism is not unique.

Cultural hybridity goes a considerable way to explain the relative weakness of Cornish nationalism and its marginal institutionalisation in the political system. However, it does not explain the fact of its existence in the first place nor its persistence in the face of considerable structural constraints. The cultural resources bequeathed to contemporary Cornwall by its 'Celtic' history and language can clearly still resonate sufficiently powerfully to propel people into supporting and working for Cornish ethnoregional movements. This might suggest there is a resilient core to the Cornish identity that imagines itself as distinctive enough to demand forms of separate treatment, whether political or cultural, from the central state. Active at a relatively low degree when compared with Scotland or Wales, this core nevertheless sustains the Cornish ethnoregionalist movement at a certain level of activity.

There is no reason to assume that this movement will disappear, having struggled to carve out a small, but distinct, niche for itself. But will it change to reflect what some observers see as a growing multiplicity of identities? Cornish ethnoregionalism may be at a turning point. As in the Isle of Man, there seems to be a process of cultural renewal under way as 'creative reselection' produces a new set of symbols around which 'cultural performances' can take place (Hale 2002). Ethnicity is open to negotiation and Cornishness may be becoming more of 'an idea, a set of values, a way of relating to place and to each other' than a fixed, essentialist ethnic identification (Lewis 2002). It remains to be seen whether the hints of creative cultural re-selection can manufacture a more inclusive nationalism able to appeal to both insiders and incomers.

The possibility that Cornwall may accompany the Isle of Man or Brittany into a 'post-ethnic' future (Timm ????) raises questions about the salience of ethnicity in a future Cornwall. Echoes of this may be heard in attempts by the Cornish Constitutional Convention to build a feeling of belonging to Cornwall as a 'region', subverting the official discourse of regionalism in England. Simultaneously, others are re-emphasising Cornish ethnicity, in the process attempting to draw firmer historical boundaries between 'Cornwall' and 'England' (Angarrack 2002). Such contrasting initiatives reinforce the impression of a Cornish hybridity, one in the process of constant change and renegotiation. However, if a sense of cultural renewal is to be attached to projects of civic autonomy then the current Cornish institutional vacuum provides perhaps the most critical constraint for Cornish ethnoregionalism. In the absence of an institutional context feelings of insecurity may overwhelm cultural renewal and produce a permanently marginalized illiberal nationalism in Cornwall, and one, moreover, that comes in two varieties, Cornish and English.

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