

**THE CONCEPT OF “NATIONAL CULTURE”
WITHIN THE NEW GLOBAL CONTEXT - WITH “BRITISHNESS”
AS A KEY EXAMPLE**

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Abstract

In the context of the rapidly changing world order and of globalization, both of them determining subsequent developments, the concept of “national culture” is expected to undergo fundamental changes with spectacular reshaping, but with tensions and contradictions emerging from the nations’ involvement in the new political, administrative and economic bodies, as well. The national identities are expected to be recast, preserving the fundamentals of the individual heritage, but suffering the consequences of new forms of devolution, regionalism and nationalism.

Keywords: change, globalization, dilemmas, identity, tradition, development

Introduction

Important debates take place everywhere about many issues which represent objects of concern for the scholars preoccupied with the further developments in the field of “culture”. Such issues include the place which the classic markers of national cultures – landscape, nature, rurality- will take under the new circumstances. A further set of key issues concerns the changes in the political culture of nations, massively transformed, in the latest decades, by the forces of privatization and consumerism; a fact which cannot be neglected is that these trends created a sort of “moral vacuum” and, hence, an increasing concern with the question of “values”. A direct consequence is represented by the serious mutation noticed around the idea of family and community which has witnessed a gradual decline; new values have developed alongside with the emergence of new forms of lifestyle which have sometimes been perceived as threatening the “old ways of life”, being associated with the nostalgic desire to recover the “lost” traditions and forms of existence.

A new reality

We can say that today we witness the clash between the "old" image of a well settled and solid cultural model, and the "new" one which is still vague and, why not, somehow dangerous.

Therefore, the reality is that a common, distinct trait characterizes today the culture of all nations/societies, no matter their geographic location; it means an increasing concentration on consumption and consumer culture, leading to the partial dissolution of other forms of social connections which could be considered "traditional". It goes hand in hand with the powerful forces of "privation" producing individualism, alongside with the rejection of the old communitarian/group values. In many cases, the new and old opposing trends determine clashes or even open or dissimulated forms of struggle between the divergent principles of "enterprise" and "heritage".

These divergent principles have supporters either among "the modernizers", who imagine the new styles of existence, or among "the fundamentalists" whose desire is to drive their cultures back towards the narrow forms of "nationalism".

Anyhow, one of the main dilemmas of the present moment is how to combine and to make work and coexist the two principles present in the individual's mind, to combine the future with the still existing past: the PC and Internet with what still exists from the family life, or teledemocracy with the different forms of old tradition (fundamentalism), and so on.

All national cultures are confronted with similar problems, irrespective of geographical or historical peculiarities, and the scholars in the field of cultural studies do their best in order to understand and map out the challenges of these new cultural dynamics and dilemmas.

However, in spite of the present clashes, the signs of change and modernity characteristic to the periods to come are more and more accepted, and the new styles of existence and mentality are adopted at the level of global politics.

A quite surprising situation which drew the attention of those concerned with the cultural dynamics refers to the common recognition that "modernity" is not necessary connected with western civilization.

Thus, the scholars discovered that the former assumption that the "New World Order" would mean the whole world following the American and West European type of culture characterized by the hegemony of liberalism and open market economy proved to be only an unrealistic dream. Consequently, most of the

European societies look towards other models for their future economic regeneration, one possibility being offered by the societies of South East Asia. Therefore, Western culture is more and more reorganized as only one particular form of modernity among others, and less as a universal location where humankind could find the final form of perfect existence. Such an outlook could not be but exposed for an unacceptable ethnocentric attitude.

In the framework of this new reality, the societies become aware of the world dramatic changes whose general trend is towards globalization in modernization, the path to it offering a diversity of models.

Englishness vs. Britishness

This is the context in which Britain's case could be taken as an enlightened reference; a post-imperial nation, the British society has become increasingly aware of its new position, where a privileged place can no longer be secured in the global geography of the future. Hence, Britain's attempts to adapt to the new situation, to the sense of displacement from the former stage of the centre of the world which it had enjoyed for centuries, and to come to terms with its new ethnic and cultural complexity which it must face. Out of this situation a new scenario and a new image has begun to emerge, trying to face present dilemmas and contradictions acting at the present moment.

Thus, at the core of the problem there are some answers to the question about what exactly "Britishness" might be made to mean in the contemporary world, and how to combine, in a proper way, the past and the future of the society; the rural and the urban existence of the people; the traditional and the modern; the public and the private incorporated in the individuals' lives, all of them constituting the national culture.

The question of "Britishness" is a special, but not a singular case in the world. In what follows we shall try to deal with some of its peculiarities.

In search for a new and real identity

For a long period of time, due to the nature of power relations between England as a state, and the other constituent parts of the U.K., "Englishness" has been hegemonic component within the broader term of "Britishness" with which it has often been assimilated.

During the 20th century, lots of commentators offered "definitions" of what Englishness/ Britishness was supposed to mean, the terms "British/ English" having practically the same meaning.

Nowadays, the relation between "Britishness" and "Englishness" has got a new potential, and the question of what it really means has been extensively addressed, undergoing much preoccupations regarding the real identity of the nation.

The old hegemonies of "Englishness" can no longer be considered, in spite of the attempts of some politicians (e.g. Prime Minister John Major claimed "the eternal verity of English life" based on George Orwell's imagery) to repair or reconstruct the old identities; consequently, there are, at present, numerous scholars ready to explore and indentify reality with its new positive potentials and complexity, including the contradictions which exist due to the "new ethnicities" and to imagine Britain as it is, a genuinely multi-cultural society.

However, in spite of the obviously new trends, it goes without saying, that today's Britain and its population cannot be understood or defined without a permanent reference to the past, as both Britain and its people were inevitably shaped by an imperial history which continues to be materially present everywhere in street names, monuments or buildings. The fact is that the deep roots of history and empire cannot be thrown away from the citizen's everyday life. Besides, the mentality of the white Anglo-Saxons and the way in which they used to define themselves - as race and ethnicity - in opposition to the others is an issue to be taken into consideration; it requires special attention for the reinterpretation of the situation in the postcolonial period and the reconstitution of contemporary cultural identity.

History is, therefore, the area where the origins and characteristics of "Englishness" can be discovered as well as its relation to "Britishness"; it involves the acceptance and absorption of the other neighbouring ethnicities (see the Welsh) and even the relation to European/ continental cultural identities. Similarly, English identity could be seen and explained as a consequence of the imperial venture/ "mission", including, first, England's hegemony over the rest of the British Isles, and the later annexation of territories overseas and domination over other populations. As regards the "English nationalism" / "Englishness", it really showed itself in England's history only for a short period of time, when it took the form of "Protestant identity", defined against the Catholic nationalism in Europe; it rose once again as a popular form of patriotism in the late 19th century, when Britain's imperial power was at its height. It happened due to a process of "institutionalization" obvious in school curricula, books of "national verse" and celebrations.

Nowadays, what the attentive observers of the British reality can notice is the wake of the cultural "break up of Britain" under the pressure of the cultural multi-ethnic evidence, and with the simultaneous attempt to rearticulate the national identities of the former constituting parts.

An example could be the flag of St. George- the symbol of English identity- replacing, in recent years, the British “Union Jack” in public visibility at some key moment and events, (I personally must confess the shock of seeing the English flag so often shown in London, not only with public institutions but even on private cars, a fact which I had not noticed on the occasion of my visit to the city ten years before). It seems that this symbol has allowed new and mobile forms of multi/ethnic inclusiveness which transcend the Union Jack’s exclusion of others.

Anyway, multi-ethnicity is more and more recognized and accepted as a reality of the present U.K.; besides, there are new forms of political and religious assertiveness in seek of not just toleration but also recognition and respect as legitimate elements of contemporary British culture.

On the other hand, it seems that in spite of the claims about the emergence of a multicultural “New Britain”, the members of the ethnic minorities living in the country still suffer from a variety of forms of cultural racism; at the same time - in the presence of a complex relationship between ethnic and religious identities- it seems that many of these minorities do not compete with the sense of “Britishness”, and they even show some anxieties about the extent to which their claims on “Britishness could really be accepted by white Britons. (This is especially the case of South Asians who show the preference for a religious identity- the Muslim one- before considering themselves as belonging to a British-Asian culture).

Complex political situations complicate the problem of “Britishness” due to the developments which take place in the other regions: Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

As regards Northern Ireland it is obvious that the potential of “peace process” seems still fragile and threatened with the old mentalities. The scholars agree that deindustrialization and demographic changes transformed the society; besides, some other events such as the growing importance of transnational forces (the Irish diaspora in the U.S.), Eire’s strong EU involvement, economic pressure towards European integration, seem to work together towards the region’s transformation, and contribute to the building up of a future whose sources of inspiration seems to be found outside the region’s borders. In this context, the meaning of “Britishness” is hard to define.

The recent developments in Scotland show a trend directed towards the renegotiation of the region’s place in the Union. In the context of the formation of the British state, Scotland had enjoyed a better position in comparison with the other regions, being allowed to run its own internal political affairs as regards the legal, financial, educational and religious systems, as well as at the level of local government. Nowadays, in the new context of Europeanization and globalization a significant shift has become obvious in the way in which Scotland is trying

to adjust its position as part of the politics of cultural identity; in this respect the setting up of the Scottish Parliament is leading the way in finding a solution to the situation which determined the formation of the British state.

In Wales, the same trend has brought about the setting up of the "national Assembly", a sort of Welsh Parliament. The first election's for the National Assembly took place in 1999, a significant event which reshaped the national attitude of the Welsh. It could be considered as part of the Europeanization process and of the idea of a Europe of the regions. With it, a sense of Europe-oriented Welsh position could be thought about, as well as a new meaning for Welshness, a concept undoubtedly influenced by the events.

The new developments in Wales have drawn the attention to the fact that a more complex process of modernization has emerged; the first Welsh TV channel has come into being, as well as a first Welsh language rock group, a very important event as it reminds the young generation of the existence of their almost forgotten language. It is true that, compared to Scotland with a better articulated society and a stronger sense of national identity, the Welsh society is weaker, showing a cultural identity which is still diffused and fractured. However, the strong support for the 1999 elections to the Assembly indicated a new civic spirit which opened the perspective for a genuine Welsh politics, and, with it, the rebirth of "Welshness," a fact which could, in time, affect the idea of "Britishness".

The complex and contradictory definition of "Britishness" which definitely requires realignment according to the 3rd millennium realities is analyzed by Peter Taylor in his essay "*Which Britain? Which England? Which North?*" In comparison with the term "Englishness", he stresses the idea that the profound dilemmas with which the U.K.'s inhabitants are confronted require classification and resolution.

Therefore, he argues that the present moment is one of politico-cultural choice for the citizens of the U.K. and he refers to the stringent task of classifying the English vs British culture. In his analysis he introduces three fundamental aspects of the problem which finally could make up a new "image" of what "Britishness" really is:

1. The common substitution of Englishness for Britishness (predominant among the English, who represent the majority of the citizens) a shift resulting from the English cultural politics of patronizing the non-English (the fact made the other peoples' cultural identities practically invisible);
2. The association of "Englishness" with the country-side and its village culture which determined the polarization North (industrial)- South (rural);
3. The consideration of the urban and industrial northern culture as a unitary entity irrespective of its complexity and diversity.

The suggestions made by Taylor on how the cultural-political dilemmas can be overcome could be considered an interesting solution to the problem of English vs British national identity. Thus, what he considers significant is “the logic of economic and cultural globalization which has given a new importance to city regions” (Taylor, 2001:127). His hopes are placed in a new urbanism with cosmopolitan and multicultural possibilities.

Therefore, the old ways of considering the national culture/ identity are still perceived, by some scholars, as significant for the maintenance of the existing values and of a “national home”, while, for others, the old ways represent fundamental obstacles to the creation of a more cosmopolitan order in Britain.

The latter ones argue that in the new global context, with changing centres as part of a changing world order, Britain’s position and its national culture moves to a new, different direction which implicitly means transformation.

It goes without saying that during the period when Britain had maritime power and the prestige of an empire there was a high point in British global hegemony, but with the things changed, Britain suffered the decline of authority and the decentering of its position. The adaptation to the new condition is not simple or easy because of the complexity of the situation determined, on the one hand, by the multiculturalism which is showing off, and by the contradictions caused by the old perceptions which stay in the way of change, on the other hand. As Bill Schwarz (Schwarz, 2001:157) says “Britain is struggling in its attempt to Europeanize itself, as the sense of its own providential history weighs it down in an almost metaphysical relation to its own cultural sovereignty”.

A very interesting view expressed by David Morley and Kevin Robins (Morley and Robins, 1995) on the contradictions emerging in the European Union’s attempts to reconstruct itself as a global, integrated space of Euroculture. As part of these attempts, “Little Englandism” is confronted with fears, discomfort and disillusionment.

According to them, the present situation can be defined as “divergent”, with one direction moving towards the more pragmatic projects of the state/ some groups, and another which tends to preserve the more “archaic” imperatives of a nation “trapped” in the relative historical stability of its culture.

These divergent trends become obvious in the field of culture, heritage and arts, the consumer culture and lifestyle, as well as in the cultural politics of the so called “New Age”. Each of these fields can be analyzed and the clash between the forces of tradition, on the one hand, and modernization, on the other, can be clearly noticed.

Here are some examples:

In the field of *culture, heritage and art* there is a tendency which calls for a return to "Victorian Values"(see Thatcherism in mid 80s') with due consideration given to tradition, as a way of understanding what "national identity" really means; in this respect "tradition" is continuously reinvented, as it can be seen in the case of monarchy, kept as a central institution of British culture (e.g. the story of Charles and Diana, and everything it meant for TV and the press). From this perspective "heritage" has become a "key" word, defining Britain in the eyes of the foreigners, and not only. However, in spite of different institutionalized symbols, modernization, in its turn, invades reality and the different forms of art, music, literature, visual arts a.s.o. are obvious examples; the works of art produced in Britain reflect not only the so-called "white" productions, but also the outcomes of the "non white" cultures expressing the present Britain' multicultural identity (e.g. : writers such as Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Zadie Smith a.s.o. or musical forms of expression, - New Asian underground music). The latter ones are not only tolerated by also recognized, accepted and appreciated. This attitude is an evidence of a new mentality obvious especially with the young generation.

In the field of *lifestyle and consumer culture* the rise of different forms of standardization and globalization is clear, making up a new type of cultural model, easily identified worldwide. One of these forms is the "shopping culture" – "the shopping malls" – creating optional identities available for the individuals, "off the peg", in an endless expansion of choices, and of great flexibility. This model which has invaded Britain comes in opposition to the old one which used to pin the individuals into their own social or professional identity; an example, which mirrors the change produced in the individuals' mentality refers to the growing interest in the personal image, the so-called "look", focused on the body itself as an object to be physically trained and improved; hence, a whole range of physical activities (gym, jogging, body-building, dance) which represent aspects of ordinary everyday life, for an ever larger number of people, while sportswear and sports garments have become items of fashion.

It is obvious that the present global consumerism has largely diminished the personal identity of the individuals as it was understood in the old, traditional patterns. If these transformations have been encouraged by the society development and its wealth, being up to a certain extent appreciated, there are some other aspects which refer to the individuals' lifestyle and which produce anxiety, determining calls to the "old values"; they primary refer to the old "family values", and there are many voices, politicians or commentators, who insist on the reestablishment of the traditional family; anyway the reality is different now with an increasing number of women representing the labour force, single-person households, part-time working people on the background of gendered roles fundamentally changed. A "new image" of the contemporary individual

man/woman has already emerged, while the people ready to be regimented in the new pattern.

In the same direction of the lifestyle divergent trends, the opposing groups which reflect different mentalities can also be considered, from the new environmentalists to the traditionalist lobbies acting in defense of some old values (e.g. the confrontations regarding fox-hunting).

There are also strange groups who have emerged as, for example, those which form the “new age” religions asserting values closely connected to the old traditions of either mysticism and pacifism or astrology.

Another field of confrontation between the old and new mentalities is present in the public culture sector. Up to the present time the political culture put into practice by the public culture sector has centred its effort on the construction of the image of Britishness; with this aim in view the public culture sector contributed to the binding and unification of those forces which, otherwise, could have worked in different directions, threatening to produce centrifugal tendencies. In this respect, media culture, in general, and particularly BBC culture, became symbols of Britishness in the world. Nowadays, as a result of the action of the forces of commercialism, technological change, of privatized consumerism and its inherent individualism the old symbols started to be undermined, the different forms of public culture have been weakened and, more than that, many of the forms of public provisions like public transport, railway system since privatization, and even education have become discredited. According to Ken Worpole et al. (Worpole, 1996: 52) the town centres and other public spaces are subject to be colonized by “aggressive forms of masculine culture, “no-man’s land”, quite at odds with traditional conceptions of the “public” as a space of sociability and trust”. In such a context even the idea of “community” is differently perceived, signalling a crisis of the collective belonging.

As regards the political life, the global market and increased privatization made people accept the model of a state with a reduced role where the individual must buy almost everything (education, pension rights, health) on the private market, in most cases, as a user/consumer of the internet. Under such circumstances the contrast between the mentality of the old consumer used to share with others the symbolic space of public service and the mentality of the modern consumer becomes obvious.

Thus, the British reality shows a mixture of the old and the new, both of them acting in a mobile cultural context which produces unexpected hybrid cultural forms and, undoubtedly, reshape an image of what “Britishness” used to mean and be.

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