

**Gabriel ROMAN-BĂRBUȚI**

# **BRITISHNESS AND MULTICULTURALISM**

**AN ESSAY ON POST-IMPERIAL NOSTALGIA**



Gabriel ROMAN – BĂRBUȚI

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**Lumen**

Iași,  
2011

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*Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge  
against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love  
thy neighbor as thyself*

*(Leviticus, 19:18)*

*Hell is other people...*

*(J.P. Sartre, No Exit)*

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## Introduction

The present paper has as its main theme the attempt of trying to define the concept of Britishness, both from its national and imperial perspective, and to analyze its complex relationship to such issues as ethnicity and culture, especially in the post-war period, when Great Britain is faced both with the collapse of its empire and with massive immigration from its former colonies and dominions.

The analysis will be both a synchronic and a diachronic one, with an important focus being placed on the shift of national consciousness from one epoch to the other, always trying to offer the historical backdrop for these evolutions as well. Also, the paper will stop and analyze some major issues that brought about mutations in the national imaginary, like for example colonial discoveries and the appearance of the stereotype of the savage, the American Revolution and its implications, the Irish problem, and the processes of devolution and multicultural acceptance that marked the last decade of British politics. We will thus try to understand the causes that lead to the current crisis in national identity and try to analyze the possible solutions to this complex problem.

Also, although it is an exceptionally difficult task to define such a heterogeneous concept, we will try and give an accurate definition and description of such widely vehiculated, but rarely understood notions such as Britishness, Englishness or multiculturalism. This is a work

based on a multidisciplinary approach of the main topics, as throughout the paper we will recourse to domains such as history (of England and of the British Empire), literature, political sciences, cultural studies, philosophy or international relations, to name just a few. Also, the paper tries to cover a wide as possible array of disciplines that form the core of British Cultural Studies, from literature of identities, to British history, to political institutions or to post-colonialism.

The paper will be divided into four chapters and a conclusion, and it will deal, in its first chapter with the introduction and explanation of some of the basic terms in understanding national identity, and in its subsequent chapters with the thorough analysis of these notions and their historical development.

Chapter two is a brief presentation of the imperial evolution of England, and of the main problems it dealt itself with; also, paralleled with the historic presentation of facts, this chapter tries to pinpoint the important moments in the formation of the national and imperial consciousness, and the development of meaning in these terms.

Chapter three deals with the post-imperial crisis of identity, especially with the Empire's dialectical relationship to the colonial "other", which manifests itself in several ways, depending first of all on the political interests of the governing parties. Chapter four makes a brief inventory of the main developments of the last decade, including the failure of multiculturalism and the resurgence of basic national symbols, and tries to foresee

some of the possible evolutions to the issue in the years to come.

Finally, the conclusions of the paper will act as corollary to the problem of Britishness, by trying to redefine and better understand the term, as well as comparing it with the other terms discussed throughout the work.

The bibliography chosen for this paper is as varied as possible, with the main purpose of it being to present the central problem of the work from several viewpoints, in order to give it the air of academic objectivity any serious paper requires. The material used thus varies from history textbooks, to books on the subject of national identity, be it British or general, to critical texts and up to internet resources or newspaper articles related to this topic. Extensive quotes from important “actors” and observers of the contemporary political debates on national identity will be used, to argument and question the validity of several hypotheses and opinions forwarded throughout the paper. Finally, a special emphasis on choosing the resources is placed on finding recent texts (post 1990 period), which have the advantage of both treating the issue from a more comprehensive perspective and will prove the importance and coverage of such a topic to our present-day world.

For it is clear that in the general turmoil that Western Society has been caught in, the problem of defining national identity becomes even more important and stringent, not only in the case of Great Britain, which we will analyze here, but also in the case of the other European countries, which are often used in this paper to

serve as comparison and as exemplification. Starting from the hypothesis that Britishness has evolved in recent decades from its contractual interpretation (based on the *Jus Soli*) towards a more racial and cultural understanding of the term, the current paper will try to understand the reasons that have lead to this phenomenon, as well as arriving at a set of cogent conclusions on the future developments of this concept.

In a questioning on the evolution of national consciousness and its effects on our every day society, more stringent questions will be asked and hopefully answered, in a combination of methods having in mind both the complexity of the subject and its importance to the understanding of contemporary British Cultural Studies.

## **Chapter I: Defining the terms**

### **1.1. On the question of identity and nationhood**

The Self and the Nation are probably the two most influential concepts of the XX-th century. The ontological and the national problem have so much influenced the last hundred years that it would be almost impossible to think of the XX-th century without coming back to one of these two dilemmas. From Conrad to the postmodernists, literature was faced with the continuous task of defining identities: personal identities, group identities, class identities and, importantly enough, national identities.

From World War One through World War Two, the global map has been constantly redrawn to fit the political demands of its age. Countries have been created, engulfed, dismembered. Borders have been arranged and rearranged, and each new change has brought about the emergence of new national mythologies. The general tendency, at least in the Europe of the last century was the passing from the imperial stage to the national one and finally, towards the end of the century to the regional (or federal) one.

This was also the pre-eminent phenomenon in the case of Great Britain. When Queen Victoria died, in 1901, Great Britain was the greatest power in the world, spreading across about a quarter of the globe. After 1945,

it started to lose its imperial possessions<sup>1</sup>, being practically reduced to its former island territories. Finally, towards the end of the previous century, even the composing countries of the kingdom began to start their own struggles for independence, in search of a path of their own.

In front of this shifting evolution, the issue of national identity becomes an even more poignant one. What does it mean to be British? And what does it mean to be English? Do the two definitions overlap? Or are they totally opposed terms that stand for the two main viewpoints on national identity (race versus place)? And, finally, how inclusive are these terms? Who is in and who is left out of these ever-shifting identities? To make things ever more complicated, it is not only the “insiders” (the white, English population) that are faced with answering these questions, but this pondering also becomes a central theme of the colonial outsider’s ontological quest.

The former colonists were put in front of choosing between their ancient, tribal identity, their colonial, British identity, and their forcedly and often artificial post-colonial national identity. Most of them usually chose the third. But there were also hundreds of thousands that came to Great Britain, attempting to integrate themselves as full citizens of the former empire. What were these? Can we consider them British or not? Or, to go even further, can we see them as English?

Englishness, Britishness, multiculturalism, post colonialism, post imperialism – these are the terms that mark and define the blurry borders of national identity in

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<sup>1</sup> We will have a more thorough discussion on the historic evolution of the empire in a subsequent chapter of the paper.

our age. Often used, but rarely thoroughly analyzed, and even less fully understood, each of these terms stands for a different definition of what national identity and its related issues mean.

## **1.2. Britishness or Englishness? On a long ongoing debate**

“English, I mean British”- this familiar locution alerts us immediately to one of the enduring perplexities of English national identity. (Kumar, 2003: 3) Indeed, a clear separation of Britishness and Englishness has always been a difficult task, as the two terms seem to be in a relationship of historical dichotomy and mutual exclusion: when one is on the rise, the other is low. England’s long-lasting tradition as an empire meant that its people had great difficulty in defining their national identity. Even a term like “English nationalism” sounds particularly strange to English ears: nationalism is for lesser people, while the English were, and still are, to some extent, an imperial people. They can identify with institutions (like the Monarchy or the Parliament), but have not very much cultivated an ethnic identity.

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*Us and the Other*: the axis that binds together these terms regroups the essential of human reports. History itself is, in its own way, nothing more than just a discourse formed around the opposing and complementary principles of identity and otherness.

Multiculturalism tries to solve the old dichotomist syntagm of "us and the other" by replacing it with a slightly different approach. The game of alterities is suppressed, and the other is ultimately substituted with its milder semantic form - "different". But can the utopia of multiculturalism resist in front of its many critics? And how can it resolve its issues with the growing sentiment of national pride?

**Gabriel ROMAN-BĂRBUȚI**



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