



## The United Kingdom and British Empire: A Figurational Approach

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## **The United Kingdom and British Empire: A Figurational Approach**

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# **The United Kingdom and British Empire: A Figural Approach**

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## **Abstract**

Drawing upon the work of Norbert Elias and the process [figural] sociology perspective, this article examines how state formation processes are related to, and, affected by, expanding and declining chains of international interdependence. In contrast to civic and ethnic conceptions, this approach focuses on the emergence of the nation/nation-state as grounded in broader processes of historical and social development. In doing so, state formation processes within the United Kingdom are related to the expansion and decline of the British Empire. That is, by focusing on the functional dynamics that are embedded in collective groups, one is able to consider how the UK's 'state' and 'imperial' figurations were interdependently related to changes in both the UK and the former British Empire. Consequently, by locating contemporary UK relations in the historical context of former imperial relationships, nationalism studies can go 'beyond' the nation/nation-state in order to include broader processes of imperial expansion and decline. Here, the relationship between empire and nationalism can offer a valuable insight into contemporary political movements, especially within former imperial groups.

## **Keywords**

British Empire, Norbert Elias, process/figural sociology, imperialism, nationalism/national identity, figuration, interdependence, established-outsider

## Introduction

Instead of viewing the nation/nation-state as an isolated phenomenon, forged upon a specific set of unchanging values and characteristics, this article will outline how the nation/nation-state can be considered as part of a long-term process of alteration and contestation that emerged in relation to larger networks of ‘imperial’ interaction (Bickers, 2010). Indeed, whereas ‘empire’ has more commonly been conceived as a ‘pre-national category’ (Gerasimov et al. 2005, 35), analyses of empire can:

present us with interconnected and interdependent sites, territorial and imaginative, that disrupt the naturalized oppositions between metropole and colony and exceed the boundaries of ‘national’ histories to account for the complexities generated by the flows of people, goods, and ideas across the globe since the late fifteenth century (Wilson 2006, 212)

Notably, it is by exploring this complexity and its associated tensions that the relationship between nationalism and empire can be considered as part of a long-term historical process (Inglis 2014), which, in the context of the multi-national United Kingdom (UK) (a former imperial power and unitary ‘nation-state’, comprising four ‘nations’: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales), can be used to decenter analyses of the nation/nation-state.

In particular, if one is to ‘exceed the boundaries of “national” histories’ (Wilson 2006, 212), then it is suggested that the work of Norbert Elias and the process [figurational] sociology perspective can be used to examine how state formation processes are related to and, affected by, expanding and declining chains of international interdependence. Whereas the work of both Anthony Smith (1986, 1991, 1995, 2001, 2005a, 2005b, 2010) and Ernest Gellner (1973, 2005, 2008) remains a ‘dominant contrast in typologies of nationhood’ (Wright et al. 2012, 470) and,

while this article will begin by giving due attention to both the civic and ethnic conceptions of the nation/nation-state, it will be argued that one of the most significant aspects of Elias's work is his emphasis on the long-term processes underpinning state formation. This long-term perspective can develop upon ethnic and civic approaches by focusing on the interdependencies that exist between national and imperial figurations. Accordingly, Elias's work will be used to examine how state formation processes, within the UK, are closely related to the expansion and decline of the British Empire (Elias 1978; 1991; 1996; 1998; 2012; Delmotte 2012; Goudsblom 1977; Linklater 2011a; 2011b; Linklater and Mennell 2010; Mennell 1990; 1994; Mennell and Goudsblom 1998).

### **The nation and nation-state: Ethnic and civic approaches**

Studies on nationalism and national identity have been examined and defined in various ways, by numerous authors (Elias 1991, 1996, 2010; Guibernau 2006; Hutchinson 1987; Mayall 1990). For 'ethnic approaches', the work of Anthony Smith (1986, 1991, 1995, 2005a, 2005b, 2010) proposes that the *nation* is not just a political entity but a system of cultural representations which influences and organises human action (McCrone 1997). Here, Smith (2005a, 25) draws attention to the importance of 'ethnie', which he defines as 'a named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories and one or more common elements of culture, including an association with a homeland'. Certainly, whereas Smith (1991, 39 [italics added]) contends that 'most latter-day nations are, in fact, polyethnic', he maintains that '*many have been formed in the first place around a dominant ethnie, which attracted other ethnies or ethnic fragments into the state to which it gave a name and cultural charter*'. Indeed, these ethno-national attributes are often depicted via a shared language,

religion or particular geographical topography and are subsequently associated with a specific national culture (Smith 2010).

In contrast, ‘civic approaches’ draw upon the geographical importance of the *nation-state*, with each state relating to a well-defined territory. Originating from the work of Ernest Gellner (1973, 2005, 2008), the nation is primarily a civic invention, forged for the purpose of civic politics (Anderson 2006; Breuilly 1994; Hobsbawm 1983, 1990; McCrone 1997). Here, national boundaries and collective identity provide the crucial components of a political ‘national’ community that forms part of a modern world system of nation-states (Calhoun 1994; Gellner 1973, 2005, 2008). This is closely aligned with the economic and political impact of the industrial revolution (Gellner 2008, Hobsbawm 1983), which, for Anderson (2006), helped to displace the predominance of Latin and supported developments in as well as the expansion of print capitalism. This presented the nation as an ‘imagined community’, grounded in a sense of comradeship and a shared vernacular language.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, the subsequent flourishing of national history, mythology and symbolism, which emerged across Europe during the 1800s, culminated in a number of national traditions being ‘invented’; such as, national anthems and flags (Hobsbawm 1983). According to Hobsbawm (1983, 1), these ‘invented traditions’ reflected ‘a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past’. Central to this process was the efforts of politicians, historians and journalists who helped engineer the nation-state and its associated traditions, culture and identity.

Despite their opposing perspectives, both the ethnic and civic approaches provide a detailed yet, overarching, analysis of the nation/nation-state and its relation to nationalism and national identity. This is evident in Smith’s (2010) primordial account of the nation, whereby nationalism is closely tied to pre-existing ethnic groups as well as in civic approaches, such as,

Anderson's (2006) 'imagined community' and Hobsbawm's (1983) 'invented traditions', which draw attention to the nation-state as a modern phenomenon, socially constructed and predicated upon the necessity of nationalism in politically uniting large groups of people.

However, whereas both approaches offer differing conceptions and understandings of nationalism/national identity and the nation and/or nation-state, in many instances, connections can be drawn between the two. In particular, both approaches can be aligned with wider collective communities that transcend the nation/nation-state (MacInnes et al. 2007). Indeed, Darwin (2010, 386) has redefined the relationship between empire and ethnicity as an 'imperial ethnicity'. He argues that the cohabitation of various ethnic groups within the British Empire resulted in social and political practices and shared cultural and ethnic ties being invented in order to forge supranational identities based upon imperial citizenship (Darwin 2010; Gerasimov et al. 2005).

Nevertheless, while both the civic and ethnic approaches provide only a partial insight into the relationship between empire and nationalism, analytically, each approach fails to examine how 'composite' or 'multi-layered states or empires' are formed and how 'ethno-linguistic layers' and state influences are fundamentally interdependent (Kuzmics and Axtmann 2007, 7). Rather, an understanding of national identity politics demands an appreciation of how the nation/nation-state – in both its civic and ethnic origins – emerged as part of a wider *international context* (MacInnes et al. 2007; Rose-Greenland 2013). Here, nationalism studies can go 'beyond' the nation/nation-state in order to include broader processes of imperial expansion and decline (Darwin 2010).

In fact, one important aspect of the process sociology perspective is avoiding dichotomies in favour of analyses of society that reveal historical processes (Dunning et al. 2004; Dunning and Hughes 2012; Elias 1978, 1996, 2012; Maguire 1995). Indeed, by historically locating social research (Dunning 1992), social investigations can avoid perceiving

social life as timeless or radically different in post-modern times (Inglis 2014). The importance of observing broader historical changes in the structure of societies, and the individuals who form them, is central to Elias's (2012) desire to relate long-term changes in interdependence with state formation processes.

Certainly, processual accounts of the nation are not unique to the process sociology perspective, nor, is the emergence of any 'national' society and, by extension, its imperial expansion, based upon a simple unilinear model of inevitable 'progress'. In fact, while sociologists have often condemned 'progress' theories, Mennell (1990) argues that there is a relative acceptance that societies have become more complex. If societies are 'radically' and 'qualitatively different' (Inglis 2014, 105), then it is due to changes in their social structure and relations (Elias 1978, 2012).<sup>2</sup> This can be used to grasp the continuous fluctuations affecting national identity in light of 'post- or late-modern expressions of nationalism' (McCrone et al. 1998, 16).

In view of the above, this article contends that the relationship between empire and nationalism can be used to highlight how 'relationships past, present and (possible) future' are reflected in 'changing balances of power and changing interdependencies' (O'Connor and Goodwin 2012, 482-483). In part, this directs attention to exploring how international 'social interactions' are maintained in 'space[s] within which processes of mutual constitution are productive of the entities which populate the international system' (Barkawi and Laffey 2002, 111). One way of approaching this task is to view 'imperial spaces' in relation to Elias's analysis of 'figurations'.

### **Examining 'empire': A figural and interdependent approach**



The work of Darwin (1991, 2009, 2010, 2012) has been influential in building an approach to empire that considers both metropolitan and colonial spaces as a network of relations. This approach is advocated by Lester (2001, 2006), who argues for a focus on ‘Imperial Networks’. Lester (2006, 131 [*italics added*]) notes that:

Scholars who propose a networked conception of empire generally consider it more useful to try to examine multiple meanings, projects, material practices, performances and experiences of colonial relations rather than locate their putative root causes, whether they are ‘economic’, ‘political’ or indeed ‘cultural’. *These relations were always stretched in contingent and non-deterministic ways, across space, and they did not necessarily privilege either metropolitan or colonial spaces.* They remade both metropolitan and colonial places in the act of connecting them.

The possibility for colonial sites to be ‘remade’ is considered further in Misra’s (2008) work on ‘imperial agency’ and its role in the British Empire. Indeed, while there has been ‘an understandable search to recover indigenous agency’ in imperial research (Misra 2008, 136), it is argued that there is a tendency to exaggerate its effects in relation to empire. In doing so, Misra (2008) contends that the British Empire should be viewed as a ‘system’, adding that imperial ‘systems’ could both favour and hinder certain colonial and colonized groups.

Both Misra’s (2008) ‘system’ and Lester’s (2006) ‘network’ analyses draw attention to the relations which underscored the British Empire and, more importantly, to the effects of these relations upon both metropolitan and peripheral societies. While Lester (2006, 131) argues that ‘[colonial] relations were always stretched in contingent and non-deterministic ways, his attention to the ‘double nature of the imperial system’ – that is, it’s ‘fragile’ and ‘dynamic’ qualities – allows us to see ‘that empires were not just structures, but processes as

well' (133). These 'structures' and 'processes' are brought to light when conceptions of the nation/nation-state and their relation to imperial spaces can be viewed – not as separated phenomena – but as interdependent 'figurations' each impacting upon the other.

Indeed, Elias's conception of 'figurations' occupies a central importance in his analysis of society. He uses the analogy of a 'dance' to explain its significance:

The image of the mobile figurations of interdependent people on a dance floor perhaps makes it easier to imagine states, cities, families and also capitalist, communist and feudal systems as figurations. ... One can certainly speak of a dance in general, but no-one will imagine a dance as a structure outside the individual or as a mere abstraction. The same figurations can certainly be danced by different people; but without a plurality of reciprocally orientated and dependent individuals, there is no dance. Like every other social figuration, a dance figuration is relatively independent of the specific individuals forming it here and now, but not of individuals as such. It would be absurd to say that dances are mental constructions abstracted from observations of individuals considered separately. The same applies to all other figurations. Just as small dance figurations change – becoming now slower, now quicker – so too, gradually or more suddenly, do the large figurations we call societies. (Elias 2012, 526)

In fact, the concept of figuration:

can be applied to relatively small groups just as well as to societies made up of thousands or millions of interdependent people. Teachers and pupils in a class, doctor and patients in a therapeutic group, regular customers at a pub, children at a nursery school – they all make up relatively comprehensible figurations with each other (Elias 1978, 131).

Accordingly, in order to examine the multiplicity of colonial relations, a figurational approach can help elucidate upon the multi-layered nature of social life; that of, various figurations, each connected and dynamically related to one another.<sup>3</sup> This highlights how various interdependent figurations form part of much wider global figurations of nations/nation-states, each comprising their own *interdependent* relations and based upon shifting balances of power (Elias 1978; Goudsblom 1977). As noted, this approach pays particular attention to the importance of viewing international relations as fundamentally ‘interdependent’ (Hobson 2012). Elias (1991, 18-19 [italics in original]) elaborates upon the importance of this concept in the following example:

One does not understand a melody by considering each of its notes in isolation, unrelated to other notes ... It is similar with a house. What we call its structure is not the structure of the individual stones but of the relations *between* the individual stones of which it is built; it is the complex of functions the stones have in relation to each other within the unity of the house ... the structure of the house, cannot be explained by thinking about the shape of the individual stones independently of their relations to each other; on the contrary, the shape of the stones can only be explained in terms of their function within the whole functional complex, the structure of the house. One must start by thinking about the structure of the whole in order to understand the form of the individual parts. These and many other phenomena have one thing in common, different as they may be in all other respects: *to understand them it is necessary to give up thinking in terms of single, isolated substances and to start thinking in terms of relationships and functions.*

Much like Elias's dance analogy, 'the structure of the house' serves to highlight how 'individual parts' are interdependently related to wider complexes.

In fact, a similar approach to the history of the UK and the British Empire has been presented by Cannadine (2001). 'By stressing the *interconnections* between social visions of the metropolis and the periphery, and the *structures* and *systems* that unified and undergirded them', Cannadine (2001, xx [italics added]) argues that one can 'put the history of Britain back into the history of empire, and the history of the empire back into the history of Britain'. This interdependent approach to British imperial history is also promoted in the work of J.G.A. Pocock (1975, 1992). Pocock (1982, 317, 320 cited in Kumar [2003, 13]) argued that British history:

cannot be written as the memory of a single state or nation or as the process by which one came into existence. It must be a plural history, tracing the processes by which a diversity of societies, nationalities and political structures came into being and situating in the history of each and in the history of their interactions the processes that have led them to whatever forms of association or unity exists in the present or have existed in the past.

Pocock's (1975) 'plural history' directs attention to the 'processes' and 'interactions' that have existed in the 'past' and serves to situate these in relation to 'forms of association or unity' in the present.

With regard to the above, it is possible to contextualize the study of 'empires' and 'imperial systems' in relation to the processes of interdependence ('interaction') that form part of 'imperial figurations'. By focusing on the functional dynamics that are embedded in collective groups, one is able to consider how people, nations/nation-states and multi-national

figurations, such as, empires, are interdependently related (Elias 1978). Such figurational dynamics are based upon a number of tensions and, more importantly, are historically defined. Following Elias's figurational/interdependent approach, therefore, the following section will introduce Elias and Scotson's (1994) 'established-outsider' approach in order to examine the multi-figurational dynamics underlying the UK's imperial expansion and decline.

### **Elias and Scotson's established and outsider relations**

Elias and Scotson's (1994) established-outsider model offers a unique way of examining how British nationalism as well as English, Irish/Northern Irish, Scottish and Welsh nationalisms have been shaped by interdependent, multi-level figurational dynamics. Elias and Scotson's (1994) study examined the town of Winston Parva (a pseudonym) whereby, in interviews with the town's residents, they identified a number of important characteristics between two interdependent, yet seemingly, separated groups. Indeed, what they observed was an established neighbourhood, whose history within the town had allowed them to forge closely-knit relations and positions of power and, an outsider group, who were stigmatized and perceived to be an inferior collective. Unlike the established neighbourhood, the outsider group failed to control the same positions of power and did not have the historical longevity that the established group had been able to achieve. These dynamics resulted in examples of 'group superiority', amongst the established group, and examples of 'group inferiority', amongst the outsider group.

Accordingly, if understandings of the former British Empire and UK are to be considered not in isolation but, as part of wider processes of interdependence emerging out of power relations between the British home nations and a global empire, then the capacity for

British nationalism to be based on a British domestic and later imperial scale can be embedded within power relations characteristic of established and outsider groups.

From the twelfth-century, ‘established groups in England tended to have greater power potential than established groups in the other territories of the British Isles’ (Dunning 2017). Here, it is possible to trace how England’s established position within the British domestic figuration resulted in attitudes of superiority and a propensity to prioritize ‘England’ in constructions of ‘Britain’. In fact, the dominance of English cultural and linguistics expressions has come at the cost of a decline in the Gaelic (Goidelic) languages. Craig (2011, 276) notes that:

[The Scottish] language or dialect was rejected as inferior and the centres of power and influence increasingly moved outwith the country. Following the Union, the definition of good manners, pronunciation and correct usage of the English language emanating from the English ruling class led the Scots to question their speech and manners.

As can be seen from Craig’s (2011) remarks, the influence of established groups can often provide a form of emulation for outsider groups to follow. With regards to the Thirteen Colonies in North America, Eustace (2008, 8) highlights that:

Wish though they might to assert their full membership in the British Empire, colonists frequently found themselves placed at the literal and figurative periphery of British life, their attempts to master the emotional subtleties of British-style gentility ignored or even mocked by those in the metropolis.

Accordingly, while the power differentials between established and outsider groups can reveal examples of inferiority (Craig 2011) and emulation (Eustace 2008), examples of ‘outsider’ resistance can also be identified (Vogler 2000). This is, however, a process that is clearly power balanced and based upon multi-figurational tensions reflected in a desire for national autonomy/distinctiveness and in attempts to follow established models of state rationalization. Indeed, whereas peripheral nations ‘often try to emulate or appropriate models developed by the world’s most powerful nations’ they can also develop ‘alternative models of nation-building’ (Mihelj 2011, 31). Nonetheless, while state-formation processes can undergo diverse and contrasting approaches, particularly within former colonial societies, ‘the imprint of earlier imperial systems of thought still exists in many parts of the world and continues to colour perceptions of identity, definitions of difference, and expectations of community’ (Manz 2003, 72). Consequently, by examining the multi-figurational tensions between nations/nation-states and empires, the ‘long term historical processes’ (Inglis 2014, 100) that continue to shape contemporary nationalisms, can be considered. It is to this, that we now turn.

### **From state to empire: An interdependent approach to Britain’s state and imperial figurations**

Following the ‘Acts of Union’ in 1707, Kumar (2003, 145) highlights how ‘one could both retain one’s distinctiveness in ethnic or even national terms and, at the same time, share in the new British identity made available by the newly created British state’. This emergent figuration – the British state – provided a space in which British identity could be adopted, redefined and contested. Indeed, while the work of Colley (2005) highlights the importance of the Protestant religion in uniting both Britain and its emerging colonies, Kumar (2003, 160)

reveals that ‘competing regional and even national identities could crystalize around whichever branch of the Protestant family happened to be dominant’.

Accordingly, these values and ideals were part of a much broader process of cultural, economical and political transformation occurring within Britain. One notable transformation was the emergence of a rising landed gentry, which saw a ‘massive transfer of land by way of inheritance and purchase [... and] an unprecedented rise in the profitability of land and increasing intermarriage between Celtic and English dynasties’ (Colley 2005, 161). This ‘helped to consolidate a new unitary ruling class in place of those separate and specific landed establishments that had characterised England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland in the Tudor and Stuart eras’ (Colley 2005, 161).

The amalgamation of ‘a new unitary ruling class’ can be linked to the beginnings of a British ‘nationalization’ (Elias 2012), which would see the position of Britain’s national elites becoming interdependently tied to the British state. The long-term monopolization of the British state by the English, would indicate the emergence of an established-outsider dynamic between an ‘established’ English and an ‘outsider’ Celtic periphery. In particular, within Scotland, Dziennik (2012, 145) notes how:

Highland elites used cultural imagery because it helped them to secure political capital within the fiscal-military state. Counter-intuitively, in adopting Highland dress, elites attempted to express a Highland affinity with Whig narratives of Britain’s political, commercial and constitutional pre-eminence, thus advancing the legitimacy of local rule. As had been the case for several generations of Highland elites, good relations with the state were believed to be the surest means of safeguarding certain socio-economic aspects of local authority.



The legitimacy of the Highland elite in Scotland was a status that was interdependently tied to the balance of power within Britain and reflected in a multi-layered established-outsider dynamic which crossed a British state figuration, centered on London, and an emerging imperial figuration. That is, while ‘well-born and educated Englishmen ... [were] more likely to have the pick of the jobs at home through established networks of personal connection and patronage. ... Within the imperial relationship the Scots could feel that they were the peers of the English’ (Devine 2011, 29 & 168).

Therefore, whereas the emergence of a ‘British’ middle class had become more powerful by the end of the nineteenth-century (Thompson 2008), ‘the balanced combination of royal and parliamentary power’ (Breuilly 1994, 86 see also Elias [1996]) within Britain, reflected a process of functional democratization that resulted in the parliamentization of British social life occurring much earlier compared to other European states (Elias 1996, 2012).<sup>4</sup> British power, organised and expressed through Parliament (Wellings 2010), provided both an ‘ideological and organisational function for the British state’ (Breuilly 1994, 85). Yet, in ‘an age to which the notion of natural rights was foreign ... the constitutional rights of Parliament had to be based upon historical precedent’ (Breuilly 1994, 85). As a result, middle-class elites and its intellectual sections increasingly founded an ideal image of themselves based not on family ancestry (a trait readily available for the aristocracy) but on the nation’s past (Elias 1996). Within Britain, this pride would be symbolically tied to its position as head of a global empire (Elias 1996; Howe 2010; Kumar 2003).

In accordance with ‘the emergence of a state in which aristocratic principles of governance increasingly gave way to professional ones’ (Thompson 2008, 46), stood a ‘burgeoning bureaucratic and professional middle class [who] saw the British imperial world as their oyster’ (48). ‘[I]n retrospect’, Devine (2011, 56) notes that ‘The eighteenth century can ... be seen as the classic period of British imperial expansion’, adding that, ‘The following one

hundred years maintained the territorial momentum but at the same time saw unprecedented British influence expand across the globe, even over nations where the United Kingdom claimed no sovereign authority'. Importantly, this influence would not be tied to any single 'nation' within Britain but, instead, would work interdependently with the British state, its constituent nationalisms and its expanding empire.

As a result, national identity and British identity were not static classificatory systems but processes of development that occurred alongside changes in the social structures surrounding them (Goudsblom 1977). In fact, these changes highlight how the emergence of the British state figuration in 1707 was interdependently related to an emerging British imperial figuration during the eighteenth-century. Indeed, if 'imperial prosperity was to continue apace, then the four diverse preindustrial cultural 'nations' that constituted the UK, would need to be reconciled to an ideological 'Greater Britain' (Pittock 2012, 328).

For Devine (2011, 29), it was 'the "outsiders" within the British Isles who were most willing to abandon their home country for overseas adventures'. Here, the expansion of the British Empire interdependently allied the home nations with a wider imperial network. In doing so, a larger 'imperial' balance of power between Britain and the empire emerged, a process that provided Britain and its constitutive home nations the opportunity to form part of an imperial established strata, the British metropole. This will now be considered.

### **Empire and Nationalism in the UK**

From the beginning of the English settlement in Ireland, to the political union of England, Scotland and Wales, a series of power relations between the four nations can be sketched. Indeed, this can reveal broader structural processes underpinning the development of Western European nations more broadly. Elias (1982, 98) states that in:

The mechanism of state-formation ... we always find, at least in the history of the great European states, an early phase in which units of the size of a territory play the decisive role within the area later to become a state.

In doing so, 'areas like the principality of Wales or the kingdom of Scotland, now merged with England in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland' (Elias 1982, 98).

Within England, concerns regarding British nationalism and English patriotism, were frequently denounced by a Westminster government who were 'at pains to praise the imperial instincts of England's neighbours precisely because they felt that they needed reassuring that the cry of a shared allegiance to empire was not a cloak for English aggrandisement' (Thompson 2005, 198). In conjunction with the efforts of Highland elites, who, as previously noted, sought to draw upon 'cultural imagery ... to secure political capital within the fiscal-military state' (Dziennik 2012, 145), imperial allegiances within Britain exposed a number of tensions and, equally, a number of contrasting appraisals, which as the following examples illustrate, reflected a growing network of imperial interdependence. Furthermore, empire would provide the opportunity for established-outsider relations to be transplanted to a wider level of imperial interdependence.

With regard to Scotland, Nairn (1977) argues that the 1707 union with England and Wales benefitted only a small Scottish elite. In contrast, Finlay (1997, 15) asserts that the 'value-laden judgement' of such assessments is often based on the assumption 'that Scottish nationalism must be intrinsically hostile to the British state'. Instead, 'for most of the nineteenth and early twentieth century there was no sense of contradiction in being both Scottish and British' (Finlay 1997, 15). In fact, for Finlay (1997, 15), 'they were mutually reinforcing'.

To this extent, it is possible to observe how Scottish attachments to Britain were, and, continue to be, both complex and contradictory. Attempts to suppress regional identities through educational and linguistic policies were often unsuccessful and, instead, resulted in a number of cultural revivals within Scotland (MacKenzie 1998). At the same time, many Scottish workers, driven out by a British domestic economy that failed to provide enough jobs for its growing labour force (MacKenzie 1998; Pugh 2008), looked towards the colonies for work. Here, the British Empire provided the opportunity for Scottish culture to go ‘beyond Scotland’ (MacKenzie 1998). Often this was the result of migrant Scots ‘eager to maintain their cultural identities in colonies of settlement, notably Canada and New Zealand’ (MacKenzie 1998, 231). Accordingly:

although the administration and legal systems of empire seemed to be predominantly English, the Scots set about exporting those aspects of their civil culture that had been preserved by the 1707 Act of Union. They asserted their right to develop Presbyterian missions and education in India freed from the established Anglican hierarchy. They developed colleges and schools in India and elsewhere in the dependent territories. (MacKenzie 1998, 222)

Within Scotland, therefore, imperial service would become the focus of a specifically Scottish national pride (Bayly 1989, 136 cited in Kumar [2003, 171]).

In addition, the British Empire would also provide an opportunity for Irish Catholics to flee ethnic persecution in Ireland. Clayton (2005, 236) notes that:

The Irish colonial experience included two contradictory elements, both shared by other colonised peoples. On the one hand, there was an intensification of the long tradition of

subjecting the Catholic Irish to racist stereotyping, whose content and motivation was almost identical to that experienced by indigenous peoples in other parts of the British Empire. On the other hand, Irish Catholics played a part in the empire not only as subjects but as agents of the imperial power in the maintenance of the empire.

Consequently, within Australia and New Zealand, Irish immigration aided the spread of both national and British culture across the colonies. Parent (2007) alludes to the greater 'British' cohesion that was found within the dominions compared to Britain. He notes:

Those of British ancestry cohered reasonably effectively in Australia because of expedience; they needed to cooperate to secure a distant outpost of British imperialism. So while in the British Isles there was much conflict between the Irish and the British, in Australia, though there was some friction, the Irish were generally integrated into the dominant ethnic group of whites with British ancestry (Parent 2007, 6)

This complicated relationship in Anglo-Irish relations was reflected in Irish attitudes towards the viceroyalty. In fact, while the viceroyalty was positioned within Ireland 'as a surrogate for the [British] monarch ... nationalists came to regard it as an important signifier of Ireland's distinctive national status under the Union, and were generally opposed to its abolition' (Loughlin 2013, 3). Ryder (2005, 165) states that:

Leading nationalists like Daniel O'Connell usually made a clear distinction between Ireland's political status and the status of Britain's colonies in Asia, Africa, Australia, North America and New Zealand. Colonial activity in itself was not necessarily seen in a negative light – and Irish nationalist like William Smith O'Brien could be a whole-

hearted advocate of 'colonization' scheme in Australia at the same time as he argued for Irish self-determination.

Echoing Scotland, Ryder (2005) highlights the competing dynamics between nationalism and empire in Ireland.

Similarly, within Wales, involvement in empire would be bolstered by the work of Welsh Christian missionaries throughout Africa and India (Evans 1989; Pittock 1999). For many, the harbouring of a British identity was in no way detrimental to Welsh nationalism. Jenkins (2008, 224) argues that:

to be part of the imperial adventure was a matter of great pride rather than shame to leading Welsh liberals and to the soldiers and sailors who extended British colonial rule in wars against Afghans, Zulus and Indians. By the end of the Victorian era, the British empire constituted one-fifth of the world's landmass and no one cheered louder than the Welsh when the seemingly indestructible Queen Victoria – the 'Great White Mother' – celebrated her Golden Jubilee in 1887 and her Diamond Jubilee in 1897.

Wales would also see an expansion of its commercial and urban communities (Evans 1989). Here, 'iron and coal production from south Wales became vitally important, particularly in terms of British imperial ambition' (Pritchard 2012, 328). Clydeside and the South Wales would help form the 'control points from which trade and manufacture flowed out to the world, carried in part by the trade routes of the British Empire' (Kumar 2003, 168). As a result, the effects of Britain's industrial revolution served to strengthen Wales's global interdependence via an expanding network of imperial trade and commerce. This fitted more broadly with the proudly dubbed belief that Wales represented 'Ancient Britain' (Jenkins 2008), which affirmed 'their

standing as the first possessors of the British Isles, as the speakers of the senior “British” tongue and as the guardians of the authentic “British” history’ (Jenkins 2008, 172). In doing so, Welsh culture and British imperialism were interdependently woven into the fabric of the Welsh identity (Pritchard 2012).

### **From empire to multi-national state: The post-imperial decline of the UK**

Throughout the second half of the twentieth-century, British imperial control would shift from colonial rule to informal influence. The development of a larger Western Bloc, comprising the former colonial nations, would play an important part in global power relations, as Britain maintained a close alliance with the US (Butler 2002). As a result, ‘co-operation, equality and autonomy rather than coercion’ characterised Britain’s international relations during this period (Bridge and Fedorowich 2003, 8). Brand (1978, 50) notes that by the 1960s:

[Britain was] shorn of her imperial splendour. At the same time she became more prosperous than for many years. The austerities of the 1940s and 1950s had gone but the new wealth existed alongside a feeling almost of irresponsibility. This was, after all, the swinging sixties. Britain seemed released from the cares and self-consciousness of being a world power

Whereas Britain’s political power across the globe would begin to weaken, its imperial legacies would continue to dominate British politics throughout the twentieth-century, most notable in Britain’s relationship with the EU. Since the signing of the Treaty of Maastricht in 1991, Britain has been committed, in principle, to another multi-national figuration, the European Union (Kumar 2003). Indeed, for many, Britain’s move towards Europe suggested a ‘significant loss

of the parliamentary sovereignty that ha[d] been the central pillar of the British constitution' (Kumar 2003, 241). Within England, this has been echoed in concerns regarding its own 'crisis in identity' (Doty 1996; Kumar 2003).

Furthermore, this 'loss' has echoed throughout British political discourse since the 1970s. For former Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher and John Major, Britishness was seen to reflect a heavy dose of nostalgic sentiment, with the Falklands War providing a return to imperial Britain (Mandler 2006; Osmond 1988). This sense of nostalgia would be all the more profound in Major's famous declaration that 'Britain' was a country of 'long shadows on county (cricket) ground, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pool fillers' (The Independent 1993). Major's 'British' was undoubtedly very 'English' and, as such, was largely ignorant of Britain's Northern Irish, Scottish and Welsh population. In fact, such imagery often failed to inspire those in the North of England, whose industrial centers were a far cry from imagery more commonly associated with the southern countryside.

Recently, however, the decline of the British imperial figuration has interdependently occurred in relation to broader changes to the UK state figuration, most notable in post-devolutionary measures and in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. In comments pertaining to the referendum, the British historian, Linda Colley, stated the need to 'reconcile different political identities' within Britain (Colley and Lodge 2013). For the Scots, Colley argued:

it's easier ... to think in this way because, since 1707, they have always had to have multiple identities. They have said, 'We are patriotic Scots,' and at least most of them for most of the time have also said, 'We are also patriotic Britons. We owe allegiance to a state – Great Britain or the UK – and we also have our own nation, Scotland.' It is rather like Russian dolls: they fit inside each other, not always comfortably, but they do



fit together. When the EU came along, for Scots, it was like: ‘Here’s another Russian doll that we have to fit into, another layer of allegiance.’ (Colley and Lodge 2013)

Colley’s ‘Russian doll’ metaphor highlights the layers of interdependence that have shaped, and, indeed, continue to shape, the constituent nationalisms of Britain. When considered through a figurational lens, Colley’s remarks serve as a pertinent example of how multi-figurational dynamics are marked by processes of continuity and change. Consequently, it may not be the case that Scotland has ‘always had to have multiple identities’ but, rather, when considered through a process sociological lens, such ‘reconciliation’ reflects Scotland’s location as one member of a multi-national state figuration, whose nationalism was forged both in accordance with but, also, in protest against, its neighboring nations (specifically, an ‘established’ England) (Colley and Lodge 2013). The 2014 Scottish independence referendum and the 2016 UK European Union referendum serve as examples of a *decrease* in British interdependence. Both examples highlight the figurational complexities embedded in Britain’s constitutional arrangement and, as evidenced in commentaries on the Scottish independence referendum, in the apparent tensions of establishing an ‘independent’ Scotland in relation to its former imperial ‘British’ past (Glass 2014; MacKenzie 2016).

In fact, these discussions form part of a wider debate on Britain’s ‘world role’, post empire (Black 2016a). Here, discussions on ‘the end of Empire’ have underscored analyses of English nationalism and national identity (Black 2016b; Kumar 2003; Malcolm 2012). However, whereas in England, ‘An exaggerated sense of power’ has occurred alongside ‘visible symptoms of decline’ (Crick 1991, 242), long-term analyses can help to locate these ‘symptoms’ as part of a process of increasing and/or decreasing interdependence, through which discussions on, and, analyses of, the ‘past’, can be used to shed light on contemporary issues. This is particularly significant when one considers this ‘decline’ in accordance with

England's former 'established' status. In such instances, Colley's focus on the need to 'reconcile different political identities' in the present (Colley and Lodge 2013), can be reconsidered in relation to 'the historical contextuality of social figurations' (Bærenholdt 2011, 12), the sequential changes that structure conjunctural accounts of the past (Braudel 1979) and the changing power balances that constitute established-outsider relations.

## **Conclusion**

While it is evident that one cannot ignore the gradual decline of the British Empire over the course of the twentieth-century, the evidence of previous centuries should not be forgotten. That is, it should not be forgotten that British identity was fashioned through a tapestry of domestic and international relations that were interdependently linked across both a British 'state' and 'imperial' figuration. This encourage us to understand national identities, not as static, isolated phenomena, but as processes that are written and re-written, imagined and re-imagined, invented and re-invented over time and across space (Anderson 2006; Hobsbawm 1983; Thompson 2000). Arguably, it encourages us to evaluate the development of these identities in relation to state formation processes both at the national and international (imperial) level (Delmotte 2012).

To this extent, the emergence of the British state and the expansion of the British Empire reflected a period of increasing interdependence for Britain and its constituent nations. For much of Britain's history, nationalism and imperialism were interdependently related so that the long-term formation of its constitutive nations occurred alongside the emergence of the British state and, later, the expansion and decline of the British Empire. Although Elias did not focus on imperial relations per se, his insights into European state development provide a framework for exploring the effects of widening chains of interdependence within larger multi-

national figurations, such as the British Empire. Here, the multi-national character of the British Empire can be used to shed new light on British identity in relation to its imperial context.

In particular, from 1707 onwards, the interrelated processes underlying Britain's state formation, imperial expansion and subsequent decline suggests that:

'Imperial Britishness' was not something superimposed over an array of disparate cultures and identities that made up the United Kingdom. Rather, to varying degrees, the Scottish, the Welsh, the Irish and the English regions were to find in the empire a form of self-affirmation that helped them better contend with the political and cultural challenges they were facing (Thompson 2005, 200)

While Thompson's (2005) remarks highlight how both 'national' and 'imperial' dimensions served to underlie British 'self-affirmation', this article has sought to expose how contending political, cultural and historical challenges and tensions have formed an important part of Britain's figurational dynamics. Indeed, while one can trace 'Western notions of civilized conduct ... across the world as the ideas of the imperial ruling strata spread to the belief systems in the colonies' (Linklater and Mennell 2010, 403), the social and political structure within the UK was closely dependent upon the interdependencies between Britain's state and imperial figurations. Bridge and Fedorowich (2003, 5) note that 'many of the central principles of modern British democracy were experimented with in the colonies of settlement and shipped back to the United Kingdom'.

Furthermore, whereas analyses of Britain have served to focus on Britain's decline as an imperial power (Nairn 1977), Ward (2001b, 4) highlights that 'work on empire and metropolitan culture has collectively shown, an imperial outlook' and has subsequently 'been an integral feature of British public life for several generations'. As a result, debates concerning

the end of empire (Colls 2012; Nairn 1977) suggest not a sudden dislocation of imperial attitudes and sentiments but instead a balancing of nationalist agendas through an imperial prism (Ward 2001a).

More importantly, both the emergence and decline of the British Empire was not an inevitable process but one that was dialectically played out in unstructured, long-term changes of interdependence. When viewed as part of a long-term analysis, such changes are reflected in the decentering of power from the monarchy (a hereditary position that had been weakened by the English Civil War) and in the formation of a collective British imperialism that, over the course of the twentieth-century, slowly declined in favour of devolutionary measures that have relocated certain powers to the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the intermittent Northern Irish Assembly (Kumar 2003).

Indeed, these changes can also provide an important comparison with changes in the established image of England. That is, in accordance with changes in the balance of power between established and outsider groups, it is possible to observe how England's subsumed status within Britain is interdependently tied to the decline of the British Empire and in debates on England's post-imperial identity (Black 2016b). While this can be conceived in relation to England's declining 'established' position, such concerns prove particularly significant when recent devolutionary measures have failed to provide England any separate political representation of its own.

Finally, by exploring the relationship between empire and nationalism, this article has served to trace a theoretical path that encourages us 'to give up thinking in terms of single, isolated substances and to start thinking in terms of relationships and functions' (Elias 1991, 19 [italics removed]). As a result, the work of Elias and the process sociology perspective has been used to examine how nation-centered analyses can be expanded in order to include a 'panoramic and pan-imperial view' (Gerasimov et al. 2005, 51). Furthermore, by locating contemporary

UK relations in the historical context of former imperial relationships, a decontextualized and present-centered appreciation of nationalism can be subverted by ensuring that imperial/colonial histories are considered in conjunction with wider national/global debates (Wouters and Mennell 2015).

For future analyses, a re-centering of the relationship between empire and nationalism will offer a valuable insight into contemporary political movements, especially within former imperial groups. This could extend the use of the established-outsider model in order to consider how processes of functional democratization in the UK have shaped both the Scottish Independence and European Referendums as well as the UK's post-imperial identity.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Importantly, Anderson (2006, 6) provides some theoretical light between his work and that of Gellner's, when he states that, 'Gellner is so anxious to show that nationalism masquerades under false pretences that he assimilates "invention" to "fabrication" and "falsity", rather than to "imagining" and "creation"'.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Collins (2012, 385) provides a similar argument by advocating for a 'dynamic theory of nationalism', which is shaped by the 'time patterns of social processes'.

<sup>3</sup> For example, take the City of Sheffield, a former industrial city located in South Yorkshire, England. The city is itself a figuration that is interdependent to the figuration of Yorkshire; which is located in a larger figuration of Northern England; which forms part of a multi-national state figuration, the UK; which is located in the West of Europe, another complex figuration comprising numerous national and sub-national/regional figurations. These various, yet interdependent, figurations form layers of interaction from which decisions in one figuration have an interdependent impact upon another.

<sup>4</sup> Elias use of the term 'functional democratisation' reflects the process by which power ratios within society become less unequal.