12 The Habit that is Englishness

RUDY VAN KEMENADE

When psychology and sociology investigate the role of narratives and memories in everyday life it is rare that the nation is brought into the conversation. Even those who do explicitly draw attention to it, are apt to maintain that it is a construction of a myriad of individual actors who thus propel the social phenomena in all sorts of new directions at will.

It will be the contention here that while construction is indeed central to this process, it is a mistake to emphasize the spontaneity of an individual activity.

The old notion of a national character that forms slowly over time and provides a framework within which our thoughts develop in the present is still of value, especially if shorn of its essentialist elements.

Such a theoretical position may be found in the work of the Austrian Otto Bauer, which links in with the exploration of habitus by Elias and Bourdieu. Actions are not pregiven, fixed for all time in certain routines, but neither is the individual act utterly free and arbitrary. Models of thought that take time to develop provide us with our maps of the present. Indeed the very notion of an individual freely constructing their own society itself derives from an English ideology that holds to commonsense reality rather than the metaphysics of foreign intellectuals.

When one begins to examine nationalism as a belief system it always seems easier to attribute such beliefs and behaviour to other nations rather than to one's own thinking. This is especially true in England where the English are seen as patriotic – nationalism a disease of foreigners.[1] The English are individuals with a common-sense that does not fall for such metaphysical notions.[2] Yet it is only by looking directly at these notions that one sees how odd some of these are.

Often the English offer as support that they are an insular people. After all, didn't Shakespeare say "England is an island"?[3] Which of course, geographically, it isn't. Even the country as a whole is not an island.[4] Many commentators have remarked on the way particularly the English seem confused about what their nation is, whether it be that there is indeed any difference between Britishness and Englishness.[5] Very few of my students when asked are able to provide the correct name of the country of which they are members.[6] And their country takes great care to conceal its name from them, since it does not appear on its coins and banknotes, nor on its stamps.

What Englishness with its individualistic stance along with Psychology seems to suggest is that collective behaviour is irrational; thus 'the clear message is that groups are bad for you' (Reicher et al., 1997, p.58).

_____

This idea that groups, and especially nations, are bad for you can also be found within a variety of sociological approaches.

Take one example.

> The assumption which underpins the following argument is that both the *general* category of 'nation' and *specific* nations are not natural entities but social constructions. By this I mean that the socio-cultural-political units which are commonly referred to as 'nations' are not immutable 'givens' but the product of human thought and action. The existence of nations is not a truth that human beings have *discovered* but a conceptualization of the world that we have *created*. Part of the power of this creation is that it can be advanced convincingly as something 'natural'. By conceiving of nations as 'natural' and by promoting them as such, processes of construction, of human intervention, are obscured and the motivations behind such constructions are removed from the realm of discussion.
>
> (Penrose, p.28)[7]

The question here is where is or was this 'we' that is being appealed to? At what point did it emerge? Is it really the case that each and everyone one of us is personally responsible for the creation of Welsh, Serbian, Finnish and Chechen nationalism? Did we really forget about our creations? Why is it we need reminding?[8]

In the current literature on nationalism as a phenomenon two opposing approaches are often taken. These have been labelled in a variety of ways, but be described as Primordialism versus Constructivism. According to Primordialists the nation as either a form or a specific entity has always been with us, indeed provides the very notion of what it is to be a human being. Ethnic bonds are thus merely a development from the extended families that are a necessary means for human existence. The origin and source of modern nationhood lies in our tribal past. For Constructivists though, the nation is purely a modern invention, the result of an adaptation to industrialisation, which, because of the destruction of earlier more localised communities, engenders a search for a new 'imaginary' community to bind people together. This enterprise is all about the invention of traditions, rather than national sentiments that are part of our nature. Both approaches have their points in favour, but also weaknesses in their arguments.[9]

There is a third approach, associated in particular with the various writings of A.D. Smith (1991, 1995, 1998), which seeks to use aspects from both the previous theories. This approach, which may be labelled Historicist, argues on the one hand that there must be something for a nation to be based upon- it does not arise out of nowhere. This something Smith calls ethnie, but not all ethnies necessarily arise to nationhood. And, on the other hand, when they do they are subject to all sorts of historical transformations.

The success of these undertakings hinged on a return by the intelligentsia to a living past, a past that was no mere quarry for antiquarian research but that could be derived from the sentiments and traditions of the people. This meant a twofold strategy of furnishing 'maps' of the community, its history, its destiny and its place among the nations, and of providing 'moralities' for the regenerated community, ones that could inspire present generations to emulate the public virtues deemed to express the national character.   (Smith, 1991, p.65)

A similar historicist analysis can be found within the work of Otto Bauer. Writing in 1907 in the context of a Marxist analysis of multi-national Austro-Hungary he argues that the nation is the totality of men bound together through a common destiny into a community of character. It is not that national character is some kind of independent force, rather it is the outcome of the history of the nation as Bauer explains in the following extract:

The nation thus reveals itself as a historical phenomenon in two respects. First, it is a historical phenomenon in terms of its material determination, because the living national character actively manifested in every member of the nation is the precipitate of a historical development, because in the nationality of the individual member of the nation is reflected the history of the nation of which the individual is a product. Second, it is a historical phenomenon in terms of its formal bonds, because spheres of different dimensions are bound together to form a nation by different means and in different ways at the various stages of historical development. Not only does the history of society decide which concrete features of the members of the nation constitute the national character; the form in which the historically effective forces give rise to a community of character is also historically conditioned.   (Bauer, 2000, -in p.119)[10]

Thus, what Bauer is arguing for is that the national character emerges out of the specific historical conditions of each society and that this is an identity which, though it varies along with these conditions, nonetheless provides a reinforcing framework of preconceptions for those who inhabit that society.

Within the concept of 'habitus' found in the writings of Elias (1996) there are major similarities to Bauer.[11] He is concerned with the long-term relationships between personality types and social structures, with the way in which the increasing practise of self-restraint has had an impact on the ways in which our bodies function in society. Elias suggests that because of its relationship with National Socialist doctrines people no longer look at 'national character'. However if social scientists examine it calmly "it then soon becomes evident that a people's national habitus is not biologically fixed once and for all time: rather it is very closely connected with the particular process of state-formation they have undergone. Just like tribes and states, a national habitus develops and changes in the course of time" (Elias, 1996, p.2). Elias called it a 'second nature', something that cannot be simply changed like one's clothes (Fletcher, 1997, p.11), though even this is difficult enough.

_____

Elias has certainly had some direct influence on Pierre Bourdieu (1993), who perhaps differs from him by laying more stress on the class distinctions within societal figurations with his use of habitus.

> With the notion of habitus you can refer to something that is close to what is suggested by the idea of habit, while differing from it in one important respect. The habitus, as the word implies, is that which one has acquired, but which has become durably incorporated in the body in the form of permanent dispositions. So the term constantly reminds us that it refers to something historical, linked to individual history and that it belongs to a genetic mode of thought, as opposed to essentialist modes of thought.   (Bourdieu, 1993, p.86)

As he expresses it a little earlier on the same page:

> All the principles of choice are 'embodied', turned into postures, dispositions of the body. Values are postures, gestures, ways of standing, walking, speaking. The strength of the ethos is that it is a morality made flesh.   (ibid)

Thus national character is a form of cultural capital, operating particularly within language and its ways of categorizing and constituting the world in which we live.

I would argue that the seemingly old-fashioned concept of 'national character' can be seen to emerge quite happily out of a historicist analysis, and indeed is often the (hidden) content of the contemporary discussion of 'national identity' which claims to have replaced it. This will involve a closer look at some of the stereotypes associated with being English, because, in a sense, these are necessary fictions. They are images and ideals held up to the people who are engaged with them through books, speeches, newspaper columns, and other such discourses and ideological state apparatuses. The point is, that like human languages, these are clearly human constructs, but, precisely because of this , we cannot subtract these from human beings to seek to discover the Pure, Naked Subject underneath.[12] Without a language, which then also localizes and divides, there is no humanity. So as with our other constructs these are not simply illusions. They enable us to be who we are, and we try to live up to these ideals. Unless we recognize their historical reality, there will be little chance of changing them.

Notes

1. "Nationalism is not a word often used in connection with the English. Patriotism, Anglo-Saxon racialism, imperialism are the substitutes" (Newman, 1987, xviii). Indeed there are some who deny there is any such thing as English nationalism eg. Chadwick cit by Newman, 1987, p.51.

_____

2. For Easthope (1999), nationalism is a function of modernity, 'an almost spontaneous extension of my bodily self' similar to that other modern activity of driving a car: 'a disposition so effectively assimilated that I say 'I drive' ignoring the car I do the driving with' (p.3) … 'it becomes a 'historicized subjectivity' (p.11).When therefore English people 'think they are speaking in their own voices, in fact the discourse of an empiricist tradition is speaking for them' (p.ix). Easthope takes his cue from the Nairn-Anderson theses that in England the dominant empiricist thought structures discourage attention to Theory by seeming to draw upon Reality and Commonsense. - 'English national character, profoundly secular as it is, seems to treat only two things as genuinely transcendental - cricket and its own sense of humour' (p.162).

3. See John of Gaunt's speech in King Richard II, Act II, Scene 1.

4. See the discussion about Lord Blake's claim that it is so and that this could explain the psychology of the English character in Crick, 1991, p.93-94.

5. As empirical studies down the years have shown, eg. McCrone, 2001, p.102-3 in Morley and Robins, 2001. Note also Gwynfor Evans who puts it thus: "What is Britishness? The first thing to realize is that it is another word for Englishness: it is a political word which arose from the existence of the British state", in Gramich, 1997, p.99-100 [where he gives numerous instances].

6. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

7. Also Penrose (1995) "As individuals liken themselves to some people and distinguish themselves from others, bonds are formed between people who see themselves as similar. The product of this bonding is a group which is defined by a specified similarity or similarities. In many instances, similarity is partial, temporary and a matter of degree. The similarity is partial because it is based on, at most, a few characteristics of the individuals concerned. It is temporary because the individual members change over time and, consequently, they may alter the prioritization of characteristics which shapes their personal identity and their group membership may change accordingly. Finally, the similarity which binds a group is a matter of degree because it is contingent on the designation of difference between the group which it defines and the individuals or groups from which it is distinguished. As the definition of other individuals and groups alters, the capacity for any particular characteristic to distinguish one group from others can either increase or decrease" (p.402). One's nationality is thus an individual decision that is subject to change at will, indeed Penrose argues that we need to get away from the

_____

ideological essentialism that nationalism is, and stress human similarities not differences.

Jones (2001) is a fascinating social constructionist study of the way that English immigrants to the United States draw on their cultural resources. "Believing they had a naturally understated and muted style, these interviewees could resolve the dilemma of asserting national pride without being too "over the top" about it. If one is naturally English, then there is no need to engage in public expressions of national pride; its perhaps the most muted expression of national pride that there is" (p.59).

8. There is a similar view found in Berger and Luckman (1966). Having been the creators of the world originally, like some African Creator-god, we go away and forget all about it. There are parallels in the discussion of methodological individualism (O'Neill, 1973).

9. For example the arguments to be found in Ch.2 of A.D. Smith (1995) and at greater length in Smith (1998). Briefly, "the past is not some brew of random ingredients put together by artistic inclination, nor a quarry of cultural materials out of which nation-builders invent nations, nor yet a succession of epochs on whose foundations the modern nation securely rests. The ethnic past is composed of a series of traditions and memories which are the subject of constant reinterpretation" (A.D. Smith, 1995a, p.16-7). Amongst the Constructivists one can number E. Gellner (1968) (his 'Words and Things' is a pungent discussion of Englishness as expressed within philosophy) and E.J. Hobsbawm (1990).

10. The major source in English for a discussion of Bauer is that of Nimni (1991).

11. The most useful source in this area is Fletcher (1997).

12. As Marx expresses it in, eg. Theses on Feuerbach, "But the essence of man is not an abstraction inherent in each particular man. The real nature of man is the totality of social relations … the abstract individual whom he analyses belongs to a particular form of society" (VI, VII).

References

Anderson, P. (1992) English Questions, Verso.
Bauer, O. (2000) The Question of Nationalities and Social Democracy, University of Minnesota Press.
Berger, P. and Luckmann, T. (1966) The Social Construction of Reality.
Bourdieu, P. (1977) Outline of a Theory of Practice, Cambridge University Press.

_____

Bourdieu, P. (1993) Sociology in Question, Sage.

Crick, B. (1991) "The English and the British", in B. Crick (ed) National Identities, Blackwell.

Easthope, A. (1999) Englishness and National Culture, Routledge.

Elias, N. (1978) The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners, Basil Blackwell.

Elias, N. (1991) The Society of Individuals, Basil Blackwell.

Elias, N. (1994) The Civilizing Process, Basil Blackwell.

Elias, N. (1996) The Germans: Power struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, Polity Press.

Fletcher, J. (1997) Violence and Civilization: an introduction to Norbert Elias, Polity Press.

Gellner, E. (1968) Words and Things, Penguin.

Gramich, K. (1997) 'Cymru or Wales?: explorations in a divided sensibility', in S. Basnett (ed) Studying British Cultures, Routledge.

Hobsbawm, E.J. (1990) Nations and Nationalism since 1780, Cambridge University Press.

Jackson, P. and Penrose, J. (eds) (1993) Constructions of Race, Place and Nation, UCL Press.

Jones, K.W. (2001) Accent on Privilege: English Identities and Anglomania in the US, Philadelphia, Temple University Press.

McCrone, D. (2001) "Scotland and the Union: changing identities in the British State", in D. Morley and K. Robins, British Cultural Studies, OUP.

Newman, G. (1987) The Rise of English Nationalism: a cultural history 1740-1830, Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

O'Neill, J. (ed) (1973) Modes of Individualism and Collectivism, Heinemann.

Nimni, E. (1991) Marxism and Nationalism, Pluto Press.

Penrose, J. (19??) "Reification in the name of change", in P. Jackson and J. Penrose.

Penrose, J. (1995) 'The 'cultural bases' of nationalist movements', *Nations and Nationalism*, 1(3), p.391-417.

Reicher, S., Hopkins, N. and Condor, S. (1997) "The lost nation of psychology", in C.C. Barfoot, Beyond Pug's Tour: National and ethnic stereotyping in theory and literary practice, Rodopi, 1997.

Smith, A.D. (1991) National identity, Penguin.

Smith, A.D. (1995) 'Gastronomy or geology? The role of nationalism in the reconstruction of nations, '*Nations and Nationalism*', 1(1), 3-23.

Smith, A.D. (1995) Nations and nationalism in a global era, Polity.

Smith, A.D. (1998) Nationalism and Modernism, Routledge.