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# Reimagining the enlightenment: Alternate timelines and utopian futures in the Scottish independence movement

Gabriela Manley

## ABSTRACT



This article explores how Scottish National Party (SNP) activists in Edinburgh reimagine the enlightenment past to provide alternate timelines that are appropriated in the projection of utopian futures for an independent Scotland. Starting with the question ‘what if history had happened differently?’, SNP activists harness the ‘what ifs’ and ‘would haves’ of alternate timelines where the enlightenment continues uninterrupted by the political union of Scotland and England. This approach facilitates a form of futural revisionism which captures the potentiality of the past to become utopian future without foregoing the SNP’s commitment to civic, rather than ethnic, nationalism. Thus, SNP activists are able to tow the party line of rejecting nostalgic historicism to remain open to all citizens of Scotland while still affectively engaging with the past to provide wishful utopian images for their independent future.

## KEYWORDS

Utopia; Scotland; independence; time; future; enlightenment

## Introduction

Halfway up the Edinburgh Royal Mile there is an imposing statue of David Hume, the Scottish enlightenment philosopher, economist, historian, and proponent of modern scepticism. The statue towers over the constant stream of tourists, many of whom have come to learn more about Scotland’s rich enlightenment history. Occasionally, tourists reach to rub David Hume’s big toe, which is temptingly poking out from under his robes. It is said that rubbing his toe will bring the visitor knowledge and luck, a legend that has left David Hume’s toe worn and discoloured from decades of friction. As a newcomer to Edinburgh at the beginning of my fieldwork in 2018 this was a must-see site, and my Scottish National Party (SNP) informants were more than happy to indulge, describing in immense detail the historical landmarks of central Edinburgh as we walked up the Royal Mile to meet David Hume. The past came to life around us as my informants reminisced of the great scholars and thinkers who had once lived in these buildings and walked these streets, animatedly pointing at the various signs claiming, ‘David Hume lived here’. Through the legacy of the enlightenment, past and present intermixed on the streets of Edinburgh.

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My SNP informants spoke about the enlightenment with a deep sense of pride, each landmark we passed reinforcing Scotland's great achievements and contributions to the world. Tainting this pride, however, was a sense of regret and resentment that Scotland was no longer internationally recognized for its enlightenment gifts to the world. Most activists felt 'England' had appropriated many Scottish enlightenment inventions as their own – such as Alexander Graham Bell's telephone, which people informed me with much alacrity, was indeed a Scottish, not British, invention – and all seemed to blame the Union in some way for the end of the enlightenment period. Such was the train of thought as we arrived at David Hume's statue. 'Imagine what we could've been' one informant said to me as I enthusiastically rubbed Hume's toe, 'if we'd been independent [during the enlightenment] ... the things we could've achieved by now'. 'Oh definitely!' another jumped in, 'we would be world leaders ... in education especially. And in building things, we were inventors in the enlightenment, we were always good at that, we would lead the world in inventions'. Through these walks in the historic areas of Edinburgh not only did past and present coexist, but the future too, as SNP activists connected their understanding of Scotland's Enlightenment past to their imaginations of Scotland's potential future.

Throughout my time in Edinburgh, I was taken on many similar walks by enthusiastic activists who proudly shared their intimate historical knowledge of Edinburgh's city centre. They were excited to share their home with me as a tourist, but also as a researcher, signposting the landmarks that they considered 'essential' in their personal journeys towards supporting Scottish independence. All my informants were local residents of this small central constituency colloquially known as 'Old Town'<sup>1</sup> which holds most of the major historical landmarks in Edinburgh. Some had been born there, inheriting expensive flats from their families. Others had been residents for decades, coming to the exclusive constituency as upper-middle class professionals that could afford city centre prices. Yet they all shared the same attachment to the historical landscape that surrounded them, linking it to their life as SNP activists campaigning in the area: handing out flyers, knocking on doors and putting up posters for the local SNP representative.

By virtue of living and campaigning in Old Town, most activists I worked with had become amateur Enlightenment historians, and proudly looked back to this period in Scottish history. This pride, however, often clashed with their competing commitment to a civic nationalism championed by the SNP that consciously and deliberately distances itself from historical narratives. Activists would regularly recall their struggle during the 2014 referendum to convince voters that their movement was a civic nationalist one, and they often resented the anti-independence rhetoric used by 'the British state' that had suggested otherwise. This article explores how activists have recently managed to achieve a civic discourse that simultaneously allows them to engage with Edinburgh's past. Through the reimagining of Scotland's enlightenment past, SNP activists provide alternate timelines that they appropriate in the current projection of utopian futures for an independent Scotland. By harnessing the 'what ifs' and 'would haves' of alternate timelines, SNP activists engage in a form of futural revisionism which captures the potentiality of the past to become utopian future without foregoing the SNP's commitment to civic, rather than ethnic, nationalism. In this way, Edinburgh SNP activists are able to decouple historically grounded narratives from other ethnic nationalist discourses that have been resurging across Europe, associating them instead with alternative liberal civic nationalism.

The SNP's relationship with Scotland's history is complicated, plagued with fears of ethnic nationalist accusations and civic nationalist ideological constraints. The SNP presents itself as a civic nationalist movement (Mycock 2012).<sup>2</sup> Since its inception in 1934, the SNP has to varying degrees presented itself as an internationalist (McCrone 2001), pro-European Union (Keating 2001), and civic nationalist (Keating 2009) movement, whose primary concern is the democratic imbalance between England and Scotland rather than the question of ethnic belonging. Following its rise to power in the devolved Scottish parliament in 2011, the failed referendum on Scottish independence in 2014, and the subsequent 2016 Brexit fallout in the U.K., the SNP has taken extreme care in presenting itself as the antithesis to other right-wing nationalisms that have been resurfacing across Europe, a commitment that has heightened following Brexit and the SNP's subsequent call for a new independence referendum before 2024 (Shoshan 2021; Gusterson 2017).

The SNP vocally positions itself opposite the pseudo-imperialist narrative of Brexit-supporting parties, utilizing this contrasting political position as further proof of its commitment to civic – rather than ethno-nationalism (Virdee and McGeever 2018; Durrheim et al. 2018; Rzepnikowska 2019). To this end, the SNP has sought to fully embrace the European Union and its open borders, defended Scotland's need for migrant labour, pushed back against Brexit and its isolationist rhetoric, and even rejected other contemporary civic nationalist movements which they deemed to be 'not civic enough' such as the Quebecois independence movement in 1995 (Manley 2019; Brubaker 1999). This commitment to civic nationalism, however, has also presented challenges for the movement, forcing the SNP to vehemently reject any historical narrative or association that could be interpreted as ethnic nationalist discourse. SNP activists are continuously encouraged to frame the movement as purely concerned with 'Scotland's future' rather than Scotland's past, an explicit rejection of history that was necessary for the SNP to successfully market itself as diametrically opposed to other re-surfacing European nationalist movements (see Gusterson 2017).

This professed commitment to civic nationalism has rendered SNP Edinburgh activists unable to engage with the past in traditional nationalist ways that emphasize populist historical nostalgia (cf. Mazzarella 2019; Theodossopoulos and Kapferer 2019). Activists are reticent to present Scottish independence as an opportunity for Scotland to return to 'the good old days'. This staunch rejection of historically constructed ethnic-nationalist narratives has left a gap in the evocative politics of nationalist movements that activists have filled with another kind of evocation: that of the hopeful future. The promise of a post-independence utopia has replaced nostalgia as the main vision that drives activists to campaign, necessitated by their civic nationalist rejection of the past.<sup>3</sup> The simultaneous belief in this brand of civic nationalism that rejects common nationalist narratives of glorified pasts forced them to engage with Scotland's history in alternative ways that accommodated such admiration without falling into ethnic nationalist discourse.

A temporal approach to the study of Scottish nationalist politics reveals the ways in which SNP activists navigate this civic–ethnic entanglement with history. By examining the SNP's relationship with the past through the lens of utopian futures, this article shows how SNP activists engage in non-linear interpretations of Scotland's Enlightenment that shape their dreams of independence. Pasts and futures are folded into present concerns as activists engage with history through personal political 'refractions' (Cohen 1996)

that place the enlightenment at the heart of futural imagining. Amongst SNP activists, the Scottish enlightenment exists in 'situational flow', in continuous conversation with present-future concerns and socio-political standings (Hirsch and Stewart 2005, 262). This situational flow turns the reimagination of Scotland's past into a political act, inciting activists to engage in counterfactual history, asking themselves: 'what would Scotland look like *today* if it had already been an independent nation during the enlightenment?'. This counterfactual reimagination exercise allows SNP activists to picture an alternative-timeline utopia in which all their current socio-political concerns are resolved; Scotland would have remained 'enlightened' and prosperous thanks to its independent status. It is these past-future utopias that allow activists to engage with Scotland's history without falling into traditional nationalist patterns of nostalgic yearnings (Jaskułowski, Majewski, and Surmiak 2018).

These re-imagined utopian futures not only serve as a way of bypassing ethnic nationalist rhetoric, they re-invigorate the fight for independence by forcing activists to question the current status quo of Scotland as part of the Union, working as both 'a negation of the present and an affirmation of a possible future' (Srnicek and Williams 2015, 140). Because of this, these reimaginings of Scotland's past do not remain as simple immaterial 'what ifs' but are brought into the realm of the possible by SNP activists who firmly believe the reimagined utopia to be achievable through Scottish independence. SNP activists believe that by becoming independent, Scotland would be able to achieve enlightenment utopias, actualizing the revisionist question of 'what if Scotland had remained independent?' in the future. This vision elicits a strong sense of hope in my informants, orienting them towards these concrete 'not-yets' and driving them towards social action in the present (Bryant and Knight 2019). The promise of the potential political utopia moves SNP activists to campaign for a vision of Scottish independence that resonates with Scotland's past without yearning for it. This temporal folding allows the SNP to not only present themselves as a civic contemporary nationalist movement, but to do so whilst directly drawing inspiration from Scotland's Enlightenment history in their visions and campaigns for independence.

### Civic nationalism and the problem with history

At its core the Scottish independence movement seeks to champion democracy, denouncing the power imbalances that exist between England and Scotland. The political sway that England's large population has over Scotland's political preference has long been the crux of the movement, with Scottish nationalists principally concerned with 'breaking away from Westminster', an argument based on the historical political discrepancies between Scottish and English voting patterns. Scotland has consistently voted for a left-wing government since the 1960s yet has found itself ruled by a centre-right Conservative government instead, the large numbers of the English vote overwhelmingly swaying the overall U.K. election result. 'Scotland should get the government they voted for' was the most common phrase I would hear whilst out campaigning with SNP activists in Edinburgh's Old Town. Activists would enthusiastically point out the injustices of Scotland consistently voting for left-wing governments only to find itself at the receiving end of Conservative social welfare cuts.<sup>4</sup> This sentiment was most heavily pronounced in those informants who had been born and raised in Edinburgh's Old Town,

who considered themselves more working class – and therefore more vulnerable to welfare cuts – than those who had recently moved in. ‘It’s about democracy’, they would say, ‘it’s about getting what you voted for’. For them, this grievance was historical, often rooted in family stories of poverty and struggle. This sentiment was also shared by upper-middle class newcomers, yet the narrative was less historically rooted. Most had joined the party recently, between the failed 2014 independence referendum and the 2016 Brexit referendum. Their emotional experiences of ‘unfair’ democratic imbalances were connected to the Brexit result, where even though Scotland voted to remain in the EU by 62%, Scotland’s vote was outweighed by the large Pro-Brexit English vote. For them, Brexit crystalized the narrative that independence is about ‘getting what you voted for’, and that Scottish nationalism was a struggle for democracy (Manley 2021).

Party leaders have taken great care in crafting this democratic civic narrative in both their rhetoric and through grassroots activism. The long-time charismatic SNP leader Alex Salmond argued that Scottish nationalism is ‘a democratic, liberating movement that everybody can buy into ...based on a peaceful, inclusive, civic nationalism’ (Mycock 2012). Whereas the current leader of the Scottish Parliament, Nicola Sturgeon, asserted that ‘the nationalism I represent is a civic nationalism: that if you live in Scotland, regardless of where you came from, regardless of the colour of your skin or the faith you practise, all of us can make it a better country to live in’ (cf. Knight 2017). These sentiments contrast with usual nationalist narratives that are socially exclusionary in nature, offering instead an ideology that is, on paper, simultaneously secessionist and inclusive. This contrast is carefully upheld throughout the party, from leadership to grassroots campaigners, who regularly receive media training on the appropriate discourse and language to use when discussing nationalist politics.

Of course, there are moments when cracks appear in the united façade. Activists I interviewed in the more conservative areas of the country, such as Aberdeen (the oil capital of the U.K.), occasionally slipped from civic discourses into suggestions of an essentially ‘Scottish nature’ of those born in Scotland. Further, it is no small secret amongst party members that activists from the north of Scotland voted quite convincingly in favour of Brexit in 2016, going against the nationwide trend. Yet in Edinburgh, where my primary fieldwork was carried out, civic nationalist narratives held strong. As the cosmopolitan capital of Scotland, home to three international universities and the largest immigrant population in the country, it is perhaps unsurprising that Edinburgh SNP activists showed remarkable commitment to civic nationalist discourses both in public and private conversations.

It was rare to come across narratives that veered into ethnic nationalist discourse, and when I did, they invariably came from the older generation of Old Town born and bred activists, who had joined the party during its most conservative decade of the 1970s. At times, for example, public discussions on the fight against ‘English colonisation’ took on ethnic nationalist undertones, with many activists overly concerned by the particularities of the Scottish and U.K. flags being flown on public premises. The size of the Scottish and U.K. flags on the Edinburgh Council buildings were often topics of discussion at monthly branch meetings. From the tattered condition of the Scottish flag that was seemingly replaced with less frequency than the U.K.’s Union Jack, to the smaller size of the Scottish flag and the non-central position it held, this was often seen by SNP activists as a form of banal nationalism from the British state (Billig 1995), who they believed to be

deliberately undermining the Scottish nation through their public disrespect to the Scottish flag.

Nevertheless, 'Nationalist doctrine in Scotland', Michael Keating (1996, 220) states, 'is overwhelmingly civic rather than ethnic, with broad agreement that the relevant population is those people living in Scotland'. Scottish political scientist David McCrone (2001, 177–178) sees 'belong[ing] at the "civic" rather than the "ethnic" end of the spectrum', with Scottish national identity defined 'in terms of socio-political values' rather than language or ethnicity. Historian Murray Pittock (2013, 182–183) notes that 'Scottish nationality has been strongly marked by civic, institutional and associational practices,' emphasizing the 'poor basis for any ethnic nationalism' in Scotland and 'the importance of these [geographic] boundaries as a primary determinant of Scottishness ... supported by institutions, networks, a domestic public sphere and a territory still defined by the jurisdiction of its own laws'.

Yet SNP leaders and activists alike remain conscious of the continued contested nature of Scottish nationalism both in and out of academia (Mycock 2012). This hyper-awareness led my Edinburgh informants to continuously and vocally reject any narrative that could be potentially construed as belonging to an ethnic nationalist approach, in particular any nostalgic narratives that lamented the loss of the historical 'golden years' of the nation (Virdee and McGeever 2018; Thorleifsson 2016). History, and the historical legitimacy of Scottish independence, was to a great extent a taboo topic amongst SNP activists in Edinburgh, who attempted to exclusively 'look to the future'<sup>5</sup> to build their arguments and visions of Scotland. Historical arguments for independence were deeply associated with right-wing 'blood and soil' narratives and were explicitly avoided in a further attempt to differentiate themselves from other European nationalist movements. In a sense, it could be argued that on the surface, Scottish civic nationalism is an anti- or counter-history movement.

This historical rejection deepened following the 2016 Brexit referendum. The isolationist perspective spun by Brexit-supporting parties relied heavily on pseudo-imperialistic images of Britain's past, invoking nostalgia for the lost glory years of empire, putting Britain's history front and centre of political campaigning (Virdee and McGeever 2018; Durheim et al. 2018; Balzasar 2017). The Brexit referendum was one that re-imagined the future of Britain, but did so inspired by the return to a particular point in history. The Brexit project aimed to restore Britain's past glory by 'returning' it to its pre-European condition. Slogans such as 'Take *back* control' and 'we want our country *back*' (personal emphasis) betray this desire to return, restoring Britain's trajectory to the timeline it occupied before the EU. Brexit sought to return Britain's lost future (see Balzasar 2017; Bieber 2018; Harding and Rosenberg 2005).

In contrast, the SNP aims to place itself as a diametrically opposed nationalist movement, not only by embracing all that Brexit rejected, but by affirming its nationalism as one that is concerned with the *future* of Scotland, focusing on futural potential rather than pastime returns. As is shown in the ethnography that follows, SNP activists do not seek to return to a previous time in Scotland's history; they do not wish to go *back*. There is no desire to restore Scotland's old futural trajectory or return to a previous point in time that is considered more favourable. Rather, through the counterfactual re-imagination of what Scotland's present might look like had it been independent during the enlightenment, SNP activists engage with an alternative timeline of Scottish history

from which they draw inspiration. Unlike Brexit, the alternative future imagined here was not lost, because it never truly existed; Scotland was never independent during the Enlightenment period. It is worth mentioning here that despite their criticisms of Brexit and its imperialist rhetoric self-reflective critiques on Scotland's slave history were also distinctly absent from the SNP's narrative, and the relationship between the enlightenment, Scotland's industrial wealth, and the slave trade were never discussed in earnest. Some activists went as far as refuting Scotland's involvement in the British empire, blaming 'Britain' or 'England' for coercing Scotland into participation. In general, younger activists were more inclined to discuss Scotland's involvement in the slave trade, and some attempts were made to discuss this in meetings, but the conversations never truly took off.

In practice, there was a noticeable struggle amongst Edinburgh SNP activists as they walked the thin line between ethno-nationalist yearnings and civic-nationalist futurism. Yet their continued commitment to civic nationalism and the often-outright rejection of nostalgic historicism meant that they constructed utopian futures along the lines of 'what if' the enlightenment had not been interrupted by the Union and the desire to 'combine enlightenment gifts with future imaginings of Scotland' rather than 'return' to the 'glory days' of times past. These delicate heuristic distinctions made a substantial difference to how SNP activists identified with the past in constructing and performing their political subjectivities. Shifting our analytical focus towards the complex temporal timelines that activists work with in their everyday life reveals how despite the SNP's claim of a-historical nationalism, activists in Edinburgh's Old Town cannot help but relate to the historical environment that surrounds them. Rather, activists have found a way of integrating a positive relationship with history in their nationalist politics that avoids mimicking the ethno-nationalist discourse through the use of complex temporal overlap.

### Overlapping timelines

The long-standing commitment to civic nationalism that is necessarily, and very publicly, decoupled from history forced my SNP informants in Edinburgh to develop a complex, non-linear relationship with Scotland's enlightenment past that breaks with historicist understandings of linear time (Fasolt 2004). Traditional historical approaches to nationalist studies are based on a set of dominant assumptions on the linear temporal relationships between past, present, future, where 'current happenings may be seen as outcomes of prior events and present events as belonging to the past as time flows on' (Stewart 2012, 1). The past, under this framework, is always considered 'finished' and distinct from the present, existing exclusively in the realm of 'elsewhere', a 'foreign country' that can be accessed objectively via the impersonal continuation of historical records (Hodges 2015). Past, present, and future are explicitly severed from one another (Hirsch and Stewart 2005), becoming distinct factual categories that neither overlap nor interact. This approach to linear historical consciousness has long permeated anthropological studies. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) viewed history as a set of distinct events that were linearly organized, with the division between past and present taken for granted, while Marshall Sahlins (1985), although creatively using historical documentation to account for social change in the encounters between Pacific Islanders and



Europeans, fails to break from the assumption that change over time is exclusively explained through historical reference (White 1973; Strathern 1990). Events are explained in chronological flow following one another in a 'time's arrow' version of temporal progression. As James Clifford (1997, 338) notes: 'It has been said that history is just an arrangement to make sure everything doesn't happen at once.' Yet, 'Chronology, history's orderly "flow", must be among its least intuitive devices'.

As illustrated in the opening vignette, SNP activists could not help but engage with the Scottish enlightenment that surrounded them by folding past, present and future together; landmarks and personal histories of the Scottish enlightenment seemed at times inescapable, entangled with local politics and hopeful futures. Our walk toward the David Hume statue did not inspire activists to return to the past, but rather to 'imagine what we could've been ... if we'd been independent'. Interpreting history as an 'orderly flow' is not only unintuitive, but uninformative in helping us understand the temporal folding presented by SNP activists.

In the months that followed my time with the SNP, Andrew, the activist who had organized this walk, would routinely take me campaigning in Edinburgh's Old Town, showing me between door knockings and political leaflet deliveries the landmarks that entangled with his life growing up in Edinburgh Central. Having lived in the heart of Old Town for most of his life, Andrew was particularly involved in the fight against the Airbnb 'takeover' of properties around the historical area of Grassmarket and Cowgate, at the foot of Edinburgh castle. He routinely complained about the loss of community and neighbours, his own block of flats having lost all but three permanent residents in the past ten years. His concern wasn't simply a community one, but a historic one too. Being a resident there, he had grown up steeped in the legends of Old Town, following around tour guides as a bored young boy 'stealing some fun and knowledge' as he called it, and continuously lamented the 'bastardisation' of Old Town for touristic exploitation: 'James Connolly used to live here, he was born here! And now his house is an Airbnb and I bet no one even remembers him ... they're taking over our history these bloody Airbnbs'.

As half Irish himself, Andrew felt a connection with James Connolly, an influential Irish republican and Socialist born in 1868 who strongly opposed the British rule in Ireland. Andrew felt that James Connolly's fight was mirrored today in Scotland's current struggle against the British Union, a fight that was entangled with the local politics of Airbnb properties. For Andrew, the takeover of Airbnb's was not only an everyday local and political issue, but an affront to Edinburgh's history and revolutionary anti-Union spirit. In fact, Andrew often spoke of Connolly and his revolutionary spirit as a source of inspiration for Scottish independence. He could not engage in the fight against Airbnb's without also engaging with his personal and historical relationship with the buildings that surrounded him, and the sociohistorical significance they held.

This relationship with Old Town's late-enlightenment history often led Andrew to re-imagine the past, coming up with counterfactual histories that would have resulted in a different Edinburgh today: 'Corporate Britain wouldn't be taking over like this' he lamented one afternoon as we stood in the centre of Grassmarket handing out SNP flyers for the 2019 EU Parliamentary election. 'If we'd been independent before all this, I'm not saying we should've done like the Irish, but we really missed a chance there, when Scotland was truly booming, we should've taken it ...'. 'We would've had much more respect for our history' he continued,

and we would've had a much better hold of our finances, we were so prosperous! We wouldn't've need to rely on tourism to balance the books ... All these hotels would've probably been institutes or libraries ... like they use to be ... once we're independent [in the future] we can push for these reforms.

Much like Andrew, all SNP activists would inevitably recall the enlightenment period in Edinburgh with fondness, pride, and admiration, but always with a focus on 'revising the future'. Andrew's connection to the Enlightenment did not serve as a nostalgic tool, it did not spark a desire to *return* to the Enlightenment. Scotland had not been independent at this critical moment, and there was therefore no lost future to re-instil, no linear history to rewind. Rather, this relationship served to re-imagine the future of an independent Scotland. Throughout my time in Edinburgh, Andrew repeatedly pointed to the Grassmarket hotels mentioned above, expressing his belief that they would be converted into schools, libraries, and community projects post-independence. In fact, this was an idea that was at the time steadily gaining momentum amongst Edinburgh Old Town SNP activists, who believed that independence would offer them the chance to break away from 'corporate greed' and re-model the city centre around schools and community centres.

Eric Hirsch and Charles Stewart (2005, 262) propose that in actuality, historicity is not the linear passage of time, but 'describes a human situation in flow, where versions of the past and future (of persons, collectives or things) assume present form in relation to events, political needs'. It is how people make sense of the past whilst anticipating the future through the breakdown of linear past-present-future causality. Andrew's vision of Scottish independence did just this. Based on the 'what ifs' of his imagined Enlightenment's counterfactual history, he drew inspiration from an alternative past timeline of Scotland in order to re-imagine what Scotland could look like post-independence. The fantasy of an independent Scotland during the Enlightenment allowed Andrew to engage with Edinburgh's past with admiration, and express a desire to somehow revive the spirit of this time *without* falling into regressive ethnic nationalist historical discourse. Hirsch and Stewart (2005, 263) argue that 'to understand historicity in any particular ethnographic context, then, is to know the relevant ways in which (social) pasts and futures are implicated in present circumstances'. Understanding the SNP's relationship to history through a temporal analytical lens reveals this complex, non-linear relationship with time that allows activists to fold alternative historical timelines into Scotland's potential independent future. Present and immediate political needs spark the re-imagination of counterfactual pasts and presents that inspire the SNP's vision of utopian independent futures.

There has recently been momentum in anthropology to break away from the linear constraints of historical understandings of time that lock us into part-present-future causality. In 1990, Marylin Strathern, was already sketching the centrality of temporality to historical understandings, presenting history itself as a culturally contingent way of thinking where 'an event taken as an incidental occurrence in nature, chancy and idiosyncratic, particular to the moment, is to be explained by being put into its historical context' (1990, 28). In her widely cited 1992 article, Nancy Munn proposed that we know the past through concrete 'temporalizations', directly implicating past, present, and future relations into historical knowing. On the pages of this very journal, Eric Hirsch and Charles Stewart (2005) take this observation further, breaking apart linear temporal

understandings of history to suggest that historicity is entirely socially constructed, with past, present, future temporalities in continuous conversation with each other (Stewart 2012).

Nevertheless, despite this recent development in historicity, work that interprets resurging nationalist movements in Europe through this past, present, future relationship that Hirsch and Stewart (2005) propose remains elusive (see Ringel 2014 for work on progressive political movements in Germany). The importance of the future, in particular, has been overshadowed in nationalist politics by a temporal focus that emphasizes past-present relationships (Bryant and Knight 2019; see also Stewart 2012). A temporal focus on the SNP's nationalist message reveals these multi-temporal ways in which activists in Edinburgh relate to the history around them, the rich Edinburgh landscape triggering asymmetrical historical resonances that rendered certain pasts more present than others, more politically meaningful and open to constructivist and revisionist engagement. Employing this analytical shift centring the breakdown of past, present, and future linearity in nationalist movements uncovers the temporal techniques SNP activists employ in order to avoid regressive ethnic nationalist narratives whilst simultaneously allowing themselves to draw inspiration from the past. The counterfactual imagination of 'what ifs' and 'would haves' that collapse alternative pasts and presents into Scotland's potential future provide the party with a clear futural orientation that although connected to Scotland's past, avoids historical nostalgia.

As we saw with Andrew, the primary triggers that led to the engagement with Scotland's historicity were the many landmarks of the Scottish enlightenment scattered across the Edinburgh landscape. During our Royal Mile walk to the David Hume statue, the activists who had accompanied me, led by Andrew, drew inspiration from the city around them, awakening their relationship with Edinburgh's enlightenment past. As we passed Adam Ferguson's house – an eighteenth-century moral philosophy professor at the University of Edinburgh, credited as being one of the founders of sociology – they talked about the many social and academic advances that originated from Edinburgh. It was a golden age, they insisted to me, a time of inspiration and invention that shaped the world we live in today in almost every way. James, a senior civil servant who had moved to Edinburgh Old Town from London to work for Nicola Sturgeon, pulled me aside to show me a plaque on the house wall, it read 'This tablet commemorates the meeting of Robert Burns and Sir Walter Scott which took place here in the winter of 1786–1787'. 'You see', he said 'and they all knew each other and inspired each other. Genius breeds genius, you always get them together'. He looked up at the building thoughtfully, before continuing,

you can just imagine it can't you, them all here shaping the world we know today ... you can almost feel it I think, when you stop and look, the deep history that we have in Edinburgh ... and especially when you see how they are still here, still in the ways that we think and do things.

As we continued our walk, they spoke of Benjamin Franklin's love and admiration for Edinburgh, and credited many of the liberty advancements made by the founding fathers to his trips to Edinburgh and conversations with Scottish enlightenment figures (Atiyah 2006). Standing in Mercat Cross, halfway up the Royal Mile, Andrew recounted Franklin's famous words: 'He said you know, that you could stand here at Mercat Cross and shake

the hand of a hundred geniuses in less than half an hour'. As if attempting to recreate the scene, we stood there, looking around at the tourists, locals, and various street stalls that now occupy Mercat Cross. 'I bet you still could, if the Tory's [Conservatives] hadn't destroyed education', one concluded. Further up the Mile we passed the statue of Adam Smith, eighteenth-century economist often called 'the father of capitalism'. Confronted, my informants reflected on his lasting influence today, and the wide-reaching consequences his scholarship had across the world. Their relationship with Adam Smith and his economic legacy was a difficult one, oscillating between admiration at the ways his theory had shaped the world and disappointment at the state of current capitalist neoliberal politics. 'I don't know if he's the hero or the villain!' joked one of my informants,

he certainly is the one Scot that had the most impact on the world ... I think he might ruin us all soon if we don't change though ... we could lead the world again in economics I think, if we roll out UBI [universal basic income]. If only we had been independent then ... we would have UBI already, we probably would've had it for decades by now ... just like education, imagine where we would be, our universities would probably shadow Oxbridge, we would be so much more international.

Their vision of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Edinburgh as a hotbed of thinkers and influencers highlighted what many activists believed to be a chronic decline in the social and economic imaginaries of Scotland since the Union. England had appropriated Scottish intellectual, social, and technological developments, slowly eroding enlightenment ideals. The prominence of the enlightenment in Edinburgh's landscape affectively brought these grievances to the fore, highlighting the issues that they considered to be most pressing and unjust in the present and those which required attention in a future independent nation. Economy and education, for instance, took centre stage in the activists' relationship with the enlightenment, two central aspects of their current political campaigning. In this way, the history of Scottish enlightenment existed in 'situational flow' (Hirsch and Stewart 2005, 262). Much in the manner that Benedetto Croce (1960, 12; also Pipyrou 2016) announced that 'every history is contemporary history' due to an interest in the past springing from present practical considerations, for my informants, history was refracted through their personal political beliefs that rendered salient certain pasts over others, always with a focus on the 'what if' of the future.

The activists' reimagination of the enlightenment at Mercat Cross connected Edinburgh's past academic richness with the post-2008 austerity measures imposed on the education sector by the Conservative government, which saw spending in Scottish schools fall by £400 million between 2008 and 2018.<sup>6</sup> This connection triggered a vision of Scotland free from Conservative austerity: 'I bet you still could (meet enlightenment scholars), if the Tory's (Conservatives) hadn't destroyed education'. Similarly, Adam Smith's statue inspired them to believe in Scotland's potential to once again re-invent worldwide economic models and bring about a fairer society through the implementations of universal income. Edinburgh's ever-present historical past was not only reimagined through the refraction of personal political beliefs, it compelled them to look forward by looking back, imagining a future inspired by Edinburgh's enlightenment that moved them to campaign for independence through their activism.

In this way, past and future existed in simultaneity. Historicity not only continuously produces knowledge about the past in relation to the present, but also in continuous

anticipation of the future, Hirsch and Stewart (2005, 267) suggest, while Matt Hodges adds that invoking the past ‘always implicates the future’ (2013, 478, emphasis in original). The reimagination of Edinburgh’s enlightenment not only folded past into the present but created a past–future relationship through its creation of tangible hope that was manifested on the campaign trail.

The enlightenment became a ‘sliding doors’ moment of counterfactual history where activists were inspired to ask, ‘what if the past had happened differently?’ (Daniel and Stewart 2016, 2). This alternative utopian timeline critiqued the current political status quo by bringing into sharp visibility the many ways in which Scotland could have been a ‘better’ nation. In this way, for SNP activists the imaginative engagement with the enlightenment was not just an act of detached or nostalgic remembering, but a political act in the present. It is in the ways in which the enlightenment renaissance is imagined that SNP activists diverge from other contemporary nationalist movements, emphasizing an alternative reality of ‘what ifs’ and ‘would haves’ to provide overtly futural momentum to their political campaigning, avoiding the nostalgic yearning to return. The past is folded directly into the future, creating a utopian vision of Scottish independence that gains traction from speculative imaginings of an alternate timeline.

### **Harnessing reimagined pasts: hoping for utopia**

The politics of this reimagined timeline not only highlighted the ways in which history could be utilized to inspire images of the nation’s future in a civic nationalist space, but enabled activists to harness this vision, moving them to campaign for an independent Scotland through the creation of tangible hope. Versions of Scotland that ‘had been independent during the enlightenment’ provoked a sense of hope and futural momentum. The alternative utopian timeline based on enlightenment pasts became charged with potentiality, orienting them towards imaginations that transcended the futural horizon and moving them to participate in political activism in an attempt to actualize this version of the future. In other words, the imagined future of an independent Scotland based on the counterfactual re-imagination of Scotland’s past not only allows the SNP to put a futural, civic spin on their historical admiration, but also serves them as a powerful campaigning tool, inspiring activists to hope for this utopian future.

As a futural orientation that provides momentum to everyday practice, hope is central to the SNP’s core messages of Scottish independence. In anthropology, the past fifteen years have witnessed an explosion of interest in hope, a phenomenon that Nauja Kleist and Stef Jansen (2016) relate to the current heightened sense of global crisis coupled with a lack of political and ideological direction. Pertinent to the study of SNP activism, the recent surge in studies of hope has coincided with what Fredric Jameson (2005) identified as ‘a revitalization of utopia as a “politically energising perspective”’ born as a response to the stasis of the universality of late capitalism (Cook 2018, 381). Indeed, hope and utopia are often said to be intrinsically linked, not least thanks to Ernst Bloch’s (1986) seminal work on utopian theory, *The Principle of Hope*. Ruth Levitas (2007, 53), for instance, follows Bloch in linking hope and utopia, defining a utopian state as ‘the expression of desire for a better way of living’. Henri Desroche (1979) takes this idea a step further by describing both concepts as ‘twin sisters’, ultimately understanding utopia as manifestation of hope.

Following Levitas (2007, 47), we can think of the SNP's utopia as being 'about the imaginary reconstruction of society', which helps us orient ourselves to how we believe things *should be*. The activists' relationship with the enlightenment is utopian, not because they are concerned with the utopia of the past (as most nationalist movements are), but because it helps them imaginatively reorient the utopia of the future, specifically one of independence. This reconstruction takes us a step beyond other ways in which people have felt nostalgic for lost futures, yearning for a future-past; a future that was promised but ultimately lost (Harding and Rosenberg 2005; Jansen 2019). Instead, SNP activists create a roadmap to future utopias through primary orientations of hope that graft alternate timelines of the enlightenment directly onto Scotland's potential independence futures. Framing the SNP's temporal manipulation through the lens of utopian hope reveals the practical and tangible ways in which these counterfactual re-imaginings spark a sense of futural momentum amongst SNP activists, moving them to campaign for this potential future. This imaginary reconstruction of society through counterfactual historicism allows them to give concrete shape to how they believe Scotland *should be*, and therefore *will be*, once it becomes independent. This utopian reconstruction of future through Scotland's past is what gives the movement hopeful futural momentum, sparking in activists the motivation to campaign for Scottish independence.

This temporal folding was captured by my informant's lament at the David Hume statue: 'Imagine what we could've been, if we'd been independent (during the enlightenment) ... the things we could've achieved by now'. This was a sentiment that I heard often during my fieldwork. It was invariably followed by a powerful and vivid rhetoric of Scotland's post-independence future as a utopian space of enlightenment renaissance: 'we would be world leaders ... in education especially. And in building things, we would be enlightenment inventors, we would lead the world in inventions and education'. With the focus on the word *would* rather than *were*, one can identify how projections of the future trump yearnings for the past. The trajectory the activists are referring to is undoubtedly futural – they could quite easily have been discussing how 'we *were* world leaders, we *were* inventors ...'. In a separate conversation, another activist discussed the utopian future of post-independence Scotland:

I think Scotland will be world leaders in education ... we have so much potential, and we will invest heavily in it you know, in schools and universities ... engineers as well, we are so good at building things and making things ... we will definitely have a booming engineering industry.

In this way, the past futures were not lost in the inaccessible depths of linear time, but rather the enlightenment past served as projections of achievable futures, just waiting to flourish in an independent Scotland.

The imaginations of this future utopia were as varied as those who imagined it, every activist being inspired by a slightly different enlightenment mythistory and landmark. Walking up Calton Hill on a brisk winter morning, a close informant surprised me with one of these highly personalized utopian imaginaries. Towering above the city centre, Calton Hill offers locals and tourists alike the most impressive views over Edinburgh. From this vantage point, one can take in many of Edinburgh's most famous historical landmarks. At the top of the hill lies the National Monument, built – but left unfinished – in 1822 as an homage to those who had lost their lives in the Napoleonic Wars, the

refurbished Edinburgh Observatory built in 1818, and the Nelson Monument, built in 1816 to commemorate Admiral Horatio Nelson who died at the Battle of Trafalgar.

Usually bustling with tourists, it was quiet on this winter morning, dotted with local joggers and dog walkers. The activist I was accompanying was a fan of Calton Hill and came here often to admire the view. He was a geologist by profession, a newcomer to Edinburgh following his appointment at the University of Edinburgh, and a relatively new activist in the SNP, having joined after the 2014 referendum, inspired by the pro-independence campaign that the SNP ran. He often found inspiration in the stunning rock formations of the area and would sing the praises of Edinburgh's geological history. He animatedly told me about Edinburgh's pioneering role in enlightenment science of geology, which was so significant it earned the city the reputation as 'the birth-place of geoscience'. This was particularly thanks to James Hutton, the 'father of modern geology', who was inspired by the uneven Edinburgh landscape to develop his theories of deep geological time. 'Look look!', he excitedly told me as we got to the rails that overlook Arthur's Seat:

See this? See Arthur's Seat? This is it, this is where Hutton saw the stratification for the first time ... you can see it from here, he looked at Arthur's Seat just like this and saw – can you see them? – those parallel lines that run up the side of Arthur's Seat? Those indicate the different geological ages of earth, and he saw them from here and was inspired to come up, I mean he basically came up with all of geology as we know it today!

As we continued talking about Hutton and the great contributions to geology that the Scottish enlightenment had fostered, he began to temporally wander between past, present and future. He connected the geological advances of the enlightenment to current research being carried out at the Geological Sciences Department at the University of Edinburgh, and to the impact of this for the future of an independent Scotland, and the geological discipline:

It was amazing what we achieved really [during the enlightenment], if only we had been independent ... who knows, I think that we would've been a world leader in the sciences, I think that we would've been the ones to put people on the moon and we would be now leading in geothermal technologies like the Icelanders are ... We would certainly be known as world leaders in geological sciences ... I mean look at our history!

He gestured widely at the view of Edinburgh, Arthur's Seat looming tall in the background. In subsequent conversations and encounters he would regularly return to this idea of Scotland's alternate timeline as a nation that had been independent since the enlightenment, an imaginative process that was widely shared by his activist peers that allowed him to imagine both what Scotland would have been like now and what it could still become when independence is eventually attained.<sup>7</sup>

As was the case with all other informants that engaged in this way with the enlightenment, his reconstructed utopian future of Scotland coincided heavily with the socio-political issues that were most salient to him. As a geologist, Scotland's legacy within the sciences had been a central issue throughout his time in the SNP as well as his fascination with geothermal renewable energy. His reimagination of what Scotland would have looked like in the present had it been independent during the enlightenment coincided with his beliefs on what Scotland *will* look like as an independent nation in the future. As he stressed when I asked him why he believed in independence, an independent Scotland

will be one that will thrive in renewables and lead the world with its geothermal technologies, as well as appropriately fund universities and scientific research (both topics he believed to be neglected under the current Union). His stance summed up what many of my informants intuitively believed; what 'could have been' in an alternate timeline becomes what 'could be' in a future independent Scotland.

Utopia creates the image of another world through 'a careful working upon the raw materials of the historical situation from which it emerges' (Wegner 2007, 115). This past-future deconstruction allows us to critically evaluate the present by bringing to the fore what we do *not* want the future to be. As Louis Marin (1977) argues, the neutralization of ideological parameters opens up the space for the construction of the radically different, clearing the way for the creative constructive process of figuration. The SNP's utopian wishful image thereby 'maps the place of an imminent and concrete future, forming *within* the horizons of its present emerging history' (Wegner 2007, 115). In this way, they work much in the same way as Stewart's (2012) Greek dreams, collapsing past, present, future timelines into each other and creating a present that is continuous conversation with all temporal iterations simultaneously. Blochian utopias both critique the present and offer a hopeful alternative future as a medium of change, inciting us to seek out this teleological end of a 'better society'.

The SNP's independence utopias are therefore not detached fabrications, but concrete visions grounded in reimagining Scotland's past as becoming realized in the future. They are critiquing the present state of Scotland within the Union, 'embedded in what they criticize' permitting them to 'perform the political function of critique' by imagining a radically different tomorrow which makes a social commentary on today (Sargisson 2007, 36). Here, this radically different vision exists in the elsewhere and elsewhere traditionally associated with political utopias, occupying an alternate timeline where Scotland had been independent since the enlightenment. Yet it also exists in the now, in present projections of the possible future of Scotland and its contributions to science, education or technology. The SNP's enlightenment-inspired utopias therefore are inherently political. By showcasing new radical ways of being, they anticipate a new reality, provoking a 'paradigm shift in consciousness' that creates a new imaginary space for the exploration of alternatives, an imagination of the future that unveils the possible (Sargisson 2007, 37, 38). When SNP activists participate in the process of utopia-building, they are questioning the present state of Unionism by negating its ideological and historical legitimacy point by point. To do so, they negotiate multiple strategies that re-engage with the past, reject the present and then reimagine the future, orienting them towards a specifically fashioned utopia.

In this way, they are demanding immediate action in the present, imploring us to question the status quo of Scotland as part of the Union, working as both 'a negation of the present and an affirmation of a possible future' (Srnicek and Williams 2015, 140). The Scottish enlightenment utopias therefore do not 'map the place of an imminent and concrete future, forming *within* the horizons of its present emerging history' (Wegner 2007, 115, emphasis in original), but rather the imminent and concrete future if formed from the emerging history of a reimagined past that is directly folded into our own present-future timeline. There is an affective resonance for activists, moving them towards the '*pursuit of materialising the otherwise than actual*' through the orientation of hope (Bryant and Knight 2019, 134) that is harnessed from these futural wishful images,



inspiring SNP activists to both believe in, and campaign for, an independent Scotland where utopias might be achieved.

Utopias motivate activists to seek to justify their support for Scottish independence beyond traditional socio-economic arguments. Hirsch and Stewart argued that 'to understand historicity in any particular ethnographic context, then, is to know the relevant ways in which (social) pasts and futures are implicated in present circumstances' (2005, 262–263). Both past and future are imbued with present socio-political motivations, offering a utopia of Scottish independence that in continuous situational flow, retaining its civic character by refusing a vision of *return* in favour of futural utopias constructed on alternate timelines of 'what ifs' and 'would haves'.

## Conclusion

The SNP's commitment to a civic nationalist discourse that is 'liberal' in its values has forced them in recent years to present their nationalism as diametrically opposed to ethnic nationalist discourses re-emerging across Europe. Consolidating their position as a civic nationalist movement in the face of such right-wing resurgence has led them to deliberately reject ethnic nationalist arguments grounded in historical nostalgia and a call to return to the 'good old days' (cf. Mazzarella 2019; Theodossopoulos and Kapferer 2019), a position that has strengthened since Brexit and its regressive anti-EU message. This hard-line rejection of the past as a source of inspiration left an evocative gap in their nationalist message which has been filled by that of the utopian future, rendering SNP messaging predominantly futural in nature. However, for many activists who live and campaign in the historical centre of Edinburgh, the Scottish enlightenment was inescapable. Further, it inspired awe in my informants, who took pride in Scotland's many contributions during this period. The necessary rejection of historical narratives in order to maintain the SNP's civic message clear and distinct from Brexit forced SNP activists in Edinburgh to engage with history in alternative ways which allowed them to draw inspiration from the past without wanting to return.

SNP activists have developed a complex relationship with the enlightenment past whereby history is reimagined, projected as an alternate timeline that serves as inspiration for the wishful images of a future independent Scotland. By engaging with the 'what ifs' and 'would haves' of an enlightenment uninterrupted by the political union of England and Scotland, activists project what I term 'revisionist futures' where utopias will be realized in the potentiality of the alternate timeline. The enlightenment past is highly affective in providing hope-filled momentum to activists on the independence campaign by highlighting the ways in which things *would have* been different *if* there was no Union. The reimagined past is subsequently brought directly into Scotland's potential future as activists are inspired to assert what Scotland *will be* once it achieves independence. By showcasing new radical ways of being, these utopias anticipate a new reality, provoking a paradigm shift in historical consciousness that creates a new imaginary space for the exploration of socio-political subjectivities. Through the alternate timeline of uninterrupted enlightenment, activists are provided a highly affective 'wishful image' of a concrete future towards which they orient.

Starting with the question 'what if history had happened differently?', SNP activists superimpose the utopian timeline of the reimagined past as futural orientation,

harnessing the latent potentiality of the alternate timeline in their campaigning for Scottish independence. By relocating the potentiality of the past in the actualization of the future by way of alternate timelines, the activists delicately circumnavigate the rhetoric of 'return to glory days' that implies yearning for past times, associated with other nationalist movements. Thus, the SNP activists are able to tow the party line of rejecting nostalgic historicism to remain open to all citizens of Scotland while still affectively engaging with the past to provide wishful utopian images for their independent future. A temporal analysis of the SNP's construction of utopian futures reveals the importance of temporal manipulation in the creation of civic nationalist narratives that seek to avoid 'returning' to the past. Through this temporal manipulation SNP activists have found a way of integrating their admiration for the nation's past without falling into the ethnic nationalist narratives that underpin other contemporary European nationalisms. The temporal folding allows them to directly draw inspiration from Scotland's history whilst simultaneously maintaining a futural message that looks forward rather than back, consolidating their movement as civic, rather than ethnic, nationalism.

## Notes

1. The official name of the constituency is 'Edinburgh Central'. This constituency is for the Scottish parliament only, and not Westminster. SNP activists identified with the Scottish parliament boundaries and grouped themselves as such for most campaigning activities.
2. It is worth mentioning that although this article works with the distinctions of ethnic and civic nationalism there is some controversy on the analytic value of an ethnic-civic divide (see Paul 2020).
3. My SNP informants would strongly disagree with my labelling of these independence dreams as utopian. However, this I believe is a politically motivated response that was necessary during the 2014 referendum, where the vision of independence they were selling was derogatively described as utopian, and therefore fanciful and unachievable. For SNP activists this future they are imagining is entirely possible, grounded in Scotland's current potential and therefore it is neither fanciful nor unachievable, as the utopian label might suggest. Because of this, I use utopia here not in this common vernacular sense, but following Ruth Levitass' (2007) definition of utopia as an imaginary re-construction of society that continuously strived to better itself, working both as a negation of the present and affirmation of the future.
4. Conservative governments have a reputation in Scotland for introducing aggressive welfare cuts in the country throughout the decades. From Margaret Thatcher's attempt to introduce the Community Charge in 1989, to the austerity measures implemented in 2008–2012 by Prime Minister David Cameron, where Scotland saw its budget cut by almost 10% many in the SNP believe Conservative governments (and to a lesser extent Tony Blair's Labour governments) are to blame for the high rates of poverty and unemployment in Scotland.
5. 'Looking to the future' is a sentiment that the ex-leader of the party Alex Salmond often used when defining Scottish nationalism. Ironically, he himself often failed to do so, invoking historical battles and treaties in his speeches.
6. Although these cuts are a direct result of Scotland's overall budget being cut, rival political parties in Scotland argue that the SNP failed to protect Scottish schools from Conservative Westminster cuts through budget mismanagement. SNP activists disagree, and argue that the SNP did all it could to mitigate the impact of austerity measures in Scotland.
7. Those of the older generation who engaged with the Scottish enlightenment and Scottish history. As discussed, this is a phenomenon that was not present amongst the younger generation of activists.

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