

IDEOLOGICAL MANIPULATION AT THE MUSEUM OF BRITTANY

"Alan Stivell withdraws his sponsorship of the 'Celtique?' exhibition in Rennes," reads the ^{regional} daily press. This seems surprising. All the more surprising given that when the musician criticises the exhibition for being biased in its treatment of events that took place during the Second World War, the argument put forward by the director of the Musée de Bretagne (where the exhibition is being held) is that "the purpose of the exhibition is not to retrace the history of Brittany"². This piques one's curiosity and encourages one to take a closer look.

In fact, this exhibition is beautiful and rich. It focuses on the question of whether Brittany is "Celtic" and, like an essay, is particularly well constructed.

Structure

In the introduction, i.e. as soon as they enter the exhibition, visitors are warned — on a screen showing excerpts from interviews with authoritative figures — that contemporary discourse on the Celts is a recent development. Then, they learn who the Celts really were, namely diverse populations who lived during the Iron Age (from 800 BC to the end of the first century AD) and whose archaeological remains can be found throughout much of Europe. Such is the thesis. Visitors then discover that, from the end of the 19th century to 1945, Brittany began to construct a regional identity distinct from France, based on a reinterpretation of Celtic heritage by Breton nationalists, which led to the misguided collaboration. This is the antithesis. Finally, at the end of the exhibition, visitors get the answer to the initial question (is Brittany "Celtic"?). The answer is no: "there is no direct link between the cultural facts of today and those of the populations of Antiquity"³. This is the synthesis. However, this exhibition, which claims to deconstruct a myth, is in reality itself a manipulative ideological construct that now needs to be deconstructed.

¹ Fabienne RICHARD, "Alan Stivell withdraws his sponsorship of the 'Celtic?' exhibition in Rennes," *Ouest-France*, Brittany edition, 24 May 2022; Quentin RUAUX, "When Alan Stivell snubs an exhibition on Brittany," *Le Télégramme*, Rennes edition, 24 May 2022.

² RICHARD, *op. cit.* (note 1).

³ MUSEE DE BRETAGNE, *Celtique ?*, 2022.

Deconstruction

The "real" Celts

The first part of the exhibition is full of fascinating archaeological remains. Visitors can see a map showing the maximum extent of Celtic expansion during the La Tène period and a number of fragments of objects from very distant locations within this area, which bear striking similarities to one another. The conclusion is that what united the Celts must have been their material culture. However, this is open to debate. This is not to deny the importance of Celtic craftsmanship. However, it seems that it was mainly their intangible culture (i.e. their religion, social organisation and languages) that connected them. Thus, while a wave of Celtic scepticism spread throughout the scientific world at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, the kinship and common origins of the Celtic languages have always remained undisputed scientific facts. On the other hand, several specialists in the Celtic world now consider that the utmost caution should be exercised before describing La Tène-style objects as 'Celtic'. Without entering into this debate, it is important to note that the immaterial can sometimes be more scientifically solid than the material. However, the whole point of the exhibition is, on the contrary, to create an antithesis in the visitor's mind between the material culture of the Iron Age Celts (the gentiles) — tangible and palpable — the nebulous fantasies that Breton nationalists (the bad guys) concocted about Celtic identity, which led to nauseating excesses, highlighted by an entire display window devoted to the newspaper *Breiz Atao*.

One form of nationalism can hide another

Falsification No. 1

It is true that, since its inception in 1898, the "Breton movement" (regionalist or nationalist) has made extensive use of Celtic symbolism and that, moreover, Breton activists who collaborated with the Nazi occupiers during the Second World War further accentuated this trend. However, it is wrong to claim – as the exhibition organisers do – that the image of "Celtic Brittany" is simply a construct of Bretons wishing "to connect with the past, even if it means creating a heritage from scratch [as part of] a universal need to differentiate themselves"⁵. On the contrary – and this is well known to historians – it was in fact Frankish, and later French, authors who, over the centuries, labelled the Bretons "Celtic" in order to emphasise their savagery and backwardness. From the early Middle Ages (5th to 11th centuries), chroniclers depicted the Bretons as Celts, echoing the descriptions of the Celts in antiquity by classical authors (Caesar, Tacitus, Sallust and Isidore of Seville). This labelling

⁴ John T. KOCH (ed.), *Celtic culture: a historical encyclopedia*, Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2006, p. xx.

⁵ MUSEE DE BRETAGNE, *op. cit.* (note 3).

⁶ Pierre RICHE, "Les Bretons victimes des lieux communs dans le haut Moyen Âge" [The Bretons: victims of clichés in the early Middle Ages], in Gwennolé LE MENN and Jean-Yves LE MOING (eds.), *Bretagne et pays celtiques: langues, histoire, civilisation. Mélanges offerts à la mémoire de Léon Fleuriot 1923-1987*, Rennes: Skol and Presses universitaires de Rennes, 1992.

continued over time, sometimes accompanied by bizarre ramblings, such as this one at the end of the 13th century:

The melancholic temperament is characteristic of the Bretons, Scots, Welsh and Irish. It is also characteristic of certain animals, such as squirrels, hares, foxes, snakes and other wild animals without fat⁷...

The peak of this attribution of Celticness by French authors was reached in the 19th century. Among the many examples, we can cite Balzac, who wrote in 1829 that "Brittany is, in all of France, the region where Gallic customs have left the strongest mark"⁸, Flaubert, who in 1847 struggled to distinguish "the hoarse Celtic syllables" of the Bretons from the grunting of animals, or Victor Hugo, who in 1874 claimed that Breton peasants "tattoo their clothes as their Celtic ancestors tattooed their faces"... Therefore, contrary to what the exhibition claims to demonstrate, the Breton movement does not refer to the Celtic past to differentiate the Bretons: above all, it strives to reverse the stigma. It revalues a past that has been assigned to the Bretons and has made them savages and backward. In other words, it opposes a symbolic strategy of self-representation to the "classifications and representations (of themselves) that others impose on them", as Pierre Bourdieu¹¹ explained so perfectly.

Falsification No. 2

The same Bourdieu writes that "the State produces a dominant nationalism, the nationalism of those who have an interest in the State; it can be discreet, good company, not overly assertive. The State produces in those who are (...) dispossessed by the construction of the nation-state induced, reactionary nationalisms"¹². However, the use of Celtic identity in the context of identity construction is primarily a matter of *French* nationalism. This has been the case since the Ancien Régime, but particularly since the French Revolution. This point is well known to historians and it is inconceivable that the exhibition has almost completely ignored it. Only a small panel, tucked away in a corner of the exhibition, briefly mentions, at the end of a paragraph, "the revanchist nationalism that would lift France out of the war". However, even this wording is problematic. Firstly, because it does not mention *French* nationalism (as if it were incongruous to combine the two terms "nationalism" and "French"), preferring to refer to "nationalism".

⁷ Placides and Timeo, or *The Book of Secrets*, quoted in Gwennolé LE MENN, "Les Bretons bretonnants d'après quelques textes et récits de voyage (XIV^e-XV^e siècles)" [The Breton-speaking Bretons according to several texts and travel accounts (14th-15th centuries)], *Mémoires de la société d'histoire et d'archéologie de Bretagne*, LXI, September 1984, p. 124.

⁸ Honoré de BALZAC, *Les Chouans*, Paris: Gallimard, 1972 [1829], p. 38.

⁹ Gustave FLAUBERT, *Voyage en Bretagne: par les champs et par les grèves*, Brussels Evry: Ed. Complexe, 1989 [1881], p. 196.

¹⁰ Victor HUGO, *Ninety-Three*, Paris: Gallimard, 1993 [1874] (Folio Collection, 1093), p. 233.

¹¹ Pierre BOURDIEU, *What Speaking Means: The Economy of Linguistic Exchanges*, Paris: Fayard, 1982, p. 147.

¹² Pierre BOURDIEU, *Sur l'État: cours au Collège de France, 1989-1992*, Paris: Raisons d'agir: Seuil, 2012 (Cours et travaux), p. 366.

¹³ See, in particular, Suzanne CITRON, *Le mythe national. L'histoire de France en question*, 2nd edition, Paris: Éditions de l'Atelier, 1991, pp. 140-149; Krzysztof POMIAN, "Francs et Gaulois," in Pierre NORA (ed.), *Les Lieux de mémoire*, Paris: Gallimard, 1992 (vol. 1), pp. 41-105; Anne-Marie THIESSE, *La Création des identités nationales*, Paris: Seuil, 2001, pp. 50-59 and David Avrom BELL, *The cult of the nation in France: inventing nationalism, 1680-1800*, Cambridge (Mass.) London: Harvard University Press, 2001.

¹⁴ Panel entitled "Rennes industrial and artistic exhibition: the Gallic baptism", MUSEE DE BRETAGNE, *op. cit.* (note 3).

"revanchard" (revengeful), a term that is certainly pejorative but which nevertheless refers to "the desire to avenge France's honour"¹⁵. Secondly — and more importantly — because this French nationalism, although "revanchard", is presented in a positive light, insofar as it "will raise France up after the war"¹⁶. However, French nationalism based on Gallic references was frankly racist, as Suzanne Citron pointed out:

Amédée Thierry, who elevated Vercingétorix, a figure previously absent from our history, to hero status, is the father of nationalist and liberal historiography (in the 19th-century sense) as handed down to us by the republican school: he anchors French identity in Gallic origins, which he perceived as racial. The current far right's claim to a "Gallic" identity in the face of the danger of foreign contamination is a logical product of this historiography.

To evoke the use of Celtic symbolism by Breton nationalism without properly addressing the French nationalism that induced it — and which was based on the race and "pure blood" of the Gauls — therefore constitutes a second falsification.

Absence of filiation?

Falsification No. 3

Finally, the third falsification consists of ignoring anything that does not serve the purpose of those responsible for the exhibition.

Languages, first and foremost. The direct link between today's Celtic languages (including Breton) and the Celtic languages of antiquity is scientifically proven. It is also represented on a panel in the exhibition. So how can one conclude that "there is no direct link between the cultural facts of today and those of the populations of antiquity"? Are languages suddenly no longer "cultural facts"?

Secondly, *scientific work that contradicts the ideology underlying the exhibition*.

- Joseph Cuillandre reported in a well-documented article on the similarities between the representations of space by the Celts in ancient times and those expressed in contemporary Celtic languages (from Brittany and the British Isles) until the early 20th century.
- Donatien Laurent has shown that a lament collected in Brittany as recently as the 1960s, *Gwerz Skolvan*, bears striking similarities to a

¹⁵ ACADEMIE FRANÇAISE, "Dictionnaire de l'Académie française," 9th edition (current). URL: <https://www.dictionnaire-academie.fr/article/A9C3450>. Accessed 9 June 2022.

¹⁶ MUSEE DE BRETAGNE, *op. cit.* (note 3).

¹⁷ CITRON, *op. cit.* (note 13), p. 147.

¹⁸ "Nous sommes du sang pur des Gaulois" (We are pure Gaulish blood), motion by citizen Ducalle of the department of Paris in Eugène Sue's *Mystères du Peuple*, in Paul VIALLANEIX, Jean EHRARD and CENTRE DE RECHERCHES REVOLUTIONNAIRES ET ROMANTIQUES, *Nos*

ancêtres les Gaulois: proceedings of the Clermont-Ferrand International Symposium, Clermont-Ferrand, France: Faculty of Arts and Humanities, 1982, p. 221.

¹⁹ Which reproduces a graph by Francis FAVEREAU.

²⁰ MUSEE DE BRETAGNE, *op. cit.* (note 3).

²¹ Joseph CUILLANDRE, "The distribution of areas in the Breton compass rose and the ancient conception of the inhabited world in longitude", *Annales de Bretagne*, vol. 50, no. 1, 1943, pp. 118-176. Available online at: https://www.persee.fr/doc/abpo_0003-391x_1943_num_50_1_1819

12th-century Welsh manuscript, the legend of Merlin, and ancient Irish and Scottish oral traditions relating to the theme of the wild man, the transition from Druidism to Christianity, and pre-Christian representations of the afterlife.

- Donatien Laurent himself masterfully demonstrated the link between a Catholic religious procession still practised today in Brittany (the *troménie de Locronan*), a fertility rite, an ancient Celtic ritual of circumambulation, and the Druids' conception of time (known from the remains of a large bronze calendar dating from the 2nd century and found in 1897 in Coligny).
- Finally, Daniel Giraudon has published countless works on the oral traditions of the Bretons, in which he has often highlighted the existence of a connection with Irish and Scottish traditions, sometimes sketching out hypotheses of historical continuity over the long term.

It is only by neglecting linguistic facts on the one hand, and concealing known and recognised scientific works on the other, that it is possible to conclude the "Celtic?" exhibition by stating that "there is no direct link between the cultural facts of today and those of the populations of Antiquity".

Conclusion

Manipulation is "a manoeuvre by which one attempts to impose a false view of reality through falsification and fraud".²⁵ While there is certainly no question of fraud here, there is undoubtedly falsification, which allows a false view of reality to be imposed.

That's not all. Manipulation can also be a "sleight of hand"²⁷. The "Celtic?" exhibition is full of sleight of hand. Throughout the exhibition, visitors are asked the question "Celtic or not Celtic?" in a playful way on a variety of subjects, but... the game is rigged! For example, when asked "King Arthur, Celtic or not Celtic?", the Musée de Bretagne's answer is "not Celtic (from the Iron Age!)"²⁸. This surprising answer is followed by an explanation:

The name Arthur appears only in the early Middle Ages and not in Gallic times in literary sources. However, the Arthurian cycle of the Matter of Britain by place

²² Donatien LAURENT, "La gwerz de Skolan et la légende de Merlin" (The gwerz of Skolan and the legend of Merlin), *Ethnologie française*, 1971, pp. 19-54. Available online at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40988167>

²³ Donatien LAURENT, "Le juste milieu: réflexion sur un rituel de circumambulation millénaire: la *troménie de Locronan*" (The golden mean: reflections on a thousand-year-old ritual of circumambulation: the *troménie* of Locronan), *Documents d'ethnologie régionale*, vol. 11, 1990, pp. 255-292.

²⁴ Including Daniel GIRAUDON, *Popular Traditions of Brittany: From the Rooster to the Donkey*, Douarnenez: Le Chasse-Marée / ArMen, 2000, 360 p.; Daniel GIRAUDON, *Popular Traditions of Brittany: From the Sun to the Stars*, Spézet: Coop Breizh, 2007, 310 p.; Daniel GIRAUDON, *From Oak to Reed: Popular Traditions of Brittany*, Fouesnant: Yoran Embanner, 2010, 360 p.; Daniel GIRAUDON, *Beliefs and Legends of Death in Brittany and Celtic Countries: On the Paths of the Ankou*, Fouesnant: Yoran Embanner, 2012, 383 p.; Daniel GIRAUDON and Yann RIOU, *Shellfish and crustaceans: popular fauna of the seaside in Brittany and Celtic countries*, Fouesnant: Yoran Embanner, 2013 (Popular traditions of Brittany), 272 p.; Daniel GIRAUDON and Yann RIOU, *Fish and Seabirds: Popular Seashore Fauna in Brittany and Celtic Countries*, Fouesnant: Yoran Embanner, 2013 (Popular Traditions of Brittany), 272 p.

²⁵ MUSÉE DE BRETAGNE, *op. cit.* (note 3).

²⁶ ACADEMIE FRANÇAISE, *op. cit.* (note 15).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ MUSÉE DE BRETAGNE, *op. cit.* (note 3).

In the legend, characters such as the wizard Merlin draw heavily on the legendary Celtic universe.

In this sleight of hand, illusionists use five tricks to deceive the audience. Let's reveal them:

1. *The answer does not correspond to the question.* It is a bit like asking the question "Is the Eiffel Tower French or not French?" and receiving the answer "Not French (from the ^{First} Republic!)".
2. *The answer is clever.* Visitors will probably only remember the first part of the sentence and overlook the addition in brackets. So, King Arthur? "Not Celtic"...
3. *The assertion that Arthur's name only appears in the early Middle Ages is meaningless.* It is entirely possible that the figure of King Arthur was partly inspired by several historical figures from late antiquity (the emperors Maximus and Constantine and the general Artorius).
4. *The argument underlying the negative response is absurd.* Arthur's name cannot appear in Celtic "literary sources" from the "Gallic" period for the simple reason that they do not exist. Druids, as is well known, rejected ^{writing}.
5. *The bigger the lie, the more likely it is to be believed.* To say that Arthur is "not Celtic" is so absurd that visitors are likely to believe it. In reality, however, the characters of Arthur and Merlin are a Christianised allegory of the roles of the king and the druid in ancient Celtic society.

How can we understand this vast manipulation, which combines calculated errors and deliberate omissions? What is its meaning? It seems to be simply a new incarnation of French nationalism. Not a heated and aggressive nationalism, but a "banal" nationalism, to use Michael Billig's expression, which aims to legitimise and reproduce the nation state. Yet the banal nationalism of states is by far the most widespread in the world. Much more so than extreme right-wing nationalism and that of national minorities, for example. But it is so omnipresent (and so omnipotent, thanks to the institutions on which it relies) that we do not pay attention to it.

In this case, the exhibition "Celtic?" plays this game of banal nationalism to the full. First, it legitimises the state by sweeping under the carpet the use of "Gallic" origins by racist French nationalism, which has been propagated for generations in the schools of the Republic. Secondly, it promotes the reproduction of the nation-state by attacking Breton otherness, whose Celtic component is reduced to a scandalous mystification; for nationalism is unitary: it does not tolerate diversity, plurality of options, loyalties or ^{affiliations}. Let us therefore leave the last word to a great figure of the French intellectual pantheon, Ernest Renan,

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Léon FLEURIOT, *Les Origines de la Bretagne : L'émigration*, Paris: Payot, 1980.

³¹ The calendar found in Coligny is exceptional in this regard. It is the longest text written in Continental Celtic.

³² Michael BILLIG, *Le nationalisme banal*, translated by Camille HAMIDI and Christine HAMIDI, Louvain: Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 13 July 2019 [1995], 264 p. This major work is one of the most cited books on nationalism in the world. However, it took twenty-four years for it to be translated into French. Furthermore, it was published by a Belgian publishing house, not a French one. Finally, the cover features American flags, not French ones. It is as if state nationalism did not exist in France, but only "elsewhere".

³³ Raoul GIRARDET, *Nationalisms and Nation*, Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 1996, p. 33.

theorist of the nation but also (as is often forgotten) of racism, anti-Semitism and colonisation. "Forgetting, and I would even say historical error, are essential factors in the creation of a nation, and this is why advances in historical studies often pose a threat to nationality." In the exhibition "Celtic?", the Musée de Bretagne followed Ernest Renan's nationalist instructions to the letter.

Ronan LE COADIC
Professor at the University of Rennes 2
Member of the [CELTIC-BLM](#) research centre

³⁴ See Léon POLIAKOV, *Le mythe aryen : essai sur les sources du racisme et des nationalismes* (The Aryan Myth: An Essay on the Sources of Racism and Nationalism), Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2012.

³⁵ Djamel KOULOUGHLI, "Ernest Renan: un anti-sémitisme savant" (Ernest Renan: scholarly anti-Semitism), *Histoire Épistémologie Langage*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2007, pp. 91–112.

³⁶ Alexis ROBIN, "The Influence of the Interpretation of Renan's Writings on Colonisation," *Études Renaniennes*, vol. 117, no. 1, 2016, Persée - Portal for Scientific Journals in the Humanities and Social Sciences, pp. 99-113.

³⁷ Ernest RENAN, *What is a Nation?*, Paris: Presses Pocket, 1992 [1882], pp. 42–43.