

# Britishness and british identity sociology essay



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The Latin name " Britannia" was found around 320 BC in the travel diaries of the ancient Greek Pytheas , and was used to refer to the name of some numerous islands in the North Atlantic, while the inhabitants of those places were called " Priteni or Pretani". The modification of the name came around with the reign of Julius Cesar and by 1st century BC, Britannia was being used to refer to Great Britain specifically. But the name that this nation holds today, has its origins in the Acts of Union 1707 signed on 1 May 1707 under the reign of Queen Anne. In that time took place the political union between the kingdoms of England and Scotland, and later on between 1801 and 1921 the whole Ireland was added. And the nation received the title of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Furthermore, there might not seem to be much that links France with Britishness. After all, France is a state in the Western Europe, while UK is an island situated to the northwest of the Continental Europe. Indeed, but if we add a surprise element, like the war between UK and France, the sense of Britishness becomes stronger and prominent in the eye of the enemy. In contrast in an interview with Matthew Reisz about her paper entitled " Britishness", the leading British historian Linda Colley argues that Britain is " an invented nation, heavily dependent for its raison d'être on a brutally Protestant culture, on the threat and tonic of recurrent war, particularly war with France, and on the triumphs, profits and Oherness represented by a massive overseas empire, Britain is bound now to be under immense pressure... The Other in the shape of militant Catholicism, or a hostile European power, or an exotic overseas empire is no longer available to make Britons feel that - by contrast - they have an identity in common". ( Reisz)

## 1. Debates on Britishness and National Identity

### 1. 1 The implications of National Identity

A. Brah's favorite definitions of identity were written by Erikson in 1968 and Berger and Luckman in 1971: for Erikson, the process of identity formation is for the most part unconscious except where inner conditions and outer circumstances combine to aggravate a painful or elated 'identity-consciousness'. He insists that identity is never 'established' as an 'achievement' in the sense of a personality armour, or of anything static and unchangeable (20).

These themes are echoed in the formulations of Berger and Luckman. The key premise underlying their thesis is that reality is socially constructed. They argue that, during the course of everyday life, a person is conscious of the world as consisting of 'multiple realities', but among them 'there is one that presents itself as the reality par excellence. This is the reality of everyday life' (20).

This approaches suggest that the national identity can be experienced different depending on the social characteristics that every individual has. Undoubtedly, a person has a past, this means that he/she has an ethnic identity, but is also living in the present, concluding that his/her national identity is put to a test by the forces of modernity, according to Anthony D. Smith.

Following the studies of the same author, the national identity is divided in: civic, referring to residence, shared political values, common civic

institutions and language, while the other division, called ethnic deals with ancestry, national customs and traditions. The result of this division is that the sense of national quality of an individual is related with the prosperity of the society, inducing the idea of “ regime of truth”, concept used by Michel Foucault. And Foucault further explains “ Each society has its own regime of truth, ‘ its general politics’ of truth- that is the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true ” (Higgins, Smith and Storey 20).

In his resignation speech Tony Blair declared that Britain is a society that prospers: “ I have been very lucky and very blessed. This country is a blessed nation. The British are special. The world knows it. In our innermost thoughts, we know it. This is the greatest nation on earth”. But today the “ regime of truth” of this nation lies in the eyes of the Scottish, the English or Welsh, who have this separate identity and declare that the British identity comes second.

## 1. 2 A Phenomenal called Britishness

” In ‘ A Union of Multiple Identities: The British Isles c. 1750-c. 1850’, Lawrence Brockliss et al. argued that Britishness was a perceptive and ‘ composite’ national identity that reached a point of development after 1800 and which made limited demands upon its subjects”

(Cruse).

As I said in the first paragraph of this paper and adding the testimony of Linda Colley I can state that Britishness was first of all an historical phenomenal. But as a cultural, social, political phenomenal this national

identity has eight parameters: geography, national symbols, people, values and attitudes, cultural habits and behavior, citizenship, language and achievements.

### 1. 2. 1 Geography

Britain is an island nation, having only one land border and four water borders: the Atlantic Ocean, the North Sea, the English Channel, and the Irish Sea. Being cut off from the rest of the continent by the English Channel, this unitary state developed different ideas, wits and today plays a leading role in the world.. And we find another element, the topography. This element is diverse and unique: rugged coastline, moors (Scottish moor lands), mountains (Cambrian Mountains, Mourne Mountains, Pennine Range, Mount Snowdon), lakes (Loch Lomond, Lough Neagh), bays, hills (Cheviot Hills) and rivers (The Severn and Thames, while Tay, Clyde, and Forth are river valleys).

### 1. 2. 2 National symbols

” British examples might include Trooping the Colours, Changing the Guards, the Grand National, the FA Cup Final, certain rivers and mountains, particular monuments, the Union Jack, the BBC, the House of Parliament, fish and chips, the Highland Games, the Notting Hill Festival, the Edinburgh Festival, the Eisteddfod, drinking warm beer. These are just some of the many rituals and symbols that seem to articulate Britishness” (Higgins, Smith and Storey 21).

### 1. 2. 3 People

“ People are products of their biology and environment ( Natura and Nurture)” (Storry and Childs 29). The authors explain this conflict of pride, of being different, for example the fact that a person is living in a certain region. For example Lancashire and Yorkshire have a known rivalry, despite that the red rose symbolises the end of this war and is now the national flower of England. Furthermore the people from the country side do not feel they have much in common with the economic heart of the nation, while the Londoners think as themselves as authentic Englishmen. But let's not forget that Britain is a multinational nation. The September 11 terrorist attack and the 7/7 in London, are events that put a dark veil on the minorities and people have a brutal reaction towards the emigrants, because some are of Islam religion and in the perception of many Britons this links them with the tragic events.

## 1. 2. 4 Values and attitudes

### 1. Positive values and attitudes

In general, it can be said that the greatest values and attitudes of a person are involved with his success in the contemporary world, in which the individual is an important element. This affirmation can be possible based on his previous understanding of the world with the help of culture. The people of Britain have a significant culture, that with the introduction of democracy, values like freedom, the understanding of law, and also fairness, tolerance were born. This set of values also brought a sense of difference, in comparison to the European set of values. The Britons attitude of being reserved and polite in a way that it does not affect other's feelings, has both

sides. One is positive and illustrates the courteous and educated side of a British and the other is negative and is more developed in the sub-part of this section heading.

Another set of values are pride and work ethic. There is something in history that makes the white English proud, and they are entitled to do so. Every nation has the right to be proud of their ancestors and their achievements. The second value is about the word "hard-working" that is defined by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in the United Kingdom, as they announced on their official site on August 2010 that the "full-time workers average around 37.0 hours per week, part-time workers average around 15.5 hours per week and just over a fifth of people in employment work more than 45 hours a week". But today Brits do not work the longest hours in Europe, but the Czech. They do not even appear in the top three; Britain is taken by Greece and Bulgaria. So in our modern times, this notion of "hard-working" can be a legend; and today seems a myth.

But I end this section with some important values and attitudes like community spirit, mutual help, stoicism and compassion. Values that are planted firmly in today's society.

## 2. Negative values and attitudes

The negative side of reservation is recognized by other people that are not in direct contact with the British culture, like other Europeans. But as a surprise, an unacceptable attitude about this matter comes from the Scottish and Welsh, and also from the immigrants. They see this reservation like a mask, that helps the real identity to be disguise, and the real thoughts to be

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buried. Discussing more about this negative values, pride is another key element. This values is negative, because it becomes another issue in the life of the Scottish, Welsh and immigrants.

The final negative point of view, is not regarding the groups mentioned above, but was perceived by the entire world. Probably because they are huge fans of sports and they spread more outside their borders values like drunkenness, hooliganism and yobbishness. The football hooliganism dates back in 1880s, the drunkenness issue is confirmed by the BBC : “  
Drunkenness in the UK is the highest among 24 OECD countries, measured in terms of the proportion of 13 and 15-year-olds having been drunk at least twice.”( UK teenage girls ‘ worst drunks’), and all these attitudes are called a yobbish behaviour.

#### 1. 2. 5 Cultural habits and behaviour

The perspective presented here, however, is rather different. It has not ups and downs, but only a progressive position of the British identity. When the British stand in queues (as they have been doing at least since 1837) is a sign of civilization. Sports like football, cricket and rugby are symbols of the Brits and their traditional food and drink is a ritual for the members of this nation.

#### 1. 2. 6 Citizenship

Nick Stevenson describes citizenship being part of the social system, more precisely “ it belong to the a specifically differentiated sub-system of society



( the administrative-political sub-system) ” (35). And another social writer Paul Whiteley describes it as “ a set of

norms, values and practices which bind society together, makes democratic government

possible and helps individuals to solve collective action problems” (Cruse).

But citizenship is not only about a social role, but also can be described in terms of legislation. The British

Nationality Act 1981 introduced the UK citizen, meaning that a child that is born in the UK would be granted British citizenship and passport if either its mother or its father are British citizen or are settled in the UK.

### 1. 2. 7 Language

When you are a UK citizen, it is obvious that you speak English. It does not matter if you are Scottish , Welsh, as long you have a British passport. Even immigrants can hold one in time, but the first thing for them is to learn the language. So the second thing in common beside a passport is the language. From the geographical perspective they are regions where they use different accents, but it doesn't matter as long as this element has the sense of Britishness and makes the puzzle complete.

### 1. 2. 8 Achievements

Britishness is part of the past and present. There is a nucleus of fully achieved political and historical achievements, in which Britishness is balanced and which shows a strong nation. The technological achievements

like Fleming and penicillin, Bell and the telephone, Dyson and the new vacuum cleaner, are the best ways of preserving a cultural and social heritage. In this respect, sport is a source of innovativity that was been exported in other European countries. Another successful export was the British music, that ranked high in the charts and made the Mother Country proud. Bands like The Beatles, singers like Robbie Williams and today celebrities born within the " X factor" tv-show, are symbols of Britishness and make the " cool Britannia".

## 2. The Decline of Britishness exists?

The layers of British identity and the fact that the structure of the empire is made out of separated nation-states that have their own culture, makes it harder for the notion of Britishness to be around.

### 2. 1 The causes

The multicultural Britain made possible the rising number of ethnic minorities and for the Britons to refuse the bounding with the minorities. In our modern times, we can read about the cultural differences and the highlights of the non-existent shared values. This episode of immigration is still a problem of today for the citizens of the United Kingdom, introducing some hard words towards the immigrants and their culture, words like " islamophobia". This battle is taken at higher stages, like the immigrants are accused of unfair claims on the welfare state. In many news reports, we can see that this people don't have the same rights and the same chances to live a normal life, and their human demands are perceived as a violation of the Britons rights. Because institution try to make a possible integration of the ethnic

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minorities, the people attack was called “ political correctness”. They still think that because institutions don’t take into account their perception, there is a lack of freedom of speech. But the biggest intrusion toward Britishness, was the implication of Europe in the British politics. Their rights are not negociable in the European court and the arrival of asylum seekers in the UK proposed by Europe, was a reverse.

## 2. 2 The consequences

The difficulties of establishing effective mutual communication and harmony between white Britons and ethnic minorities was already being identified as a decline of Britishness. The institutions attempt to solve the problems, create a deeper hole in this matter. The victimization was not only among British Muslim, but as a boomerang came to be a problem for the white Britons. The surprise elements of this society was the tolerance of other ethnic minorities that are seen as “ Ok” or “ like us”, in contrast with the British Muslim, that are the “ others”. This impact on the UK is called “ social unrest” and it is a serious problem, that emerges frustration and anger towards ethnic minorities groups.

## 3. Britishness in the future

In the debate of House of Lords on 19th June 2006, the future perspective of the historian, Linda Colley was took in account, regarding the common themes that can make Britishness available in the future :

There has to be a way of linking past, present and future. And one of the ways

we could do this is surely with a document. We don't necessarily want a codification of British values, but there is a case for a new bill of rights, or a bill of rights and responsibilities, which would include values. One of the things we need to do too is improve the history curriculum in schools. It is right that Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland should have their distinctive histories taught. But there could be common history lessons too, which would recognize all kinds of diversity but which would also hammer out something of a common story. This would be partly an invention; all histories are. But it might be a useful invention. (Cruse).

In the same report Gordon Brown thinks that a new British patriotism should allow people to have shared values: "...a common view of challenges and what needs to be done forge a unified and shared sense of purpose about the long term sacrifices they are prepared to make and the priorities they think important for national success" (Cruse). He argues that this new Britishness should be formed of " a rich agenda for change" with " a new constitutional settlement, an explicit definition of citizenship, a renewal of

civic society, a rebuilding of our local government and a better balance between diversity and integration” (Cruse).

Nonetheless, the financial crisis attacked also Britain, and although it has some strong sectors like pharmaceuticals, aerospace, defense, cars, high technology, research and design, pointed out by David Cameron, the prime-minister in his first economical speech, it needs at least 10 years to renaissance over. So this is only the beginning of a new delicate process of reinforcing the nation and the society, that will necessarily take time.

#### 4. Concluding statement

One major conclusion that can be drawn from this paper is the old attitudes towards Britishness has not yet provoked a seismic wave in the new mentality of some people and Britain has to make sacrifices and introduce new terminology of citizenship and civic society in the educational system. Although the multicultural Britain has created new forms for the expression of some sub-state identities, this has not helped Britishness winning over civic loyalties and government. In some cases about minorities the ‘ meaning of citizenship will be lost under the laws of the country that the individual comes from ‘(Cruse). A study “ Young People and British” ‘ found that amongst young people, Britishness “ did not feature on the list of traits which helps define personal identity” and was seen “ as an unchanging static attribute” ‘(Cruse). In addition, present debates about the future of Britishness highlight uncertainty on all sides as to what constitutes this concept and how it will be preserved in the future by the generation of “ cool Britannia”. Or it will be only about the decline of Britishness?