

Polyethnic Britain: a comparative and historical perspective

Roger Ballard

1 Introduction

Just who are the British? Who should be identified as such, and who should not? Just where and on what grounds should the distinction between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ be drawn? Whilst the issues underlying such questions may have lain relatively dormant until recently, they have now begun to erupt with a vengeance.

The current debate about Britain’s boundaries, as well as about what belongingness entails, has at least two dimensions. The first stems from the very character of the United Kingdom itself. Although by definition a multi-national state, its four components are not – and never have been – equal in status. This inequality is partly a matter of demography, for England’s population England is and always has been much larger than that of Scotland, Wales and Ireland put together; however it is also a matter of power. As the outcome of a series of Acts of Union, not only is the UK very much an English creation, but also an entity within which the English have long enjoyed a position of hegemonic dominance.

Nevertheless awareness of the extent and significance of these inbuilt inequalities is far from uniform. The Welsh, Scots and Irish have long been aware of the extent of English hegemony, and their growing disquiet has recently led to an upsurge in demands for greater national autonomy in what the English choose to call the ‘celtic periphery’. Even so most English people still have great difficulty in appreciating what the fuss is about. Their disparaging attitudes not only yet further reinforce the strength of regional nationalism, but serve to hasten the outcome which they profess they fear most: the disintegration of the Union.

These attitudes rest on a major paradox. Whilst the majority of English people are committed (if unthinking) unionists, they are nevertheless most reluctant to recognise the intrinsically plural character of the entity which the union draws together: witness, for example their routine use of the terms ‘English’ and ‘British’ as if they were wholly synonymous. So it is that although it is quite self evident to both the Scots and the Welsh that if they are British at all (although many are now beginning to doubt even that) they are Scots-British and Welsh-

British, most English people regard it as quite unnecessary – not to say absurd – to identify themselves in hyphenated terms as English-British. True Brits, as they see it, are just as much English as British. Neither term requires a qualifier, and the Scots and Welsh should simply be grateful to find themselves included within the fold.

This vision sets the scene for some even more pressing issues. Since the English find it impossible to conceive of themselves as equal partners within a wider Union, preferring instead to view themselves as its essential core, the increasingly obvious fact that the population of their own home territory is no longer homogeneously English, but has instead become profoundly – and indeed irreversibly – ethnically plural is inevitably regarded as yet more alarming still.

So it is that English hegemony has two complementary dimensions. Firstly it rests on an assumption that English ways are ‘naturally’ superior to those deployed by all those whom they have successfully incorporated into the United Kingdom; and secondly that the resultant Anglo-British social order is by definition socially, religiously, culturally and linguistically homogeneous. And to the extent that these premises have become an entrenched component of national ideology, it follows that any deviation from either of these conditions necessarily constitutes a wholly unacceptable – and therefore non-negotiable – threat to the integrity of the established social order.

1.1 The English in history

Precisely because this set of assumptions has now become so firmly entrenched, it is worth considering where this vision came from. At first sight history offers no obvious clue, since the English cannot – and indeed have never tried to – trace their heritage back to a single homogeneous linguistic, cultural and biological source. However distinctive English traditions may be, they are by common consent the outcome of a complex admixture of Norman, Scandinavian, Saxon traditions with yet more ancient Celtic elements. Nevertheless a more or less homogeneous set of social, cultural, linguistic and religious conventions which could be categorically labelled as “English” gradually began to crystallise out from these strongly creole origins, and in that process two events appear to have been of critical importance: firstly Henry VIII’s break with papal authority 1533, and secondly his daughter Elizabeth’s construction of an explicitly Protestant English state in the aftermath of her sister’s Mary’s brief pro-Catholic reign. The results of all this were of far reaching importance.

A newly crystallised sense of Englishness played a crucial role in stabilising this whole enterprise. First of all it played a key role in establishing the external boundary of the English state, on the grounds that the one thing that an Englishman could not be was the subject of a foreign potentate or power – and most notably of the Pope; secondly, and perhaps yet more importantly still, this same imagery was used to secure a sense of national homogeneity – and hence of ethnic solidarity – amongst those included within that boundary. The Church of England played a crucial role in the process of homogenisation. In the first place its newly developed liturgy was in English, rather than Latin, and the vehicles for that process of standardisation, the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer soon became the gold standard for the English language itself; secondly because the new liturgy was brought into uniform use across the length and breadth of England; and thirdly because the Church of England, ‘by law established’ not only became an alternative source of legitimacy to that stemming from Rome, but also – through its parishes – became a central plank of local government. It followed that once the provisions laid down in the Book of Common Prayer had been authorised by Parliament, anyone who failed to accept its precepts was not merely a religiously misguided heretic, but also guilty of traitorous disloyalty to both Crown and Parliament. The English people, the English Church, the English Parliament and the English Crown were thereby welded together in a single self-reinforcing entity which was arguably the world’s first nation-state.

However this solidarity had an in-built cost. Despite intense efforts to build a religiously uniform English state, a range of stubborn minorities, and most especially the recusant Catholics, refused to accept the provisions of the new order. Pluralism, it turned out, could not be entirely suppressed, not matter how fearsome the punishments with which such ‘traitors’ were threatened. As a result the English state eventually learned to live with religious pluralism in a classic compromise. If pluralism could not be eliminated, anyone foolish enough to deviate from the majoritarian norm could at least be deprived of all manner of personal rights and privileges. The principal means by which this was achieved was through successive Acts of Uniformity, each of which were worded in such a way that anyone who refused to subscribe to the precepts of the Church of England found themselves automatically excluded from public offices of all kinds, as well from professional training in England’s only two Universities, Oxford and Cambridge.

At one level these measures were remarkably successful, since the vast majority of England's population embraced the new ethno-religious regime without demur. However those at whom the measures were initially aimed, the English Catholics, found themselves – as was intended – in a deep dilemma. If they kept their faith their deviance would, of necessity, reduce them to the position of second-class citizens. However the Catholics were by no means the only victims of this very early example of the use, and indeed the elaboration, of ethno-religious homogeneity as a means of reinforcing national unity: a whole series of immigrant minorities, of whom the Huguenots and the Jews were by far the most important, found themselves subjected to exactly the same pressures. Their responses differed somewhat, however. Whilst the Huguenots eventually assimilated, and hence disappeared into the English mainstream (even if most took several generations to do so), the Jews, like the Catholics, put up a great deal more resistance, taking the view that marginalisation was always preferable to the humiliation of assimilation.

The strategy which lay at the core on the Acts of Uniformity was no brief episode. It was not until the middle of the nineteenth century – three centuries after they had originally found their way into the Statute Book – that the raft of legislative measures which deliberately marginalised members of all of England's religious minorities began to be unwound. Nor is process yet complete: the Church of England still enjoys a remarkable series of constitutional privileges, including the right of its Bishops to sit as members of the House of Lords; moreover members of the inner core of the royal family are still barred from having anything to do with Roman Catholicism. So it is that although post-Henrician England's commitment to ethno-religious homogeneity has always been contested – and never more so than during the past century and a half – its native population managed to achieve – and for several centuries to sustain – a remarkable degree of linguistic, cultural and religious ethnic homogeneity. All remaining traces of the divisions between the Norman and Anglo-Saxon components of the English heritage were swiftly eliminated, and although tiny minorities of Catholics, Jews and Huguenots may have sustained themselves on the periphery of the established order, they offered no serious threat – despite several bouts of paranoia – to the condition of homogeneity which had come to be seen as vital to the integrity of the English national order.

1.2 The Industrial Revolution and the resurgence of ethnic pluralism

With the onset of the industrial revolution, however, a new challenge emerged. Rapid urban-industrial expansion generated a voracious demand for additional labour, and by the middle of the nineteenth century the English countryside was quite unable to cope. Migratory inflows from ever further afield soon emerged, and from the eighteen forties onwards an ever-increasing number of settlers from Ireland's impoverished western counties – the vast majority of whom were Catholics – began to establish themselves in England's major industrial cities. As newcomers, the Irish had little alternative to start right at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy, doing the jobs and living in the accommodation which English workers preferred to avoid. But although English workers were relatively untroubled by the growth of the Irish presence during periods of economic expansion, everything changed when boom turned to slump: as resources and opportunities shrank, they promptly began to view the Irish as unwelcome competitors, doing the jobs and living in the houses which they themselves should rightfully occupy.

However anti-Irish hostility was by no means focused solely on the material challenge to majority interests which their presence was held to represent. Two further areas were of particularly significant. In keeping with growing popularity of biologist explanations, it was widely assumed that further growth of this innately inferior Celtic population would, unless swiftly controlled, offer a dangerous threat to the integrity of the English race. Secondly it was widely believed that the Irish had insinuated themselves into the heart of English cities as part of an elaborate papist plot, whose object was – as ever – to undermine Englishness, Protestantism and the Crown. Far-fetched though such allegations may seem today, they found extremely widespread support during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Most especially during periods of recession, rabidly anti-Catholic itinerant preachers attracted large and enthusiastic audiences, especially in England's northern industrial cities, with predictable results. Fired with "religious" enthusiasm, young English workers were often persuaded to take violent vengeance on the enemy within by mounting vicious attacks on Irish people, their property and their Churches – and all the more so they had the temerity to defend themselves.

The severity of the tensions so precipitated can be gauged from their impact on Karl Marx, on of whose letters includes the observation that

“Every industrial and commercial centre in England now possesses a working class *divided* into two *hostile* camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life ... he cherishes religious, social and national prejudices against the Irish worker ... the Irishman pays him back with interest in his own money....

This antagonism [which] is kept alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit and the comic papers ... *is the secret of the impotence of the English working-class.*” (Marx, K 1971: 506)

But if Marx’s comments are judicious, Engels provides a much more graphic – and much less sympathetic – commentary on the same phenomenon:

“Every year has brought armies of the Irish hither. It has been calculated that more than a million have already immigrated, and that not far short of fifty thousand still come every year, nearly all of whom enter the industrial areas in the great cities, and there form the lowest class in the population. There are in London 40,000; in Manchester 40,000; in Liverpool 34,000; Bristol 24,000; Glasgow 40,000; Edinburg 29,000 poor Irish people. These people have grown up almost without civilisation, accustomed from youth to every kind of privation, rough, intemperate and improvident, bring all their brutal habits with them ...

The worst dwellings are good enough for them; their clothing causes them little trouble, so long as it holds by a single thread; shoes they know not; their food consists of potatoes and potatoes only; whatever they earn beyond these needs they spend on drink. What does such a race want with high wages? The worst quarters of all large towns are inhabited by Irishmen. Whenever a district is distinguished for especial filth and ruinousness, the explorer may count upon meeting chiefly those Celtic faces which one recognises at the first glance as different from the Saxon physiognomy of the native, and the singing aspirate brogue which the Irishman never loses..... With such a competitor the English working-man has to struggle, with a competitor upon the lowest plane possible in a civilised country, who for this reason requires less wages than any other.” (Engels 1971: 124 – 127)

These remarks could hardly be more revealing. Not only does Engels have no qualms whatsoever about taking sides in what we would now identify as a classic instance of inter-ethnic confrontation, but his presentation of the Irish as unwelcome and unfair competitors in the labour market, as well as a group of people whose innate biological inferiority is matched by equally misguided lifestyles, can be matched almost word for word with the arguments which were subsequently directed at the Irish migrants’ Jewish, Eastern European, Afro-Caribbean and South Asian successors. If immigration has been part and parcel of the process of industrial expansion, so the growth of ethnic pluralism – and then of inter-ethnic conflict – has been an equally significant component in the whole enterprise.

1.3 Visible and invisible minorities

Nevertheless those dimensions of diversity which stem from the arrival of the most recent influx of labour migrants have an additional – and very distinctive – characteristic. Because this section of the minority population is overwhelmingly of non-European origin, its

members are easily distinguishable from the more indigenous elements of Britain's population by virtue of their physical appearance. Moreover they are quite routinely so distinguished: physical appearance, and most especially skin colour, is regarded as a social marker of such importance that it pre-empts all other aspects of one's personal social status – hence, for example, the use of such terms as 'a Black teacher' or 'an Asian accountant', rather than 'a teacher who is Black', and so forth. Moreover this kind of identification has wide-ranging social consequences, since it very frequently triggers exclusionistic reactions from members of the white (or to put it more precisely, the *not-coloured*) majority. Given that this is so it is worth distinguishing between *visible* minorities – or in other words groups whose members are immediately identifiable, no matter how much they may conform to majoritarian social, cultural and linguistic norms – and *invisible* minorities, who, even though they may be believed to be routinely identifiable ('I can always tell a Jew a mile off'), can in fact relatively easily pass themselves off as being no different from anyone else if they so choose.

Yet although there is at least in some senses a radical difference between the experiences of visible as opposed to invisible minorities, both because the former have no means of escaping the impact of racial marginalisation, and because their very appearance also triggers all manner of deeply entrenched assumptions about the innate mental, moral and cultural inferiority of all of Britain's (and indeed of Europe's) former imperial subjects, there are nevertheless many parallels between not just between the way in which members of both kinds of minority were treated by the members of the indigenous majority, but also in terms of their responses to the experience of exclusion.

Examined from this perspective, the violence to which members of Britain's visible minorities currently find themselves exposed is anything but unprecedented. Indeed in so far as parallels can legitimately be drawn, there are good reasons for suggesting that the levels of violence to which members of the Irish Catholic minorities in the textile towns of Lancashire found themselves exposed during the course of a succession of 'Orange riots' during the late 1860s was a great deal more vicious, and led to substantially higher levels of bloodshed, than anything yet experienced by members of the more recently arrived visible minorities. And as is clear from the quotations from Marx and Engels, the charges levelled against the Irish Catholics (as well as their Jewish successors) are almost identical with those directed against the heirs of the more recent post-war influx.

Beyond this there is a further crucial parallel. Whilst a large part of the hostility directed at the invisible minorities was focused on their religious, cultural and linguistic distinctiveness, and although it was always argued that the more they abandoned their commitment to alterity, the more socially acceptable they would become, very few members of any of these groups wholly renounced their ethnic loyalties. To be sure many went to considerable lengths to alter their public appearance, and changed the language they spoke, the clothes they wore and even the names by which they identified themselves the better to conform to majority expectations. Yet however radical these changes may have been in public contexts, their private – and above all domestic – realities were often very different. The Catholic Irish no less than Jewish settlers drew themselves together to form what are best described as ethnic colonies, within which they sought to reconstitute the greater part of their ancestral linguistic, cultural and behavioural heritage. For those who have eyes to see, thriving ethnic colonies organised on just this basis are with us to this day – even if their participants otherwise still pass as invisible. Nor is the driving force behind these processes simply a matter of romanticism. It is precisely because members of these ethnic colonies have been able to look to each other for mutual support, especially when faced with the otherwise overweening forces of majority exclusionism, that members of these groups have been able to survive and very often to prosper in the face of severe adversity. Britain's Jewish population – whose mean social status has moved from the bottom of the working class to the upper echelons of the business and professional elite in the course of the past century – are a dramatic case in point.

1.4 The dynamics of ethnic pluralism

If Britain's visible minorities have acted in this way – despite urgent efforts to persuade them to act otherwise – there is clearly every reason to expect that their more visible successors will follow their example, since members of visible minorities have both much less to lose and far more to gain by so doing. Less to lose because comprehensive assimilation is by definition impossible in their case, so the maintenance of ethnic distinctiveness in public merely confirms the message read into their skin. Meanwhile they have far more to gain not only because their very visibility is so much more serious a handicap, but also because the comprehensive alterity of their cultural, religious and linguistic traditions gives them access to a particularly rich store of ideas and strategies by means of which to seek to circumvent, and better still to subvert, those very processes of racial and ethnic exclusionism. So it is that

however much the indigenous majority may wish or expect Britain to be an ethnically homogeneous society, the new minorities have added a particularly rich series of additional dimensions to its long-standing condition of ethnic pluralism.

Last but not least it is also worth emphasising that such developments are in no way unique to the United Kingdom. Although this volume is primarily concerned with the way in which processes of ethnic diversification have been played out in an British context, there is nothing unique at all either about the way in which industrialisation led to the large-scale importation of migrant labour: every heavily major economy in the world has at some point found it necessary to recruit a migrant workers on a similar basis. All are therefore not only becoming increasingly plural in character, but are also finding themselves wracked by similar patterns of ethnic tension. Immigration and its pluralistic consequences can no more be halted than Canute could keep the tide at bay: the challenge before us can only be met by learning once again to live with difference, rather than by engaging in modernistic dreams which at best envisage its disappearance, and at worst its forcible elimination.

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