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The ins and outs of Anglo-saxonism: the future of white decline

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In an essay called 'Making the planet hospitable to Europe', the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman contemplates the idea that this continent, this section of the earth's crust, shoulders a special historical burden. The onus is on Europe to develop new forms of political power-sharing that allow permanent cultural diversity to flourish. This 'delicate operation' depends, he suggests, on the ability to separate 'the bases of political legitimacy, of democratic procedure and the willingness to engage in a community-style sharing of assets, from the principle of national and territorial sovereignty with which they have been for most of modern history inextricably linked.'ⁱ

Bauman goes on warn that it is hard to get the timing right as we attempt to move beyond the national to a revised and expanded notion of the civic. 'To say that a political framework cannot be established without a viable ethnocultural organism already in place, ' he writes, 'is neither more nor less convincing than to say that no ethnocultural organism is likely to become and remain viable without a working and workable political framework. A chicken-and-egg dilemma if ever there was one.'ⁱⁱ

Robert J. C. Young has argued in *The Idea of English Ethnicity* that 'what is often taken to be a "crisis" of Englishness at any particular time is generally a sign that it is in the process of refashioning itself'.ⁱⁱⁱ Taking this to be a reminder that we are dealing with convoluted historical processes, where national identities are adapted, threatened and contested in relation to political change both within and outside the nation state, it is necessary to look to the past in an attempt to think forward from our precarious and vulnerable present. How deep and murky is the reservoir of ideas, theories, prejudices, hopes and fears that will provide the main resource for negotiating new formulations of English solidarity?

One of the recurring themes of Englishness is a lament for a past that is lost, and a deep sense of melancholy that the country has been irrevocably harmed. The combination of neurotic self-questioning and the tendency to feel victimized suggests that there are indeed past wounds that have not been adequately dressed. For this reason alone, any debate about the country's future must reckon with the part that 'race' continues to play in prescribing the bounds of Englishness as ethnocultural identity. The pathology of whiteness understood as an aspect of culture as well as ethnicity is hardly a prerogative of Englishness alone, even though it can be traced back there for its source.^{iv}

One of the very worst outcomes of a new start-up England would be an increase in crude and racist nativism, top-down moralising, hectoring and prescribing, and guilty, vapid breast-beating, all on the subject of what it might mean to be English (or not) in this day and age. Alternatively one of the more welcome features of devolution might well be a productive, future-oriented debate about what it means to live in a plural, post-nationalist and postcolonial country. Here a different strand of English civic solidarity might have a chance to emerge, one that is linked to devolved forms of political participation (and indeed, 'community-style sharing of assets',) in local, regional and even global frameworks rather than over-determined by dubious concepts of ethno-national bloodline, indigeneity or indelible cultural difference.

You don't have to be Sherlock Holmes to predict a mixture of all these outcomes, bumping up against each other in a race to prescribe borders that include some and exclude others. However, within these two broad sets of possibilities outlined here, a specifically English cacophony of national identity talk fills the airwaves. It is this space in between the shrill tones of racism and xenophobia and the longing for egalitarian, cosmopolitan solidarities that urgently needs our attention in the present, whether or not formal devolution takes place.

There is no suggestion that this project of disentangling the civic from what used to be the national will be anything other than appallingly difficult,

and the risks of implementing it incalculable. Moving away from anachronistic imperatives of national sovereignty and nation-building, we are faced with the task of developing new political frameworks capable of fostering different kinds of solidarity and citizenship. Hovering around these two admirable terms, however, is the question of identity, and what kind of political work it might be called on to perform in the service of the collective – national, ethnocultural or otherwise.

The historian Dolores Hayden has described the word ‘place’ as one of the trickiest in the English language, ‘a suitcase so overfilled one can never shut the lid.’^v The same is true with ‘identity’, although the two share a wardrobe in common as well. The term ‘ethnocultural’ incorporates both concepts, and is therefore useful in gathering together the stories we tell about where we come from, where we live and who we think we are. But it is also important to be clear about the relative weight that each part - ethnicity and culture - brings to the equation.

In what ways does the idea of Englishness function as an ethnocultural category within the current arrangement of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland? Since all collective identities are constituted in and through relationships to others, then it follows that it is important to look at the defining edges of Englishness as well as attempts to describe its essence. The English antipathy to extreme nationalism, patriotism and even self-definition is often wheeled out as a national defect that needs correction. What are the tendencies within English nationalism that confer (or dictate) a right to belong, to count, to opt-out of, or to claim a meaningful connection to this country, whether it remains part of a union or not?

Green Field Politics

In Krishan Kumar’s comprehensive study, ‘The Making of English Identity’, he describes the impact of a variety of profound changes both inside and outside the homelands of the United Kingdom such as end of empire, the rise of Celtic

nationalism and the claims of ‘multiculturalism’. The English ‘find themselves called upon to reflect upon their identity, and to rethink their position in the world,’ he writes. ‘The protective walls that shielded them from these questions are all coming down.’ In this day and age, ‘English national identity cannot be found from within the consciousness of the English themselves. We have to work from the outside in.’^{vi}

By making this last point so early in his own study, Kumar attempts to break with a different pattern of identifying what is special about England which it is important to note here. He refers to this as the ‘cosy assumptions about Englishness, with its sleepy villages and ancestral piles.’ The derogatory word ‘cosy’ here is telling, and in being too quick to dismiss the relevance of the rural dimension, Kumar and others like him risk losing sight of a vital element of this debate. It is worth repeating that the fantasy of the English village - whether sleepy, real, imagined or simply lost – stubbornly remains at the heart of a powerful consensus on what makes this country unique. This extract from Moazzem Begg’s account of confinement in Guantanamo speaks for itself:

People were fascinated by my stories of Birmingham, and of what it was like to be a Muslim in Britain. No one knew anything about that. I found myself telling them about England’s green fields and villages with a nostalgia that surprised me – I hadn’t ever lived in an English village. I told them too about Warwick Castle, and Blenheim and Buckingham Palaces, the Lake District, Loch Ness, Snowdonia, Stratford-upon-Avon, and Sparkhill. It was escapism, and I really enjoyed both the telling and the listening.^{vii}

For more knowing audiences at home, English village life is played out in ironic, postmodern form in films like ‘Hot Fuzz’ and more mild-mannered but no less sinister detective series like Agatha Christie’s ‘Marple’ and ‘Midsomer Murders’. These representations testify to an obsessive belief that under the ‘sleepy’ surface of its pleasant veneer, the essence of pastoral Englishness harbours a vengeful, destructive energy.

Meanwhile long-running soaps like ‘The Archers’ and ‘Emmerdale’ are brought to life by long-running class warfare inherited from deep-rooted patterns of land ownership and labour. Their plots rely on all manner of generic social conflict to sustain dramatic tension, from homophobia to rape and child abuse, and from casual racism to violence and even murder. What distinguishes these fictional village communities from their urban counterparts, however, is that the characters represent a far greater cross section of social and economic backgrounds than would normally interact. Weaving their disparate lives around threatened English institutions like the pub, the post office, the shop, the farm and the church, these depictions suggest that country life is undeniably different from either metropolitan or suburban sociality. The village becomes entertaining precisely because it offers a glimpse of an imagined England to which most people do not have access, anchoring viewers to a sense of the ‘real’ country which, despite its dramatic storylines, remains relatively untouched by foreigners and the outside world.^{viii}

Conversely, the collaborative music project ‘Imagined Village’, which brought together some of the country’s best known musicians and song-writers, suggests how those assumptions might be challenged in more productive ways. The group chose this title to signal their desire for an inclusive, creative community dedicated to exploring the roots of English traditional music in the multicultural present. Their iconography is an empty, open space in a setting which has both urban and rural features, complete with a policeman inspecting an abandoned car.

These cultural references should alert us to recurrent, internal conversations about Englishness which recognise deep patterns of exclusion as well as inclusion. Until recently all the problems associated with immigration, multiculturalism and race were assumed to belong to urban life, certainly by those who lived outside metropolitan areas, and whose views were likely to be shaped by the *Mail* and the *Telegraph*. Since 2004, when migrants from eastern Europe began to arrive in large numbers to work in the fields, glasshouses and

packing sheds, the topic of immigration acquired more immediate political significance. Supermarket shelves dedicated to Polish goods – a powerful indicator of the flexibility of market forces - have appeared in parts of the country that might once have considered themselves immune from the influence of foreign cultures, notwithstanding the presence of Chinese and Indian take-aways on every high street up and down the land.

The use of migrant labour in the country's agricultural sector points to another link between the parochial and the global. The village remains one of the most important, if endangered, units of human habitation anywhere on the planet. Its failure to survive in economically sustainable form provides a measure of the destructive forces of economic globalisation which smash the chain between food, locality and culture – a long-drawn-out process which has been well documented in the context of England's urbanisation.

Jamie Oliver and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall might well be viewed as annoying and self-serving celebrity chefs, but their phenomenal success only underlines a painful crisis that can be understood in terms of national identity: we don't know how to cook, we don't know where our food comes from, we're getting too fat and we don't know what's good for us any more! The ethics and politics of food production and consumption have finally become mainstream issues, mainly thanks to 'mad cow disease' and, more recently, a growing awareness of climate change. This brings the productive value of the land (and therefore the continuing history of the village) into view in an altogether different light, although the rate at which it has been sold off to 'lifestyle farmers' in search of faux ancestral piles presents another set of problems.

Kumar is right though that the depiction of rural England can turn inwards in a cloying, nostalgic manner. Reflecting on the disappearance of 'village life', author Richard Askwith declared recently that the point of no return was passed, unnoticed, some time ago. 'Most of us have been vaguely aware of such developments for years,' he writes in his book^{ix}. 'But the thought that struck me, and has continued to gnaw at me since, was that so much change

and loss in such a short space was tantamount to a social tidal wave, in which a whole way of life – and a whole class of traditional country-dwellers – had been swept away.^x

Askwith's claim that the 'lost village' summons up the ruins of a collapsed civilization deserves close scrutiny. When the particular, threatened 'way of life' – resting, in this case, on the notion of a traditional English ruralism - bears a significant, deeply rooted connection to the country's national identity, this sense of loss can generate powerful emotions, exacerbating a melancholic relationship to the past.

His book belongs squarely in a tradition of voicing an explicit lament that England's very life force has been damaged.^{xi} Roger Scruton's *England: An Elegy* is a prime example of this as well. He introduces his book as a 'memorial address'. Its first chapter is called 'What on Earth Was England?' and he concludes with 'The Forbidding of England'. Among his exhaustive list of the characteristics of a living and cultivated England that have now vanished, he writes, 'Having been famous for their stoicism, their decorum, their honesty, their gentleness and their sexual Puritanism, the English now subsist in a society in which those qualities are no longer honoured – a society of people who regard long-term loyalties with cynicism, and whose response to misfortune is to look around for someone to sue. England is no longer a gentle country, and the old courtesies and decencies are disappearing...'^{xii}

Scruton's catalogue belongs to this melancholic mode of writing about Englishness, but he represents a commonly held view: England's distinctiveness has been irrevocably destroyed. The BBC's disciplining of Russell Brand and Jonathan Ross following their obscene prank call in October 2008 provided a classic example of the crisis of civility that Scruton refers to here. By this I am not referring to the media focus on the affair, nor to the public debate that followed the revelations of the 'crime', but the demographic evidence that showed that people under the age of 30 were more likely to be baffled as to why the item was considered so offensive.

The repetition of this fact during the week that the scandal was under discussion reflected a widespread concern that the country's ethical and cultural norms were being eroded, and that the gulf between old and young was growing deeper by the minute. In this context the BBC, a heavily symbolic institution at the best of times, is charged with maintaining and setting the standard for national, public culture while also competing within a largely un-regulated, transnational but Anglophone mediasphere.

In the resulting chaos, where the media is blaming the media, it is the young who are seen to be adrift from their moral moorings. They are unreachable by parental guidance or citizenship education and debased by vulgar, commercialised norms, largely thanks to the diffusion and reach of US cultural power. BBC Newsnight's staging of Jeremy Paxman's interview with Dizzy Rascal on the occasion of Obama's election was one provocative example of the BBC straying out of its depth in a bid to appeal to younger viewers.

Understanding Anglo-Saxonism

The dominance of the English language within this new media environment can give the illusion that the world is both knowable and accessible to all those who speak it. Here I want to return to Kumar's suggestion that English national consciousness is best traced from outside the country. Growing up in the 1950 and 60s it was always a puzzle to read the spines of Churchill's volumes: *The History of the English Speaking People* on my parents' bookshelf. Did this mean, I used to wonder, that there were other countries where people thought of themselves as English? I soon came to take it for granted that many of our friends and neighbours had either come from or relocated to New Zealand, South Africa, Australia and Canada, and that their families were spread around the world as if it was perfectly normal.

Robert Young's recent study helps to explain how Englishness (which often embraced the contentious term 'Anglo-Saxonism') became a global phenomenon as a result of empire-building in the 19th and 20th centuries. This has

important implications for our own postcolonial deliberations. In his concluding chapter entitled 'Englishness: England and Nowhere', he writes:

So it was that during the course of the nineteenth century, Englishness was translated from the national identity of the English living in England into a diasporic identity beyond any geographical boundaries which included all the English who had now emigrated all over the globe.^{xiii}

Examining the ideological basis of this phenomenon shows that there was a powerful Anglo-supremacist force at work. Many hoped for a more formal recognition of this achievement, referring to it as the 'Britannic Confederation' of Anglo-Saxons, to cite one example. The creator of one of English literature's best known fictional characters, Sherlock Holmes, Arthur Conan Doyle (ironically born in Scotland), dedicated his novel 'The White Company' (1891) to such an idea:

*To the hope of the future
The reunion of the English-speaking races
This little chronicle
Of our common ancestry is inscribed^{xiv}*

The term Anglo-Saxon is important to bring to the table of English identity-talk, especially in the light of this historical background. It is often fished out of an imaginary gene pool as though it can feed the hunger for a solid sense of *ethnicity* peculiar to the English. It is sometimes used as an alternative to plain white, to make a distinction from Celts or any other local tribal heritage, or to differentiate the political culture of the Protestant, Anglophone world from that of continental Catholic Europe.

The history of the term is revealing, however, not least because its earlier connotations have been so misunderstood, and because it has meant different things in different historical periods. In the 19th century the idea of 'Anglo-Saxonism' gained in popularity largely due a political and cultural movement to accommodate and meld the different strains of Saxon (Germanic) and Celtic (Irish) lineage that were dominant in England and Ireland respectively. As it

developed into a contentious, but heterogenous, identity during this period of scientific inquiry into human hierarchies, it rapidly became useful as a powerful idea to bind together the new colonial settlers as a common people, particularly those in north America.

Here it did the work of race as well as ancestry by appealing to delusions of a triumphant whiteness. 'For the end of Saxonism led to the adoption of a new identity,' writes Young, 'in which Englishness was an attribute of the English, but no longer directly connected to England as such, rather taking the form of a global racial and cultural identity – of 'Anglo-Saxons'.^{xv}

This brief account collapses decades of intense argument and dissent that took place against a background of economic, political and social change. We can learn further from the past by attending to the word 'ethnicity' which, as Young points out, was adopted by UNESCO in 1945 as a replacement for the biological concept of 'race', so much discredited by the vanquished Nazis. It remains a pivotal term in our grammar of identity for similar reasons: it refers to culture and heritage rather than notions of genetics or species. Yet it is not always well understood, and rather than making the concept of 'race' obsolete, it also performs as a codeword for some of the pernicious ideas that underpin the residual belief in embodied, inherited human difference.

Aside from examining the terms we use to think about the relationships between ethnicity, culture, nationality and ancestry, there are two important principles that need to be rescued from this broad sweep of history. Both stem from patterns of migration flowing in and out of the country. Each a product of a different directional force, these principles have a bearing on the documented uncertainty about what it means to be English, or what Kumar refers to as 'the enigma' of English national identity. The first relates to the term 'indigenous' or 'native' peoples which invariably contrasts with those who are deemed to be settlers. In political usage, the concept of indigeneity is increasingly used to articulate claims either to entitlement – this is our land - or injury – we are the

ones who are being marginalised. The trouble is that English 'ethnicity' was always subject to mixture and flux.

Historians have often pointed out that the English were often unsure of who they were because they were composed of so many different groups – Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Celts, Vikings, Normans, to name but a few. In 19th century England, the self-appointed scientists of mankind – anthropologists, ethnologists, philologists - devised elaborate maps, charts and physiological illustrations to show just how many 'races' there were in the country, identifiable and ranked by skin colour, body shape, hair type and so on.

This mania for categorisation appears to be nonsense today (not least because they all appear to fall into the category of 'white') but it is still significant. The fact that England has long been recognised as an old nation made up of jostling tribal ingredients blunts any persuasive claim to a doctrine of ethnic purity.^{xvi} This remains a powerful story that continues to resonate in our time, particularly as English regional identities are likely to become more pronounced in the event of devolution.

The second principle is derived from the fact of emigration. As the English moved out into the world to live and work in the colonies they made a virtue of what would now be called transnational identities – even though they were conceived in ethno-racial terms. Through common language, networks of kin, intermarriage, and cultural adaptation, the meanings of Englishness became both diffused and crystallised in different forms over vast geographical distances as well as over time.

Living in climates with little seasonal change and very different ecologies, colonial settlers developed great longing for particular landscapes and established cultural norms of English life. Rudyard Kipling's famous line 'And what should they know of England who only England know?' was an acknowledgement that the 'real' England was more likely to be found in colonial settings where it was recreated and sustained with greater enthusiasm and national pride than it was in the 'mother country'.

These two historical processes can now be emphasised to supply some founding ideals of future English identity. Stories of immigration and emigration on dramatic scales have been intrinsic to the country's understanding of itself, providing it with indelible experience of the kinetic forces shaping the modern world. These raw materials have proved invaluable in narrating the history of London as an extraordinarily heterogenous and magnetic world capital, building on the fact that the city was founded before England was declared a country. But underlying the dynamic of movement and plasticity of a restless island people has been the hideous doctrine of white supremacy as the basis of European civilisation's claim to control the world.

Fortress Europe

In 1596 Queen Elizabeth 1 issued a proclamation banishing all 'blackamoors' from the country.^{xvii} Less well known is the fact that banishment legislation was the order of the day, and not just aimed at Africans. Two years earlier the monarch had commanded all native Irish men and women, driven from Ireland by hunger, land dispossession and cultural repression, to leave England. Around the same time an Act of Mary stated that any Gypsy who remained for longer than a month was liable to be hanged.^{xviii} But it was not until 1905 that Parliament regulated immigration into Britain when the Aliens Act was passed in order to restrict large numbers of Russian and Eastern European Jews entering the country as refugees. The law reflected deep anxieties about the perils of racial mixture, the presence of 'undesirables' who bring disease and crime, and the limits of the country's celebrated capacity for admitting refugees and exiles from abroad.

Over a century later, in 2008, the latest rules governing immigration became more stringent than ever: a new points-based system is intended to consolidate successive governments' efforts to block economic migrants entering from outside the EU, whether or not they possess the skills to work. Although the question of immigration control is the preserve of the British government,

affecting Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as well as England, it is England that enjoys by far the most ethnically diverse population and has the greatest experience of both economic and postcolonial immigration.

It is worth pointing out that many countries in the EU employ exclusionary concepts that are formally embedded in linguistic terms as a way of distinguishing between those who rightfully belong inside the walls and those who are there on sufferance. The Dutch use the geological metaphor 'allochthonous' to refer to those whose origins lie outside the country, as opposed to the 'autochthonous' who come from the bedrock; the concept of 'gastarbeiter' or guest worker in Germany and Austria has notoriously stigmatised the immigrant as a temporary visitor on short term contract. By contrast, the ridiculous notion of 'third generation immigrant' used in English is a more indirect way to undermine a person's right to put down roots in Britain.

But the inexorable tightening of immigration control by individual countries within the EU points to a different dimension of racial ordering, one that demands a wider perspective than the narrowly national or ethnic. Within the last twenty years the mechanisms to restrict immigration and asylum have been not been the sole preserve of national governments, but developed largely in response to international crises or wider political settlements. The end of the Cold War, for instance, and the momentum of economic neo-liberalism influenced the process of European integration, including the negotiations over its internal borders under the Schengen agreement. What happens within 'Fortress Europe' is largely determined by a consensus on who should be kept out.

In *The Threat of Race*, theorist David Goldberg explains why it is so important to engage with the category of 'race' even though a majority might think (especially with the election of Barak Obama) that it has become redundant. '

...Race has continued,' he writes, 'silently as much as explicitly, to empower modes of embrace and enclosure, in renewed and indeed sometimes

novel ways, as much shaping the contours and geographies of neoliberal political economy globally as modulated by them’.

‘As *embrace*,’ he continues, ‘race constitutes a bringing in, an engulfing, elevating, consuming, and suffocating hold on populations. It is a holding up and a holding out, a tying and restricting. As enclosure acts, it continues to encircle, closing in and out, to fence off. Perhaps the symbolic sign(post) of race in our (neo)liberal present reads “DO NOT TRESPASS.”’^{xix}

The forms of exclusion adopted by any individual state are part of a larger structural economic and military nexus from which there is no escape. At this time of unprecedented global economic insecurity, it may be fascinating to observe the role of national governments as they collude and compete to manage the local effects of the credit crunch, but this should not be allowed to mask the underlying trans- or supra-national architecture of global economics that continues to determine the balance of power between north and south. The analysis of how racism operates within and in relation to capitalism is subject to fierce and ongoing debates, but the point here is to consider how and where economic factors combine with embedded structures of racism to influence who might be allowed in and who would be kept out of a newly devolved, new European entity.

Here fantasies of whiteness are able to supply qualifications on grounds of birthright, historical precedent, cultural and religious background, kinship, entitlement and so on. Anxieties about the status of ‘native’, ‘indigenous’ and white, so routinely cited in our current political discourse, are apparent not just in the UK but in all European societies where national identities, rooted in colonial histories, are conflated with being white and Christian. In other Anglophone countries founded by European settlers the term ‘indigenous’ has altogether different associations. Australian PM Kevin Rudd’s public apology to aboriginal peoples in February 2008 was a hugely significant step in the debate about what it means to be Australian today. But here too, economic migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are liable to be seen as the undeserving beneficiaries

of social resources, claiming and receiving welfare entitlements at the expense of majority populations. Meanwhile both Australia and Canada have issued calls for skilled workers from the UK: 400,000 Brits emigrated to Australia in 2007 alone in a pattern of migration that rarely hits the headlines.^{xx}

States of Injury

It is important to accentuate the idea that the history of whiteness is intrinsic to the concept of race itself, in all its changing formulations and fatal outcomes. However, some might argue that it has been vanquished as a meaningful category, despite the continuing and careless use of racial terms to refer to skin colour and ethnic origin. Polls indicate, for example, that religion rather than race is more divisive across society generally. Ten years after the publication of the MacPherson Report, the Equality and Human Rights Commission announced the results of a poll showing that British people were 'increasingly at ease with racial diversity' but many still lacked faith in institutions to represent all groups or treat them fairly.^{xxi} Decades of struggle to banish racism from political and institutional practice have led many to believe that racist views and behaviour have now been relegated to the private sphere. Here ignorance, hatred, fear and prejudice continue to poison social life whether uttered under the collective breath or just audible and objectionable enough to be denounced in ritual manner – particularly if the perpetrator happens to be a celebrity or member of the royal family.

However, one of the most alarming reiterations of this crisis of English identity has been a creeping mood of resentment that being 'white' does not mean what it used to. More worrying, the white working class has been identified as the embodiment of this volatile condition. Other symptoms of unease include the resurrection of Enoch Powell as a true statesman and English patriot, much misunderstood in his time. The fortieth anniversary of his notorious 'Rivers of Blood' speech provided an opportunity to reflect on contemporary issues of immigration, social cohesion and segregation. One of the

recurring themes was that the forthright condemnation of Powell's racism, both by the Tory government and the Labour opposition, had led to the suppression of disgruntled white working class voices in the name of a dogmatic and repressive moralism.

Meanwhile the white middle class has endeavoured to protect itself from the ravages of market economics by committing to the delusion of choice – where to live, where to educate children, how to maintain a sense of distance from the poor and undeserving even if you happen to live on the same street. Research indicates, however, that the phenomenon of 'white flight' associated with middle class populations in urban and suburban areas is often counter-balanced by a belief that living in more diverse, multicultural communities bestows valuable cultural capital.^{xxii}

It has become almost routine for politicians and pundits to allude, directly or by insinuation, to the injuries heaped on white working class communities on the basis that they have borne the brunt of immigration and multiculturalism.^{xxiii} This populist explanation affirms that racism is an understandable response to perceptions of 'unfairness'. A heightened, racialised, sense of grievance then becomes a substitute for discussing more complicated issues of social class, poverty and inequality.^{xxiv}

The reporting of a recent speech by Trevor Phillips is a good example of the way that the fear of white decline is amplified through the echo chamber of popular media. Days after the credit crunch took effect in 2008, Phillips observed that Britain was exporting unemployment since over a million migrant workers had left the country, most of them returning to Poland where the economy had begun to grow. He then offered the suggestion that in a shrinking economy, white people in the UK would be competing for employment in a more open market, alongside many skilled workers with better qualifications who might not be British.

His speech was widely reported, and found its way on to page 2 of the Sun under the headline 'Whites in help plea'.^{xxv}

The argument was boiled down to a single paragraph condensed into the message: *Struggling white people need more help or Britain will face a rise in race hate, the equality chief warned today. Brits who lose their jobs could become resentful of immigrants who are employed. Equality and Human Rights Commission boss Trevor Phillips said. He told a migration summit: 'In most parts of this country, the disadvantaged won't be black, they will be white'.*

Social theorist Ghassan Hage offers some useful conceptual tools in his investigation of what he calls 'white decline' in the context of the 'defensive society' in Australia. Societies are mechanisms for the distribution of hope, he argues, and 'the kind of affective attachment (worrying or caring) that a society creates among its citizens is intimately connected to its capacity to distribute hope.'^{xxvi} In the USA the concept of white decline became visible in new forms during the run-up to the 2008 elections. Journalist Gregory Rodriguez elaborated on the anxieties expressed across the country months before he was elected, when Hillary Clinton was still contender for Democratic candidacy:

'The Clinton campaign's assertion of her electability based on "hardworking white American" voters reveals deep divisions in the Democratic coalition. But it isn't a sign of the resurgence of white supremacy in America. Rather, it is a formal re-articulation of whiteness as a social category and a racial interest group.'

Rodriguez's observations resonate within parallel debates on Europe's future. He continues,

'Is this white supremacy? No, in fact it might be its opposite, an acknowledgment that white privilege has its limits. With immigration and globalization reformulating who we are as a nation, it isn't the white elites that are threatened by the changes; rather, it's the nearly 70% of whites who are not college educated who figure among the most insecure of Americans. Many feel that their jobs are being outsourced or taken by immigrants -- legal or otherwise -- and that their culture is being subsumed. When Clinton promises to make their voices heard, she's appealing not to Anglo-Saxon racial triumphalism but to the

fear of white decline.^{xxvii}

Recognising the global dimensions of this crisis of 'white decline' is an important first step if we are to resist the appeal of division along racist lines at home. Unless we find alternative explanations for why so many communities across England live in pockets of inherited poverty and deprivation, we will continue to fail in our efforts to build new forms of civic solidarity.

The ultimate sacrifice

Finally the question of social security remains to be thought through in radical and open-minded forums. From the 1930s the term referred to the government's responsibility for the social welfare of its people who were, in turn, thought to owe some form of national (usually military) service in return. Today the intertwining of the words social and security has quite a different resonance. The concept of securitocracy, borrowed from an analysis of apartheid South Africa, is a useful one for our own predicament. The notion of 'rule by insecurity', sometimes referred to as 'securitisation', describes changing strategies used by governments to manage their populations in the period following the Bush administration's perpetration of the 'war on terror'. New Labour's introduction of identity cards, currently being tested on foreigners, is the most outrageous example of their attempt to persuade citizens that they will be safer if they submit to centralised surveillance.

The organisation of social security - the strategies for distributing resources for the wellbeing of individuals designated as eligible - is inseparable from the structures of political participation. It is these arrangements that largely determine what citizenship amounts to in any given country. Constantly under attack and open to negotiation, the structure of social welfare in Britain is the product of powerful ideological battles, as well as unwieldy and often inefficient systems of governance.

Any consensus about a political framework that might hold together a newly devolved England will emerge out of bitter negotiations to determine who

is eligible for social welfare and what forms of allegiance or duty this might demand in return. With a strong national identity the traditional rules are clear: one must be ready to kill and to die for one's country, or give up one's children, in exchange for protection by the state. The soldier is inseparable from the citizen.

The modernisation of Britain's Armed Forces gathered pace when conscription was finally scrapped in 1960. Although the end of national service was hotly debated in the immediate aftermath of the 1939-45 war, the consequences of this measure for civil society have not been fully explored. One effect has been an increasing separation between military and civilian worlds, and now the public is only intermittently concerned with how the Armed Forces attracts new recruits. Meanwhile those who die in battle are still represented as proudly serving Queen and Country, despite plenty of evidence to show that this might not be why they joined up.

Grenadan-born Private Johnson Beharry, awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery in the early stages of the Iraq war, was explicit about why he defied family and friends to join the British Army during a particularly low period of his life. He describes in his autobiography *'Barefoot Soldier'* the moment he realized that he was eligible as a citizen of a Commonwealth country. Having read a recruiting advert on an old newspaper he found on the tube, he made up his mind to apply: 'If I joined the army all my problems would be solved at a stroke. I can remain in the UK. I might even get a British passport.

'I'll also get a reasonable wage, but best of all, I'll break completely with the past.'^{xxviii}

Beharry's frankness is echoed in many contemporary soldier memoirs and other testimonies from British-born counterparts who are similarly motivated by the desire to escape a cycle of drugs, poverty or dead-end jobs rather than by some abstract notion of loyalty to the nation. The reality, however, is that in an era of unpopular and dangerous wars it has proved impossible to meet recruitment targets without looking further afield.

Military museum curators at last collaborate with schools to explore the rich archives detailing the contribution of colonial troops in the two world wars – if only in Black History month once a year. But it is rare for political commentators to acknowledge that Britain's role in the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan is largely made possible by recruiting significant numbers of young women and men as a direct result of those same historical links.

The British Army now employs personnel from over 35 countries, many of them holding dual nationality and some with no intention of becoming British citizens. Figures published in 2008 show that there were 7,240 officers and soldiers from Commonwealth countries, trained and untrained. Of these, 2205 were Fijian, 690 Ghanaian and 630 Jamaican, while South Africans and Zimbabweans combined totalled 1365.  Many countries refuse dual nationality to their citizens which has serious implications: Fijians, for example, are barred from owning land if they renounce their native citizenship. The South African government has drafted a mercenary law to ban any citizen from joining a foreign army. This means that those currently in the British army risk becoming criminalized once this law is officially passed. A prevailing attitude towards these conflicting ideas of nationality, loyalty, duty and freedom to move around is reflected in the comment of one Zimbabwean recruit whom I interviewed in the course of my research. When asked if she was worried about her government's policy towards those who joined the British army she replied: 'I don't see why any government has a right to tell us which armies we can join.'

In the context of British policy it is hard not to conclude that there is an insidious double standard operating in the name of restricting immigration for the benefit of the country. Non-European foreigners, whether skilled or unskilled, are now to be barred from employment as doctors, teachers, categories of nursing and many other occupations in favour of applicants from the EU. At the same time, citizens from Commonwealth countries, many of whom were oriented towards the 'mother country' by education, religion or family ties, are

invited to risk their lives for Britain and to profess loyalty to the Queen (who remains the head of the Commonwealth too). By joining the British Army they enable the institution to increase its intake of ethnic minorities, and hence achieve the desired aim of becoming more representative of the country as a whole, in statistical terms at least.

The host of immigration issues involved in employing non-UK nationals in the Armed Forces not only highlights the complex link between welfare and warfare, but, more importantly for England's future, lays bare the contradictions at the centre of national identity. The patriotic support for the Gurkha veterans offered by the *Daily Mail* reflects deeply held loyalties towards those who fight on behalf of Britain. They are 'our boys' and deserve 'our' full backing, which includes the benefit of pensions, free healthcare and the right to remain in the country. But the public is not yet aware of the sheer number of recruits from Britain's former empire, women and men who might otherwise be cast as ineligible skilled and unskilled migrants from outside the EU. Europeans, on the other hand, citizens of countries that were at war with Britain within living memory, are prohibited from joining the armed forces but are free to enter the country and qualify for benefits through reciprocal agreements.

Back to the White Cliffs

Meanwhile the battlefield itself is represented as the site of the ultimate defence of Britain's integrity. In 2008 Foreign Secretary David Miliband declared that the military operation in Afghanistan was as vital to national security as the war against the Nazis. Speaking to a *Daily Mail* journalist while on tour in the Middle East he declared: 'Why we are there is straightforward. Sixty or 70 years ago the Armed Forces defended Britain on the White Cliffs of Dover. Now to defend Britain we have got to be in the toughest areas of the world like Afghanistan. So the purpose of the mission is absolutely clear, it is to make sure Afghanistan does not become a safe haven for people who want to plot against the UK.'^{xxx}

The reality of war poses the question of how we hold together our accounts of the way we feel about a country – the England of the head, the heart and the imagination - with more prosaic but pragmatic issues involved in participatory democracy, including foreign policy and defence. We are repeatedly told that young white Britons - particularly in England - are at a loss to explain what is distinctive about their national culture, or more worrying, that they hold negative perceptions of what it means to be white, English or British – a condition sometimes referred to as ‘identity fragility’.^{xxx} In response, the Britishness project launched by New Labour exists as a precedent for trying to instil a sense of civic identity through education, but there are few signs that this has met with anything other than ambivalence. Research indicates that many young adults may be confused about the distinction between English and British, but they are overwhelmingly indifferent to the whole concept of national identity outside the arena of competitive sport.^{xxxii} The concept of global citizenship is increasingly attractive to a generation at ease in a virtual world where activism, social networking and entertainment have no respect for national borders.

It remains a curious fact that while the battle to recognise Britishness as an inclusive category has been won some time ago – however unevenly or grudgingly in some quarters - Englishness has remained more stubbornly white by association, despite being by far the most diverse country within the UK. I have tried to argue here that Bauman’s notion of the ‘ethnocultural’ can be helpful in developing a different political vocabulary based on the will to share assets and resources as well as power. But the signs are that as long as racism continues to animate the category of whiteness as an index of authenticity, privilege, eligibility or injury, it will continue to operate as a fundamental mechanism of exclusion, as it does for Britain as a whole and for the rest of Europe and the Anglophone world.

ⁱ Zygmunt Bauman *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2008, p 242-3.

ⁱⁱ *ibid* p 244-5.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Robert J. C. Young *The Idea of English Ethnicity*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2008, p 179.
- ^{iv} Winthrop D. Jordan *White Over Black: American Attitudes Towards the Negro 1550-1812*, New York, Norton, 1977.
- ^v Dolores Hayden *The Power of Place* Cambridge MIT Press, 1995, p. 15.
- ^{vi} Krishan Kumar *The Making of English National Identity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 16.
- ^{vii} Moazzem Begg with Victoria Brittain *Enemy Combatant: A British Muslim's Journey to Guantanamo and Back*, London, Free Press, 2006, p. 133.
- ^{viii} Neil Chakraborti & Jon Garland 'England's Green and Pleasant Land? Examining Racist Prejudice in a Rural Context' *Patterns of Prejudice*, 38; 4, 383-398.
- ^{ix} Richard Askwith 'Another Country: Whatever Happened to Rural England?' in *The Independent*, March 31 2008.
- ^{xi} Patrick Wright is the most astute chronicler of this, starting with *On Living in an Old Country* (1985) London, Verso, 2008. See 'Real England? Reflections on Broadway Market' *openDemocracy*, 23 April 2008.
http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/real_england_reflections_on_broadway_market
- ^{xii} Roger Scruton *England: An Elegy*, London, Chatto and Windus, 2000, p. 245.
- ^{xiii} Young, p 231.
- ^{xiv} Ibid p 232.
- ^{xv} Ibid p xi.
- ^{xvi} Interestingly the US State Department website provides more information on Britain's ethnic genealogy than any official site produced by the UK government. It states that 'Contemporary Britons are descended mainly from the varied ethnic stocks that settled there before the 11th century. The pre-Celtic, Celtic, Roman, Anglo-Saxon, and Norse influences were blended in Britain under the Normans, Scandinavian Vikings who had lived in Northern France.'
<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3846.htm> (accessed January 2009)
- ^{xvii} Peter Fryer *Staying Power: A History of Black People in Britain*, London, Pluto Press, 1984, p 10.
- ^{xviii} Peter Linebaugh & Marcus Rediker *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2000, p. 57.
- ^{xix} David Theo Goldberg *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism*, Oxford, Wiley Blackwell, 2009, p 372.
- ^{xx}
http://news.hotproperty.co.uk/Australia_top_destination_for_British_emigrants_18357883.html
- ^{xxi} New Commission poll shows British institutions need to 'keep up with Obama generation'
<http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/newsandcomment/Pages/keepupwithObamageneration.aspx> (accessed January 2009)
- ^{xxii} Steve Garner *Whiteness: An Introduction* London, Routledge, 2007, p. 57-8.
- ^{xxiii} Vron Ware 'Towards a Sociology of Resentment' in *Sociological Research Online* September 2008. <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/>
- ^{xxiv} See also Kjartan Páll Sveinsson ed. *Who Cares About the White Working Class?* London: Runnymede Trust, January 2009.
- ^{xxv} 'Whites in help plea' in *The Sun* October 30 2008, p 2.
- ^{xxvi} Ghassan Hage *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society*, London, Merlin Press, 2003, p 3.
- ^{xxvii} Gregory Rodriguez 'The fear of white decline: Hillary Clinton's outreach to working-class voters signals the group's declining economic security' in *Los Angeles Times*, May 19, 2008.
<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-oe-rodriguez19-2008may19,0,5458017.column>
- ^{xxviii} Johnson Beharry VC *Barefoot Soldier: The Amazing True Story of Courage Under Fire* London, Sphere, 2006, p. 196.
- ^{xxix} Army Personnel Statistics Report Published on 18th December 2008 by DASA (Army)

^{xxx} B. Brogan, 'Miliband compares Afghanistan to "defending white cliffs of Dover in WWII"' *Daily Mail*, 10 June 2008, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1025065/Miliband-compares-Afghanistan-defending-white-cliffs-Dover-WWII.html#>

^{xxx}_i Department for Education and Skills *Curriculum Review: Diversity and Citizenship*, p. 31. Available at www.teachernet.gov.uk/publications (ref 00045-2007DOM-EN). See also Margaret Wetherell 'Speaking to Power: Tony Blair, Complex Multicultures and Fragile White English Identities' *Critical Social Policy* 2008; 28; 299-319.

^{xxx}_{ii} Steve Fenton 'Indifference towards national identity: what young adults think about being English and British' in *Nations and Nationalism* 13 (2), 2007, 321-339.