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The Self and the Other in the British National Context

Gabriel ROMAN- BĂRBUŢI¹

Abstract:

In this article we want to analyze the concepts of identity and multiculturalism, particularly with reference to the British context. In this regard, we present a brief analysis and display on historical view, as being emblematic of the issue exposed. Multiculturalism is considered as the only solution for the reconciliation of the two perspectives: Englishness and Britishness. Multiculturalism tries to solve the old syntagma of "us and the other" by replacing it with a slightly different approach to this age old relationship. Contemporary multiculturalism appears as a form of cultural or rejuvenation, which is necessary for any given culture to continue existing.

Keywords:

nationhood, multicultural patterns, multiculturalism, identity.

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Part 1: The Self

On the question of identity and nationhood

The Self and the Nation are probably the two most influential concepts of the XX-th century. The ontological and the national problem have so much influenced the last hundred years that it would be almost impossible to think of the XX-th century without coming back to one of these two dilemmas. From Conrad to the postmodernists, literature was faced with the continuous task of defining identities: personal identities, group identities, class identities and, importantly enough, national identities.

From World War One through World War Two, the global map has been constantly redrawn to fit the political demands of its age. Countries have been created, engulfed, dismembered. Borders have been arranged and rearranged, and each new change has brought about the emergence of new national mythologies. The general tendency, at least in the Europe of the last century was the passing from the imperial stage to the national one and finally, towards the end of the century to the regional (or federal) one.

This was also the pre-eminent phenomenon in the case of Great Britain. When Queen Victoria died, in 1901, Great Britain was the greatest power in the world, spreading across about a quarter of the globe. After 1945, it started to lose its imperial possessions, being practically reduced to its former island territories. Finally, towards the end of the previous century, even the composing countries of the kingdom began to start their own struggles for independence, in search of a path of their own.

In front of this shifting evolution, the issue of national identity becomes an even more poignant one. What does it mean to be British? And what does it mean to be English? Do the two definitions overlap? Or are they totally opposed terms that stand for the two main viewpoints on national identity (race versus place)? And, finally, how inclusive are these terms? Who is in and who is left out of these ever-shifting identities? To make things ever more complicated, it is not only the "insiders" (the white, English population) that are faced with answering these questions, but this pondering also becomes a central theme of the colonial outsider's ontological quest.

The former colonists were put in front of choosing between their ancient, tribal identity, their colonial, British identity, and their forcedly and often artificial post-colonial national identity. Most of them usually chose the third. But there were also hundreds of thousands that came to Great Britain, attempting to integrate themselves as full citizens of the former empire. What were these? Can we consider them British or not? Or, to go even further, can we see them as English?

Englishness, Britishness, multiculturalism, post colonialism, post imperialism – these are the terms that mark and define the blurry borders of national identity in our age. Often used, but rarely thoroughly analyzed, and even less fully understood, each of these terms stands for a different definition of what national identity and its related issues mean.

Britishness or Englishness? On a long ongoing debate

"English, I mean British"- this familiar locution alerts us immediately to one of the enduring perplexities of English national identity.² Indeed, a clear separation of Britishness and Englishness has always been a difficult task, as the two terms seem to be in a relationship of historical dichotomy and mutual exclusion: when one is on the rise, the other is low. England's long-lasting tradition as an empire meant that its people had great difficulty in defining their national identity. Even a term like "English nationalism" sounds particularly strange to English ears: nationalism is for lesser people, while the English were, and still are, to some extent, an imperial people. They can identify with institutions (like the Monarchy or the Parliament), but have not very much cultivated an ethnic identity.

Still, as it has been stated, a lowering in one sentiment means a rise in the other. In 2005 the <u>Commission for Racial Equality</u> published a report entitled "Citizenship and Belonging: What is Britishness?" to examine the way in which British people of different ethnic backgrounds thought about Britishness. The Commission reported that:

As White people involved in the study were asked to talk about Britishness, many immediately and spontaneously changed the topic of discussion slightly talking instead about a perceived decline in Britishness. This happened in all focus groups with White people. They attributed the decline to four main causes: the arrival of large numbers of migrants; the 'unfair' claims made by people from ethnic minorities on the welfare state; the rise in moral pluralism; and the failure to manage ethnic minority groups properly, due to what participants called political correctness.³

The decline in Britishness might seem as a natural phenomenon, following the collapse of the "outer empire" and the apparently inherent

² Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p.3.

³ All information and quotes concerning this report are taken from the online version of the document, which appears at the internet address:

http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/Pages/default.aspx (accessed 22 February 2008).

⁴ The terms "inner" and "outer" empire will be used throughout the work according to the meaning Krishan Kumar gives them in his *The Making of English National Identity (2003)*.

collapse of the "inner empire" (as Scottish and Welsh nationalisms are on a rise), but there is one more thing that seems to be giving the notion its final blow: the post-war mass immigrations. Britishness has become, as a term defining national belonging, terribly outdated, rather used by the multiculturalists to express the feeling of the island's diversity. Instead, it has become more and more replaced by Englishness.

As long as England, through its imperial endeavours, was the centre of the western world, the notion of being English was regarded as a powerful datum (in the same respect that being white is never referred to as an "ethnic minority," or men never think of themselves as a gender) which was not under questionings. But with the loss of the Empire, the ongoing mass immigrations from the former colonies and the resurgence of "inner empire" nationalisms, the idea of rethinking Englishness did not seem so odd anymore.

In his quintessential work, *Nation and Naration*, important post-colonial critic Homi Bhabha argues that every nation defines itself by simultaneously gazing inward, to regard the "*heimlich* pleasures of the heart" and outward, to confront and repudiate the "*unheimlich* terror of the space or race of the other".⁵ If this be considered as true, what did the English nation see when it regarded a global beyond that was also an imperial within?

If Englishness has been understood less as a natural condition and more as a sort of second nature, as something that is communicated to the subject by certain identity-reforming places, as something that can be both acquired and lost, could the global reaches of the empire contain spaces in which one could be English? Or was the empire truly beyond the borders of Englishness, a radically alien outside within which the colonist would inevitably confront the Kurtzean spectacle of himself or herself "going native"? Was the empire the domain of England's mastery of the globe or the territory of the loss of Englishness?⁶

Losing the empire, slowly but surely, meant that this paradoxical problem became more and more stringent. Up to one point the West Indian or Asian was considered a British subject. Of course, in most cases it did not have the same rights as the colonists, but his sovereign was still the British monarch and British law was considered the guideline of his actions. But with the loss of imperial possession, this former Asian, coming over to Great Britain, or even being a second generation citizen, is in a serious dilemma: what is he now? He is

⁵ Homi Bhabha, Nation and Narration, London: Routledge, 1990, p.2.

⁶ Ian Baucom, Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, p.6.

no longer British, for Britishness is in the current state of events an outdated notion; is he English?

"The West Indian or Asian does not, by being born in England, become an Englishman. In law he becomes a United Kingdom citizen by birth; in fact, he is a West Indian or an Asian still". This categorical statement of Enoch Powell, ultra-conservative MP famous for his racist prejudices, comes, paradoxically, in the same time in accordance to many of the governmental policies of the late 70s and 80s, and in contrast to the notion of multiculturalism and ethnic indulgence as it has come to be understood by Great Britain throughout its history and has been promoted by the Labour Government throughout the nineties.

Multicultural patterns

"Who am I?" or "Who are We?" – has there been a more poignant question asked by humanity throughout the century that has just ended? It is a question that has caused debate at almost every level of human understanding, from physics to philosophy, from religion to sociology. Literature, as well, is imbued with this ontological quest: from Conrad to the postmodernists, it continues to define and redefine identities - personal identities, group identities, class identities and, importantly enough, national identities.

The dilemma of identity is of course older than the XX-th century, having its theoretical grounding in the XVII-th century's debate between the empiricists and rationalists, and being practically as old as mankind itself⁸. But never has this question been so stringently and obsessively re-asked as in the last hundred years. As for the answer, the most frequent one is also one of the simplest: "I (or we) am (are) not the other".

Us and the Other: the axis that binds together these terms regroups the essential of human reports. History itself is, in its own way, nothing more than just a discourse formed around the opposing and complementary principles of identity and otherness.

The famous French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss observed the simultaneous presence in the *savage thinking* of two contradictory values of otherness and universality. For the tribe, what is found outside its perimeter pertains to a different humanity, even to the non-human, but in the same time –

⁷ Enoch Powell stated this in 1968, as a follow-up to his famous *Rivers of Blood* address, which we will discuss later on.

⁸ In one of the first known works of literary fiction, the story of the Sumerian king Gilgamesh, we can already detect some early existentialist strains of thinking, related to man's fate and position on earth.

thanks to the totemic system – human beings (and even some animals) are invited to some sort of universal fraternity. Our own technological society invented nothing new from this point of view: today, as well as yesterday, one might notice the same swing between group and species, between valuing, even exacerbating the differences and their blurring.

History proves, however, that otherness is more influent than universality. Peculiar traits of an "exotic" civilization makes us easily forget the common legacy of races and cultures: pursuing the course of the human collective imaginary, we are forced to accept that differences have imposed themselves better to the spirit than similitude. "Tribalism", nationalism, racism come just from this durable structure of the imaginary. From the ancient Greece and Rome's classification of the different populaces as civilized versus savage to Huntington's contemporary theorizing on the "clash of civilizations", this sort of dichotomist Manichaeism of the relationship self – other has been one of the basic driving forces of human actions throughout history.

But with the emergence of ever larger societies, ultimately leading to the global society of today, with the evolution of such feelings as sameness and belonging and with the ever-growing interdependence between formerly isolated factors, the concept of otherness had to be rethought. Who is the other in a global society like ours? Against who or what are we to compare ourselves? Tribe-nation-race-planet — this ever more inclusive grouping of human collectivities meant that nobody was being left outside. This eventually led to even more confusion in trying to define ourselves. Rimbaud's apparently nonsensical statement of Je est un autre¹⁰ makes perfect sense from the point of view of the modernist and especially postmodernist identity confusion.

Multiculturalism, thus, comes just to offer a solution to this contemporary perplexity. It is actually a simple solution, because the only new aspect it brings is that of conciliating the two age-old complementary notions of otherness and universality. Simplifying as much as possible the concept, what it actually states is that we are both different and the same, and that it is just this *coincidentia oppositorum* that eventually defines our true identity. Being part of a global society, we can no longer define ourselves by contrast to something or someone, but in the same time, for the sake of diversity, we can not as well fully adopt the concept of universality. Rather, multiculturalism tries to achieve a *consensus* between the two, to incorporate both the particular and the general into one overarching cultural pattern.

⁹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée Sauvage*, Plon, Paris, 1985, p.201.

¹⁰ I am another (Fr.)

Multiculturalism tries to solve the old dichotomist syntagm of "us and the other" by replacing it with a slightly different approach to this age old relationship. The game of alterities is suppressed, and the other is ultimately substituted with its milder semantic form - "different", thus definitely shifting the focus from the classical contradiction between syntactical subjects towards a more post-modern understanding of the terms as springing from a form of organic difference (or "différance", to paraphrase Derrida's famous notion).

Today, these notions are regarded as being a rather "modern invention", namely having emerged and evolved as a form of ideology mainly in the second half of the century, being in close connection to such events as the fall of colonial empires and the massive waves of immigration that followed. This viewpoint sees multiculturalism as a form of moral and cultural crisis, or at least as a response to a critical and confusing situation. Another way of looking at multiculturalism is that of considering it as a phenomenon that has existed, under different forms, since ancient times.

In the Hellenistic era, which lasted from the late 4th century BC to at least the 7th century AD, the Greeks encountered four other civilizations: Roman, Celtic, Judaic, and Persian. What happened in that era was genuinely multicultural, but not by design. As the historian Arnaldo Momigliano pointed out¹¹, Hellenistic civilization had all the instruments for knowing other civilizations except command of languages, and all the marks of a conquering and ruling class except faith in its own wisdom. Signs of multiculturalism can as well be seen in all the major cultures throughout time, from the Romans to Islam or to Ancient China.

In fact, all cultures have displayed deep ambivalence toward strangers, who pose a challenge to the fixed system of ritual, folkways, and traditions. Whether these strangers are ultimately treated with hostility or admiration depends heavily on the vitality of the "receiving" culture. When a culture loses its inner security, strangers appear more threatening.

Thus, contemporary multiculturalism, from this point of view, appears more as a form of flexibility or cultural rejuvenation, necessary for any given culture to continue existing and its powerful re-emergence in the post-imperial period is an organic reaction to a phenomenon that had reshaped the world maps and had rethought the ideological, national and ethnic relations of the previous centuries.

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¹¹ See Arnaldo Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom: the limits of Helenization*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990.

The British multiculturalism

National identity exists, as Khomi Bhabha stated it, of two parts: *the self*, reflected through nationalism, national pride etc. and *the other*, manifested as a dialectical component that constantly mirrors and shapes the self. Multiculturalism is just the way in which every nation chooses to reflect the other. The heterogeneousness of multiculturalism makes it difficult to be clearly defined and pinpointed; as with national identity, it is a concept dependant on historical and local circumstances.

Different multicultural patterns come from the different historical manners of treating colonial subjects; probably the two most well known "multiculturalisms" (if it be allowed to use a plural for the sake of emphasis) are the French and the British one. Compared with the French, whose goal was assimilation and whose methods therefore involved direct rule and integration of the colonies in a uniform system of administration centred on Paris, British imperial rule was generally indirect and marked by considerable local variation. ¹²

One important consequence of this policy was the willingness to accept a greater variety of customs and cultures than was true in the French case. Such an attitude of pluralism made it easier for British statesmen to espouse a policy of 'multiculturalism' when, in the post-war period, the question arose of how best to integrate immigrants into British society. Taken with the absence, among English people themselves, of any clear sense of what English national identity might mean, this policy was by far the best answer to the challenge posed by mass immigration.

But what seems completely reasonable at one point becomes unacceptable and problematic at another. Tolerant British ethnic policies bring about periods of unrest. The post-war labour governments fail to achieve the process of "integration without assimilation" ¹³. In 2001, a series of ethnic-driven riots sparked in the North of England and in areas strongly populated by immigrants (like certain neighbourhoods in Bradford, Leeds, Burnham or other northern cities of England), questioning first hand the actual success of labour's ethnic and cultural integration program.

But probably the most symbolic failure of British multicultural policies was the 7/7 bomb attacks of London. The biggest shock of this attack was that it was perpetrated and planned by English-born, British citizens. This seemed to overthrow not only the theories of the success of British multiculturalism, but also the old British concept of *Jus Soli* ("right of the soil") which stated the

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¹² Krishan Kumar, "English and French national identities: comparisons and contrasts", in *Nations and Nationalism*, 12.3., 2006, p.423.

¹³ This syntagm stands as a basic definition of the British multicultural project.

prevalence of birthright citizenship and which had stood at the basis of defining British identity for the past hundreds of years in Great Britain. If British citizens could citizens could perpetrate such a brutal attack on the nation that adopted and accepted them as they were, didn't that mean that Powell and all the other extreme right politicians were somehow right to state the impossibility of ethnic integration, up to several generations of British-born immigrants?

In front of such clear evidence, even the prime-minister of the time and main supporter of multicultural policies, Tony Blair, had to concede to the "failure of multiculturalism" and the need for re-instituting a system of national values.

1.1. Playing with words

National selfness and cultural otherness are, as we have noticed, the two defining and dialectical parts of the more encompassing general perspective on national identity. However, we have seen that these are terms that rarely have a fixed identity, but rather continuously re-invent themselves, according to history and politics. They are also, as we shall observe in the chapters to come, dependant of the political perspective: Britishness in the post-imperial era is for the left the triumph of the multicultural model and of the welfare state; for the right it is the patrimony of the empire, a system of values that needs to be protected and isolated; for the extreme right, it is the symbol of whiteness and English superiority.

Multiculturalism can also be submitted to various, often paradoxical views: from those praising it as the most adequate manner of social integration, to those disavowing it for the lack of social cohesion it provides. It is difficult, on the whole, however, to say which definition to these terms is the most accurate; rather everybody must decide for itself on these matters. But in order to do so, one must first analyze the given data: historical framework and evolution as well as the perspectives and solutions each definition offers. Playing with national mythologies is a tricky business, which often stirs up extreme and illogical passions and debates.

Part 2: The Other

Noble or ignoble? England meets the savage

The Age of Discoveries brought not only a tremendous boost for Western Europe at the economic and political level, but it also represented a great change in the register of the collective imaginary of its society. A new character made its way in the panoply of symbolic figures. By definition, he is interpreted as the other, not only a mere opposite to the civilized westerner, but also a mirror into which the latter gazes, in his attempts to find meaning and to define selfness.

The savage – this is indeed the greatest mystery and attraction the New World has to offer. The American savages, integrated in the system of the world in the age of the Renaissance become the direct continuators of the ancient Greek tradition of the Barbarian at world's end, as well as becoming the direct target of the modern prejudices on religion, philosophy and ideology:

Pagans, superstitious, lacking everything and cannibalistic by nature, they were devalued in rapport to European religion, reason and civilization. But, following the dialectics of alterity, they have been in the same time, valued. As once the ancient Greek or Chinese, [...] the modern West has also appealed to its savages. Good and evil savages had roles appointed to them. From this contrasting perspective we must judge the discourse on the exotic space, be it America (synthesis of everything good and evil), Africa (the negative pole of savageness) or Polinesia ("the noble savage" in its entire splendour). 14

Indeed, the savage is a complex and shifting figure. Shakespeare sees in it a deformed sub-human (that is how he describes Caliban, the native inhabitant of the island in "The Tempest"), while Montaigne or More use their savages to portray the moors and faults of their contemporary society. Finally, Dryden, in "The Conquest of Granada", for the first time uses the stereotypical expression "noble savage", which will later on rise to fame with the help of French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau.

So which of these is the "true" savage? Opinions vary, from person to person and from one age to another. Two things are certain: first, the West is fascinated by the savage. When Pocahontas, the Amerindian princess, marries John Rolfe, in 1614, and decides to come to England in order to make peace and aid to the development of good trades and relationships between her people and the English, she quickly becomes the darling of London society. When she dies, in 1617, she becomes a legend and a symbol.

Secondly, as much as Western society was intrigued by the savage, it did not hesitate to kill, sicken or imprison him. The exact number of Amerindians killed in the period 1490-1890 is still a question of debate, but historians estimate numbers tolling up to 100 million¹⁵ The smallpox disease was the most important factor, but the human one also bears significant importance.

¹⁴ Lucian Boia, *Pentru o istorie a imaginarului*, Humanitas, Bucuresti, 2006, p.120.

¹⁵ David Stannard, American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992, p.147.

Thus, in the first two centuries since discovering the New World, the Westerners manage to solve the problem of the American savage: 90 to 95% of the native population becomes extinct. This is not an isolated phenomenon: in Australia or in Africa, tens of thousands of natives are killed in the wars for conquest.

Admired or deprecated, loved or feared: this is the story of the savage in the first centuries of its contact with the English. He is everything imaginable, except for what he should be most: a human person with a voice and soul of its own. The savage, in the age of discoveries, never answers back. He never has opinions; one might even doubt that he is entirely human. In the XIX-th century, racism and evolutionism equally contributed to the lowering of the non-European, decreeing the other races as less successful out of biological criteria. "They (the savages-n.t.) were pictured, on the scale of time, as stages long overpassed by white civilization. Ethnology and prehistory were thus united. To approach prehistoric man, time travel was no longer necessary; spatial travel was sufficient". ¹⁶ For five centuries, the savage is denied a voice of his own; he only gets one late in the XX-th century.

The other answers back - postcolonial identities

Identity, by definition, is a two-sided problem. On one side, we have the self perceived image, on the other we have the image projected to the exterior. National identity does not differ from this; and if we are to analyze correctly the way in which post-war immigration has affected the notion of national identity in England and Britain, we must also take into account the "voice" of the other, of the former colonist.

The other, had been perceived, by definition, as an inferior being. A survey in the 1960s suggested that two-thirds of white Britons considered the British superior to Africans and Asians. Less than a quarter considered Americans inferior, and just above one-third considered Europeans inferior. The general British perception was that they "gave the natives railways, hospitals, schools and roads and what is more taught them how to administer their countries." ¹⁷ So how could the British listen and accept what the "natives" had to say? From the beginning this seemed an impossible dialogue, for, as postcolonial writer Salman Rushdie points out:

¹⁶ Lucian Boia, *Dona secole de mitologie nationala*, Humanitas, Bucuresti, 2005, p.121.

¹⁷ Paul Ward, Britishness since 1870, Routledge, London, 2004, p.136.

Four hundred years of conquest and looting, four centuries of being told that you are superior to the Fuzzy-Wuzzies and the wogs, leave their stain. This stain has seeped into every part of the culture, the language and daily life. 18

But the responses were ambiguous not only on behalf of the dominant, white population, but also on the other side of the "barrier". The ancient British subject saw himself, after the fall of the Empire, become alienated and foreign, in conflict with their old national and imperial allegiances. Walter Lothen, another migrant from Jamaica, recalled that 'When I came here I didn't have a status as a Jamaican. I was British and going to the mother country was like going from one parish to another. You had no conception of it being different.' Post-imperial national identity often stressed these differences, in a brutal manner.

So, what was the answer the "native" gave to the different manifestations of Britishness? In a post-war study on Polish immigration to Great Britain, Jerzy Zubrzycki identified three main responses on the part of the immigrants: assimilation, accommodation and conflict. ²⁰ Jan Kowalski, a member of the Polish intelligentsia who had found his way to Britain during the war and had served in the Polish army, was disillusioned by the defeat of Poland and its subordination to the Soviet Union and hence explained how 'I have ... adapted myself wholly to British ways of life ... After all - I eat their bread. Once I earn my living in this country - why should I stick to my pre-war national loyalties?'

Franciszek B. explained that he admired the English, but remained Polish, accommodating himself to Britain rather than assimilating into its ways. In part, this was because of the response he met from English friends, 'who have known me for a long time [but] very often instruct me in a very paternal manner about the a, b, c, of what is called "The British Way of Living".

The third form was conflict, expressed in the attempted suicide of 'Maria', who had migrated from a displaced persons' camp and been employed within an English family who not only were unkind to her but whose irreligious behaviour she found unacceptable.

However, the overwhelming majority of cases has become fully integrated into British society and has accepted the British way of life, in the same time altering it through its actions. Through a phenomenon of symbiosis,

¹⁸ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, Penguin, London, 1991, p.130.

¹⁹ Paul Ward, Britishness since 1870, Routledge, London, 2004, p.137.

²⁰ All the information on this study are taken from the recounting Ward (2004) makes on the subject in pp.111-114.

the two defining parts, multiculturalism and nationality, have become so intertwined, that it is difficult to separate one from the other. As author David Dabydeen points out: 'You cannot be Guyanese without being British.' But as he continues, white Britons are equally imperial in background: 'And you cannot be British without being Guyanese or Caribbean'²¹.

For this is what Britishness has come to symbolize, in the post-imperial milieu: a perfectly integrated society, going beyond both the rightist nostalgic isolation and the leftist multiculturalism, which has proven itself flawed out of too much political correctness. This integrated, unified and interdependent spirit is indeed one that is connected to Britain's imperial legacy. Most white Britons have, after half a century of black and Asian immigration and descendancy, begun to come to terms with the need to define a new way of being British, because black and Asian Britons have insisted that they do so. Many, probably most, British people, white and black, have seen the experience of immigration and ethnic diversity as a positive benefit to British culture and identity.

²¹ Apud Ward, quoted work, p.122.

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