

Is There an Icelandic Democratic Exception?

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Seven years have passed since the start of the economic and political crisis in Iceland in 2008. Attempts at reforming the country's constitution, the heterodox positions it has taken in matters of finance, and the political dynamism of its civil society have certainly aroused curiosity; however, these astonishing facts have yet to draw the interest of political science.

Iceland, a small country placed at the top of international rankings for quality of life, Human Development Index (HDI),¹ and gender equality, was discovered in 2008 by the international press after being long imagined as devoid of history and problem-free. In this respect, the brutal economic crisis of that year troubled a set of representations wherein the island was linked, without much consideration, to the Scandinavian sphere and its supposed model. Since then, Daniel Chartier² has remarkably shown the rhetorical contortions that the major francophone and Anglo-Saxon media had to make in order to render coherent a discourse that had ignored the structural weaknesses of Icelandic society.

The Icesave referendum, the new constitution, the eruptions of the Eyjafjallajökull and then of the Holuhraun—the media coverage of Iceland is still largely fragmented and event-based. This approach, however, does not seem to be limited to the journalistic sphere: With the exception of medieval history and linguistics, the humanities and social sciences are reluctant to occupy a terrain that might reveal itself to be far more complex than it would seem. And yet topics of interest abound. The island has recently witnessed a flurry of political events, from the attempt at rewriting the constitution in a participatory fashion to the rejection by referendum of several public debt restructuring plans, through the rise of new, atypical political parties. Iceland is one of the few developed countries in which an effort has been made to completely overhaul national institutions after the global crisis of 2008. How have these experiences been received and sanitized? What biases cloud our vision as soon as we start to take an interest in this island?

The Constitutional Process

The exceptional economic and political crisis that Iceland underwent in 2008 and the protests that followed in front of Parliament in Austurvöllur square led to the resignation of the conservative government of Geir Haarde in January 2009. One year later, the Althing (the Icelandic parliament), made up of the new ruling coalition of Social Democrats and environmentalists in power, adopted Act no. 90.2010. The “Lög um stjórnlagathing,” or Act on a Constituent Assembly, clarified the constitutional reform mechanisms adopted—a

¹ Between 2009 and 2013, Iceland went from third to thirteenth place in the Human Development Index rankings, remaining a frontrunner among the most developed countries of the world. See UNDP: hdr.undp.org/en.

² Chartier, Daniel, *The End of Iceland's Innocence*, Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, 2011, 239 p.

constitutional reform that was one of the demands made by protesters in Austurvöllur square. It allowed for the creation of the National Forum, an assembly selected by lot that was supposed to represent the Icelandic population and that functioned for a day. It also led to the formation of a Constituent Assembly (25 elected members from civil society) that was to draw on the proposals made by the National Forum for the implementation of the new constitutional text.

After many legal twists and turns, the Supreme Court's invalidation of the Constituent Assembly election, and the holding of a referendum—with a positive outcome—on the new constitutional text, the latter remained in limbo and has yet to be adopted. Following the legislative elections of April 2013, the Progressive Party and the Independence Party, which had previously been ousted from power, returned to head the government with a coalition led by Sigmundur Davíð Gunnlaugsson. The Progressive Party came first, with a campaign focused largely on the cancellation of real estate debts (these had been indexed to foreign currencies and had exploded after the collapse of the Icelandic krona). The party, on the other hand, had little to say regarding the fate of the new constitutional text, and pleaded, as the Independence Party did, for it to be rewritten or abandoned outright by Parliament. The text is now being discussed in a parliamentary committee whose presidents are openly hostile to any drastic modification of the current Constitution. Nevertheless, the defense of the new text continues to be one of the aims of struggle of the new parties that emerged with the crisis, including the Pirate Party, which is now leading in the polls, and the Bright Future Party, to which the former Mayor of Reykjavík Jón Gnarr belongs.

Romantic Visions of the North

Whether because of its size or its geographical location, the country is often overlooked, classed among irrelevant cases, which has led historian Gunnar Karlsson to refer to it as a “marginal society.”³ The exotic uses of the Icelandic case are indeed common, and just as there exist forms of Orientalism,⁴ one can consider that there are forms of Nordicism or “Septentrionalism” that have remained unchanged for several centuries. In the case of Nordic societies, however, the recourse to analytical frameworks drawn from postcolonial studies is extremely recent. An example of this approach is *The Postcolonial North Atlantic*, in which Lill-Ann Körber and Ebbe Volquardsen⁵ examine the place of representations of Greenland, Iceland and the Faroe Islands among these countries' inhabitants as well as in their relations with the Danish homeland (still effective for Greenland and the Faroe Islands) and more generally with the European continent. The questions being raised have proven fertile, not only to approach these regions with a fresh look, but also to test the overall strength of the new analytical frameworks. For instance, the works of Kristín Lofsdóttir⁶ have been very fruitful in showing how Icelanders themselves can contribute to the perpetuation of ambiguous relations with foreign countries, and how the current explosion of tourism on the island has reinforced this ambiguity. Whereas Iceland was formerly perceived by travelers as a relic of northern Europe's medieval past, it is now not only traditional Icelandic culture that is being emphasized, but also the presumably harmonious relationships of Icelanders with the

³ Karlsson, Gunnar, *Iceland's 1100 years: the history of a marginal society*, London, C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2000, 418 p.

⁴ See, of course, Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, New York, Vintage Books Edition, 1978, 368 p.

⁵ Volquardsen Ebbe. and Körber Lill-Ann, *The Postcolonial North Atlantic, Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands*, Nordeuropa-Institut der Humboldt-Universität, Berlin, 2014.

⁶ Lofsdóttir, Kristín, “The loss of innocence, The Icelandic financial crisis and colonial past,” in *Anthropology Today*, 26 (6), December 2010, pp. 9-13.

environment. Lofsdóttir shows⁷ that these projections also influence how some Icelanders speak about themselves, in particular when they take great pains to distance themselves from the figure of the foreigner, the barbarian, and to appear as Europeans like all the others. The “In Defense” movement, supported notably by the Progressive Party (one of two main right-wing parties in the country), is a good example of this recurring desire to appear as the good student in the eyes of Europe and the United States. When, in 2008, Gordon Brown placed Iceland on the list of terrorist states following the collapse of the Icelandic bank Icesave, many Icelanders sent photos of themselves with the slogan “Do I look like a Terrorist?” Lofsdóttir notes similarities between this reaction and that of Icelandic students at the Danish colonial exhibition of 1905, who were also concerned with distinguishing themselves from the real barbarians (in this case, Greenlanders) and not with questioning broader systems of oppression.

Whereas Orientalist myths serve to construct an “inverted double” and allow the Western world to define itself implicitly, the political uses of the Nordic model seem aimed rather at outlining desirable horizons, at pointing to what ideal European societies might look like. Ultimately, those who invoke this model forget to define the Nordic world and employ it more as a mirror. The scientific poverty of such a designation is now recognized,⁸ as it prevents us from grasping the particularities of Nordic societies. The specificity of the Icelandic case consists in a double labeling: on the one hand, the country’s membership in Nordic societies, and, on the other, its historical position as a former Danish colony located on the margins of Europe. To this is also added an important nationalist component, one that is often minimized by international observers yet remains key to understanding the broad political orientations of the country—whether its non-accession to the EU or the negative outcomes in the Icesave referendums on debt repayment. This component draws, among others, on national mythologies formed around Icelandic History and language, which Gudmundur Hálfðanarsson refers to as “the two breasts of Icelandic nationalism.”⁹ One of the most emblematic examples of this is the Althing’s proclamation that it is “the world’s oldest parliament,” even though the original parliament, born indeed in 930, had little to do with its successor and had very few powers during the 700 years of colonial rule. The inclusion of representative democracy among national values undermines all critique of parliamentary institutions or the functioning thereof, and ends up presenting Icelandic society as democratic in essence. Moreover, the existence of corruption and clientelist reflexes are obliterated by the attachment to Nordic exemplarity, even as, for example, the work of the Special Investigation Commission conducted after the crisis clearly highlighted the amateurism and the many dysfunctions of the Icelandic political class.

A certain number of discourses emphasizing “Viking manhood” and “the Icelandic spirit of conquest,” which circulated during the financial bubble that preceded the crisis, have also been analyzed since then—the use of the term “Business Viking” by the President, the Government and the Icelandic Chamber of Commerce in London being one of the most

⁷ Lofsdóttir, Kristín, “Icelandic Identities in a Postcolonial Context,” in E. Volquardsen and L.-A. Körber, *The Postcolonial North Atlantic, Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands*, Berlin, Nordeuropa-Institut der Humboldt-Universität, 2014, pp. 67-82.

⁸ See, in particular, Aucante, Yohann, *Les démocraties scandinaves, des systèmes politiques exceptionnels?*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2013 or the journal *Nordiques, Réceptions et rejets des modèles nordiques / Björn Larsson: le plus français des écrivains suédois*, n°25, Spring 2013.

⁹ Hálfðanarson, Gudmundur, and Kizilyürek, Niyazi, “Two Islands of History: ‘History Wars’ in Cyprus and Iceland,” in C. Bilsel, K. Esmark, N. Kizilyürek, and Ó. Rastrick (eds), *Constructing Cultural Identity. Representing Social Power*, Písa, Edizioni Plus – Pisa University Press, 2010, pp. 1–17.

striking aspects of this phenomenon. The emphasis was then placed on the spirit of conquest, on risk taking and on the “looting” of wealth from abroad. References to the Icelandic “golden age” were frequent at the time, such as when Jón Ásgeir, one of those new businessmen, had a three-meter statue of a famous Icelandic Viking built in his offices in London.

Lastly, as I mentioned earlier, the recourse to the referendum to reject plans to repay foreign shareholders constituted another moment of nationalist affirmation in the face of international humiliation, in which Iceland went from being a model to being an example of economic and political bankruptcy. In particular, the “In Defense” movement and the Icelandic right identify with this image of the little country bravely resisting the dictates of foreign powers. Meanwhile, self-criticism by elites regarding their handling of the economy remains weak, as Iceland becomes merely one of the victims of a much broader crisis over which it had no control.

Figure 2. “The modern Viking” as seen by a famous Icelandic clothing brand; Credit: 66°North

The Reflexivity Imperative

While several research fields have opened up over the last five years, these require that we engage in reflexive work on our own views of the island. Icelandic society has known major cases of corruption (some of which have come to light since the crisis), ambiguous relations with Russia, and notable social tensions in the wake of the economic crisis (recurrent strikes in the health and education sectors). Yet the Icelandic field has rarely been explored by French political science, and the only thesis ever written in French on the subject is that of Michel Salle, which dates back to 1968... No scientific analysis has thus been conducted to date on the specific political consequences of the crisis suffered by the country in 2008-2009.

Figure 3. Protests in front of Parliament, Austurvöllur square, CC OddurBen

The protests that followed the crisis were nevertheless the largest since 1945 and the country’s accession to NATO. Held in front of Parliament, in Austurvöllur square, they were also characterized by the involvement of the entertainment world and that of some intellectuals—e.g., the singer and LGBT activist Hörður Torfason or the writer Njörður Njarðvík—by their international echo, but also by their demands for the resignation of Geir Haarde’s right-wing government and the drafting of a new constitution (which they obtained). Moreover, the work of a Special Investigation Commission, in which Judge Eva Joly took part, revealed major dysfunctions within the Icelandic political administration, as well as ignorance of financial mechanisms from which the country nonetheless handsomely profited. For the first time, a former Prime Minister, Geir Haarde, was symbolically indicted and convicted of bringing the country to bankruptcy, and several bank officials were eventually sentenced to prison terms in 2015, apparently vindicating the ill-informed and enthusiastic arguments that had circulated in previous years regarding the Icelandic crisis.

These protests and the ensuing constitutional process were not exploited merely on the island. On the contrary, they seem to have been the object of significant mythologizing in the demonstrations that spread throughout the world more than one year later. For this reason as well, the Icelandic events warrant attention, for while they preceded the Indignados and

Occupy Wall Street protests, they saw the use of similar slogans in the critique of corruption and political elites, and in the demand for more democracy. The instrumentalization of these events has not been free of the exotic biases I mentioned earlier, which are especially evident in the case of Spain, as shown in particular by the Catalan journalist Èric Lluent. As for us, the interviews we conducted with Icelandic activists revealed a significant gap between the expectations of foreign publics and the realities experienced and expressed by those same activists. Here is, for example, what an activist and then deputy of the Citizens' Movement (a party born of the protests) had to say:

What happened here, they only see the history of it, and many people think that we have a new constitution. They think we've put all the bankers and politicians in prison, and of course it's not like that, it's far from being the case. [...] In 2008 and 2009, so many groups came to discuss, trying to read, and of course [...] most people do not really read, they remain floating on the surface. And I think that Icelanders do the exact same thing with South America as Spain and Scotland do with Iceland. They don't try to understand how things really happened and how they ended.¹⁰

Thus the Icelandic events were once again transposed and instrumentalized as symbols of Nordic exceptionalism, and served to produce a mythology with which the protesters of 2011 could identify. In the end, the construction of the "Icelandic myth" of a victory over political elites says more about the expectations of the 15M or OWS protesters than they do about the Icelandic case itself.

The Icelandic events are especially interesting in that the small number of activist networks makes it easier to follow how they were formed internationally between the beginning and the end of the demonstrations. While no radical alteration of know-hows or their reproducibility can be observed, the limited size of the Icelandic population does help to trace the building of interpersonal relationships. Thus we can see how travels of ideas played a role in the implementation of the new Constituent Assembly. For instance, according to the testimony of a member of *Maurabúfan* (one of the citizens' associations that impelled the process), it is an American environmentalist, Paul Hawken, who apparently suggested the idea of the random draw to achieve an Assembly with the most diverse profiles.

Conversely, it seems that the Icelandic constitutional process subsequently inspired several experiments in Scotland or Ireland. It also aroused the interest of Catalan separatists: The movement "Procés constituent a Catalunya," for instance, sent an invitation to activists and members of the Icelandic Constituent Assembly.

New Political Horizons

The attempt at rewriting the Icelandic constitution was certainly a first on the international scene, even though the content and conduct of this process were often relayed abroad in a caricatured form. For instance, contrary to international headlines that spoke of "Constitution 2.0," Internet usage was not so central to the events. Participation on the Web was limited to social networks, with no legal guidance as to how proposals posted online should be taken into account. Nevertheless, the diffusion of successive versions of the new constitution and that of recordings of Constituent Assembly meetings were clear highlights of the process. The techniques employed to draft the constitutional text, including the holding of

¹⁰ Interview conducted on September 29, 2014.

an assembly selected by lot and the subsequent creation of a Constituent Assembly made up of personalities from outside political circles, also warrant attention.

Figure 4. Facebook page of the Constituent Assembly

In addition, the current failure of the new constitution, far from dooming the experiment, has proven to be a considerable source of information on the state of relations between political officials and the island's population, as well as on contemporary conceptions of democracy—i.e., on representations of what constitutes a fair deliberation. The elaboration of the first forms of assembly selected by lot reveals singular similarities between environmental groups, feminists and entrepreneurial management. The random draw was not conceptualized in advance, but viewed rather as a simple tool for the aggregation of opinions. One could also explore the conflicts of legitimacy that emerged throughout the process between Parliament, the Constituent Assembly and the Supreme Court, as these were symptoms of a significant weakening of representative institutions during the crisis.

As for the text of the Constituent Assembly, it contained measures that were unprecedented in constitutional law—for instance, the declaration of national ownership of the natural resources of the country, a right to information and to government transparency, as well as rights for children and specific protections for animals and endangered species. The text also enacted some measures that seemed contradictory: the strengthening of the Presidency and, at the same time, a popular referendum mechanism that is among the most open in the world (10% of the electorate).

The argument of size, often used to avoid any discussion of the possibility of reproducing Icelandic participatory mechanisms, is hardly tenable. True, the size of the Icelandic population is comparable to that of a city like Nantes, but the mayor of Nantes is not endowed with the powers to decide its own foreign policy or those in matters of immigration or natural resource management. In other words, like any independent nation, Iceland has institutional structures similar to those of its neighbors; hence, it must cope with the same traditional games of power and politics. If there is an effect of size on the political direction of the country, then it must be sought rather in network dynamics, in family or affective relationships, or in the recourse to cooptation, which become visible whenever one examines the large property-owning families of the country, or the links between those families and the LIU—i.e., the main lobbying organization for the fishing industry that is still very powerful.

Thus, the creation of the National Forum, which was the first step in the rewriting of the constitution, had little to do with scale. Indeed, the construction of a representative sample through a random draw hardly bothers with such details, and it would be entirely possible to reproduce such assemblies in larger countries, even on the scale of a continent like Europe. Conversely, it is also possible that network logics influenced the elections of the Constituent Assembly; yet to confirm this, one would need to conduct an in-depth study of the links existing between elected officials and their constituents, as well as prove that these electoral outcomes did not stem from previous media exposure.

Finally, according to the Icelandic polling institute MMR, the Pirate Party has been at the top of the polls for the last six months, ahead of the Independence Party—i.e., the country's oldest right-wing party. Created in November 2012, the Pirate Party was born of the Citizens' Movement, which itself claimed a connection with the protests in Austurvöllur

square that led to the resignation of the government in January 2009. One should also recall that the Pirate Party maintains important links to Wikileaks (Birgitta Jónsdóttir, one of the party's deputies, was also the spokesperson for Wikileaks on the island), leading Snowden to consider requesting asylum in Iceland at one point. Concurrently, the creation of the IMMI (International Modern Media Institute), also with the support of members of the Pirate Party, was aimed at elaborating a set of laws to turn the country into a “freedom of information paradise” and to protect whistleblowers. If we add to this set of initiatives the investigation Commissions—in which Eva Joly participated—and the online work of the Constituent Assembly, we can see that the transparency requirement developed alongside more traditional critiques of the political class. The party currently has three deputies in Parliament, along with the Bright Future Party (another party born of the protests), which saw the anarchist comedian Jón Gnarr become mayor of the capital. It is therefore tempting to draw parallels between this party and those that have flourished in Europe in the wake of the large protests of 2010, and to see whether the current wave of interest in the Pirate Party will last until the next legislative elections in 2017.

Thus, throughout this brief presentation of the political and epistemological issues involved in the study of the Icelandic case, I have tried to show that classical discourses on a supposed Icelandic exception generally lead analysts to overlook key elements of the 2008 events and their aftermath: the weight of Icelandic nationalism and of an endlessly reworked national romance; the “mythologizing” of the pots and pans revolution abroad; and, lastly, the specific location of the island in the international flow of ideas, between Scandinavian, European and North American influences.

To go further

* National Forum: <http://www.thjodfundur2010.is/english/>

* Constituent Assembly: <http://stjornlagarad.is/english/>

* New Constitution: http://stjornlagarad.is/other_files/stjornlagarad/Frumvarp-enska.pdf

* A Grapevine article on the “Icelandic myth” in Spain: <http://grapevine.is/news/2015/05/29/the-icelandic-myth-in-spanish-media/>

* MMR poll conducted on August 4, 2015 (in Icelandic): <http://mmr.is/frettir/birtar-nieurstoeur/485>

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