THE MAKING OF ENGLISH NATIONAL IDENTITY

KRISHAN KUMAR

The Enigma of English National Identity

'English, I mean British' - this familiar locution alerts us immediately to one of the enduring perplexities of English national identity. How to separate 'English' from 'British'? Note that the reverse problem is nowhere as acute. Non-English members of the United Kingdom – Scots, Welsh, Irish - rarely say 'British' when they mean 'English', or 'English' when they mean 'British'. On the contrary, they are usually only too painfully aware of what is peculiarly English, and are ultra-sensitive to the lordly English habit of subsuming British under English. For them it is a constant reminder of what they perceive to be - rightly, of course -England's hegemony over the rest of the British Isles.

So the confusion is a peculiarly English one, and is rich in historical and cultural resonances. It tells of the difficulty that most English people have in distinguishing themselves, in a collective sense, from the other inhabitants of the British Isles. They are of course perfectly well aware that there are Welsh, Scots, Irish, and even Manxmen and Jersey Islanders. They make jokes about them, imitate their accents, and call upon them for special effects, as when they lend colour to poverty by portraying it in a Glasgow slum, or intone passages from Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* in a mock-Welsh voice. But these are particular exceptions to the general rule, which is to see all the major

events and achievements of national life as English. Other ethnic groups are brought on in minor or supporting roles.

How has this come to be? And why in particular do the English have such difficulty in defining their national identity? Compared to, say, the French, Germans or Italians, there is very little tradition of reflection on English national identity. Even the term, 'English nationalism', sounds strange to English ears. Nationalism is for *other* - lesser? – peoples. It is, in the English way of thinking, a regressive phenomenon, full of all kinds of dangers. The English can identify with institutions – monarchy, Parliament, the Common Law – but they have not very much cultivated an ethnic identity.

A principal reason for this – or so I argue in my recent book, *The Making of English National Identity* – is that the English were and to some extent still are an imperial people. Moreover, they were imperial in a double sense. They first of all constructed an 'inner empire', the 'empire of Great Britain', later known as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. This they did by conquering the Welsh and Irish and, after many centuries, forcing the Scots into a union. They then went on to construct the more familiar overseas empire, the British Empire, sometimes known as 'Greater Britain'. At the time of its greatest extent, just after the First World War, this empire covered a quarter of the earth's surface and included a quarter of the world's population – the largest empire the world has ever seen.

The question of English national identity is bound up with this double identification. England and Englishness have to be seen within the framework of this imperial history, in all its complexity. We have to put aside, at least initially, the common method of studying 'national character' – the approach adopted in such well-known

works as George Orwell's *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941) or Joseph Priestley's *English Journey* (1934). These work, as it were, from the inside out – considering such things as morals and manners, landscape and townscape, literary and other cultural modes as expression of the national character. These are immensely suggestive. But there is a prior task - or, to put it differently, one has to begin from a different direction. One has to work from the outside in. One has to see English national identity as a kind of residue; the response to and the result of England's engagement with its imperial venture, and of its perception of its mission in the world.

Missionary Nationalism

In all its varieties, one thing is clear about nationalism: it is a populist doctrine, in the sense that it asserts a natural bond between *all* the members of a nation (however defined). If blood, or language, or religion, or history, defines the quality of belonging, then all who share in it must be admitted as members of the nation, and must on that account be participant members of any state - 'nation-state' - formed by the nation. It is for this reason that most theorists date the rise of nationalism to the aftermath of the French Revolution, with its fundamental doctrine of the equality of all citizens.

England before the late nineteenth century - if not later - was not populist in this sense. It could not therefore know nationalism. There were moments of patriotic fervour at the time of the Spanish Armada, and on several other occasions during Elizabeth I's reign. There were claims for equality during the English Civil War, though quickly stifled and in any case couched mostly in religious terms. There was a popular mobilization against the French during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. But none

of these amounts to an instance of nationalism proper, and certainly generated nothing like a persisting national consciousness. Monarchs and statesmen might invoke 'the nation' when occasion called, but English society throughout this time was highly resistant to the notion that 'the people' constituted an equal body of citizens with equal rights (and duties) of participation in civic life. A good part - perhaps as much as two-thirds or three-quarters - of the English people did not 'belong' in this sense to the English nation, which remained largely the preserve of the upper and middle classes.

English national consciousness did, I shall argue, develop at some point towards the end of the nineteenth century. But what kinds of identity were available to the English before that time? Thanks especially to the work of Linda Colley – see especially *Britons* (1992) - we can offer a better answer to that question than previously. Colley's argument is that for much of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries, the inhabitants of the newly formed Great Britain (through the parliamentary accession of Scotland in 1707 to the already existing union of England and Wales) saw themselves primarily as Britons and their country as Britain. This did not entail the suppression of other identities based on the previously existing English, Welsh and Scottish lands, with their various histories, nor of course identities based on region or class. But it meant that on all occasions which called for a mass collective response - the Jacobite threat, the struggles with France, the conflict with the American colonies - the overriding identity was likely to be British rather than any of the other available alternatives.

This then was a national identity of a kind. But it was not a *nationalist* identity, an identity framed in terms of common membership of an ethnic community. Its attachment was primarily institutional - to Church, to Parliament, and, above all, to the Crown, in the

shape of the decidedly un-English Hanoverian dynasty that had only recently, amidst much controversy, succeeded to the throne. ‘For King and country’ was the watchword of this type of national belonging - a nationalism of the state rather than of the people. The other crucial ingredient was religion. The British nation was the Protestant nation. It portrayed itself as the defender of the Protestant faith everywhere, ready to stand against the armed might of Catholic Europe. Formerly represented by Spain, in this period it was France that emerged as the formidable Catholic threat. English, Welsh, and Scottish Protestants - Catholic Ireland as usual being the odd man out - could unite in common denunciation of the reactionary French monarchy and in common plunder of its empire.

The inadequacy of a purely English national identity stood out clearly in this role - enthusiastically endorsed by the mass of the people - as the protectors and promoters of Protestantism. England might be thought by many, at least among the English, to be the heart of this mission. But to claim this, to emphasize the contribution of a particular partner in the Protestant coalition, would have diminished the grandeur of the task and diluted its missionary quality. England’s glory shone the brighter for being reflected in a cause far loftier than the advancement of national self-interest. Like Spain at the time of the Counter-Reformation, or Russia in its conception of itself as ‘the third Rome’, England’s national identity was willingly buried in the service of a missionary cause that was in the fullest sense global. World civilizations do not require anything so puny as national identities. Nationalism is for lesser nations. It is this conviction that underlies the long-standing English disdain for nationalism.

In the nineteenth century, with the increasing secularization of European culture, the Protestant card became less easy to play, the more so as many of Britain’s new rivals

– Germany, the United States – were themselves predominantly Protestant. Now the English, as the core nation of the world-wide British empire, came to emphasize their 'civilizing mission', as the carriers of constitutionalism and the rule of law. Moreover, as the first industrial nation in the world's history, the British had every reason to feel that they had a lesson to teach the world – a view endorsed by observers as different as Alexis de Tocqueville and Karl Marx. Once more therefore English identity was submerged in a wider, more inclusive missionary purpose. Like the Romans before them, the English celebrated their achievements, not themselves.

The Moment of 'Englishness'

Sometime towards the end of the nineteenth century, there did begin to emerge something like an English national identity. Why was this? What made it then seem necessary, if not to displace Britishness, at least to develop a firmer sense of Englishness alongside it?

Probably the most important reason was ideological. The nineteenth century was the age of nationalism, and the latter part of the century saw the new doctrine developed to its most intensive point. Italy and Germany had united around it; the Habsburg and the Ottoman empires were being pulled apart by it. Everywhere on the Continent, and increasingly in the rest of the world, nationalist movements were on the rise. In the United Kingdom itself, Welsh and Scottish nationalism dates from this period, while in the form of 'the Irish question' Irish nationalism threatened, as it still does, to tear the political fabric of the nation apart.

Nationalism at this time had come to be predominantly of the cultural or Herderian kind. As opposed to the older kind , emphasizing common citizenship, cultural nationalism emphasized common ethnicity. The hallmarks of this ethnicity were held to be language, religion, history, and blood or 'race'. These expressed the 'soul' of the nation and every nation, it was felt, must have a soul.

English intellectuals responded energetically to this felt need. In language and literary studies, in historiography, fiction, and folklore, there arose what can best be described as a cultural movement to define and, consistent with nationalist practice, celebrate Englishness. England too, the movement seemed to declare, had a soul; and it was a soul different from that of the rest of the kingdom in which for so long it had so unselfconsciously and promiscuously lain.

The moment of Englishness at the end of the nineteenth century is not simply a historical marker. It defines, in many ways, the essence of Englishness as this has come to be conceived in the high culture of the nation. Many of the later accounts of 'the English character' or 'the English tradition' drew heavily on it, even while they sought to broaden its base and make it less inward-looking.

But the Englishness of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was mostly a cultural definition. It was an affair of poets, novelists, literary critics, philologists, folklorists, and historians. At the level of national politics it was played down, surfacing mainly in occasional pieces and after-dinner speeches (e. g. Stanley Baldwin's *On England*, 1926). This was a natural and necessary response to Britain as a world power and the ruler of a world empire.

Other developments in the first half of the twentieth century also muted the political effects of Englishness. Of particular importance was the new labour movement and the rise of the Labour party. Quite apart from the fact that it was technically international in outlook, the national labour movement was quite unmistakably British, not English. It got its greatest impetus not from England but from its Welsh and Scottish heartlands. Another factor was the rise of a powerful new cultural medium, that of broadcasting. The British Broadcasting Corporation, founded in the 1920s and headed in its formative years by a Scot, John Reith, from the start aimed to foster British, and not simply English, culture. Perhaps the high-point of this twentieth-century Britishness was reached during the Second World War, when all parts of the United Kingdom and of the British empire overseas united in the struggle against Germany.

English Nationalism?

All this began to change in the period after the 1960s. The empire was gone, as was Britain's position as an industrial world power. Lacking the stimulus and the bracing influence - no to mention the profits - of a world role, Britishness capitulated in the face of an assertion, with varying degrees of force, of Scottish, Welsh, and Irish nationalism. England, the core nation, stood exposed, no longer protected by a surrounding carapace of Britishness. The other nations of the United Kingdom began to envisage a rosier future as separate members of the new European Community. England too was forced to consider this prospect and, in the process, to reassess itself and its future identity. An additional stimulus was the entry of large numbers of immigrants from the former territories of the Empire, most of whom settled in England rather than in other parts of

the United Kingdom. Their incorporation posed the question of what kind of culture, exactly, they were to be incorporated in.

One consequence of the decline of Britishness was a renewed emphasis on Englishness. But now it moved from culture to politics. One might say - cautiously - that something like an English nationalism came into being. There was a new stridency in the utterances. 'New Right' Conservative politicians, starting with Enoch Powell and continuing, in a different vein, with Margaret Thatcher , Norman Tebitt, Michael Portillo, and others, were among the most vocal proponents. They were joined by a group of right-wing historians and publicists such as John Vincent, Jonathan Clarke, Norman Stone, and the 'Bruges Group' opposed to British membership of the European Union. While often they spoke of 'Britain', it was not usually very difficult to read this, as in the past, as a code for 'England'. The former Conservative Prime Minister John Major once memorably evoked the nation in an image composed mainly of village cricket and warm beer - an echo of Baldwin that seemed to exclude not just Welsh, Scots and Irish but most women, the bulk of the English working class and the vast majority of the non-white population.

It has to be said that such 'Little Englander' views have found an echo among considerable sections of the English population at large - at least if we are to believe their newspapers, or observe their behaviour at football matches, where the red and white flag of St. George – the English patron saint – now flourishes in place of the (British) Union Jack. . But it has always been clear, at least to outsiders, that Englishness embodied the aspirations and self-images of a particular section of society - for much of the time, those of the dominant upper and upper-middle classes. It was their politics, their church, their

sports, their manners and ways of speaking, their schools and universities, their view of history, that provided much of the content of 'the national character'. In recent years such a conception has been under assault from a variety of sources - women, workers (or their spokesmen), blacks, gays, and other groups supposedly 'hidden from history'.

The force of the criticism is evident. What is less clear, or less credible, are what are proposed as alternatives. Englishness may be an ideology, but as is well known ideologies tend to diffuse themselves widely in society, touching groups which may be very distant from the centres of power. Monarchy, in so far as it has come to be associated with Englishness rather than Britishness, is one example of this effect. What can compete with such long-standing symbols and sentiments? Multi-culturalism? Federalism? 'Europe'? Merely to name them is to be aware of the problems. People may not consciously seek a national identity or even know that they have one, but there are moments in their lives, both individually and collectively, when they seem to need one and to reach for it. Englishness, as it has been handed down and celebrated, is today an embattled concept and practice. It is out of touch with many of the ideas and much of the reality of contemporary British society. But it would be foolish to think that it cannot still generate enthusiasm and mobilize considerable support, at all levels of society. If Britain were to break up, if the Scots, the Welsh and the Irish (including the Ulster Protestants) were to negotiate their own arrangements with the European Union, we might for the first time ever see the rise of an English nationalist movement. Like all such movements, the very satisfactions it offered to some might be seen as highly threatening to others.