ENGLISHNESS AND THE PARADOX OF MODERNITY


From the start, whenever that was, England has always proclaimed itself a historic nation. With an unusual intensity the promise of its future has been overdetermined by its past, burdened in its historicity with 'a heap of passive sedimentations' which Gramsci claimed to be the due of all old nations. In the current epoch - the period of imperialism and its aftermath - it gets ever harder to imagine a future for England and for the neighbouring, subordinated nations of these islands. The predominant genres of English Utopian writing, for example, are reproduced by disinterring ancient, mythical pasts or by slowly transmuting them into familiarly tedious technocratic dystopias which rail against the modern world. In the current century past grandeur appears to slide irretrievably into decay and decomposition. The modernity of the new century never quite seemed able to break free from the imprint of this past. That peculiar intellectual formation, English literary modernism, took possession of this dialectic of grandeur and decline and gave to it a distinctive voice. It pervades the work of Eliot, the metamorphosed midwesterner, from The Wasteland to the Four Quartets. And it finds one of its most famous, compressed expressions in Virginia Woolf: 'But there could be no doubt that greatness was passing, hidden, down Bond Street, removed only by a hand's-breadth from ordinary people who might now, for the first time and last, be within speaking distance of the majesty of England, of the enduring symbol of the state which will become known to curious antiquaries, sifting through the ruins of time, when London is a grass-grown path and all those hurrying along this Wednesday morning are but bone with a few wedding rings mixed up in their dust and the gold stoppings of innumerable decayed teeth.'

The historical conjunction of the modern period and the dramatic proliferation of recharged ideologies of Englishness has long been evident, linked above all to the expansion of the formal territories of empire. Recent academic discoveries of the late-nineteenth-century predilection for the invention of tradition, in new and old countries alike, in Europe and Japan as much as the USA, have given a new dimension to the study of ritual and collectivities, including that of the nation. In this new collection Robert Colls and Philip Dodd concentrate on the varied forms in which Englishness was constructed and reproduced. They take the period from 1880 to 1920 (although in fact the essays freely move well beyond these confines) because, as they put it without apparent irony, 'we, as
well as others (e.g. Stuart Hall and Enoch Powell) believe that it is within the
shadow of that period, and its meanings, that we still live'.

The essays collected here prove conclusively the existence of a major
discursive shift occurring at the end of the last century in which a range of new
and forceful national identities was produced, organized not only in the state
and political institutions but throughout the civil order itself. The essays
examine literature, music and politics, the Irish as 'marginal Britons' - a fine,
intelligent study by D. G. Boyce - women and national identity, ruralism and
two wide-ranging opening surveys by the editors, of which the one on political
cultures is thoughtful, provocative and contentious. Time and again it becomes
clear that the dominant national cultural institutions of contemporary England -
the Oxford English Dictionary, the implantation of English as an academic and
school discipline, the Dictionary of National Biography, the national art galleries,
music colleges and orchestras and so on - were formed in this period, creating a
new civic culture, and amounting to a risorgimento as organized as, if rather
more understated and concealed by the perceived inheritances of tradition than,
those simultaneously established in the new European nation-states.

This is a book which is imaginative, impressive and good to read. Not
surprisingly in an analysis as innovative as this there are problems too. The
choice of case studies doesn't actually substantiate the claims of the introductions,
and is confined too closely to pre-existing academic objects of study (literature,
music, politics). There could have been far more attention to the popular
relations of England, less inscribed in the dominant cultural institutions. The
lived, subjective and gendered forms of national identity are too often flattened,
or given a rather sociological, mechanical interpretation which makes it difficult
to understand how these subjectivities were reproduced on a scale so
overbearing. It would have been useful too if some of the more abstract themes
which cross-cut the case studies could have been separately developed; given the
influence of Gramsci on the editors, an analysis of the emergence of the new
stratum of organic intellectuals is something crying out for further comment.

But the essays have done their job, definitively marking out a new cultural
formation. The problem for the future is that in all probability there will appear
any number of further case studies, relishing the minutiae of ever narrower
excavations in which more empirical work will be deployed to reiterate the
thesis elaborated in this book and elsewhere. Further introspective studies of,
for example, the origins of academic English, reviewing once more the careers of
Sir Henry Newbolt, Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, are not
now required. It would be a shame if the excitement of this collection were to be
diverted down the more pedestrian byways of conventional academic historiography.

IMPERIALISM

The editors recognize and apologize for the absence of the imperial dimension:
this is indeed a telling, symptomatic omission, articulating its own indictment
which students of the national culture would do well to consider. It suggests a
failure in the wider political and intellectual milieu, reproducing in the critiques
rather too traditional, familiar structures of inclusion and exclusion. For the modern symbolic unities of England can make no historical sense unless the imperial determinations are painstakingly reconstructed - above all, the dominating inescapable centrality of India for the self-image of the English.

There is, for example, the extraordinary combined and uneven cultural development of Englishness, producing a powerfully circumscribed masculine metropolitan centre of unparalleled privilege (Westminster, the City, Oxford and Cambridge), the adjacent 'domestic' regions quaintly known in middle-class parlance as the Home Counties, in the south-eastern corner of the country, more open to feminine negotiation (the country houses dominated by the fashionable hostesses, the suburbs, Ascot, Henley and so on, the secluded total institutions for the children: the famous public schools and the profusion of anonymous south coast prep schools) and then the outer satellites of Ottawa or Buenos Aires (which until very recently boasted its own branch of Harrods), Nairobi or Cairo (with its renowned monument to the empire, Shephard's Hotel) possessing a closer cultural proximity to the metropolitan centre than those other great imperial cities, Cardiff, Liverpool or Glasgow. This was a cultural map profoundly organized by racial, class and gender boundaries, constituting a complex series of internal and external colonial relations. Illustratively, one can think of Rab Butler (born in India in 1902) perceiving his biography as based on the 'tripos' of India, Cambridge and the British Conservative Party; or Agatha Christie (born in Torquay in 1890) coming out, as it used to be said, in Egypt - marginally easier on the family finances than London - which no doubt cultivated her later assiduous engagement with the discourses of orientalism.

The ordered communities of the white settlers created the imagined England - despite the real, often complete relations of estrangement - as home. From the 1870s and 1880s, when increasing employment could be found on a regular basis for the middle classes in the formal or informal colonies, the lived relations of the expatriates had a significant impact on the domestic culture. Their sons and daughters (George Orwell, Doris Lessing) could not experience actually existing England without a deep, disturbed shock, while their grandchildren wondered at the detritus washed up in the suburban semis - 'A crocodile's skull... on the wall like a symmetrical, dried-up sponge. A leopardskin rug complete with fangs in a pink wax mouth, with claws and tail, sprawled over the chintzes.'

The settlers took with them all the confidence of the upholders of a new, classical civilization. The men had been steeped in the study of the classics. The great colonial cities aspired to embody in their very architecture - the daunting marble mausoleums - a neo-classicism. New Delhi, built from scratch from 1913 to 1930 by one of the most assured imperialists of them all, Sir Edwin Lutyens, was to be the greatest. But Lutyens was busy, too, in Pretoria and Cape Town, designing the embassy in Washington, and creating Admiralty Arch and the Mall in the imperial capital. At the same time, for the retired imperial functionaries, he built the sprawling modern country houses in the Surrey and Sussex hills, popularized in the newly published Country Life. Little wonder, perhaps, that A Passage to India was conceived and written in Weybridge.

But this white civilization, in its architecture and literature and in its daily
round of club life, was built on the principle of a strict segregation from the
native black and brown cultures. Apartheid can hardly be said to have been
invented by a reactionary Dutch caste rather late in the history of the Dominion
of South Africa when its origins are so violently etched into the culture of the
British Empire. For the ordered neo-classical landscaping was not only to
proclaim the future of the empire but simultaneously to destroy the remnants
of earlier indigenous cultures. The facade of imperial dignity systematically
concealed the work of the Indian labourers - some 29,000 it seems - who built
the viceregal home in New Delhi, carefully following Lutyens specifications;
and in so doing these colonized workers destroyed and effaced their own pasts
and their own cultures. Here the ideals incubated in the imperial vision of
England began to converge with 'the dirty work of Empire at close quarters',
with 'the wretched prisoners huddling in the stinking cages of the lock-ups, the
grey, cowed faces of the long-term convicts, the scarred buttocks of the men
who had been flogged with bamboos'. The imperative to segregate imposed by
polite culture could find expression in the architecture and in the splendour of
the imperial city; it could, too, under different exigencies, impel a logic of
retribution for which Amritsar is infamous.

THE DISINTEGRATION OF ENGLISH HEGEMONY

The pre-history of the reassertion of English authority in India lies with the
insurrection of 1857 - reworked back into the popular memory of the white
culture through a handful of startlingly simplistic reconstructive narratives. By
the turn of the century inter-imperialist rivalries intensified; this was accompanied
by an anxiety within the dominant classes which gave renewed coherence to the
varied perceptions of the Orient - most of all the great fear, rarely spoken, that
the epochal dominance of the white races was drawing to a close. The symbolic
moment which triggered these latent anxieties most forcefully occurred with the
Japanese victory over Russia in 1905. A distinguished Africanist declared: 'The
news of the Japanese success was discussed in the souks of Morocco, the
mosques of Egypt and the coffee-houses of Turkey, in Indian bazaars and
African mud-houses. It was the first set-back of the Caucasian since the
Neolithic period.'

Of course, the historic denouement of 'the Caucasian' has not been half so
dramatic as this. About the battle of 1905, 'the British felt almost as pleased . . .
as the Japanese, for the victorious navy had been largely built and equipped at
Barrow, Elswick and Sheffield; and most, if not all, of the Japanese officers had
been trained or professionally advised by Englishmen'. Yet the sentiment
persisted: half a century later in notes for his opening address at the Bermuda
Conference with Eisenhower, Harold Macmillan claimed: 'For about 2,500
years Whites have had their way. Now revolution: Asia/Africa.' The reconstruction
of the post-war world did indeed see the locus of economic hegemony shift from
the Atlantic to the Pacific. 'We are apt to forget that there are as many
Vietnamese in the world as there are British, that for every one of us [British,
that is] there is one Filipino, one and a half times as many Nigerians, three times

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as many Indonesians, fourteen times as many Indians, and nearly twenty times as many Chinese.\textsuperscript{11}

This must put the contemporary study of England in a historic perspective. Not only has the British Empire effectively terminated, but the hegemony of the English state as the constituent force in the United Kingdom has come under terrible strains in recent years. England begins to look increasingly synonymous with the south-east corner of the old nation-state. Declaring war on Egypt or Argentina (both former subject nations) in desperate bids to reassert national power appears to outside eyes as only vain, stupid and dangerous. Even the most powerful institution of the old empire, the financial houses of the City, now function primarily as a collective sub-branch of New York and Tokyo - and even this is determined as much as anything by London's position in the time zones between them - in the late capitalist system of 24-hour global banking. Given the shifts in this overall balance of power we can understand why it is now possible, with the constitutive cultural relations of England no longer taken for granted, for studies of Englishness to make their appearance.

THE PARADOXES OF MODERNITY

Yet a number of puzzles remain. The most intriguing has to do with the idea of modernity. While a number of cultural historians have in a rather conventional fashion been settling accounts with the inherited forms of national subjectivities, others have been orbiting different planets, investigating the various contemporary legacies of the cultural break inadequately represented by the name of modernism. The modernist aesthetic forced into being new ways of seeing, undermining traditionalist forms of representation, and in many of its earliest variants was militantly populist, desperate to detonate the conventional forms of cultural practice associated with high Victorianism. Above all, the incubus of perceived traditions could be blasted away by the shock of the new. The point of interest, in this context, is that the first, heroic phase of the modernist break coincided almost exactly with the reinvention of Englishness. Both processes occurred simultaneously. A kind of double vision ensues.

It is not sufficient to suggest that these two cultural shifts appear as simple antagonists. In England, certainly, literary modernism combined with many aspects of the more traditionalist imperatives of Englishness. Conrad, James and Eliot were all attracted to English culture because of its 'density' and order. The great intellectual organizer of English modernism in the 1920s was \textit{Criterion}, funded and directed by Lady Rothermere and edited by Eliot in his spare time from the Foreign and Colonial desk at the head office of Lloyds Bank. Harold Acton delighted in instigating public readings of \textit{The Waste Land} at Conservative Party fetes. Indeed in high cultural circles the modernist aesthetic was one important form through which the notion of Englishness was reasserted.\textsuperscript{12}

On the other hand, while this process may have been rather intensified in England, it was not without parallels in the rest of continental Europe - as some of the intellectual currents of fascism were to show. England was not alone in witnessing both a reassertion of invented traditionalism and the advance of
modernism; but the idea of the invention of tradition suggests perhaps some common cultural features.

Much of the recent attraction for modernism or postmodernism has had less directly to do with high literary manifestations, and more with the lived forms inscribed within popular cultures - most of all, popular exuberance for the dynamic of constantly shifting fashions, the 'signs on the street' celebrated by Marshall Berman: the day-glo pink jeans striding through the South Bronx.\textsuperscript{13}

In Britain the emergence of a popular modernism also coincides with the deepening idea of English traditionalism. Cinema, radio, fashion and beauty contests, mass advertising, airplanes and automobiles, a profusion of daily papers, detective and science fiction, funfairs, Charlie Chaplin, skyscrapers - these belonged not only to Chicago or Manhattan, but provided the rhythms which more generally were to come to dominate city life. As Raymond Williams puts it, 'out of an experience of the cities came an experience of the future'.\textsuperscript{14} Nor was London simply the city of imperial pomp: east and west were sharply segregated, creating a specific internal colonialism; and London too was the most cosmopolitan of cities, constituted by a bricolage of cultures - as Baedeker noted at the turn of the century, there were in London more Scots than in Aberdeen, more Irish than in Dublin, more Jews than in Palestine, more Roman Catholics than in Rome. The pattern was repeated as a feature of the urban experience. And the fast-developing seaside resorts, Blackpool especially, provided their own provincial modernist experience, defying the order of the suburbs all around. Similarly, the 1924 Empire Exhibition held at Wembley, devoted to an idea of Englishness fully conforming to those described by Colls and Dodd, gave its 17 million visitors all the thrills of a popular futurism.

There would still seem to be some truth in Marx's observation that 'in our days everything seems pregnant with its contrary'. Or as Berman comments, 'to be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction'.\textsuperscript{15} The paradox here - not addressed in the book - is the possibility that the dynamic and recurring inventiveness of tradition may precisely have required a popular, carnivalesque projection of modernity and of the future in order to sustain the idea of the past.

NOTES

1 The quote is from \textit{Mrs Dalloway}. The impact outside the national culture can be surprising. For Gabriel García Marquez this single sentence 'transformed my sense of time' and was a trigger for \textit{One Hundred Years of Solitude}; Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza and Gabriel García Marquez, \textit{The Fragrance of Guava} (London: Verso, 1982), 48.


3 For example, compare the essay here on 'The Englishwoman' as represented in the \textit{Girl's Own Paper} and other media with Gill Frith, "'The time of your life": the meaning of the school story", in Carolyn Steedman, Cathy Urwin and Valerie Walkerdine (eds), \textit{Language, Gender and Childhood} (London: Roudedge & Kegan Paul, 1986).

4 It is now nearly a decade since this work was initiated, following the tracks of Renee
6 This, too, had repercussions on the domestic national culture. When female homosexuality was debated in the House of Commons in 1921 Colonel Wedgwood assumed that Labour MPs, bereft of the insights acquired by a classical education, would be ignorant: ‘I do not suppose that there are any members of the Labour Party who know in the least what is intended by the Clause’; Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and sexuality, 1880-1930* (London: Pandora, 1986), 115.
8 George Orwell, *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, volume I (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 266.