Will there always be an England?
Greg Smith

Nation states as we currently know them are a development of late modernity, and the ideology of nationalism that underpins them is problematic. The absolute link between, language, culture, historical myth making, and territory emerged in the 19th and early 20th century largely, in the context of liberation struggles against oppressive empires and undemocratic regimes, first in Europe and the Americas and then in the colonised regions of the global South. In an age of (crumbling) globalisation, and the mass migration of peoples, the existence of nation states can be problematic, both internally and in their relationships and conflicts with one another. Currently the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland shows some tensions in the relationships between its constituent nations. But it is not alone, as consideration of states such as Spain, Belgium, Canada, India and the former Soviet Union reveals. The case we examine here is England: is it possible to resolve the issues of geography, national identity, and political representation and governance?

Identity Theory
First though, we need a short exploration of the theory of social identities. My theoretical framework draws on Henri Tajfel's theories of social identities in social psychology and Fredrik Barth's (1969) anthropological work on ethnic groups and boundaries. According to Turner and Tajfel *et al*. (1979), in-group / out-group relations are shaped by a threefold process of social categorisation, social identification and social comparison. Persons sort other individuals into social categories, using labels and stereotypes available within the culture and then identify the self with a particular category which is considered as 'us' or the in-group. They then make comparisons with other categories who are regarded as 'them' or out-groups.

As people spend more time in social networks with the in-group, they develop an identity, cultures, rituals and boundaries which give some measure of ontological reality to the social group. Barth describes the same phenomenon and gives examples of how particular markers can become salient in defining the boundaries of particular social groupings, determining who will be included or excluded. There is a tendency among any in-group towards 'othering' people who are different from themselves by highlighting a boundary marker. An **imagined community** is a concept first developed by Benedict Anderson in his 1983 book, *Imagined Communities*, to analyse nationalism. Anderson depicts a nation as a socially-constructed community, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of a group.

Identities can also look different from an outsider's viewpoint, and can be more or less salient in different contexts. The perspective already discussed above suggests that identity work is the process by which an individual manages various elements to constitute a unique personal identity and engages in social relationships in accordance with them. However, at the same time, people face many externally determined constraints. Wealth or poverty, postcode

lotteries, citizenship rules, educational achievement or lack of it, observable skin colour, or physical appearance, health or disability or membership of a particular family or local community can prevent people from achieving all that they would wish. Some elements of identity are therefore *ascribed* by others rather than *achieved* or *constructed* ourselves. In this more complete account, identities are not so much personal as social constructions, based on a synthesis of structure and agency effects, with feedback loops and the exercise of reflexivity as proposed in Anthony Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration. Social categorisation takes place in several different dimensions leading to a nested and hierarchical structure of identity groups in contemporary society. This overlapping of identity elements is referred to by social scientists as 'intersectionality' and is increasingly mobilised politically to highlight injustices against minority groups, for example in the multiple levels of discrimination which will impact the life of a black, working class, disabled woman.

England as imagined community
The origins of Englishness date back to the settlement of Anglo-Saxon tribes from the 5th century CE. There were numerous political entities and kingdoms covering parts of what is now geographical England, and some emerging sense of English Christian identity emerging in the context of conflict with pagan Vikings.

From 1066 political rule was centred in the Anglo-Norman Empire with territorial claims that stretched from Hadrian's wall to Gascony, with the ruling classes speaking and writing in French. By the late 13th century under Edward I, English power had been projected into Wales, Ireland, and less successfully to Scotland. The Middle English language was more widely used, although the claims to sovereignty over lands in France were real until the end of the Hundred Years War in the mid 15th century. But it was the propaganda of the Tudors in the 16th century that established the myth of England as an imagined community.

The break with Rome under Henry VIII, and the religious distinctiveness of England as a Protestant nation in conflict with France and Spain, was essential to Englishness. The English language and printed literature, such as Shakespeare's plays and the King James Bible, reinforced national identity and pride, and continues to be drawn on by traditionalists today. However, in our post-Christendom context, religion has little real significance as a marker of national identity – 'Church of England' as a tick box identity applies to a diminishing number of old, white people (two thirds of whom voted for Brexit), while believing and practising Christians are more likely to describe themselves as Anglican, Catholic, Charismatic, Baptist or Pentecostal.

The English language, thanks to centuries of colonial expansion, is no longer associated other than historically, with England. It is a world language (with a dominant North American form) that is spoken as a first language by millions of people in North America, the Caribbean, Australasia, and as a second language by educated people in Europe, Africa, India and other parts of Asia. Within the British Isles, and even within England, the language has many diverse forms in terms of spoken accents and dialects, which retain greater effect and loyalty than the standard 'BBC' English.

Why is Englishness salient today?
The existence of the Centre for English Identity and Politics reflects the reality that there is renewed concern about Englishness in the current decade. This is obviously an impact of the current state of UK politics, set in both a European and global context.

The 2016 referendum, which led to Brexit in which England and Wales produced majorities for leave while Scotland and Northern Ireland did not, has had serious consequences for two Unions, in Europe and the UK. In Scotland, Brexit was followed by increased support for full independence, though this may be softening because of weakening support for the devolved SNP government. Northern Ireland has suffered turbulence in politics and a failure to produce a stable devolved government, because of the contradictions of Brexit, and increased support for a united Ireland. Even in Wales there is a debate about increasing powers of the devolved Welsh government. England is left without its own devolved assembly, with contradictions around a UK Parliament in which English MPs dominate legislation that covers the whole of the UK, but cannot do the same on matters which apply only to England, while the other nations have double representation.

The political conundrum causes some resentment, but it is driven to a greater extent by the politics of populism and resurgent nationalism, which have been stirred up by agitators such as Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage, and right-wing newspapers and media channels. Populism and nativism are an international phenomenon responding to discontent with globalisation and international capitalism. Various forms of religion have made alliances with populist politics, such as Trumpite white 'evangelicalism', European Christianism (Le Pen, Orban, Russian Orthodox Church, etc.), Islamism (Erdogan's Turkey), and Hinduism in Modi's Hindutva. England's populism has tenuous links with religion, although around two thirds of (nominal) Anglicans voted to leave in 2016 (Smith and Woodhead 2020), and recently Paul Bickley suggested that non-practising Anglicans are ideal Reform voters.[1]

The link of populism with Englishness seems to me to be based around an 'othering' narrative. 'We' are English because we are not (uppity, 'woke') Scots or Irish, and we are definitely not 'foreign', Eastern Europeans, illegal immigrants and asylum seekers or, 'god help us', Muslims. There are clear elements of racism and xenophobia in this notion of English identity. For while it is generally acceptable to define oneself as Black or Asian British, or even Black or Asian Scottish, being hyphenated-English and non-white is rarely heard or accepted in popular conversation.

There are of course softer versions of English identity, where people talk of positive aspects, such as English landscape, material and cultural heritage, warm beer and Morris dancing and, above all, loyalty to English national sports teams, in international tournaments. Note however, this applies mainly to soccer and Rugby Union, where there are old rivalries and structured competitions that pit England against the other nations. In Olympic sports it is

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[1] https://religionmediacentre.org.uk/news/non-practising-anglicans-are-ideal-reform-voters-says-data-cruncher-on-politics-and-religion/

Team GB who compete and capture the loyal support of the English people. In Lawn Tennis the joke is that when Andy Murray won grand slam competitions he was described as a 'British player' but when he lost he was treated as Scottish.

How much does England matter?
Within the category of 'English' most people have other nested and intersecting identities, and arguably these are often more important.

First of all, most people have regional, county and city identities. For many these are stronger than or at least equal to their Englishness. Think of the terms Londoner, Northern, Yorkshire, Lancashire, Brummie, Scouser, Cornish, Geordie, or Prestonian. These are often marked by accents, dialects, local food cultures and festivals. Perhaps the most important marker of local 'tribal' identity is loyal support of a particular football (rugby league or cricket) team, notwithstanding the fact that the Premier League, and elite level cricket, are globally franchised businesses. David Goodhart wrote about the distinction between somewhere and anywhere people,[2] and suggested that the former, who had strong local identities and kin and friendship networks, and were concentrated in 'left behind' communities, were more likely to vote 'leave' in 2016, and to support the Tory populist agendas. The 'anywhere' people were more mobile, more globalist in outlook and more likely to vote 'remain'. While there are lots of problems with this analysis, particularly if it is taken as a binary, and without reference to ethnicity and race, it does highlight the importance of localism for many people.

Secondly, people have a social class or status, whether they identify with it, or whether it is imposed on them by others. In the 21st century it is not as straightforward as in previous times where everyone fitted neatly into three main categories (Upper, Middle, Working Class) defined on the basis of occupation. Yet economic, educational and status inequalities cannot be denied. And each of these have a different impact on what it means to be English.

Thirdly, there are many people resident in England who don't identify as English. For most of these it is a matter of ethnic heritage, e.g. Irish, Scottish, Jamaican, Indian, Pakistani, Nigerian, Chinese, Polish, Muslim, Christian (citizen of heaven). There are many, too, of mixed ethnic heritage. As noted above, to say you are (hyphenated)-English is rarely acceptable, and does not feature in the categories of ethnic group in the 2021 Census (even in the 'other' write-in descriptions). I have known people who describe themselves as Black-Bradfordians, Bangladeshi-British, Pakistani-Brummies, African-Londoners, and Lancashire- Muslim, but cannot recall a single 'Asian-English'. Fundamentally, 'English' means white native heritage.

Religious identity no longer maps onto England as a nation. Loyalties and belonging is either global (the Holy Catholic Church, the Khalsa, the ummah) or local (my church congregation, gurdwara, or mosque). In Christian circles, perhaps especially in Anglican and conservative

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2   www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/22/the-road-to-somewhere-david-goodhart-populist-revolt-future-politics

Evangelical circles, it is still common to hear expressions of 'pray for the nation', or even 'our nation'. This often comes out at times of political crisis or elections, However, it is always couched in ambiguity; is it for the nation state of the UK, for some obscure spiritual entity of 'England', or a subtle reference to the cultural (Christian) heritage of (white) English people?

Political alternatives

I have argued that Englishness doesn't matter that much, or even is positively dangerous as it can't be divorced from racism and xenophobia in terms of identity. But does England matter politically?

I want to argue that it does not, and that any proposal for an English Parliament, or even an England Grand Committee of sitting UK MPs, misses the point. Working on the principle of subsidiarity, which derives from Catholic Social Teaching, all decision-making is best done at the most localised level for which it is appropriate. Therefore we should have maximum local devolution of powers and budgets, to a large number of geographically bounded units within England. (Given the recent pattern of centralisation and the reduction of powers and funding for local councils since 2010, this would be a major reversal of policy).

How would we divide up the country? The current standard regions are too big, too diverse and lacking in identity to make much sense. And the lack of success of New Labour attempts at regional government showed how unwieldy this would be. The emergence of several city regions, with their own directly elected mayors with control of substantial resources, has some positive aspects, but it cannot easily be made to fit the whole country. But there is evidence that economies flourish best when they are managed and developed at this sub-regional level, with these areas trading with other regions across the globe.

The [Preston Model of developing a strong local economy,](#)[3] linked to a renewed municipal socialism and co-operatives, has much to recommend it, though experience on the ground in the city where I live suggests there are some difficulties because Preston is not a unitary authority and is located in a wider sub region of Lancashire, which is fragmented in terms of political structures. Religious activity also sits well in sub-regional geographical units, for example as dioceses, councils of mosques, interfaith groups, seem to work well at this level.

Perhaps, therefore, we should retain the existing City regions or metropolitan counties, and recognize a few more such as Central Lancashire, and the east Midlands (Nottingham, Derby, Leicester). In other less urbanised parts of the country, Counties (or the like) may provide more suitable territorial boundaries, with sufficient local identity and economic coherence.

I think we should have reservations about directly-elected local mayors for these intermediate units of government. They tend to favour personality and populist politics and concentrate

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[3] www.preston.gov.uk/article/1339/What-is-Preston-Model

power too much in the hands of a single person [(or monkey).[4]] More emphasis should be placed on (sub)-regional Assemblies, with members elected to represent constituencies (with a top up party list system, or a single transferable vote for greater proportional representation). These assemblies would then elect a leader or mayor, with executive powers, subject to scrutiny. Within each local constituency there could also be a town or district council elected to manage specifically local issues and services.

Central government would have the power over budgets and a minimum service standard for essential services (health, social care, transport, education, housing, environment) in every devolved sub region. Hopefully they would assign resources more equitably between regions, so a serious levelling up process could begin.

In short, we would do better to turn our attention away from the false myth of England, and concentrate on devolving both our tribal loyalties and democratically elected political powers to more manageable sub regions.

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[4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stuart_Drummond