Is there an English Nationalism?

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Acknowledgments

Introduction

Much attention has been paid to the resurgence of Englishness, and of 'the English question', in the period since the late 1990s.[1] Central to this debate has been the issue of likely and/or appropriate political consequences emerging from such a resurgence. But an accurate appreciation of the political impact of New Englishness will depend on whether we are witnessing English *nationalism*, or instead the partly overlapping but politically less forceful phenomenon of English *national identity*.[2]

The distinction is vitally important (Mandler 2006) because – as this paper will argue – nationalism involves the politics of struggle and power in ways not necessarily associated with expressions of national identity. Nationalism, therefore, carries greater and potentially much more threatening weight than does national identity, in terms of its effect on state politics, policy and response.

Despite this, analysis of English nationalism as such has been comparatively limited to date. The bibliography to Arthur Aughey's excellent book, *The Politics of Englishness*, lists 648 items, with only six of these titles mentioning the phrase 'English nationalism' (Aughey 2007). If nationalism has been under-scrutinised in the contemporary English context, it is also true that the term has often been deployed in an unhelpfully blurred sense, as though it merges almost synonymously with the phenomena referred to by the terms 'nation', 'nationality' or 'national identity'.

This paper therefore asks the important question: 'Is there an English nationalism?'[3] It does so on the basis of a precise definition of the various terms involved. In particular, it is argued that we can only satisfactorily answer the question about whether there is a contemporary English nationalism if we set out systematically what nationalism actually is, and then examine the complexities of the English case when set against that definition. Only on the basis of a theoretical definition and explanation of nationalism and its dynamics can we avoid circularity in our consideration of the extent to which such a phenomenon actually exists in contemporary England.

The question posed here is one of timely significance, given a series of recent developments. The embedding of a devolutionary UK settlement which some see as unjust in its treatment of England (Hazell 2006); the apparent embarrassment of New Labour in power at the adoption and assertion of Englishness (Kenny and Lodge 2010, Cruddas and Rutherford 2011); the emergence to some prominence of groups such as the English Defence League; and the aforementioned efflorescence of a more assertive popular cultural Englishness – all of these developments render necessary a precise answer to the question of whether an English nationalism has emerged in the early 21st century.

The three parts of the essay will ask inter-related questions. First, what is nationalism? Second, is there an English nationalism? Finally, what are the political and policy implications of our analysis?

The central argument is that what has emerged to date is a resurgent Englishness, rather than an English nationalism, and that this makes appropriate political responses less difficult than some have imagined, if the English question is to be resolved to most people's satisfaction.

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1   See for example Hazell (2006), Aughey (2007) and Kenny and Lodge (2009)

2   Drawing on the work of Anthony Smith, the fundamental features of national identity will here be taken as 'an historic territory, or homeland'; 'common myths and historical memories'; 'a common, mass public culture'; 'common legal rights and duties for all members'; and 'a common economy with territorial mobility for members' (Smith 1991: 14).

3   This paper forms part of ippr's 'English Questions' project. See http://www.ippr.org/research/themes/project. asp?id=4317

What is nationalism?

There are difficulties enough with defining the words 'nation' (a group of people thinking themselves a distinct group characterised by shared descent, history and culture), 'national' (something distinctively characteristic of a nation) and 'nationality' (the fact of belonging to a nation, or the identity or feeling related to it).

Defining 'nationalism' is an even more complex process. But the argument here is that the true definition and explanation of nationalism lie in a particular interweaving of the politics of community, struggle and power. And if we ask what, at root, makes people into nationalists and makes nationalists of so many, then the crucial place to start is with the necessity and appeal of **community**.

The nationalist idea of community resonates with many of humanity's deepest instincts and needs: towards survival, security, protection and safety; towards the fulfilment of practical economic and other needs; and towards belonging, particularly to stable, coherent, meaningful, lastingly special and distinctive groups.

For this process of belonging to work, we require shared means of communication between members of the group, things that provide the basis for durable agreement, coherence, trust and interaction. These can take various forms, and are often enough very practical in addition to their emotional or psychological value. They include territory: the attachment to our own special place, to a land which we work, on whose resources we rely, and from whose distinctive features we derive emotional and practical sustenance. To the centrality of place and national homeland might be added the pivotal communal feature of the people themselves. There are practical dimensions here, since community with those around us is required for our survival. But there are psychological rewards also, because the ennobling of our own special people allows for enhanced individual self-worth, fulfilment, meaning and purpose.

Nationalists often take this further with notions of communal descent. As members of the same nation, so the assumption goes, we are linked by blood. Now this is only partly true, since national groups are not hermetically sealed units of descent, but in fact much more hybrid phenomena. Yet it is not entirely untrue either. The people to whom you are born frequently do determine your national identity, and you are indeed more likely to be related by blood to more members of your own nation than to those of others.

Through much of this, wider linkages of culture represent another means of communication and another explanation of why nationalist community appeals so strongly. This can involve a distinctively shared language, but also metaphorical languages of religion or music or sport or diet or value, among many, which allow for shared interaction and trust and yield meaning within a national group. And the key feature here – whatever our nation – is our own national culture's perceived 'specialness'.

Often tied in with shared culture is a reliance on a sense of shared history. This group we belong to is a lasting one – it has gained worth through its historic achievements and legacies, and has purpose and direction in its imagined future. If national history has reached a low point, then we are united by a sense of the need for historic redemption. There is great and enduring appeal in such historical stories, containing lessons and morals.

And so the national community tends also to have an ethical dimension. Our group is not merely typical in what it embodies, but is characterised by superior moral claims, values, purposes and obligations. A darker feature of nationalist community – but again one which both defines and explains its appeal – is to be found in the idea of exclusivity: what you specially are implies and requires a category of what you are not. If my national culture and history define who is within my community, then they also define who is outside – beyond and excluded from it. This too can appeal to many people, in telling a tale of good versus evil, and in providing comfort and moral certainty at the same time.

National communities do not require all of these features – shared attachments to territory, people, descent, culture, history, ethics and exclusivity – but they do require some of them, and the emotional and practical logic within each of these features helps to explain the existence, durability and pervasiveness of such communal, national groups.

But nationalism involves more than simple membership of such self-conscious community. It also involves **struggle**: collective mobilisation, activity, movement towards change, and a programmatic striving for goals. The latter can vary but may include sovereign independence, secession from a larger political unit, the survival or rebirth of national culture, or the realisation of economic advantage for the national group. History provides many more examples.

Once again, overlapping motivations can be detected. There is the central urge towards self-preservation; the practical pursuit of material interests; the longing for dignity, prestige or meaning; the explicable response to threats (actual or perceived); and the urge to avenge past wrongs and rectify group grievances.

In all of this, nationalist struggle involves the putting right of what is considered wrong in the present. Additionally, in all of this, there is an individual engagement with the organised pursuit of communal goals, with communal advantage that benefits the individual nationalist, and does so in ways which help to explain nationalism's enduring appeal.

If the rewards for the individual are magnified here by involvement in nationalist collectiveness, then it is also worth noting the dual allure of nationalist struggle. There is the instrumental appeal – struggle as a means of achieving worthwhile and necessary goals – but there is also the attraction inherent in struggle itself, with its psychological rewards, and its conferring upon individual and group alike of the very qualities so sought, prized and cherished by the nationalist movement.

How do nationalists pursue such struggle? Sometimes through violence (in wars of national liberation, expansion or annexation), sometimes through electoral and party-political process, sometimes through cultural campaigns and organisations, or sometimes through the embedding of national ideas in repeated rituals and routines, and in the emblems built into national life and place.

Nationalism is not merely about community in struggle but also and centrally about questions of **power**. Power is what is so frequently sought by nationalists, and very often in the form of a state which matches the nation. The deployment of power in pursuit of nationalist objectives defines – and again, I think, helps to explain – nationalist activity. It might even be suggested that, at root, nationalism is really a politics of legitimising power. Nationalists tend to assume the nation to be the appropriate source of political authority, and therefore to seek power for their own distinctive national community. The legitimacy of national power involves the attractive prospect of those in power in your community being like yourself, coming from your own national group and representing your own interests and values.

Nationalist ideas about power focus on the vital notion of sovereignty. Indeed, much of the appeal of nationalism lies in this attachment to the idea of the national community possessing full sovereignty over itself as a free and independent unit. All people within the nation share equally in the sovereign power which makes decisions for the group, and so any law derives ultimately from your own authority. Central to nationalism's appeal is this idea, that by sharing equally in the power which governs us, we are made truly free. As nationalists, we give consent to our national rulers and to their possession of sovereign power. Such individual attachment to the idea of popular national sovereignty seems to make a certain sense because we, as individuals within the national community, have an equal share in the sovereignty through which decisions are made for us. As such, we are supposedly liberated.

This is why state power and self-determination lie so close to the heart of nationalist histories and politics around the world. But if power is the objective and the explanation of so much nationalist struggle, then power too lies at the heart of what it is that nationalists actually do in their day-to-day and year-to-year activities. Power is deployed by nationalist communities in their pursuit, achievement and maintenance of objectives. It is used as leverage in nationalist campaigns for the righting of wrongs, for the winning or defending of freedom or culture. It can be wielded in violent, propagandist, intimidatory, administrative, verbal, literary, state, sub-state and many other forms of persuasion and coercion. This involves mobilisation, rather than merely individual acts, and the attraction of wielding such power helps to explain the durable appeal of nationalism as part of a way of life.

So these notions of community, struggle and power together offer an interwoven definition and explanation of nationalism and its extraordinary dominance in politics and history. It is not that we cannot find other means of identifying and belonging, or of pursuing change and acquiring power.

Rather, the point is this: the particular interweaving of community, struggle and power in the form of nationalism offers far grander opportunities than do these other means. The family, for one, cannot offer the scale of interaction to provide for our necessary exchange or safety. A powerful job will not allow for access to the kind of serious power that is available through nationalism. Sub-national cultural enthusiasm – whether for region, football team or whatever – does not allow for such large-scale, durable, all-inclusive possibilities as would the same writ national.

Indeed, nationalism has an absorptive quality, which allows for it to subsume, incorporate and gain further strength from other areas of our lives in ways that seem to strengthen them too. The family offers comfort and meaning and belonging, but is protected by the power of the national community. Business interests are defended and furthered by the nation. Sporting enthusiasm or musical pride gain distinction and exaltation through their national dimensions. While feminism, socialism or religion may each appeal very powerfully, none can absorb the nation in the way that nationalism can absorb them. In the eyes of so many, nationalism – despite its many failings – has seemed to offer a better set of possibilities than its rivals in world view.

So, if community, struggle and power do between them explain nationalism,[4] then what light does this cast on our English case?

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4   See English (2007) for a fuller exposition of this argument.

Is there an English nationalism?

There is certainly considerable evidence in contemporary England of the first element of nationalism, **community**, and its various shared dimensions. Attachment to territory, and to patriotically apprehended specialness of place, is clear in the arguments of those championing and promoting English identity. For example, Roger Scruton's conception of the importance of the English countryside and landscape is documented in his moving account of England (Scruton 2001), and this pattern is evident in a long tradition of literary, musical and artistic evocations of England in the modern period. Likewise, notions of people and descent are conspicuous, whether in Scruton's own view of the distinctive, associative culture of England, or in the declaration of an English enthusiast such as journalist Simon Heffer that: 'I am very English. My family is English on both sides as far back as you can go' (Heffer 2007).

Heffer and Scruton helpfully provide emblematic evidence of the importance of English culture within a national sense of community. Commenting on the surge of enthusiasm prompted by the Euro '96 football tournament, Heffer has recalled his sudden realisation 'that actually my identity as a citizen was not a British identity: it was an English identity. I began to realise that I was very English' (Heffer 2007). For his part, Scruton has instanced the significance of the cultural legacies of the English Reformation and Protestant religion (Scruton 2001).

Yet there are complicating factors here too, in the realm of the cultural. One recent study of St George's Day identified a widespread sense of Englishness expressed through distinctive language, literature, music, landscape, food and drink, but also found that for many people the distinction between Englishness and Britishness was difficult to make. Indeed, it appeared that for some celebrating Englishness represented a way of celebrating Britishness simultaneously (Mycock and McAuley 2009). This problem can be seen if we return to our emblematic English patriots, Heffer and Scruton. The former has, for example, presented Ralph Vaughan Williams as an English figure, while many of the elements of his moving portrait of the great composer emerge explicitly as British, rather than purely English (Heffer 2000). Roger Scruton's invocation of figures such as Oscar Wilde and Edmund Burke again demonstrates the difficulty of disentangling Englishness from the wider cultures of these islands. And how else would one expect it to be, given physical proximity and centuries of cultural intermingling?

A similar point could be made regarding history. There can be no doubt about the residual force of English historical identity, reflected at popular level by huge interest in books and television treatments of key episodes. But, again, it is hard here to disentangle the English from the British, as numerous high-profile examples demonstrate (Schama 2002, Ferguson 2003, Marr 2007).

That there is an ethical dimension to contemporary English self-image seems unquestionable, whether exemplified by the duty of fighting for, or merely playing sport for, your country. But, again, evidence from people prominent in debates about contemporary Britain would seem to suggest a far from simple picture. Journalist Peter Hitchens has been more prominent than most in trumpeting the need for attention to the ethical dimensions of national life. But it is very much Britain, rather than England, which Hitchens considers the appropriate unit to preserve (Hitchens 2000 and 2007). Hitchens also identifies neatly the existence of our final link in the chain of nationalist community, exclusivity. Contrasting his preferred Britishness with Englishness, he observes: 'Englishness – you've either got it or you haven't got it, it seems to me. It's more exclusive' (Hitchens 2007).

In terms of community, therefore, there is clearly something substantially matching our definition of nationalism in the English case. True – identity and attachment are complicated in important ways by the blurring of Englishness and Britishness. Yet there remain in contemporary England key aspects of those shared communal understandings which lie at the heart of nationalism. If English identity is indeed on the rise in the period since the 1990s (Curtice 2009), then this point carries even greater force.

Nationalism – rather than national identity – requires the additional quality of **struggle**. Here, at present, the notion of an English Nationalism (as opposed to a mere cultural sensibility) seems largely to evaporate. There simply is not the kind of significant, organised political struggle by English nationalists that the UK has seen in Ireland, in Scotland or in Wales (let alone in other settings of nationalist energy around the world).

It is not that there are no efforts towards such struggle. The English Defence League has attempted a right-wing mobilisation in defence of what it sees as English culture and rights, and against the threats and incursions of radical Islam. But the scale and impact of this effusion from angry England have been tiny. Again, the small, vocal 'Campaign for an English Parliament' has shown considerable energy in asserting that only an English parliament will properly answer the English question (Waterhouse 2007), but it has failed to make any serious impression on mainstream political imperatives, or to develop a sufficiently pressing profile to achieve the momentum that it desires.

So, while there has been some noise around specific issues (whether St George's Day or an English parliament), this has not come near to the level required, for example, to define any serious political party. The fact that many who might enthuse over English distinctiveness are happy to engage with parties named UKIP (*United Kingdom* Independence Party) and BNP (*British* National Party) aptly illustrates the situation. Nationalist struggle typically becomes most marked in campaigns against outside interference. But even here, in England, there is a marked lack of expressly *English* nationalism. Anti-European Union sentiment in the 2009 European elections resulted in some conspicuous successes for UKIP and the BNP, rather than for English nationalist parties, and even the English sentiment expressed through the BNP and UKIP remains comparatively marginal within UK politics.

Two wider UK contrasts might serve to underline the point. Clearly, there is nothing in contemporary English political life to compare with the violent, sustained separatist campaign of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) between 1969 and 2005 (English 2004). But neither have English nationalists managed even to emulate the far less serious separatism of Welsh militants (Humphries 2008). Were English nationalism to represent a serious force, then major electoral expression of this would have emerged, and it has not yet done so. But one might also have expected (given the Irish and Welsh comparative cases) that some form of more militant struggle might at least have begun to emerge. This could, perhaps, have formed around the organised pursuit of separate English parliamentary power structures, or the establishment of an explicitly English citizenship, or, indeed, the protection, extension and state-backed implementation of some cultural expressions, such as a more prominent English dimension to the BBC in England. It could, of course, also have manifested itself in explicitly English nationalist political parties, mobilising support and votes for explicitly English nationalist politics. On both counts, the absence of any such serious struggle underlines the fact that this feature of nationalism is currently lacking from English politics. The forces typically propelling people towards such struggle (the sense of foreign intrusion, of cultural suffocation, of economic injustice, and so forth) have not been felt powerfully enough by enough people to produce a significant and distinct English nationalism in the contemporary UK.

Of course, such struggles relate to the third dimension of nationalism: legitimate **power**. Broadly, despite grievances concerning England's current deal under the Union, the question of rearranging state power has not come to motivate or be a priority for significant numbers of English people. There appears no sense of urgency, nor any substantial commitment to change an unacceptable present reality into what English separatists might consider to be a more proper structure or system.

Such mobilisation may, of course, emerge in the future, and resentments concerning inequalities in levels of spending across the UK and the imbalances of parliamentary representation certainly exist. But there has developed no serious political organisation working to make England a political community in its own right (something which would involve momentum towards dismantling the UK, and reinventing power structures). The omission of England from Labour's devolution programme since the 1990s has not prompted a genuine nationalist movement in response (Mitchell 2009, Bryant 2009).

Conclusion

The argument here is that elements – but not enough elements – of an English nationalism currently exist, if we look through the lenses of systematic definition and analysis. What has resurfaced is 'Englishness' – an English cultural sensibility, a feeling of distinct identity based on peculiarly English traditions, practices and attitudes – rather than English form of nationalism. There is significance enough in this cultural and communal resurgence, and its implications should be carefully considered by politicians and policymakers in coming years (Kenny and Lodge 2009). As they do so, however, it is important to distinguish between national sentiment and nationalism, and to reflect on key questions arising from such careful distinction.

In conclusion, I will identify four.

The first question concerns the durability of the United Kingdom. There have long been assumptions made – on the left as well as the right – that the UK and its associated Britishness will inevitably disintegrate and die (Nairn 2000, Heffer 1999). Despite this, there remains considerable practical engagement with the UK across all of its constituent units, and little immediate prospect of the state's disintegration (Mitchell 2009). Even the most conspicuous setting for sustained separatist violence – Northern Ireland, to which none of the other three parts of the UK can compare in terms of an aggressive campaign for independence – has seen, in fact, a settlement which involves leading members of the formerly violent separatist movement administering a reformed version of UK government in Belfast (English 2004).

It is true that the UK and Britishness lack the emotional power of a person's attachments to England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland or Ulster. It may also be true that what decisively holds the UK together is a mixture of perceived economic advantage and comparative political apathy. Nonetheless, most people clearly consider the layered structures of the UK preferable to engagement in active separatist struggle and mobilisation. As such, the enduring appeal and existence of the UK suggest that we should beware of assuming inevitable disintegration.

Indeed, talk of the crisis of Britishness (Chen and Wright 2000) might be judged to be exaggerated, especially when set against the standard of genuine state crises across much of the world (Laitin 2007). One ironic feature of this is embodied in our second concluding question: Is it in fact the case that the durability of the Union is reinforced, rather than threatened, by Scottish and Welsh nationalisms, and by expressions of English cultural identity? Nationalism in Wales and Scotland is strong, but not yet sufficiently so to ensure separation from the UK. In England, as argued here, there exists a powerful cultural identity, but not a nationalism of any current weight. Do these emotionally powerful outlets for resentment in fact allow people to live within the UK (partly for reasons of economic benefit and political stability) in ways which are more acceptable precisely because of the steam-releasing rewards of centrifugal nationalism or national identity expressed within the state? Paradoxically, it may be that cultural and other expressions of none-British identity allow for the UK state to survive more easily than would be the case were there a necessary choice between *either* the UK *or* respective Welsh, Scottish or English identities.

Third, we surely need to know more about the comparative trajectories of the various nationalisms and national identities in these islands, and why their inter-relationships and differences developed as they have. Clearly, the sleeping and occasionally patronising dominance of England over Scotland, Wales and Ireland (in terms of population size and balance of power) partly explains the reactive nationalist assertion in these other nations. But this does not explain why, for example, nationalism in Wales has been so different from Irish nationalism in Northern Ireland. Much that is taken as sufficient to have prompted militarily powerful separatism in the north of Ireland from the 1960s onwards was also evident in 1960s Wales, including language enthusiasm, student radicalism, economic disenchantment, historically distinct cultural identity, constitutional disaffection, sharp Anglophobia, and a sense of cultural disenfranchisement and historical destiny (English 2004, Humphries 2008). Yet nothing has emerged in Wales to approach even remotely the campaigns of the IRA and associated Irish republican paramilitary groups over the past 40 years. Why not? An answer to this question might prove very significant indeed as the UK faces challenges in coming decades concerning disaffected ethnic and religious minorities. The point here is that there are strong historical reasons for different trajectories to have characterised the different national settings in these islands. I am not suggesting that there is one normal or proper route for nations to follow. (In the case of Wales, for instance, a different geographical relationship to England and

a different religious complexion made probable a different nationalist relationship to England from that experienced by Irish nationalists.) I do think, however, that systematic comparative scrutiny of English, Welsh, Scottish and Irish histories in terms of nationalism and national identity would show us what was similar, what different – *and why*.

This would be useful as we ponder how things might develop in the future. An English nationalism might be different in key ways from neighbouring nationalisms, and were an English nationalist movement to develop as a major force in the future, it might be that some as-yet absent factor (a more dramatic and sustained economic crisis, perhaps, or some tectonic shift in international relations) would act as the catalyst, although the failure so far of the recent economic crisis to generate any significant English nationalism might caution against high expectations here. My tentative argument is that, at present, no such catalysing moment looks imminent, and that most English people will continue to find that their English identity can be expressed within a Britishness and a British state which require no major remoulding or nationalist mobilisation.

Fourth – and most pressingly, perhaps – there is the central question raised by the recognition that England has experienced a resurgence of cultural identity but not a nationalism as such. If there is indeed no substantial English nationalism, then is it right for politicians and policymakers to focus on the cultural, rather than the formally political or constitutional, aspects of the English question? This has profound implications for party political strategists (especially in a Conservative Party still so comparatively weak outside England).

Put another way, if English nationalism is effectively absent, then is it appropriate instead for politicians to address questions relating to *British* nationalism? In the case of the latter, there *have* historically been struggles for power, as well as ongoing complexities surrounding the state representing and embodying British nationalism itself. Despite the fact that Britishness carries far less emotional force than do attachments to Scotland, Wales, Ireland or Ulster – or England – it is perhaps towards Britishness that reflection on English nationalism ultimately points. In particular, if the UK is indeed to endure, politicians need to continue to mould a Britishness that accentuates the positive and emancipatory elements of British politics and identity, and to diminish those aspects of British nationalism which constrict and weaken, and which generate conflict.

Moreover, if I am right and there is little to fear at present in terms of English nationalism, then a consolidation of Britishness may be complemented by certain gestures towards state recognition of English identity, without much danger of this causing political destabilisation. The blurred lines between Englishness and Britishness, and the absence of a forceful English nationalism, mean that UK political parties can probably worry less about Englishness, and recognise it more openly, than has sometimes been the case. Especially, perhaps, on the left.

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