

"Celtic?"

FROM BIAS TO POST-TRUTH?

Under the guise of open questioning, the exhibition "Celtic?" held at the Musée de Bretagne from 18 March 2022 to 4 December 2022, is in fact engaging in nationalist manipulation of minds which, although denounced on several occasions — with supporting arguments — has not yet, for the time being, provoked the necessary public reaction.

Manipulation

A false question

The exhibition "Celtic?" at the Musée de Bretagne claims to "question the Celtic identity of Brittany"¹, which would be very interesting if it weren't a ploy: any questioning can, in fact, prove to be intellectually constructive². As a teacher and researcher, I spend my time asking questions, making hypotheses and doubting. I am therefore particularly open to questioning. However, through this exhibition, the Musée de Bretagne is attempting to pass off as "questioning" what is, in reality, nothing more than a biased demonstration, contrary to scientific ethics and disrespectful to the public.

¹ Web page, "Celtic?", *Musée de Bretagne*, [n.d.]. URL: <https://www.musee-bretagne.fr/expositions/celtique/>. Accessed 8 August 2022.

² One could even — if one were to apply scientific rigour and intellectual honesty — question the very existence of the Celts (as well as that of the Germanic peoples, the Latins, the Semites, etc.), as some sceptics do, but that was not the purpose of the exhibition.

A real deception

In a post published on 29 June on the Mediapart Club, I showed how the exhibition was intellectually dishonest³. Here, for the record, is a summary of my main arguments:

- It is dishonest to say that it was the Breton movement that sought out Celtic identity: in reality, it has been associated with the Bretons since the early Middle Ages. The Breton movement has mainly sought to reverse the stigma.
- It is dishonest to mention only the use made of Celtic identity by Breton nationalists, without mentioning the use made of Celtic identity by French state nationalism, based on racist ideas, taught in schools for generations, and taken up today by the far right.
- It is misleading to write that it is "revanchist nationalism that will lift France out of the post-war period".
- It is false to say that there is no direct link between the cultural facts of today and those of the populations of Antiquity, when there is a direct linguistic link between contemporary Celtic languages and the Celtic languages of Antiquity.
- It is contrary to all professional ethics to deliberately conceal scientific work that contradicts the exhibition's message, particularly that of the famous ethnologist Donatien Laurent.

It is dishonest to use a rigged game to cleverly slip inaccurate ideas into the public mind.

Whistleblowers

At least three successive warnings have been issued about this exhibition:

- On 20 May 2022, musician Alan Stivell, patron of the exhibition, withdrew his patronage, denouncing on Facebook a "manipulation of minds"⁴ ;

³ Ronan LE COADIC, "Ideological manipulation at the Musée de Bretagne", *Mediapart*, 29 June 2022. URL: <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/r-le-coadic/blog/290622/manipulation-ideologique-au-musee-de-bretagne>. Accessed 11 July 2022.

⁴ Alan STIVELL, "Musée de Bretagne in Rennes, 'Celtic?' exhibition. I withdraw my sponsorship," *Facebook*, 20 May 2022. URL: <https://www.facebook.com/AlanStivell.Official/posts/535956071231587>. Accessed 8 August 2022.

- On 29 June, I warned of "ideological manipulation at the Musée de Bretagne" in the post I just mentioned, published on Club de Mediapart⁵ ;
- On 23 July, Yann-Vadezour ar Rouz denounced the "stigmatisation of Breton identity" on the website "Justice pour nos langues" *Justice for our languages*(6).

I don't know how much attention the other alerts received, but I personally received an unusually high number of responses to my post, all of them positive. While some came from the general public, many others came from the scientific community: ethnologists, archaeologists and even members of the scientific committee for the exhibition or the Museum of Brittany. Barry Cunliffe, in particular, a world-renowned archaeologist whom I did not know personally, did me the honour of writing to me in these terms:

Several people I know have visited [this exhibition] and were very unhappy with the biased tone of the presentation. I am very pleased to have your thoughtful opinion. I now understand perfectly why there was discontent. It is a great pity that the museum authorities did not seize the opportunity to encourage a serious and open-minded debate⁷.

All these private reactions have reinforced my analysis, but the lack of public reaction so far troubles me.

Public reactions are slow in coming

The media

The regional daily press and regional television have not yet really picked up on these three successive warnings. They have, of course, mentioned Alan Stivell's resignation, but have sometimes tended to downplay its significance. *Le Télégramme*, for example, reported that the musician was "sulking" about the exhibition⁸, which risks reducing his warning to a mere childish prank in the minds of readers. France 3, for its part, published on its website that "everything is in the question mark" of the exhibition's title, which could imply that

⁵ COADIC, *op. cit.* (note 3).

⁶ Yann-Vadezour AR ROUZ, "The stigmatisation of Breton identity through the exhibition 'Celtique?'" , *Justice for our languages*, July 2022. URL: http://justicepournoslangues.fr/actualites/2022/la_stigmatisation_de_l_identite_bretonne_via_l_exposition_celtique.html.

⁷ Excerpt (translated from English) from a private email dated 1 August, published with the author's consent.

⁸ Quentin RUAUX, "Quand Alan Stivell boude une exposition sur la Bretagne" (When Alan Stivell snubs an exhibition on Brittany), *Le Télégramme*, Rennes edition, 24 May 2022.

Stivell refuses to engage in debate⁹. However, this famous question mark is in reality nothing more than a decoy: under the pretext of taking "a questioning stance"¹⁰— which would be perfectly commendable —, the exhibition does not question, it asserts. In fact, it puts forward a thesis imbued with French nationalism and conceals from the public the scientific work that would enable them to realise that this thesis is unfounded. It would have been more accurate for this exhibition to be called "Not Celtic!", with an exclamation mark.

As for the other two alerts (mine and that of the website "Justice for our languages"), they have so far received little coverage in the regional media¹¹. Have regional institutions, on the other hand, been more responsive?

The institutions

The Regional Council of Brittany

According to information available online, the Regional Council of Brittany's Department of Education and Languages was notified of the issue surrounding this exhibition on Monday 1 August 2022. The director of the department replied that he had "taken note of [this] alert" and added that "we will look into it"¹², which is a non-committal response.

Les Champs Libres

The same website also reports that the director general of Les Champs Libres, which oversees the Musée de Bretagne, announced in response to the criticism that the exhibition texts would be "re-examined"¹³. We cannot *assume*

⁹Céline SERRANO, "Controversy. It's all in the question mark: Alan Stivell withdraws his sponsorship of the 'Celtique?' exhibition at the Musée de Bretagne," *France 3 Bretagne*, 25 May 2022. URL: <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/bretagne/ille-et-vilaine/rennes/alan-stivell-retire-son-parrainage-de-l-exposition-celtique-2549376.html>. Accessed 8 August 2022.

¹⁰ Fabienne RICHARD, "Alan Stivell withdraws his sponsorship of the 'Celtic?' exhibition in Rennes," *Ouest-France*, Brittany edition, 24 May 2022.

¹¹ Mis à part un article dans *Le Télégramme* du 21 juillet. URL : <https://www.letelegramme.fr/ille-et-vilaine/rennes/apres-alan-stivell-un-prof-de-rennes-2-critique-une-exposition-sur-la-bretagne-21-07-2022-13119020.php>. Accessed 10 August 2022. An article was also published by the independent Luxembourg newspaper *Le Quotidien*: AFP and LE QUOTIDIEN, " Bretagne, pas celtique ? Controversy around an exhibition," *LeQuotidien.lu*, Luxembourg, 3 August 2022. URL: <https://lequotidien.lu/culture/la-bretagne-pas-celtique-polemique-autour-dune-expo/>. Accessed 8 August 2022.

¹² "The Brittany Region determined to find out about the practices of the Museum of Brittany", *Justice for our languages*, August 2022. URL: http://justicepournoslangues.fr/actualites/2022/la_region_bretagne_resolue_a_se_renseigner_sur_les_pratiques_du_musee_de_bretagne.html. Accessed 8 August 2022.

¹³ Yann-Vadezour AR ROUZ, "The Musée de Bretagne forced to review the content of the 'Celtic?' exhibition," August 2022. URL:

rejoice. However, the arguments accompanying this review project — according to which the problem with the exhibition consists only of "a few clumsy mistakes" and "some slightly inappropriate adjectives" — raises doubts about the real desire to correct the exhibition. For this is not a matter of "clumsiness" but, on the contrary, of a manipulative skill that has been exposed¹⁴. Let us hope that the "review" in question will not be a sham, merely removing the most obvious strings.

It is not enough, in fact, to remove the peremptory and erroneous conclusion from the exhibition (according to which "there is no direct link between the cultural facts of today and those of the populations of Antiquity"¹⁵) and to change a few "somewhat inappropriate adjectives" to put an end to manipulation. A genuine inquiry — whether scientific, legal or otherwise — is based on complete or, at the very least, balanced information. However, the exhibition skilfully concealed scientific work that did not support its ideology (according to which contemporary Celtic identity is a myth constructed by the Breton Movement, which drifted towards collaboration during the Second World War). Instead of simply removing the "bits" that have been exposed by criticism, the Musée de Bretagne must now display the scientific work that this exhibition has hidden, put an end to the artificial opposition between material and immaterial culture, and finally contextualise the exhibition's message.

EXHIBITING SCIENTIFIC WORK THAT HAS BEEN HIDDEN

As a sociologist and somewhat of a linguist myself, in my previous post I mentioned the ethnological and linguistic works omitted from the exhibition. These include those of Joseph Cuillandre, Daniel Giraudon and, above all, Donatien Laurent, who suggest a cultural continuity between the Celtic populations of ancient times and those of today¹⁶.

Since then, among the many testimonies that have been sent to me, I have been informed that Donatien Laurent's (somewhat complex) article on the Troménie

http://justicepournoslangues.fr/actualites/2022/le_musee_de_bretagne_contraint_de_revoir_le_contenu_de_l_exposition_celtique.html. Accessed 8 August 2022.

¹⁴ As for the "somewhat inappropriate adjectives", one wonders whether replacing "revanchist" would significantly alter the meaning of the phrase "the revanchist nationalism that will lift France out of the war"...

¹⁵ MUSEE DE BRETAGNE, "*Celtique?*" exhibition, 2022.

¹⁶ LE COADIC, *op. cit.* (note 3).

de Locronan¹⁷ was the subject of an excellent popularisation¹⁸ published by a partner of the Musée de Bretagne, which is therefore free to use it.

However, it was mainly *the great names in Celtic history and archaeology* that were pointed out to me as having been overlooked by the exhibition. In particular:

- archaeologist Venceslas Kruta, for whom there is "no break, but evolution" between the Celtic world and medieval society¹⁹;
- Historians Myles Dillon and Nora K. Chadwick, who argue that Celtic culture has partly "survived" in Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Brittany up to the present day²⁰ ;
- and finally archaeologist Barry Cunliffe, who has just published a major work on the continuity of Celtic identity in Brittany from antiquity to the 20th century with Oxford University Press (perhaps the most prestigious academic publishing house in the world)²¹ .

Of course, one could argue that not everything can be shown in an exhibition. But there is a difference between "showing everything" and showing nothing at all of what has been expressed by scientists whose work contradicts the ideology of the exhibition.

ENDING THE ARTIFICIAL OPPOSITION BETWEEN MATERIAL CULTURE AND IMMATERIAL CULTURE

According to the works of Françoise Le Roux and Christian-J. Guyonvarc'h, the Celts of antiquity — who did not form an empire and refused to use writing — were united above all by their intangible culture: their languages, on the one hand, and Druidism, on the other²². Celtic languages still survive today, albeit with difficulty, in Brittany and the British Isles. As for Druidism, although it disappeared centuries ago, it has nevertheless left some traces to this day in worldviews, folklore, art and certain religious rites, which have been the subject of serious scientific study. It is therefore absurd to summarily oppose reality to myth.

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ Anne GOUEROU, *Troménie de Locronan, un chemin au rythme du temps celtique* (Troménie de Locronan, a path in tune with Celtic time), Lorient: Bretagne culture diversité, 2022. URL: <http://livre-tromenie.bcd.bzh/index.php>. Accessed 8 August 2022.

¹⁹ Venceslas KRUTA, *Les Celtes*, 12thed., Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2019 (Que sais-je ?).

²⁰ Myles DILLON and Nora K. CHADWICK, *Les royaumes celtiques*, Paris: Marabout, 1979, 315 p.

²¹ Barry CUNLIFFE, *Bretons and Britons: The Fight for Identity*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2021, 488 p.

²² Christian-J. GUYONVARC'H and Françoise Le ROUX, *La civilisation celtique*, Paris: Payot, 1995; Christian-J. GUYONVARC'H and Le ROUX, *Les druides*, Rennes: Ouest-France, 1986, 448 p.

CONTEXTUALISING

It is legitimate to mention the use of Celtic identity by Breton nationalists, including in the context of collaboration with the Nazis; however, it is illegitimate to do so out of context. Yet it was French nationalism that first cloaked itself in Celtic identity, starting with the "quarrel of the two races"²³ and then widely disseminated it for generations through the republican school system, using arguments derived from "scientific racism". To mention one without the other is to mislead the public. We can hope that the

The "re-examination" of the exhibition will not be *minimal* and will bring about this contextualisation. In the meantime, however, what can be said about the reactions of "civil society" to these warnings?

Civil society

The association Bretagne Culture Diversité (BCD)

I have repeatedly contacted the semi-public association BCD, created on the initiative of the Regional Council of Brittany, which funds it, and tasked with the cultural education of the public. It has so far refused to disassociate itself from the exhibition, of which it is a partner, and even continues to advertise it on the internet. I have therefore resigned with regret from this association, of which I was the founding president and then chairman of the scientific council.

The scientific committee

Several members of the exhibition's scientific committee and the permanent scientific council of the Musée de Bretagne have expressed — privately — their reservations about the content of this exhibition. However, none of them have spoken out publicly so far. I regret this, but we are in the middle of summer and everyone needs a holiday. I hope that people will be more willing to speak out after the summer break.

Conclusion

In France, all children learn the basics of 'classical' culture, i.e. Latin and Greek: a little history, a few snippets of mythical and mythological stories, and sometimes a little etymology. Celtic culture, on the other hand, is almost completely absent from French education. We can therefore only

²³ Léon POLIAKOV, *Le mythe aryen : essai sur les sources du racisme et des nationalismes* (The Aryan Myth: Essay on the Sources of Racism and Nationalism), Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2012.

It is gratifying that a regional institution has taken the initiative to enlighten the general public on this subject. But it is a double-edged sword.

Any educated adult who visited an insensitive exhibition on the Latin and Greek heritage of French culture would be able to make up their own mind. However, the same cannot be said of Celtic culture, which is so little known. A cultural institution can therefore easily, as the Musée de Bretagne did in this case, mislead the public without their knowledge, as they do not have sufficient cultural background on the subject to uncover the deception.

If, moreover, the warnings were neither reported by the press nor taken seriously by elected officials and institutions; and if the cultural and scientific figures who have become aware of the manipulation and are concerned about it in private did not speak out publicly, there would be a risk of slipping into a post-truth era in Brittany, as elsewhere²⁴: Trump won the 2020 presidential election, Putin is not waging war in Ukraine, and the Bretons are not Celts.

Rest assured, however, the Gauls remain the ancestors of the French!

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²⁴ The concept of "post-truth" refers to the tendency of certain authorities to prioritise ideology or emotion over objective reality and the public's propensity to trust them, which ultimately renders the truth secondary. Although the term is recent (see KEYES Ralph, *The Post-truth Era: Dishonesty And Deception In Contemporary Life*, New York: St Martins Pr, 2004), the reality is long-standing and has been studied by social psychology. The latter shows that, through a kind of "cognitive laziness", we are all inclined to be influenced by authorities presumed to be competent, thus allowing ourselves to slip into "a form of mild torpor" (GIBERT Cylien, "From post-truth to post-justification: the case of the 'Russian report' on Donald Trump", *The Conversation*, 7 February 2017). To stimulate our critical thinking, contradictory interventions from other authorities are particularly welcome.