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Knowledge of both British identity and British nationalism is critical to understanding the state and its constituent regions. The British state still looms large over each region, and British nationalism and identity continue to provide both parameters to, and lessons for, the minority nationalist agenda. This paper first addresses the complex questions of defining nations and nationalism in a British context, and then briefly analyses the nature of British nationalism over time. The purpose here is not to provide a detailed answer to the question of Britishness. Rather, it is to draw out some of the complexities of British identity, and to intimate the dilemmas and challenges posed by British nationalism to minority nationalists over time.

The existence of a British nation is not something on which political theorists agree. The definition of nationhood is invariably problematic, and almost inevitably involves a level of subjectivity (Hechter 2000: 12-14; Robbins 1993: 85-6). Crick has characterised the dilemma: “perhaps the minimum definition of a nation is a group who think they have the same general characteristics. The difficulties begin when one actually looks for characteristics” (1991: 91). These difficulties have not prevented theorists from attempting to define nationhood, but national identity refuses to conform to rules, and for every criterion of nationhood proposed, a national exception seems to exist.

Marquand outlines some popular criteria of nationhood, before drawing attention to the problems inherent in each. One possible criterion, he argues, ‘is that the territory in question should once have been a state. But Bavaria, Hanover, Tuscany and Piedmont, which are not normally classified as nations, were states of sorts much more recently than Scotland’ (Marquand 1991: 33-4). Another possible criterion is the existence of a separate language, but Marquand notes that this rule places Flemings, Basques and Catalans above the Irish. A third criterion is ‘the possession of a historic identity, giving rise to common loyalties and shared memories which endure through time’ (Marquand 1991: 34). However, virtually every territorial group can make this claim and the criterion is, in any case, highly subjective.

Hugh Kearney has argued that to describe the UK as a ‘multi-national’ state ‘makes a good deal of sense…It is not, however, a complete description, since it ignores the unifying factor of “Britishness”‘ (1991: 3). Kearney answers his own famous question-four nations or one?-by arguing that the UK may well comprise four nations and one (1991: 4). However, he also concedes that the British ‘nation’ is the most problematic of all nations within the UK, since it appears to comprise four other nations (Kearney, H. 1991: 5). Yet, other theorists are more reluctant even to countenance the possibility of a British nation.
Bernard Crick contends that “‘British’ is a political and legal concept...it is not a cultural term, nor does it correspond to any real sense of a nation. And nor should it’ (1991: 97). For Crick, the political development of the British state occurred largely without the cultural development of nationhood, and any sense of a British nation was only ever minimal:

throughout the eighteenth century ministerial writers made unsuccessful attempts to establish as colloquial usage ‘North British’ and ‘South British’, as if the English and Scottish nations had gone out of business. There was a brief attempt, amid facetious derision, to call all kinds of Irish ‘West Britons’ (1991: 90).

Etymological difficulties reflected a weakness of attachment to the idea of a British nation. The fact that the British state, and empire, remained powerful simply reflected the fact that, ‘There are multi-national states whose unity does not depend on manufacturing a single national consciousness’ (Crick 1991: 96).

Whether or not a British nation ever existed, forms of British nationalism certainly did, and there were important methods by which nationalism operated to appease and incorporate the diverse regional and national identities within the United Kingdom. Neil Davidson has defined nationalism as ‘active participation in the political mobilisation of a social group for the construction or defence of a state’ (2000: 14-15). However, this thesis adopts a broader definition as proffered by leading theorists Anthony Smith and Michael Keating. Contrary to Davidson, Smith has argued that ‘Not all nationalists want complete sovereignty. Some may prefer the autonomy of “home rule” or federation with another state. But all want recognition of their right to the homeland’ (1979: 3). Keating, similarly, has defined nationalists as ‘those who consider themselves members of a national community with the right of self-determination...to be a nationalist is not necessarily to be a separatist’ (1996: 20). This broader conception of nationalism is superior in two respects to that offered by Davidson. First, in the case of the United Kingdom, it enables more sophisticated historical analysis: by Davidson’s definition, nationalism did not exist meaningfully in Scotland until the late-twentieth century, and perhaps has never existed in Wales. However, the Scottish Home Rule Association and Cymru Fydd (Wales to Be) movements of the nineteenth century were clearly nationalist movements in the sense of being ‘a programme of action to achieve and sustain the national ideal’ (Smith 1979: 3). Their cause was the nation, and they sought political and cultural expression of that nation, however ill-defined. That such nationalists proffered no short-term plans for sovereignty reflects the character of the United Kingdom at the time, but does not reduce these movements, in many cases highly political, to mere expressions of regional consciousness.

Moreover, a considerable amount of contemporary minority nationalism is not centred on demands of statehood. Indeed, as Keating argues, minority nationalisms are often more forward-looking than their host states, and quick to appreciate the complexity of shared sovereignty and overlapping identities (1996: 223). Scottish and Welsh themes of ‘Independence in Europe’, for example, are programs of the more sophisticated nationalists which recognise that the European Union ‘deliberately diffuses sovereignty. Its political system is built upon bargaining and negotiating in a complex environment’ (Keating 1996: 225). The complexity of this environment is further reinforced by the existence of sophisticated power-sharing settlements such as that currently operating in
Northern Ireland, where political power is inexplicable solely within a paradigm of sovereignty. While taking many forms, then, nationalism is not always concerned with statehood, and many minority nationalists are cognisant and welcoming of overlapping identities and shared sovereignty.

British nationalism, nevertheless, has always been quite different from the nature of most peripheral nationalism within the UK. Traditionally, the British experience has been characterised as state-building nationalism, “embodied in the attempt to assimilate or incorporate culturally distinctive territories in a given state” (Hechter 2000: 15). Hechter argues that, from the sixteenth century, English rulers attempted to promote homogeneity by “inducing culturally distinctive populations in [the] Celtic regions…to assimilate to their own culture” (2000: 15). He maintains nevertheless that state-building nationalism tends to be culturally inclusive, by virtue of the paramountcy of geopolitical concerns (2000: 16).

Arguably, though, British nationalism cannot be characterised either as culturally inclusive or as assimilationist. Either characterisation lends a homogeneity to the nationalist phenomenon that is not borne out by even a cursory glance at history. For instance, it could be argued that British nationalism has been a fairly benign force through history, and that the political stability of the British state has always remained of primary concern. The United Kingdom, by this account, did not require an overarching cultural framework upon its formation, and British national identity was considered an admirable, though hardly necessary, goal for the stability and success of the state. As Crick has shown, this philosophy was certainly reflected in many state policies:

Many of the Old English Tories had a clear and politic sense of the diversity of the United Kingdom. In India too they came to practise a politics of cultural tolerance, not assimilation; indirect rule, not administrative centralism as in the Spanish and French empires…They were ruthless in maintaining English political dominance; but, on the whole, let numbers, wealth, and territorial advantage take care of that (1991: 91).

At home, nineteenth-century British nationalism was manifest in the ‘state-fostered cult of a depoliticised Scottish identity’ (Crick 1991: 91), evidenced by the visit of George IV to Scotland. There is not scope here to discuss this process at length, but it is enough to note that British nationalism was indeed often more benign than other state-building nationalisms on the European continent. According to Crick, English Tories in the nineteenth century ‘had little desire for cultural hegemony, and they viewed Scottish and Irish culture either with a cynical tolerance or with a romantic attraction’ (1991: 91). Scots, in particular, even became both welcome and prevalent in the British corridors of power (Robbins 1993: 239-57) as the British Empire grew.

Following this line of argument, it could be held that an absence of assimilationist tendencies helped the preservation of national and regional identities within the UK. It could further be argued that British nationalism, through being culturally inclusive, created not one but many British identities. As Morton argues, Britishness has always meant different things to those in Wales, Scotland, England and Ireland:

The idea of ‘Britishness’ is distinct in each, built around a number of competing and intermixed identities. There is, of course, much commonality in the British experience, but it means something unique to each of the four nations. The falsity
of the conceptualisation of Great Britain as a unitary nation-state is visible culturally as well as institutionally (Morton 1999: 7).

British nationalism, by this account, never fully succeeded in turning the United Kingdom into a homogenous ‘nation-state’ (Robbins 1993: 228). Indeed, Robbins emphasises that the United Kingdom has historically preserved unity (itself often precarious) but has never achieved uniformity (1993: 292). Yet, while this thesis concurs that uniformity has never defined the British state, several British policies have certainly sought such uniformity, and any characterisation of British nationalism as unequivocally inclusive does not hold true over time.

Some theorists maintain that British nationalism has operated in particularly insidious ways, promulgating false and damaging myths of Anglocentric homogeneity. Pittock opines that Anglocentric historiographic practices continue to inform identities throughout the UK, leading to portrayals of a tendentious British homogeneity:

Because even now what we experience as ‘British’ in the narrative of cultural comment has been created through a selective adoption of the central English politico-cultural concerns of the past three hundred years, it is all the more important to investigate questions of cultural complexity which lie behind the building of Britain (1997: 6).

Pittock highlights the example of the media to illustrate this point, claiming that a disproportionate number of BBC programs are still made in London, compared with just two per cent of BBC programs made in Scotland in 1995 (1997: 6). Crick himself concedes that ‘Most modern English…have no sense of this duality at all; to be British is simply to be English’, also noting that the affairs of Scotland are notoriously under-reported in the London media (Crick 1991: 97).

This conflation of ‘English’ with ‘British’ has been a common concern of minority nationalists in the United Kingdom. Hugh Kearney has highlighted the way that even twentieth-century historians consistently moved from ‘English’ to ‘British’, ‘as if the two were somehow equivalent’ (Kearney, H. 1989: 2). This terminological sleight of hand was also reflected in popular essays, and often after acknowledgement by the author of the very issue. In defending his own use of the term ‘English’ instead of ‘British’ throughout The Lion and the Unicorn, George Orwell argues that

It is quite true that the so-called races of Britain feel themselves to be very different from one another. A Scotsman, for instance, does not thank you if you call him an Englishman…but somehow these differences fade away the moment that any two Britons are confronted by a European (1940: 145-6).

With this justification, he continues to refer to England frequently throughout the remainder of the essay, though the essay is more properly about the British state and its likely condition after World War II (Orwell 1940). Orwell’s observation on national identity may have appeared prescient in the middle of World War II, and external wars have certainly bolstered a sense of British identity historically (Colley 1992). However, a Scotsman today would probably still not thank Orwell for calling him an Englishman, even in front of a ‘European’ crowd. This Anglocentric approach, whether in history books, popular essays or works of
fiction, has the effect of presenting a falsely homogenous image of the UK. ‘Britishness’ may still mean different things to those within different regions of the UK, but to much of the external world, and often to the English, ‘British’ remains a synonym for ‘English’. Orwell’s essay conforms to the pattern described by Crick half a century later: ‘The English are now very prone to mistake patriotism for a strong nationalism and to forget that the United Kingdom is a multi-national state’ (Crick 1991: 96).

National and regional differences within the United Kingdom have traditionally been under-represented through the Anglocentric nature of much historical and popular writing. This is a tradition which has clearly not been overcome as the British state enters the twenty-first century (Crick 1991: 97). To an extent, this represents a subtle form of British nationalism, where the homogeneity of the British people is implied in terminological useage. Congruence between a British nation and the British state is suggested, though the nation in question is in fact England. The increasing demographic dominance of England within the UK over time only exacerbated the tendency of many to view ‘English’ as interchangeable with ‘British’, though Welsh, Scottish, and Irish Britons undoubtedly viewed their identities differently. For minority nationalists, the assertion of rights and identities has often involved challenging and debunking Anglocentric myths of British homogeneity.

Moreover, apart from this often subtle conflation of ‘Britain’ with ‘England’, British nationalism has also been explicitly assimilationist at points throughout history. It could well be argued, for example, that the British nationalism which followed the Battle of Culloden in 1745 was exclusivist and assimilationist in nature, as evidenced by the state proscriptions of Gaelic language and Highland dress in Scotland. These actions were coloured by the fact that ‘Great Britain was perhaps the only major kingdom of western Europe which believed itself open on a barbarian frontier’ (Pocock 1993: 247) at this time, and assimilationist policies were seen as necessary for the security of the state. Equally, in the seventeenth century under Charles I, anglicisation was pursued in a direct manner, most notably through the recovering of Church property and alienated tithes, and through moves to diminish the Presbyterian influence in Scotland (Kearney, H. 1989: 121). At various stages, state-building nationalism in Britain also involved the proscription of the Welsh language and the denial of rights to Catholics and Dissenters in Ireland, explicitly exclusionary policies. In short, to categorise British nationalism as historically inclusive is clearly inaccurate-nationalism is, in the British instance, a complex phenomenon which changes over time.

For minority nationalists, the changing forms of British nationalism have always required different responses. This is not to suggest that minority nationalists have always been reactive to changes in British nationalism and policy, but the parameters within which they can operate are necessarily shaped to some extent by the dominant host state. Nationalism within each of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland has altered substantially over time, and simple categorisations or typologies are insufficient to explain nationalist phenomena. Equally, British nationalism does not fall to either the ‘exclusionary’ or ‘benign’ explanation. While being generally more inclusive than many European states historically, British nationalism has also operated at both subtle and explicit levels to suppress regional and national identities within the United Kingdom, in the name of creating a British cultural homogeneity.
Just as British identity cannot be labelled “a fixed element which can be merely transmitted across the centuries” (Robbins 1993: 40), then, British nationalism cannot be easily categorised. Crick argues that the coexistence of culturally inclusive practices, and assimilationist tendencies, typified the British state in the years after 1707:

That could almost be a summary of the mental attributes needed to hold the new United Kingdom together: on the one hand, toleration; but on the other Machiavellian guile or force against any threat to the unity of the kingdom, perceived as order itself. Hence there was not merely the defeat of a bold, lucky but hopeless foray in 1745, but the savage destruction of the clan system that had made it possible (Crick 1991: 93).

Contemporary British nationalism has infrequently involved the promotion of internal force, but the tension between tolerance and Machiavellian guile remains symptomatic of the British state in the twenty-first century. Appeasing the peripheral nationalists was an important priority of twentieth-century British politicians and leaders, and with good reason. Minority nationalists have been instrumental in raising the profile of regional identities, and in mobilising those identities politically. In the twenty-first century, Crick’s hypothesis that a single national consciousness is not essential for a multi-national state like the UK appears increasingly vulnerable, and British nationalism may again need to ‘reinvent’ itself to preserve its constituent parts.

This paper has explored definitions of nation and nationalism in the British context. It has argued that British state-building nationalism is itself difficult to characterise definitively, and has changed its shape considerably over time. Mostly, policies of the state have sought to incorporate and assimilate, rather than coerce regions to adopt a British identity, but historical fluctuations here provide some initial insight into the diversity of minority nationalism within the British state. Moreover, this brief historical analysis of the state has highlighted the origins of considerable ethnic, religious and national diversity. The history of the British state and its constituent regions is in many ways a history of nations and nationalisms. Greater understanding of these nationalisms is essential to understanding the full diversity and complexity of the British state.

Bibliography


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Dr Andrew Harvey is Executive Officer of the Australian Council of Deans of Education. His PhD was on minority nationalism in the United Kingdom, and his interests extend to social theory, British history and comparative international education perspectives.