

England's Discontents

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Political Cultures and
National Identities

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Introduction

The national question is today returning to the political agenda in a rebalancing of priorities after a period in which radical politics was largely defined by a transnational, anti-globalisation focus. With the collapse in the 1990s of nation-state regimes claiming to be communist, and with capitalism operating on an increasingly transnational basis, transnational political movements targeting multinational institutions, such as at the summit meetings of the big powers or transnational corporations, indicated a shift in political energies consonant with the moment. Yet the Arab Spring and the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 in particular, returned us joltingly to the question of political power at the national level. Here all the classic tropes of the revolutionary situation returned – a popular revolt against a hated government embodied in a particular figure (Mubarak), a violent oppressive state meeting popular resistance that then fractures the army, the role of external nation-states allied with the oppressive state and its national oligarchy, an alliance of popular forces overcoming to some extent prior divisions and, perhaps most pressingly and what was least satisfactorily resolved in the Egyptian case: what would the political organisational forms and objectives be that could displace the status quo? In short, power and the legitimacy of power and counter-power on the terrain of the nation-state were starkly posed.

The Egyptian Revolution, whose symbolic centre had been the occupation of Tahrir square in Cairo, in turn spawned the Occupy movement in Spain, North America, Britain and elsewhere. Although this was a synchronous international movement, this was also the beginning of each movement turning towards its own national context and state to demand change. Thus we saw the rising popularity of once-marginal parties such as Syriza in Greece, the formation of new political parties such as Podemos in Spain or newly vibrant forces emerge on the Left within the old established parties, such as Bernie Sanders's 2016 run at the Democratic Presidential candidate in the US or the bolt-from-the-blue

success of Jeremy Corbyn in becoming leader of the Labour Party in 2015. This return to the national stage for political contestation is a tacit recognition that governmental power gives access to at least some branches of state power and state power remains a significant prize in the struggle for a better world. This is not to say that the transnational arena in which nation-states are situated is not criss-crossed by very powerful economic and institutional forces that are operating above the nation-state. Yet these forces and organisations struggle to achieve anywhere near as much legitimacy and democratic credibility as the nation-state has accumulated, despite continuing deficiencies, over several hundred years.

Despite the international context of nation-state development and therefore the commonalities which similar social and economic structures produce, the national question is a question of the *specificity* of national development in each case. In the British context there has been an extensive debate about the historical formation of Britishness and how that determines our present condition. In this debate, what has loomed large has been the early development of agrarian capitalism in England especially and how that may have cemented the economic, political and symbolic power of an agrarian elite that in turn gave an inflection and centrality to ruralism, undemocratic state institutions and an anti-democratic, anti-meritocratic ideology in the British imaginary. The historical development of the Industrial Revolution, another world first, then adds a new set of social and cultural forces to the mix, themselves split between those attached to industrial capital and those that made up the industrial workforce. The complex relationships between these new social agents and practices and the older ones associated with agrarian capitalism produce in turn a wide range of interpretations and debates concerning these relations and their actual and desired relative weight and importance in the formation of Britishness as a composite outcome of all these relationships. This reflexive commentary on historical developments becomes in turn a part of the historical process. And this is all overlaid again by the development of the empire whose legacy and long-term effects, economic, political and cultural, are still active and contested in our contemporary scene. All this before we even consider how this complex of forces, including the rise of the middle class, entered into and were transformed again by the twentieth century.

So a return to the national question in a British context, means a return to debates about the specific history of national *identities* that

form the composite notion of Britishness. *Identities* in part because in the British case, this is a supranational unit made up of both regional and national identities (England, Wales and Scotland, but also Northern Ireland and before 1922 the entirety of Ireland). *Identities* because (as the case of Ireland already alerts us to) imperial power projection meant that Britishness was entangled globally with territories around the world and then subsequently inward migration brought significant numbers of people from the former colonies into Britain, especially after the Second World War. *Identities* also because different classes and alliances between classes have struggled to shape Britishness in their own collective image. And *identities* because contesting political cultures have developed as the key organisational forces that have brought together regions, nations, ethnicities and classes and given them particular accents, narratives and political and cultural representation. The term ‘political cultures’ refers to recognisable value systems that seek representation at the level of the state but which have their roots in a capillary-like network of social, economic and cultural relationships far broader than formal institutions of political power (i.e. parliament and parties).

Everything above already indicates that I do not approach national identities in the classic manner of the British or English authors who enumerate an arbitrary list of discrete characteristics (e.g. modest and self-effacing, emotionally reticent, individualistic, polite, practical, etc., etc.). Such approaches to the question of identity lack both a sense of historical change and formation (they become unchanging essences) and a sense of ‘structure’ or the structuring forces that gives rise to the empirical characteristics. They also often conceal how a particular (upper class) identity has come to stand in for the national. In this empirical approach we move from a rather haphazard and apparently subjective list of traits to a universal: *this* amounts to *the* British identity, when we should be looking for structured but composite formations that alter historically as the outcome of political struggles, which are always ultimately contests of power over resources and recognition or esteem.

It is de rigeur to stress the plurality and hybridity of national identities in contemporary cultural studies. It has become a standard trope in the study of culture and undoubtedly speaks to very important truths about identity in general, whether we are thinking about identity in relation to the individual, the social group or national identity/ies. What has been termed the ‘linguistic turn’, beginning with the theoretical

revolution of structuralism in the late 1950s, developed a new model of identity. Structuralism taught us that identity, and meaning in general, was always *relational*. Not a word, a meaning or identity could signify something without differentiating itself from other words, identities or meanings. Intelligibility of meaning was always ghosted by the difference of a signifying unit from other signifying units in complex relationships. Scaled up to the question of national identity, Britishness, for example, was defined by its relations of difference with other national identities (American or German national identities for instance) rather than its own inner essence.

As structuralism passed into post-structuralism, so the question of difference was pressed further: differences and identities formed out of them were no longer conceived as relatively durable 'structures' as the famous binary oppositions of structuralist analysis might suggest. Instead a new sense of the mutability, contingency and continual flux of meaning around terms was increasingly matched to the fast-moving developments in culture, technology, economics and politics. The rather static understanding of meaningful structures that structuralism had developed, was exploded as a new sensitivity to difference and continual change emerged within cultural theory. The theoretical shifts in thinking about identity that structuralism and post-structuralism wrought definitely had a broadly political orientation. It amounted to an extraordinarily sustained liberal critique of conservatism as a political culture, with the latter's investment in rather more static and unified cultural understandings that could sustain a more assured hierarchy of value, a greater sense of autonomous development from a range of 'outsiders' and a firm sense of a boundary marking itself off from those apparently absolutely different others. The normative implication of the liberal critique of the conservative model was that difference and change should be embraced (was already with us in fact), while the normative underpinning of conservatism was that 'vertical' (i.e. hierarchical) unity, cultural homogeneity and historical continuity were to be prized above all else.

The linguistic turn blasted open two of the common traps which discussions of identity had typically fallen into previously: the notion that identity was more or less fixed in time, that continuities were far stronger and more significant than change; and the idea that identity was about unity and homogeneity, that who we thought we were (identity) must rest on similarity (of interests, of culture, etc.). Yet any identity,

any drawing of a boundary that stakes out a claim for a distinctive and recognisable formation, not only depends on difference ‘outside’ it to define itself, it is always also made up of differentiated component parts internally. This is true of individuals, social groups, political cultures and national identity itself. ‘Identity thinking’ has had a tendency to play down these differentiated component parts, or at best recognise and celebrate them as part of the diversity of a broader unified identity ‘beneath’ the differences. Yet when we dig further into the component parts of an identity we often find that while they may be held together within the force field of a broader framework, there may be considerable tensions or even contradictions between the component parts and these tensions and contradictions are in turn historically mutable. This book will focus on the internally contradictory dynamics of the key political cultures that have fashioned Britishness. In particular I focus on how conservatism and liberalism, in a competitive partnership of alliances and tensions, have been central to the formation of Britishness. I also explore how their contradictory relationship with the British capitalism they otherwise support is also a key dynamic that has formed the national cultures.

If an appreciation of the temporal change and internal differentiation of identity has been hard won, then the question of grounding identity in the complex of powerful forces of a social and economic kind has been harder still. Here the linguistic turn has been less successful in helping us understand how and why identity forms and changes the way it does. Indeed, if liberalism has conducted a long cultural and theoretical ‘war’ against conservatism, it has also conducted one, in academia especially, against the discipline of political economy, the discipline which has most insistently raised those awkward questions about our social and economic model of capitalism. This ‘war’ against political economy as a discipline has its parallel outside academia in the mainstream institutions of politics, where a disinclination to ‘burden’ capital with any social responsibilities, has entrenched itself amongst the political class. The liberalism of the linguistic turn does not exactly reflect liberalism in the political institutions, not least because the latter, in the real world of politics, exists in complex alliances with conservatism, which academic liberalism, in theory can afford to appear to remain implacably opposed to (at the level of models of identity in particular). But there is a clear connection nonetheless between economic liberalism in the core political institutions and cultural liberalism in academic theory.

The political and methodological framework of this book does not accept that conservatism and liberalism exhaust the possibilities of discussing cultural politics, political cultures and their relationships. Even if conservatism and liberalism loom large as the most powerful philosophical and political actors at work in our historical moment (and historically) we need not accept their horizons as the methodological and political presuppositions by which to examine their movements and dynamics. For there is a vast terrain of social experiences which these political cultures struggle to properly accommodate or to even recognise. This 'political unconscious' provides the normative basis for speaking outside the conservative–liberal consensus. The aim of this book is to develop a model of national identity that can be adequate to the complexities of identity at the level of historical mutation, structured and internally differentiated composition *and* materially grounded in the play of social and economic forces. As we move to ground cultures and identities in their socio-economic contexts, so some of the assumed and easy pluralism of the linguistic turn begins to be reconceptualised within a framework that brings into view structured power relations, patterns of interest and reproductions of inequality.

The methodological and political framework that I deploy here, to meet the demands of complexity *and* power in the formation of Britishness, is an 'applied Gramscianism'. Antonio Gramsci's work continues to attract a lot of critical attention, much of it at the level of philosophical enquiry or in the field of international relations. Here though I seek to show how Gramsci's concepts, such as hegemony, historic bloc, civil society, molecular change, the national-popular, and so forth, can help us understand a specific social and historical formation, including those social experiences that lie outside the framework of the dominant conservative–liberal bloc. Gramsci's concepts must be brought to bear on the real historical content of Britishness and that in turn means revisiting a number of important debates and conflicting assessments of this national formation and different and even conflicting uses and understandings of Gramsci's concepts. In the 1970s and 1980s Gramsci was the theoretical inspiration for significant accounts of Britishness, especially by two political scientists, Tom Nairn and Perry Anderson, and the founding figure of cultural studies, Stuart Hall. With the benefit of hindsight we can draw critically on their work to think anew about Gramsci and Britishness. For example, I will show how Gramsci's concept of the historic bloc allows us to understand in

new and powerful ways, how political cultures have reconfigured their dynamic relationships with each other over the long duration, in relation to broader socio-economic constraints and opportunities and how all that in turn has shaped British self-identities.

This is, I believe, a surprisingly rare undertaking, perhaps because it requires a multidisciplinary approach, which is difficult and risky. Here I combine critical political economy, political science and historiography, political communications, cultural studies, media studies and film studies. This interdisciplinary range is not accidental but broadly corresponds to the three terrains which Gramsci's analysis can help us cover: the social class-economic relations (critical political economy), the State (political science and historiography) and the cultural and communication practices of civil society (political communications, media studies, film studies and cultural studies). In terms of its argument, this book is structured in a rather non-linear way; it rotates through conservatism and liberalism in turn, exploring their relationships with economic liberalism and the dialogic relationship of competition and alliance between conservatism and liberalism for leadership of British capitalism. In the latter chapters the contradictions and discontents between conservatism, liberalism and economic liberalism intensify as we approach our own current turbulent moment. My hope is that the reader rotates through the arguments, the theoretical concepts and the historical narrative that is constructed from different angles, so as to build up a complex prismatic account of Britishness. Gramsci's methodological framework amounts to a revalidation of the important role of politics and culture in shaping historical outcomes. That is a vital and potentially empowering truth in an otherwise dispiriting age in which politics and popular participation have drifted apart. With that in mind, the final chapter of this book probes where we are now, how we got here and how we can go forward by reconnecting politics with popular participation. On the question of identity, Gramsci combined a sophisticated methodological framework with an urgent political project. A degree of philosophical sifting is required, he suggested, 'to work out consciously and critically one's own conception of the world ... refusing to accept passively and supinely from outside the moulding of one's personality'.¹ The personality, he argued, was 'composite'; it is made up of many different ingredients that have been accumulated historically within the culture – itself a site of different and conflicting cultures – before one is even born.

The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without an inventory. The first thing to do is to make such an inventory.²

What a resonant phrase that is! '[A]n infinity of traces, without an inventory'. It speaks to the need of any political, cultural and educational project to construct such an inventory. This book is a contribution to a critical inventory of Britishness.

Political cultures and national identities: a Gramscian framework

Introduction

British capital is not a singular unitary phenomenon. But in all its many differentiations it has been a decisive force in helping to shape British national identities. When we think of some of the main versions of British national identity we can correlate them easily enough to various fractions of British capital. Firstly, we have Britain's identity as a 'nation of shopkeepers' as Napoleon was said to have once described the country. He did not mean it as a compliment. The image rests in large part on the commercial capital, made up of merchants and retailers, which have formed part of the British capitalist class, including a large fraction of small business retail capital. In the eighteenth century, there was a veritable 'cult of trade' according to historian Linda Colley, where one in five families lived off trade and the distribution of goods, much of which depended on the product of slave labour in North America and the Caribbean and other land-holdings acquired overseas, such as India.¹ Between 1701 and 1750, the East India Company massively increased imports in the commodity that was to become quintessentially 'British': tea. It grew from 67,000 pounds of weight to nearly 3,000,000 (and smugglers brought in even more).² Growth in trade preceded, helped capitalise and then helped expand other forms of capital and therefore extend the material terrain for other versions of national identity. By the mid-nineteenth century, Britain was known as the 'industrial workshop of the world' and its industrial identity remained a significant if troubled and increasingly embattled part of its economy and identity right through to the 1980s, when under Thatcherism, de-industrialisation set

in with a vengeance. But if industrial capital has played a defining part of Britain's identity, so too, and very contentiously, has the aristocratic and landowning class, around whom a powerful *mise en scène* of country life has been developed, widening to encompass sober bourgeois farmers and middle-class professionals brought up in the small villages in the south of England. Then again, another feature of British identity was the connection between the 'gentlemanly capitalists' of the landed oligarchy and the banking capital of the City of London, which grew in the late nineteenth century and which was an attractive alternative occupation for aristocratic families looking to sustain their wealth while avoiding the lower status occupation of industrial and commercial capital. The heyday of the City came to an end in many ways in 1914, at least for a time. After the First World War, the 1929 stock market crash, the 1930s Depression, the era of protectionism, then the Second World War and the subsequent international post-war financial architecture that reined in loose speculative capital, the power and the profile of the City was constrained somewhat. Yet its power started to grow again in the 1970s and it bounced back again in spectacular style from the 1980s, as the engine of Thatcherism, to leave an indelible mark on British national identity once more. To this we must add of course the history of empire – in which both the City and industry participated, and which has also shaped British identities in ways which are still being felt – for example in the need that British political and military elites have to be major players on the international stage of foreign affairs (with all that implies for sustaining barely affordable military spending – especially on nuclear weapons). The empire was emphatically a product of nineteenth-century British capitalism. It achieved its 'classic' imprint on British national identity towards the last quarter of the nineteenth century although it could draw on a much longer history of colonial entanglements and possession going back several centuries. The racism it helped to foster within some of the general population and the illusions of a 'civilising mission' it required are still very much with us today. The alliance between American neo-conservatives and British liberals – who unleashed their inner bomber – over the disaster that was the Iraq War in 2003, is only one example of how much the nightmare of an imperial past continues to weigh on the present.

But if the various fractions of British capital have provided the essential terrain on which different versions or facets of British national identity have developed, this has only happened because of the equally

essential mediating work done by definite *political* cultures. These political cultures orchestrate those capital interests in particular ways and give them a definite sense of orientation, purpose, identity, and value system. Political cultures interpret the experiences of people shaped by their economic-class formations. In doing so, they work with images, values, and representations. The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci was one of the key thinkers on the Left to develop our understanding of the importance of parties and political cultures more broadly in shaping historical outcomes. He was unusually sensitive for a Marxist of his generation to the importance of language, which his studies in philology as a student in Turin had helped him to appreciate. As he put it:

In reality, every political movement creates a language of its own, that is, it participates in the general development of a distinct language, introducing new terms, enriching existing terms with a new content, creating metaphors, using historical names to facilitate the comprehension and the assessment of particular contemporary political situations, etc., etc.³

This interest in language meant that Gramsci was aware of the importance of the relationship between politics and culture. In selecting, interpreting and amplifying certain experiences, certain ways of understanding, certain normative assumptions, political cultures marginalise and exclude others. Certain images of a class and its experiences become typical in the systems of representation at its disposal. In the course of political struggle, cultures will hope certain images become resonant more generally, 'symbolic' of the hopes and aspirations of broader strata of people than the ones who most immediately populate the landscape of the images and stories political cultures develop. As Michael Billig notes, 'Nationhood ... involves a distinctive imagining of a particular sort of community rooted in a particular sort of place'.⁴ Indeed, it may be that those people and places, their communities and their work, that receive the highest profiles in the representations of national political cultures are hardly typical of the broader sections of the population that are being invited to identify with them. This is because such people and places function as moral exemplars and have a rhetorical value in exhorting others to in some way or another adopt the exemplars as role models. To take rather contrasting examples from conflicting political cultures: both the image of rural England, which has been central to conservatism as a political culture and the image of the industrial manual (usually