

British Identities before Nationalism

Ethnicity and Nationhood in the
Atlantic World, 1600–1800

Colin Kidd



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1 Introduction

This study addresses the significance of ethnic identity within the early modern British world. What was the ideological status of ethnicity in the centuries which immediately preceded the rise of nationalism and racialism? Was ethnic identity an important constituent of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century political and religious argument? Or was it largely subordinated to the claims of church, confession, kingdom and constitution? A second line of investigation attempts to unravel the orientation and nature of identity construction in this era, not least because its intellectual leaders still subscribed to the Mosaic account of the peopling of the whole world from the stock of Noah. On a more local level, how did the British, the English in particular, conceive of their ethnic relationship to the rest of Europe? Furthermore, was the familiar antithesis of Celt and Saxon part of the early modern world view?

My initial inspiration was derived not so much from the preoccupations of the new 'British' historiography,¹ though these have come to shape the eventual monograph, but from more theoretical themes which concern students of nationalism. There is a general consensus, underwritten by a variety of scholarly approaches in history and the social sciences, that nationalism is a modern invention. However, no single school of modernists monopolises the field, in large part because of the chasm of disagreement over the relative contributions of materialist and idealist factors in the rise of nationalism. Ernest Gellner and others have located nationalism within the vast social and economic upheavals of the past two centuries. Before the advent of commercialisation and industrialisation, it is argued, culture was peripheral to economic life, however

¹ See e.g. J. G. A. Pocock, 'British history: a plea for a new subject', *Journal of Modern History* 47 (1975), 601–21; Pocock, 'The limits and divisions of British history', *American Historical Review* 87 (1982), 311–36; H. Kearney, *The British isles: a history of four nations* (Cambridge, 1989); L. Colley, *Britons: forging the nation 1707–1837* (New Haven and London, 1992); A. Grant and K. Stringer (eds.), *Uniting the kingdom? The making of British history* (London, 1995); S. Ellis and S. Barber (eds.), *Conquest and union: fashioning a British state 1485–1720* (London, 1995); B. Bradshaw and J. Morrill (eds.), *The British problem, c. 1534–1707* (Houndmills, 1996).

controversial it might have been in the religious sphere. Indeed, within early modern Europe, elite and popular cultures stood at a wide remove from one another. There was often more cultural affinity between elites across borders than existed within a state between elite and indigenous folk cultures. Modernisation, according to Gellner, changed all this. The imperatives of commercial and industrial mobilisation dictated the creation of large pools of numerate and literate employees who could facilitate the requisite calculations, transactions and bureaucratic regulations. As a result, the political centres of the European state system, particularly within the great multiethnic empires, pressured peripheral communities, whether local, confessional or national, to conform to national norms. Thus culture became intensely politicised, provoking the rise of self-conscious nationalisms, a situation exacerbated by the unevenness of economic development between regions and ethnic groups.² Although the broad contours of the Gellner thesis are persuasive, the specifics carry less conviction. In central and eastern Europe there are problematic time lags between the advent of nationalist intelligentsias and agitations and the later appearance of the new economic structures with their attendant dislocations. Gellner's is by no means the only version of the materialist interpretation of the rise of nationalism. Eric Hobsbawm and Miroslav Hroch have advanced more straightforwardly Marxist versions of the phases of development of nationalist movements.³ Moreover, there is another important variant of the materialist argument, associated with Karl Deutsch, Benedict Anderson and Eugen Weber, among others. This body of work stresses the role of modern communications, including developments in print media and the ever-increasing intrusion into the peripheries of fiscal-military states, in the rise and provocation of nationalisms.⁴

Even within the idealist camp scholars have staked out markedly different positions, though their basic chronologies are similar, with the late eighteenth century identified as the crucial watershed. Isaiah Berlin recognised the rise of nationalism as a by-product of the Counter-Enlightenment, a wave of particularist reaction led by Herder to the universal liberal ideals of the Enlightenment.⁵ A parallel explanation was

² E. Gellner, *Thought and change* (1964: London, 1972), pp. 147–78; Gellner, *Nations and nationalism* (Oxford, 1983).

³ E. Hobsbawm, *Nations and nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge, 1990); M. Hroch, *Social preconditions of national revival in Europe* (Cambridge, 1985); Hroch, 'From national movement to the fully-formed nation', *New Left Review* 198 (1993), 3–20.

⁴ K. Deutsch, *Nationalism and social communication* (1953: 2nd edn, Cambridge, MA, 1966); B. Anderson, *Imagined communities* (London, 1983); E. Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: the modernisation of rural France, 1870–1914* (London, 1979).

⁵ I. Berlin, *The crooked timber of humanity* (London, 1991), 'The bent twig: on the rise of nationalism'.

advanced by Elie Kedourie, who traced the emergence of nationalist doctrine specifically to late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century German philosophy, and in particular to the evolution within Kantian and post-Kantian circles of the values of autonomy and self-determination.⁶ However, other scholars, including Eugene Kamenka, have focused more predictably on the French Revolution as the spawning ground for nationalist doctrines of popular sovereignty.⁷ This era has also attracted considerable attention from scholars keen to examine the transition from a classical conception of politics, focused on the institutions of the *polis*, to an obsession, both romantic and scientific, with ethnic and racial categories.⁸

The various broad churches of modernism are opposed by primordialists, led by Anthony Smith, who believe that the modernist approach has led to a neglect of important continuities in the long-term evolution of national consciousness. However, even the primordialists accept much of the basic modernist case. Smith denies the contention that nations are 'invented', but his primordialism is qualified by the concession that modern nationhood, which draws on deep ethnic roots, is nevertheless not a direct continuation of older forms of identity, but is rather 'reconstructed' out of pre-existing materials.⁹

Quite apart from this debate over the historic provenance of nationalism, there is the related issue of whether they correspond to underlying and enduring national 'essences'. Those scholars who advance essentialist interpretations of nationhood are, in academic terms if not by the cruder criteria which reign in the public domain, an uninfluential minority.¹⁰ Indeed, the battle between essentialists and instrumentalists has been largely won by the latter.¹¹ The major area of disagreement among social scientists is between varieties of instrumentalism and over the degree and type of ficticity involved in the construction of identities. At

⁶ E. Kedourie, *Nationalism* (1960: new edn with afterword, London, 1985).

⁷ E. Kamenka, 'Political nationalism: the evolution of the idea', in Kamenka (ed.), *Nationalism: the nature and evolution of an idea* (New York, 1976).

⁸ M. Thom, *Republics, nations and tribes* (London, 1995); I. Hannaford, *Race: the history of an idea in the west* (Baltimore, 1996). Another modernist-idealist has stood on its head the central premiss that the roots of nationalism are to be found within the fabric of modern culture; rather, argues Leah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: five roads to modernity* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), the idea of nationalism is itself constitutive of modernity.

⁹ A. Smith, 'The origins of nations', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 12 (1989), 348.

¹⁰ However, as A. Hastings, *The construction of nationhood* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 169, points out, there are some cases, such as the Jews and the Gypsies, where there are underlying biological continuities.

¹¹ The main challenge to the modernist consensus comes not from essentialist-primordialism, but, as A. Smith, 'Gastronomy or geology? The role of nationalism in the reconstruction of nations', *Nations and Nationalism* 1 (1995), 3–23, points out, from the 'cynical, if not playful' deconstructions of the post-modernists.

one extreme instrumentalists reduce identity to political and economic choices. For example, Paul Brass sees ethnic identity formation 'as a process created in the dynamics of elite competition within the boundaries determined by political and economic realities'.¹² Some anthropologists reduce identities to the bare binary oppositions constructed as a matter of course in the relationship of core and periphery, self and other.¹³ Even primordial identities are recognised to be constructs. Smith has argued for the antiquity and longevity of ethnocentrism founded not upon biology, but upon collective *myths* of common descent. According to Smith's formulation, the pre-modern 'ethnies' out of which many nationalisms emerged were 'constituted, not by lines of physical descent, but . . . by the lines of cultural affinity embodied in distinctive myths, memories, symbols and values retained by a given cultural unit of population'.¹⁴

Secondly, there is the question of ficticity. One of the major implications of the modernist consensus has been to stimulate an awareness that national and ethnic identities are unstable over the *longue durée*. Historians are becoming more vigilant in their avoidance of the fallacy inherited, as Michael Biddiss points out, from nineteenth-century nationalism itself that nations enjoy 'an entirely objective existence'.¹⁵ Within modern historiography and the social sciences most approaches to national and ethnic identity nowadays emphasise their fictive dimensions. Historians and social scientists have become increasingly aware that ethnicity is not a straightforward reflection of common biological descent; rather, ethnic identities are now recognised as cultural fabrications, which can be imagined, appropriated or chosen, as well as transmitted directly to descendants. Many of the differences between the leading modernists, Gellner and Anderson, which lie at the heart of the current debate over identity construction revolve around their respective understandings of fiction and authenticity. Gellner imputes a degree of pejorative inauthenticity to the invention of modern nationalisms. Anderson, however, argues that all communities larger than face-to-face groups, such as tribes and villages, are in a sense imagined. Thus, according to Anderson, all ethnic and national identities are, of necessity, artificial constructs, though none the less authentic facets of the human experience. In spite of these intractable tensions, there is a keen awareness throughout the field that ethnic identities are not timeless, but provisional and pliable, with an elasticity permitting a considerable degree of invention and reinvention.¹⁶

¹² P. Brass, *Ethnicity and nationalism* (New Delhi, 1991), p. 16.

¹³ See M. Chapman, *The Celts: the construction of a myth* (Houndmills, 1992).

¹⁴ A. Smith, *National identity* (Harmondsworth, 1991), p. 29.

¹⁵ M. Biddiss, 'Nationalism and the moulding of modern Europe', *History* 79 (1994), 413.

¹⁶ Gellner, *Nations and nationalism*; Anderson, *Imagined communities*.

Mainstream anthropology now eschews the notion that ethnic identities reflect underlying biological, or even to a large extent cultural, truths. Ethnicity is now a question of processes and relationships rather than of ethnic and cultural essences. The Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth highlighted the importance of boundary relationships and their maintenance in the construction and perpetuation of ethnic identities.¹⁷ Yet, according to another Norwegian anthropologist, Thomas Hylland Eriksen, such boundaries are themselves unstable: ethnic identities are both 'situational' and 'negotiated', sometimes undercommunicated, sometimes overcommunicated, according to specific and changing contexts.¹⁸

The fluidity of identity construction discerned by anthropologists provides useful markers for students of the early modern era, the mental makeup of which was innocent of nationalism and racialism, and which was correspondingly less self-conscious about ethnocentric consistency. Indeed, it is clear that nationalist thinking was alien to the early modern era. The word 'nationalism' itself was not coined until the last decade of the eighteenth century, and thereafter enjoyed a most precarious and marginal existence, appearing in lexicographies only from the late nineteenth century.¹⁹ Despite differences in other areas, scholars are in agreement about the basic constitution of nationalist thought. John Breuilly defines nationalist ideology as 'a political doctrine built upon three basic assertions', namely, that 'there exists a nation with an explicit and peculiar character', that 'the interests and values of this nation take priority over all other interests and values' and that the nation 'be as independent as possible', with an aspiration, 'usually', to 'political sovereignty'.²⁰ Peter Alter recognises a characteristic ideological feature common to nationalisms: 'In nationalism, the nation is placed upon the highest pedestal; its value resides in its capacity as the sole, binding agency of meaning and justification.'²¹ In this respect, according to the primordialist J. A. Armstrong, nationalist doctrine is 'historically novel'; throughout the 'lengthy record of human association', rarely did 'group identity . . . constitute the overriding legitimization of polity formation'.²²

Given this scholarly consensus about the recent provenance of nationalism, I found myself preoccupied with the puzzle of how one should

¹⁷ F. Barth, 'Introduction', in Barth (ed.), *Ethnic groups and boundaries* (Oslo, 1969).

¹⁸ T. Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and nationalism: anthropological perspectives* (London, 1993).

¹⁹ W. Connor, *Ethnonationalism* (Princeton, 1994), p. 98; R. Williams, *Keywords* (1976: London, 1988 edn), p. 213; P. Alter, *Nationalism* (1985: English transl. London, 1989), p. 7. For 'national' vocabulary in nineteenth-century Europe, see P. Cabanel, *La question nationale au XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1997), pp. 5–9.

²⁰ J. Breuilly, *Nationalism and the state* (1982: 2nd edn, Manchester, 1993), p. 2.

²¹ Alter, *Nationalism*, p. 9.

²² J. A. Armstrong, *Nations before nationalism* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1982), p. 4.

describe the national identities which preceded the emergence of nationalism proper without lapsing into anachronistic usage. In a previous book on Scottish identity in the eighteenth century I borrowed the term 'ethnocentrism' from the work of Anthony Smith to describe national consciousness in the early modern era, in an attempt, perhaps clumsy and over-scholastic, to avoid speaking of 'nationalism',²³ a label which I believed – and still believe – to be misleading when applied to the early modern period, which witnessed national consciousness but nothing so explicit or doctrinaire as nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalisms. However, because I now have considerable doubts as to the role of ethnicity in early modern political culture, I have become less confident about my earlier use of 'ethnocentrism'. Hence, I arrive at my central question: what *was* the place of ethnicity in the discourses of the era preceding the rise of nationalist and racist ideologies?

The British world between about 1600 and the 1790s provides a useful case study, an environment rich in connections and contrasts. The historic patriotisms of England, Scotland and Ireland did not function in isolation, but as a system of competing claims and counter-claims, dominated in the seventeenth century by tensions within the Stuart multiple monarchy, and in the eighteenth by the rise of an overarching Britishness. The eighteenth century also saw the birth of colonial patriotisms in Protestant Ireland and America. This study aims to tease out the presence and status of ethnicity within the value systems of the intellectual elites – lay and clerical – who shaped and articulated the public identities of the British political nations. While a crude xenophobia was, as a number of studies have shown, a potent factor in British popular culture during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,²⁴ the pattern within the mainstream of political argument is considerably harder to discern.

²³ C. Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's past* (Cambridge, 1993).

²⁴ T. W. Perry, *Public opinion, propaganda and politics in eighteenth-century England: a study of the Jew bill of 1753* (Cambridge, MA, 1962); Colley, *Britons*; C. Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism in eighteenth-century England* (Manchester, 1993); D. Statt, *Foreigners and Englishmen: the controversy over immigration and population, 1660–1760* (Newark, DE, 1995), ch. 7.