# Changing Englishness:
# In search of national identity*

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*The subsumation of Englishness into Britishness to the extent that they were often indistinguishable has contributed to the fact that at present an English identity is struggling to emerge as a distinct category. While devolved Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have been able to construct a strong sense of local identity for themselves in opposition to the dominant English, England, without an equivalent Other, has never had to explain herself in the way Scotland or Wales have had to. But now, faced with the after-effects of globalisation, devolution and an increasingly cosmopolitan and multicultural society as a consequence of de-colonisation and migration, the English find it difficult to invent a postimperial identity for themselves. This paper argues that there are chances and possibilities to be derived from the alleged crisis of Englishness: Britain as a nation-state has always accommodated large numbers of non-English at all levels of society. If England manages to re-invent itself along the lines of a civic, non-ethnic Britishness with which it has been identified for so long, the crisis might turn into the beginning of a more inclusive and cosmopolitan society which acknowledges not just the diversification of the people, particularly the legacy of the Empire, but also realises that the diversity of cultures has to be accommodated within a common culture. Such a common culture can be developed and nurtured by teaching a critically re-assessed history syllabus which would enable citizens to emotionally engage with and share in the social and cultural heritage of Britain.*

**Key words:** *national identity, Englishness, multiculturalism, ethnicity, immigration*

It has been common in the past for the English – and others – to say "English" when they should really have said "British". 80% of all British citizens live in England as the political and economic centre of the UK, and England and English has frequently been taken to mean the whole of Britain[1].

No less than Shakespeare himself, England's national bard, conflated England and Britain when he had the dying John of Gaunt describe England as "this sceptred isle …. bound in with the triumphant sea" (*Richard II*, 2.1.40, 61). This confusion is

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[1] For instance, on 14 August 1914, newspapers reported: "England declares war on Germany". This was under PM Asquith on whose gravestone it says: "Prime Minister of England, 1908–1916". But, as a matter of fact, there has never been a Prime Minister of England only (Cf. Taylor, 2004: 130). For further examples of the pervasive confusion of England with Britain see also Kumar 2003: 1–12.

a peculiarly English one and goes back to history: Britain as a political entity is the result of "internal colonialism" (Kumar, 2001: 42) with England being the aggressor and an imperialist nation which invaded and annexed the neighbouring countries and subjugated the populations of Wales, Scotland and Ireland. Because England has dominated the British Isles for so long, an attachment to Britain has always been easier for England than for Scotland or Wales (Starkey, quoted in Brooks, 2006). The development of British culture has never clashed with English sensibilities as it did with the Welsh when threatened with the loss of their language, and the British government has never offended majority political opinion in England, as it did in Scotland and Wales where they never gave majority support to Margaret Thatcher, but nevertheless found themselves governed between 1979 and 1997 by the Conservative party they massively rejected. It is therefore not surprising that many English share a construction of national identity that is British.

The subsumation of Englishness into Britishness to the extent that they were often indistinguishable has contributed to the fact that at present an English identity is struggling to emerge as a distinct category. The reason for this is that many elements of this British identity, with which the English have identified, have long lost their validity. According to the historian Linda Colley, the concept of Britishness largely began to emerge in the 18th century and was promoted by the common religion of Protestantism, which was used as a propaganda weapon to encourage the English, the Scots and the Welsh to unite around a common flag – and against Catholic enemies, in particular France and Spain (Colley, 1992). The Empire – which was always the British, not the English Empire – was also a unifying force, drawing heavily on the expertise of the Scots and Welsh as doctors, traders, explorers, engineers and administrators. In the 19th century then, Queen Victoria became the imperialist flagship and first monarch to all of Britain and the Empire. But Protestant belief no longer binds people in a society which has become increasingly secular and multi-religious, the monarchy is troubled, Britain has experienced a reduced world role since 1945, and – the Empire has now gone.

England was the driving force behind the British Empire, but with the Empire gone, the English, more than their Celtic neighbours, find it difficult to discover a postimperial identity for themselves (Weight, 1999)[2]. After the decline of the Empire, post-war migration to Britain and multiculturalism as a consequence of decolonization posed the biggest challenge to an English identity. England has absorbed large numbers of people from the former colonies – in particular from the Caribbean, India and Africa – to the extent that today people from ethnic minority groups make up 9% of the population of England,

[2] Cf. Krishan Kumar (2001: 46): "England's national identity was willingly buried in the service of a missionary cause that was in the fullest sense global." See also Jeremy Paxman (1999: vii): "The imperial English may have carried British passports – as did the Scots, Welsh, and some of the Irish – but they really didn't need to think too hard about whether being 'English' was the same as being 'British': the terms were virtually interchangeable."

compared to only 2% of the population of both Wales and Scotland. England, therefore, is ethnically more diverse in terms of the *recent* origins and current cultures of its people than Scotland and Wales[3]. English cities and towns, in particular, consist of very varied multicultural, multilingual and cosmopolitan communities. About 20% of the population of London, and nearly 15% of the West Midlands are from what are loosely called ethnic minorities.

This was the context in which Scottish and Welsh nationalism has grown. The end of the Empire and the relative decline of Britain in the post-war world have made many Scots question the importance of the Union. Over the last few decades, England has had to face nationalist challenges from Scotland and Wales as regional differences have become more and more pronounced. As a consequence of these separatist movements, devolved parliaments in Scotland and Wales have been introduced with the curious result that in the new "multi-national state" only the English are without a parliament or assembly of their own[4]. Devolved Scotland, Wales and

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[3] Cf. Alibhai-Brown (2007): "England is a cultural and biological crossbred… This is why millions of migrants seek to come here and why, way back in the times of Elizabeth I, the influx from elsewhere was unstoppable. You do not have anything like the same energetic heterogeneity or magnetism in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland." English society has indeed become more and more culturally mixed. Chinese and Indian food, the cuisine of the Empire, has become standard British fare. There is an abundance of Asian grocery stores and snack bars in England's cities and a survey has shown that chicken tikka massala is the nation's favourite dish, more popular even than fish and chips (Johnston, 1997). Cultural events like the Notting Hill Carnival, staged by the Caribbean population of Britain every year in London, are part of a common culture. Many non-white Britons have excelled in sport and show business: Black or Asian newsreaders like Trevor McDonald and Moira Stuart are household faces. Currently, 30% of all professional football players in the UK are black and cricket, the archetypal sport of the white English middle and upper classes and epitome of 'Englishness', has been assimilated by the Indians. School populations show similar signs of mix and change. Classrooms now draw upon Caribbean-British and Indo-Pakistani-British catchments, each with a youth culture, both mainstream and ethnic. Asian students are high-achievers at school and university and a recent study has shown that Black Britons are more socially mobile and less likely to be working class than the white population and have emerged as a new entrepreneurial and professional class (Taher, 2005). Black ambition was only recently epitomised by Tim Campbell, the son of working-class Jamaican immigrants and 28-year old winner of the BBC business series *The Apprentice*. He won a job working for Alan Sugar and has risen above his working-class roots to gain success in business. Last but not least, at the 2006 World Cup in Germany the traditionally aggressive and nationalistic white English identity of England football fans was softened by a multi-cultural mix of white, black and Asian Britons, all cheering for the England team.

[4] The Scottish and Welsh MPs in Westminster can vote on many English matters where English MPs cannot decide issues in Scotland and Wales because power has moved to Edinburgh and Cardiff respectively. The fact that the British Parliament at Westminster decides on English affairs is just a case in point that the English – by identifying with Britishness – have denied themselves many of the overt signs of Englishness one might otherwise have expected. For example, the National Trust does not operate in Scotland, there being instead a separate National Trust for Scotland. There is also a National Library of Wales, but no English national library, just the British Library. Similarly, there is a Scottish National Gallery, but not an English national gallery, just the British Museum – it's striking how many institutions and organizations are called British, National or Royal. There are also national anthems for Wales and for Scotland, but not for England. Instead the National Anthem of the United Kingdom ("God Save the Queen") is played. The saint days of Andrew and David are celebrated in Scotland and Wales respectively, but St George's Day is not celebrated in England (despite it also being Shakespeare's birthday). Instead, the vast majority of the English people ignore their national day with cool reserve and disdain, which might in itself reflect a rather confident and unchallenged sense of identity. There are only few exceptions to the absence of typically "English" organizations, for example, English Heritage and the English National Opera (Cf. Bryant, 2006: 187).

Northern Ireland have emerged as confident nations with a strong sense of local identity, while Labour's devolution policy has had a destabilising effect on the notion of Englishness.

Neither do the English seem to find the kind of inspiration in Englishness that Scots, Welsh and Irish derive from their respective nationhood. While the Welsh and Scots manifest their national pride in their Scottish and Welsh identities, regional loyalties in England are still strong enough to dilute interest in the identification with a common Englishness. Scousers, Brummies, Geordies, Yorkshiremen, Cornish people and residents of London all have a strong regional identity, which they often place ahead of an Englishness they sometimes find alien and embarrassing. While the Scots, Welsh and the Irish all have something to fall back on and have thus been able to construct a modern identity for themselves in opposition to the dominant English, England, without an equivalent Other, has never had to explain herself in the way the Scottish or Welsh identity has had to. But now, faced with the after-effects of de-colonization, globalisation and devolution, the English have begun asking questions about their identity and are increasingly concerned to re-define their Englishness.

This insecurity about what constitutes national identity has led various politicians from the Left and Right to argue that more attention to common values and practices is needed. Otherwise, so they fear, there is the danger of a vacuum being created which could be filled by extremist opinion with dangerous consequences for social harmony. Growing community tensions, the problem of a radicalised minority of young Muslims who reject a country they believe morally corrupt and the fatal London bombings of 7 July 2005 have sparked off debates on the alleged shortcomings and failures of British multiculturalism. It came as a shock to many British people that the suicide bombers were British nationals, leading outwardly "normal" lives in British society, one even playing cricket with friends the night before he travelled to London[5].

Addressing the Fabian Society in January 2006, Gordon Brown pleaded for "a Britishness which welcomes differences but which [he is eager to point out] is not so loose, so nebulous that it is simply defined as the toleration of difference and leaves a hole where national identity should be" (Brown, 2006). However, he seems to find it extremely difficult to fill that hole and can, in the end, only return to the "modern commitment to liberty, responsibility and fairness" (ibid.). But there is nothing in this definition of Britishness peculiar to Britain, Brown speaks of citizenship in universal terms. Values such as liberty, responsibility and fairness are common to the whole of humanity, not just to Britain.

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[5] Even those who support the concept of a multicultural British society emphasise the need for an integrative and unifying identity: "If a plural society is to hold together, it clearly needs a shared self-understanding, a conception of what it is and stands for, a national identity" (Alibhai-Brown, 2001: 273). Trevor Phillips, the Head of the Commission for Racial Equality, argued in an interview in *The Times*, 3 April 2004, that multiculturalism was out of date. It encouraged separateness when the need now was to emphasise "common values … the common currency of the English language, honouring the culture of these islands, like Shakespeare and Dickens" (quoted in Bryant, 2006: 197).

New Labour's initiatives of forging a Britain of which all citizens would be proud by introducing a narrow "Britishness"-test for ethnic minorities in 2005 must remain equally questionable: One cannot *test* values, people have to live, express and act them out in their everyday lives. And it must have come as a surprise to many to hear a Scottish-born Labour Prime Minister encourage people to fly the Union Jack on a "British Day" to promote unity, but then this may well be an indication of the confusion and uncertainty that pervade much of the Britishness debate.

Gordon Brown's idea of a system of common values and shared history as the basis of national unity is in fact only a short distance from what the Conservative leader of the Opposition sees as constituting Britishness. For David Cameron, national unity and the sense of British identity are threatened by what he calls the "five Berlin walls of division" (Cameron, 2007) – among them multiculturalism. In his opinion, multiculturalism is divisive and encourages dangerous separateness and therefore more attention to common values. Instead of a belief "in something called multiculturalism" he demands: "We've got to make sure that people learn English, and we've got to make sure that kids are taught British history *properly* at school" (ibid.). One wonders if what he has in mind here is actually that far away from Margaret Thatcher's insistence that the story of the British Empire be taught in British schools without apology as a story of the nation's civilising mission – "the White Man's burden". Be that as it may, David Cameron's demand for the proper teaching of history points to another problem, the problem of what ought to be taught in history (and literature and language) classes. What should an effective education for responsible citizenship look like? How can one bring out the richness in Britain's multicethnic societies and do justice to the almost 5 million people of ethnic minorities who currently live in the UK – people who *can't claim* Britain's glorious imperial past as their historical legacy?

Not surprisingly, Lord Parekh's report on *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* criticises the "absence from the national curriculum of a rewritten history of Britain as an imperial force" (Parekh Report, 2002: 25), demanding a reassessment which inevitably would emphasise the negative side-effects of the Empire ranging from subjugation and racism to exploitation and plunder. Recognising that changes were needed in the history syllabus and in the methods used to teach it, the content of traditional A-level history lessons will soon see radical changes: Breaking a convention of teaching history broken into periods of time (such as the Tudors, the Victorians and post-war Britain), a new history course, launched in 2008, will instead concentrate on historical concepts and thematic topics, examining values across the era. This means that in an exam students could be writing about British imperialism, witch-hunts in the 16th century and America's Wild West within one answer (Asthana, 2007). This points to a new way of framing historical subjects. Similarly, the public debate about 1807 and the abolition of the slave trade has shown how the nature of modern British identity can best

be approached through a historical analysis of Britain's often uncomfortable past. Schools and colleges across Britain have used the 1807–2007 commemorations for a debate about empire, multiculturalism and national identity.

Because it is in the history classroom, not in townhall citizenship seminars, that a sense of belonging and connection to Britain and its past can be nurtured, history syllabi should make it their task to inculcate a sense of integrative and unifying identity beyond race and religion. Only if history lessons enable citizens to emotionally engage with and share in the social and cultural heritage, as in the above-mentioned cases, will the realisation of civil, political, social and cultural rights and duties bear the marks of a common culture. Multiculturalism can and does work – but only in so far as it does not take the form of ethnic segregation, but of a cultural exchange that enables members of different communities to interact and learn from each other and to share in each others traditions[6].

I started out talking about Englishness and end up talking about Britishness. The usual dilemma. But the question of English national identity is bound up with this double identification. England and Englishness have to be seen within the framework of Britain's imperial history. And maybe something can be learned from this debate about Britishness for the revival or "re-fashioning" of Englishness: The English themselves, as we have seen, find little difficulty feeling British and have unwittingly conflated England with Britain, while England's Celtic neighbours very often associate Britain with outside domination. With the Empire gone, the Scots in particular, started loosening their links to Britain. And, as they are drawing back now from the Union, they cannot take with them much that the idea stood for. But the English can: Britain is the perfect example of a nation-state, a state identified not by an ethnicity, but by historically developed institutions and structures, such as Parliament and the monarchy. The fact that the British nation has always been a *civic*, not an *ethnic* nation also explains why many Black and Asian British citizens who were born and raised in England have come to think of themselves as hyphenated Britons, i.e. *Black British* or *British Asian*, while only few think of themselves as ethnically English – a status considered to be exclusively white. Englishness, apparently, is still racially coded, while Britishness has no necessary ethnic overtones. But just as Britain has always accommodated large numbers of non-English at all levels of society – starting with the incorporation of Wales and Scotland into an expanded England – so England is ethnically diverse, too – a "mongrel tribe" (Alibhai-Brown, 2007), if you like. England can keep Britain's inclusiveness, can keep the idea of a people rooted in something other than shared blood or shared soil. England then could become a place where people are not expected to have the same skin colour or to have ancestors who were born on the island, but

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[6] In his speech "Europe in a Global Age" at the 14th NIC Symposium on Intercultural Communication 2007, Prof. Gerard Delanty talked about the "interprenetation of communities" in Britain and "cosmopolitan inclusion". He suggests defining multiculturalism as a form of social and legal recognition and respect, rather than mere tolerance.

a place where it becomes as natural to talk about being Black English or Anglo-Asian as it has become to call yourself Black or Asian British.

So where does this leave all those people for whom George Orwell's comment about England being the country of cricket on the village green, warm beer and "old maids biking to Holy Communion through the mists of the autumn morning" (Orwell, 1941: 10) still means so much? I'm not saying we should ignore the past, the idea of a "green and pleasant" England is still remarkably potent for many. In fact, what one notes is that the English seem to be finding difficulties in giving any account of themselves except such as they can drag up from the past. This could be seen very clearly when the Labour Government last year joined the media in "search of national identity" and launched an Icons Online Project asking the English to submit their favourite icons of Englishness. The predictable answers included tea, Punch and Judy, the traditional red phone boxes, cricket and pubs. Only two icons out of almost 80 so far – Brick Lane, where a large proportion of London's Bangladeshi community lives and the "Empire Windrush", which brought nearly 500 immigrants from the Caribbean in 1948 – were listed to represent the variety of England's different communities. But if drinking beer and playing cricket defines Englishness, in what sense can Muslims be English? In what sense can the traditional rural presumption of white England be extended to millions of Black, Asian and other immigrant Britons who are concentrated in cities and who have no historical link to an idealised English landscape?

English heritage is only part of the picture, not the whole. The heritage of the Empire is now woven into the texture of England: "People like me", writes the Jamaican-born British cultural theorist Stuart Hall, "who came to England in the 1950s have been there for centuries; symbolically, we have been there for centuries. I was coming home. I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea" (Hall, 1991: 48). Stuart Hall's image of the cup of tea – the ultimate symbol of English identity – to illustrate the strong bond between *colonized* and *colonizer* shows that traditional English stereotypes or a sense of exclusive Englishness – which associates being English with being born in England – can no longer satisfy in the light of an England of vibrant variety – a variety of religions, ethnicities and lifestyles.

So, there are chances and possibilities to be derived from the alleged crisis of Englishness: If England manages to re-invent itself along the lines of a civic, non-ethnic Britishness, with which it has been identified for so long, the crisis might turn into the beginning of a more inclusive and cosmopolitan society which acknowledges not just the diversification of the people, particularly the legacy of the Empire, citizens (whose forebears were) of Black or Asian origin, but also realises that the diversity of cultures has to be accommodated within a common culture – enriched because of its diversity.

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**KINTANTIS ANGLIŠKUMAS: IEŠKANT TAUTINĖS TAPATYBĖS**

**Elke Schuch**

S a n t r a u k a

Anglų priskirtis britams dėl dažno šių objektų neskyrimo nurodo ir anglų identitetą, kuris dažnai išskiriamas kaip toks. Kol Škotija, Velsas ir Šiaurės Airija turėjo galimybių konstruoti stiprų vietos identitetą supriešinant jį su anglų identitetu, Anglija, be jokio atitikmens Kitiems, niekuomet nesiekė pristatyti savęs taip kaip tą darė Škotija ir Velsas. To priežastis ta, kad daugelis elementų, sudarančių kritiškąjį identitetą, kurį anglai sau priskyrė ilgus metus, prarado savo tinkamumą (šiandienos atitikimą).

Šiame straipsnyje yra teigiama, kad yra galimybių išspręsti Anglijos identiteto krizę: Britanija kaip šalis visuomet gebėdavo savo visuomenėje tinkamai integruoti skirtingų kultūrų atstovus. Jei Anglija galėtų save pristatyti kaip pilietišką, ne etiškai britišką, kaip ji buvo suvokiama ilgus amžius, krizė gali tapti kitokia, pasikeitimo pradžia, įtraukti ir kosmopolitišką visuomenę, kuri skatina ne žmonių atskirtį (išryškina skirtumus), tačiau priima ir kultūrų skirtumus, kurie yra svarbūs kuriantis bendrai kultūrai, kuri gali būti sukurta mokantis kritiškai vertinti ir peržiūrėti istoriją. Tai padėtų piliečiams, laikantis emocionalumo, įsitraukti ir dalytis socialiniu ir kultūriniu Britanijos paveldu.