‘A sense of where you belong in the world’: national belonging, ontological security and the status of the ethnic majority in England

MICHAEL SKEY

Department of Sociology, University of Leicester, UK

ABSTRACT. The significance of national forms of imagination and organisation has been increasingly questioned in an era of rapid globalisation. While theoretically stimulating, those who stress the importance of global mobility and sociability sometimes overlook what well-established, “thick” attachments to the nation offer to disparate individuals, notably in terms of anchoring subjectivity. This first part of this paper explores how debates around belonging in England continue to define certain “ethnic” groups as more or less national, because they embody certain traits, practices or norms. It is then suggested that those who claim, and are treated as if, they belong “without question” may be offered a key sense of material and ontological security that is underpinned through routine practices, symbolic forms and institutional arrangements. The second section looks to evidence this argument by exploring how challenges to this ontological order, which focus on the agency of “perceived” others in relation to everyday spaces, practices and material objects, are debated and resisted.

KEY WORDS: banal nationalism; England; English; ethnic majority; national identity; ontological security.

Introduction

In the past three decades, the subject of globalisation has become the focus of intense scholarly debate as attempts are made to understand the impact of increasing flows in people, products and images. These studies have generated a range of valuable insights in relation to, for example, non-places, global cities, diasporic networks, perceptions of global risk, trade and the emergence of new forms of socio-political organisation. They have also opened up fresh avenues for theorising social relations (Beck 2004).

Yet in drawing attention to the significance of global mobilities and calling for the utilisation of new theoretical frameworks, these studies sometimes place so much emphasis on (studying) change and fluidity that ‘any notion of cultural
continuity or reproduction is . . . outlawed’ (Bader 2001: 258). As a result, those who dismiss the ‘experiential frame of national societies [as a] . . . scam’ (Beck 2002: 29) fail to address why such a framework might continue to matter.

In this paper, I want to focus on the status of a relatively under-researched group, the “ethnic majority” in England. As members of this group have formed the unmarked category against which “others” within the national territory are defined, their own position has often remained “beyond question”. Being recognised in this way is significant, as it not only contributes to a settled sense of identity in a relatively stable social environment, but also provides the basis for social action (Jenkins 2000: 8). In other words, a taken-for-granted national identity, in offering a reliable framework for making sense of the world and orientating oneself towards “others”, may confer both psychological stability and status.

This argument is underpinned by the work of those who have shown that a key sense of self and place, for many, continues to be defined in national terms and realised through a myriad of routine practices, utterances and symbolic forms that re-create the world as a world of nations (Billig 1995). Moreover, I also suggest that this relationship may be productively explored by using the concept of ontological security, which refers to ‘the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action’ (Giddens 1990: 92).

Before discussing how these ideas might be applied to the English case, it is important to outline what is, and is not, being claimed here. Most importantly, I am not suggesting that nationality operates at all times and for everyone as a source of comfort and (ontological) security. Such an argument would push us close to a functionalist understanding of nationhood, undermined by problems of teleology and stasis.

Instead, a more dynamic model can be generated by treating ‘the banality of national referents . . . as a social accomplishment’ (Condor 2000: 199) and placing the emphasis on processes of (re)production and struggle. It is quite possible, however, to acknowledge the contingent (and sometimes contested) nature of the most banal national referents and their role in re-creating, for some, a “common sense” view of the world as it is (and should be).

The next section will be used to provide some context for the subsequent empirical analyses, by examining recent debates around identity in England, notably in relation to the status of different “ethnic” groups. I will then outline my own contribution, drawing on Hage’s concept of national cultural capital (1998) and Giddens’s (1984, 1990) writing on ontological security.

**Identities in Britain**

In the British Isles, the constitution of self and other has often been defined in relation to colonisation, and there is a large body of work that has demon-
strated the degree to which racial categories have informed debates around national belonging (see Gilroy 1987). However, while these issues are still discussed in terms of the threat that certain racialised groups pose to the nation (Kushner 2003), there has been a noticeable shift in the way the categories of British and, to a lesser extent, English have been opened up in recent times (McCrone 2002: 312). Devolution in Scotland and Wales has also contributed to these more reflexive discussions around belonging in Britain, notably by shifting attention to the status of the ‘hitherto under-researched Anglo white majority’ (Nayak 2003: 139).

For instance, Susan Condor and her colleagues undertook a series of studies (Abell, Condor and Stevenson 2006; Condor 2000, 2006; Condor and Abell 2006; Condor, Gibson and Abell 2006) in England, aimed at understanding ‘the ways in which ordinary social actors construct themselves as nationalised subjects’ (Condor and Abell 2006: 55).

Using data from qualitative interviews, they outlined a number of tropes through which English identity is commonly articulated; birth/territorial attachment (neutral), blood (racist), culture (assimilationist) and personal biography (cosmopolitan) (Condor, Gibson and Abell 2006). Crucially, the use of each was seen to be contextually dependent, shifting in relation to the subject under discussion and the respondent’s own sense of identification with different membership categories.

In terms of the ethnic majority, both Condor (2000, 2006) and other researchers (Byrne 2006; Fenton 2007) have noted that many ‘speakers displayed a reflexive concern over the rationality and morality of national categorisation and stereotyping’ (Condor 2006: 657). In general, an unwillingness to adopt an explicit national footing is often linked to a more cosmopolitan outlook. In the English context, such a strategy has also been associated with the articulation of a “rational” English identity (Kumar 2000) and, above all, a desire to avoid the imputation of prejudice, where discussions about national belonging are rejected for being equivalent to inappropriate talk about ‘race’ (Condor 2000: 175).

However, the rejection of narrow, exclusionary definitions of nationality at certain moments should not disguise the tensions within many of these debates, as individuals move between more open and closed categories of belonging (Condor 2006). For instance, it has been widely observed that the disavowal of racist categories does not preclude the stigmatisation of certain groups within the national space. In such cases, two inter-related strategies are generally employed to avoid the taint of prejudice.

The first puts forward the view that nations, as bounded and homogeneous cultural entities, should be protected from the threats posed by “other” cultural practices and values (Barker 1981). In England, this is often achieved by drawing a distinction between the categories of English and British, with the former characterised as indigenous, stable and closed (Condor 2006). The second strategy draws on a narrative of victimisation, with majoritarian interests (seen to be) ignored at the behest of vociferous minorities (Hewitt
2005). Fenton and Mann (2006) have used the concept of *ressentiment* to make sense of these discussions, noting how they often involve long-standing grievances concerning (perceived) changes within the local or national community, that often come to focus on the presence of privileged ‘others’.

Therefore, while the study of nationality in a complex, multi-national state, such as Britain, must attend to the different ways in which membership categories are contextually negotiated and transformed over time, we must also acknowledge the degree to which distinctions continue to be drawn between different groups, with some seen to be more national than others. To take but one example, Condor and her colleagues observed that ethnic minorities who ‘strategically identified as English . . . did so in a manner that acknowledged the subversive status of the act’ (Condor, Gibson and Abell 2006: 150). For certain “marked” groups then, identifying as English is still viewed as a challenge to established rules and conventions.

Alternatively, this presupposes a category of people who not only play by such “rules” but also benefit from (and, perhaps, enforce) them. In the next section, I want to explore this idea further, in relation to Ghassan Hage’s (1998) writing on national cultural capital and the ‘domesticated other’. Hage’s work is particularly salient as it suggests why some people are seen to have greater/lesser claims to a particular category of identity. It also offers a starting point for thinking about the consequences of these processes, particularly for those whose status remains largely unquestioned.

**National cultural capital**

Drawing on examples from Australia, Ghassan Hage has argued that different groups are perceived to be (and made to feel) ‘more or less national than others’ within a delimited national territory (1998: 52). Drawing on Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital, he suggests that those groups who possess greater ‘national cultural capital’ in relation to a whole host of ‘sanctified and valued social and physical cultural styles and dispositions’ (*ibid.*: 53) are able to position themselves (and are recognised) as unconditionally belonging to the nation.

While others have used similar ideas in relation to identity markers (McCrone 2002: 308) or unmarked categories (Brubaker et al. 2006: 211–15), I feel that Hage’s concept is particularly useful in pointing to the range of features/characteristics that are used to position someone as “national” as well as the idea that one can accumulate and, of course, lose such capital. For instance, a number of studies have pointed to the growing sense of discomfort or uncertainty felt by non-white groups in Western countries (Manzoor 2008; Noble 2005) as a result of their increasingly marked position after the terrorist attacks in the US in 2001.

Such examples demonstrate the crucial link between recognition and belonging and the unequal relations of power that exist in the attribution
and acceptance of identity claims. Put simply, our “status” remains largely dependent on the judgements and (re)actions of others. The second point to emphasise here is that those who are recognised as belonging will not only have a more settled sense of identity, and access to whatever benefits the in-group accrues, but are also able to make judgements about the status of other people.

This process, what Greg Noble labels the ‘production and regulation of strangeness’ (2005: 188), is particularly salient to the national case, which is explicitly defined in terms of identifiable boundaries. We can explore the implications of this by referencing the controversial debates around immigration at the current time. Those who wish to see immigration controlled tend to focus on the problem of “too many” and the identity of particular marked groups whose presence is seen to be problematic. Yet as Ghassan Hage argues, ‘concepts such as “too many” assume the existence of a specific territorial space” (1998: 37–8) and the presence of two distinct groups; those who feel entitled to make such judgements as well as the “others” who are subject to this managerial gaze (Hage 1998: 44–6).

The undomesticated ‘other’

The assumption that some people within the nation can evaluate “how many” also implies that there is an acceptable level of “just right” as well as the possibility of “not enough” (Hage 1998: 37). A sense of control or agency is at the heart of these debates and this is where the domesticated “other” (ibid.) may have particular theoretical purchase. This concept challenges the common perception that it is ‘the presence of otherness per se which is problematic’; instead, emphasising ‘the necessity of the “other” to the functioning of dominant forms of life, and of how that otherness is kept in its place, rather than necessarily being entirely excluded’ (Morley 2000: 223).

Much of the recent work on national belonging has focused on processes of exclusion and how they marginalise particular groups. As important as this work is, it does tend to underplay what these processes may offer to those whose interests they serve, notably in terms of the subjectivities they produce (Foucault and Gordon 1980: 119). In other words, we must also acknowledge that those who are recognised as having an entitlement to judge who and what is appropriate within the bounded territory of the nation may take great comfort (whether consciously or otherwise) from being positioned in this way. As Bridget Byrne asserts, ‘subjects [may] develop passionate attachments to their positionality, even though it inevitably involves foreclosure and the loss of other possibilities and ways of being’ (2006: 17).

Moreover, these classifications may come to be valued not only in terms of the status they produce but also because they are crucial in underpinning a (more or less) “common sense” understanding of the way the world is, and should be. In other words, by ‘fixing social relations into a symbolic and...
institutional order’ (Huysmans 1998: 242), they make a complex and sometimes threatening world more meaningful and manageable.

In the next section, I want to explore this idea in more detail, by linking Giddens’s writing on ontological security with the work of those who have emphasised the everyday (re)production of national forms of identity and organisation (Billig 1995).

Ontological security

To be ontologically secure, the individual must be more or less able to rely on things – people, objects, places, meanings – remaining tomorrow, by and large, as they were today and the day before. Without a degree of managed certainty in their relations with other people and the material environment, each encounter would have to be dealt with on an ad hoc basis, placing individuals in a permanent state of anxiety. A crucial element in freeing the individual from the burden of this potentially crippling uncertainty is habitualisation, routine forms of behaviour and knowledge that are spatially and temporally organised (Berger and Luckmann 1991: 70–85).

These ritualised interactions and habits ‘unite participants in a way that promotes order and predictability’ (Gergen 2001: 18) thus (re)creating an ongoing and consistent sense of “reality”. As a result, individuals gain confidence in the world around them, both in terms of achieving practical ends and in the management of their relations with others. This ties in with our earlier discussion concerning the importance of processes of recognition, which were seen to be crucial in underpinning an ongoing sense of identity and agency.

A second important point that Giddens makes concerns the fundamental issue of change and, in particular, the impact of structural transformations on routine practices, symbolic forms and the maintenance of ontological security. Having initially concentrated on the contrasts between pre-modern and modern societies (1984, 1990), Giddens’s more recent work (2002) has focused on the increasing pace (and consequences) of globalisation. In the latter case, it is liberalised, “global” systems of economic production and consumption, increasingly mobile populations and the rapid interchange of ideas through the mass media that are seen to challenge relatively well-established belief systems and practices, including those associated with the nation.

The significance of these processes has been well documented, and, in some cases, the “potentialities” offered by new forms of sociability and connectivity should be advanced and celebrated. This emphasis on change, however, does at times underplay the importance of established social relations and organisations, notably for those who struggle ‘to maintain the[ir] sense of . . . identity [and] a sense of continuity that allays fears of changing too fast or being changed against one’s will’ (Sigel 1989: 459).
The significance of everyday (national) life

Caterina Kinvall (2004) has explored this idea by suggesting that the ‘strength of nationalism . . . as [a] powerful identity-signifier . . . [comes from being able] to convey unity, security and inclusiveness in times of crisis’ ([ibid.]: 762). What I want to address here is the reasons why this might be and how we can best evidence such a position.

In the first instance, we can tie in the earlier discussions concerning the practical features/accomplishments of everyday life that re-create the social world as intelligible and meaningful with the work of those who have focused on the myriad ways in which national discourse has become ‘embedded in routines of social life’ (Billig 1995: 175) and ‘absorbed into a common sense view about the way the world is’ (Edensor 2002: 11).

In the contemporary era, social relations, representations and organisations continue to be defined in national terms, governed and institutionalised in accordance with national temporalities and located within the spaces of the nation, thereby contributing to a relatively consistent view of “reality” (Condor 2000; Dhosest 2005; Edensor 2002; Palmer 1998; Pinchevski and Torgovnik 2002; Pointon 1998). Furthermore, in realising an ongoing and fairly stable sense of (national) self, other and place, these everyday processes and symbolic systems secure disparate individuals to the wider community and also provide them with ‘a positive understanding of who and what they are’ (Reicher and Hopkins 2001: 33).

Kinvall’s reference to ‘times of crisis’ leads on to my second point, which suggests that the rather nebulous concept of ontological security can be best evidenced when it is either absent or threatened. This parallels Garfinkel’s (2004) argument that in order to study the rules and norms of behaviour that guide everyday interactions, it is first necessary to breach them. Such an approach is also supported by research in the field of housing studies (Dupuis and Thorns 1998; Kearns et al. 2000), which has shown that the ‘the psycho-social benefits of home’ ([ibid.]: 387) – as a locus of autonomy, constancy, privacy and ontological security – are most emphatically articulated by those with negative experiences of domestic living. Similarly, I want to suggest that the significance of a largely taken-for-granted sense of (national) identity and place may only come to the fore when it is threatened, because it has formed part of the background to everyday life, what most people know, up until that point (Schutz and Natanson 1967: 95).

Before looking to evidence these discussions empirically, in the next section I will outline the main objectives of the research project from which the data are taken, notably with regard to some of the main methodological choices that were made.

Research project

The study in question (2008) was designed to explore the articulation of social identities among the ethnic majority (white, English-born people) in
This group has often been assumed to have a more settled sense of identity and place and has therefore come under less scrutiny, even as wider debates around (national) identity and belonging have risen to the top of the media and political agenda in Britain in the past decade.

Group interviews were used to focus on the ways in which people drew on shared knowledge and understandings to make sense of different issues. In terms of the sampling strategy, the use of group interviews was also designed to shift the unit of analysis from the individual as a representative of a wider social group to ‘thematic content’ (Lunt and Livingstone 1996: 92) and the possible range of views associated with a particular subject. As George Gaskell notes, ‘the real purpose of qualitative research is not counting opinions or people but rather exploring the range of opinions, the different representations of the issue’ (2000: 41).

This type of approach is predicated on the notion that the data generated through the initial group interviews will, in turn, inform who is approached to take part in subsequent interviews. My own strategy involved relying on snowball sampling in the first phases of the recruitment process and then, in the second phase, focusing on those areas and groups that I had not been able to recruit up until that point. In total, I carried out twenty-one group interviews around England, stratified according to class, region and age.

The project was presented as an attempt to collect “ordinary” people’s opinions about the state of the country, and the interview schedule was devised to be as “open” as possible to allow respondents to talk about their own interests and concerns. This ‘wait-and-listen’ approach (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008: 256) provided opportunities to identify when and how ‘common-sense assumptions and ways of talking about nationhood’ (Billig 1995: 61) were used and debated during the course of the discussions.

Of particular interest were the ways in which categories of belonging were defined, maintained, negotiated or challenged in relation to national and other “identity” groups. Here, I drew on the broader tenets of Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA; Baker 1997), which not only focuses on processes of categorisation but also the range of features that are associated with boundary-making. As McCabe and Stokoe write, ‘categories . . . are linked to particular actions . . . or characteristics . . . such that there are conventional expectations about what constitutes . . . [membership and] normative behaviour’ (2004: 603–4). This involved observing how, and in relation to which topics, different individuals constructed particular categories of (national) belonging and, in particular, those practices, values and traits that were used to justify the exclusion of certain groups.

‘More or less English’

Earlier, it was argued that certain groups are perceived to be, and made to feel, more or less national than others because they embody, or not, the
‘sanctified and valued social and physical cultural styles and dispositions [that constitute] . . . national cultural capital’ (Hage 1998: 52–3). The following examples illustrate this idea rather well, the first involving members of the Hastings Group in a discussion about their neighbours (born in England, of South Asian heritage), who are just about allowed into the category of English when asked directly.

Paul: I, I, I mean, their children, for example, will go in. They are not going to look at the Urdu part of it ‘cos their . . . they’ve grown up . . . they are more or less . . .
Heather: English.
Paul: . . . English. If you want to put . . .
Interviewer: More or less?
Paul: More or le . . . w, w, well, yeah, more or less.
Interviewer: What brings someone from being more or less to being . . . English?
Paul: It’s good, I know, you picked out a very . . . I, I, I, I’ve used . . . uh . . . you picked up on a point, I . . . . You’ve got to accept them as being English.

In this case, Paul and Heather are able to consider their neighbours as English because they possess sufficient cultural capital, with language skills, accent and participation in Christmas celebrations also mentioned. However, this possibility presents Paul with a dilemma, evidenced by the range of false starts, hedges and pauses as he tries to provide an “appropriate” answer to my final question. He is aware that, in this context, excluding the family from the in-group category would not only contradict previous statements but also leave him open to possible accusations of prejudice. Having struggled to articulate his position, the deictic term ‘them’ in the final phrase is particularly telling as even when offering a grudging acceptance of his neighbours’ status, Paul still re-creates a marked boundary between those who really belong and those whom ‘you’ve got to accept’.

A second example comes from a group in the North of England who focused on Bangladeshis as the marked category who were seen to possess the least cultural capital because they could not or would not integrate. My respondents also pointed out that Hindu families that they knew who had ‘fully integrated into British society’ were worried that:

there will be racial tension probably in the future and they [white people] won’t say, ‘are you a Muslim?’ they’re just going to say, you’re black and that’s [their] . . . great concern.

In this case, it can be seen that even becoming ‘fully integrated’ is not enough to enable these Hindu families to escape scrutiny during times of increasing tension, because of their physical appearance.

These types of comments offer further evidence that race remains a salient feature in the assignment, and recognition, of national cultural capital in England. However, the significance of these arguments can only be explicated if we focus not only on the types of people that are seen to un/conditionally belong, and on what basis, but also what they are seen to belong to and why this matters.

© The authors 2010. Journal compilation © ASEN/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2010
The right to manage national space

This idea can be opened up in relation to the following extracts, which not only draw distinctions between groups within a national space but also allow the speakers to claim for themselves an established position within the in-group category.

*Terry*:
No, it’s like, it’s like I say, it’s a tree, first you’re a Mancunian, aren’t you and then you’re Lancastrian, Northerner, y’know, as it expands you become a different thing, depending on what conversation you’re having basically.

*Interviewer*:
But which is the most important one, which is the one you have the most allegiance to out of all of those?

*Peter*:
Now the ironic thing about that is we take it to the next level where we say, ‘We’ll watch the England football game’ . . .

*Terry*:
The biggest thing which we find as a bugbear in this country . . . is that when you get an international cricket match against England and Pakistan, then the true loyalties of your country are reflected . . . and we’ve got far more Pakistani people who are quite proud to put T-shirts on their back of their own country, their own flag, but yet they’re living in this England

*Peter*:
Yeah, and it, it’s and it’s not just . . . er . . . a historical thing, it, it’s a fanatical thing . . .

*Roger*:
Precisely. (Manchester Group)

*Melanie*:
In my old school like it was really weird, there was not a single black or mixed race person. It, it’s so sheltered and it’s so uncultural, it was English, proper English and I think that’s a shame that in a way, without, y’know, the line between having too many and having none, but like, it was a shame we didn’t get, whereas in London you get a chance to meet people from all walks of life, and like, learn about other stuff whereas around here it is really quite sheltered, I guess. (Cirencester Group)

In the first exchange, a relatively reflexive debate about identity shifts to focus on the presence of problematic ‘others’, when the group is asked to prioritise allegiances. Interestingly, while ‘their’ actions are discussed in terms of locality, national categories are used to define in- and out-groups. Indeed, the first linguistic feature to note is the vivid use of deixis, a form of rhetorical pointing used to establish meaning in relation to the immediate context. For example, the terms ‘we’ or ‘us’ might be used to refer to a particular family, trade unionists or humanity, as a whole, depending on the setting and position of the speaker. In this case, the pronouns ‘we’, ‘their’ and ‘they’ indicate that the ‘other’ is being identified and monitored in relation to the bounded space of the nation. In other words, it is only with reference to ‘this England’ that the presence of ‘Pakistani people’ can be defined as a problem.

The term ‘we’ is also being used metonymically to stand in for all English people, rather than just the speakers and their immediate audience (Ricento 2003: 619). The significance of this linguistic feature is that it allows Terry to position himself as someone who has the right to pass judgement on the presence of suspect groups within the nation. Furthermore, the response of the others within the group shows that they recognise Terry’s right to make such claims.
In the second extract, Melanie also employs the deictic term ‘we’, in the phrase ‘we didn’t get’, to position herself within the membership category ‘proper English’. Likewise, the issue of ‘too many’ draws on racial categories but again only makes sense with reference to a delimited territory. Finally, the racialised ‘other’ is also distinguished through its possession of culture or ‘stuff’ that can be learnt about and evaluated. This stands in contrast to whites, the default category, whose habits are so familiar and unproblematic as to be ‘uncultural’.

‘Having too many and having none’

While the continued use of racial markers is obviously significant, what I want to emphasise is the idea that such utterances also enable the speakers to clarify, and hence secure, their own status as members of the national community. However, this sense of entitlement is not given but comes from ongoing processes of imagination, categorisation and interaction. These are, in turn, underpinned by established (though often contested) forms of knowledge about who belongs and why (Billig 1995: 68).

The final aspect of the above extracts that I want to discuss are the phrases ‘we’ve got . . .’ and ‘the line between having too many and having none’ as they are both performing a significant rhetorical function. Not only are they being used to construct powerful boundaries between those who unconditionally belong, but, crucially, they both treat the suspect groups as a possession or something that must be monitored and managed. It is this idea of management that points to another important feature of these debates, which concerns processes of boundary-maintenance and the ability of the dominant group to define the conditions of belonging.

This is where the idea of the domesticated “other” comes to the fore. Earlier it was argued that the presence of the “other” was a powerful element in establishing the in-group as a coherent entity (Condor 2006). Recent social psychological research also indicates that high levels of in-group entitativity are associated with feelings of greater security, as the group is perceived to be a coherent and unified actor and better able to manage potential threats (Sacchi, Castano and Brauer 2008). Therefore, the boundary between in- and out-group(s) must be carefully maintained in order to establish a homely space in which those who “belong” can feel secure. Where there is a perception that these boundaries can no longer be adequately maintained, feelings of anxiety or uncertainty may ensue.

In contemporary Britain, this sense of crisis or threat has been commonly debated in terms of Islamic terrorism and the idea of community cohesion. Alternatively, across the group interviews, these challenges tended to be perceived and articulated in relation to routine interactions and spaces. This indicates, as we suggested earlier, that it is everyday features of the social and
material landscape that are a crucial element in underpinning and stabilising a sense of “reality” and security for significant numbers.

‘They’ve let ’em in and they’ve taken over’

The following extracts detail a list of routine occurrences involving the presence of or symbols associated with the undomesticated “other” that, on the surface, might seem rather unremarkable. Yet for these individuals, they made a lasting impression.

Joan: My, my grand-daughter was on holiday a couple of weeks ago. She came back into Manchester Airport and she was so annoyed. I don’t know what . . . um . . . a . . . uh . . . what did she make of the girl that was on the passport desk . . .
Dennis: What did she?
Joan: What, the girl with the white yashmak .
Dennis: Yeah.
Joan: Yeah. She was on the passport desk and she said ‘I’m coming back off my holiday into my own country’ and there’s this lady standing there, telling us what to do.
Dennis: . . . with a yashmak on.
Joan: . . . with a yashmak on! And she couldn’t even see her face, she was so angry wasn’t she?
Dennis: Yeah, yeah.
Joan: . . . and then her friend, she came back from Italy the last week and she said, ‘Guess what happened?’. Coming back into my own country, I had to show my passport to somebody, y’know, who’s not originally from this country . . .
Dennis: . . . and they couldn’t even speak proper English . . .
Joan: . . . proper English . . .
Dennis: . . . you’re talking to someone now that was born in this country, you’re talking to somebody that, y’know, has, has come into this country. (Liverpool Group)

Barry: I’ll tell you what, what it is, is happening, round here, that is where we live right, you will never get a take-over of what they have in London.
Andy: You will, you will.
Barry: You won’t. We won’t allow it.
Andy: It’ll come, they’ll come fucking gradually.
Kevin: It’s just gradually getting in, isn’t it?
Andy: They’ll get in, it’s like a disease, it’ll fucking just . . .
Kevin: Like cancer, just spreads.
Andy: They’ll spread. Well, I mean, look at that . . .
Kevin: It’s a cancer of the fucking . . . y’know, there’s tea bars, coffee bars . . .
Barry: . . . they’ve let ‘em in and they’ve taken over.
Chris: . . . just for them to sit in, do you know what I mean, and they’re sat in there, sat in the corner, twenty of them sitting around and the lasses that work there, they’re grabbing their fucking arses. (Middlesbrough Group)

Gillian: I also regard myself as English not British. And I’m sorry to see that it is changing, our way of life and everything is changing. I don’t want to belong to Germany or continentals but I’m afraid we are being shoved into it, aren’t we?
Interviewer: Does anyone else agree with that?
Paul: Your culture’s disappearing.
Interviewer: How’s it disappearing?
Paul: Well, if you got to Hyde, we’re talking Muslims. Hyde Town Hall, they’ve taking ’em down now because I think, there’s some protests but all the signs, the first sign you saw was in Arabic . . . uh . . . Urdu, and the first forms you see when you go in there . . . uh . . . don’t get me wrong, I don’t mind helping ’em if they come over here but the emphasis all seems to be . . . to, to find the English leaflet was harder and that annoyed me, really annoyed me and I’m not particularly racist in any way, shape or form but when I saw that . . . er . . .
Hazel: . . . I mean, we are, we offend ’em now with the British stamp. All the stamps that we made up for, for Christmas . . .
Paul: Yeah. (Manchester Group)

These examples point to the important link between recognition and agency and the fact that it is the dominant group’s status that is perceived to be under threat. Talja Blokland made similar observations after concluding an ethnographic study in a working-class housing estate in Rotterdam, the Netherlands (2003). She noted that the everyday practices of migrants – cooking “strange” foods, playing loud “foreign” music, wearing Islamic dress – upset local white residents ‘because their norms of public practice had been violated and their symbolic ownership of the space challenged’ (ibid.: 11–12). Positioning themselves as ‘the people that belonged here’ these individuals argued ‘that they were entitled to have the [migrants] adapt to them, the powerful and symbolic owners of the space’ (ibid.).

This type of sentiment is expressed in the first extract, where individuals, who take their own status for granted, become angry when asked to submit to the authority of others, whose dress and language skills are seen to exclude them from the in-group category. In this instance, even the passport officers’ “official” role, being charged with protecting the country’s borders, fails to generate recognition of their “national” status. Alternatively, the repetition of the possessive term ‘my own country’ is used to mark out the status of the complainants, while the way in which Joan and Dennis collaborate in the exchange articulates a growing sense of incredulity at these repeated challenges to a previously settled set of social relations.

Similarly, in the second passage, the context of the wider discussions defines the sexist behaviour in the local café as a problem in relation to the identity of those involved (Muslims). The emphasis on physical numbers again flags up issues of control and agency. In this case, ‘they’ invert the symbolic order by harassing the female staff, whose status is acknowledged through the use of the colloquial term ‘lasses’. As a result, the question of what has been ‘taken over’ seems to have a double meaning, with the café representing a microcosm of the nation, which has been previously portrayed as a physical body threatened by disease. The fact that, ‘even when people are speaking about specific localities, they often end up articulating these to the space of the nation’ (Hage 1998: 38) suggests that the nation operates as a powerful frame of reference in making sense of these issues.

The last exchange also suggests that perceived challenges to everyday features and assumptions generate a lasting impression because they compli-
cate or scrutinise what had previously been unremarkable or beyond reflection. Gillian’s more general concerns about the loss of ‘our way of life’, in relation to European integration, are picked up by other members of the group who shift focus to the (perceived) threat that minorities represent to established routines and expectations. Paul is careful to downplay any racist intent, instead attributing his annoyance to the fact that these groups had been privileged, thus violating (previously) accepted norms of public life.

Finally, the reference to British stamps also indicates the degree to which such fears become projected onto the most banal of objects, which come to stand in for who “we” are. Similar views were expressed by many of the groups I interviewed with regard to other routine objects and practices that were perceived to be under threat from the presence or actions of minority groups. These included piggy banks, Christmas cards, jelly babies, traffic and other public signs and blackboards.

These examples lend weight to the argument that it is everyday symbols, practices and spaces that underpin a relatively secure sense of “reality”, including relations between “them” and “us”, for those who define themselves as unconditionally belonging to, and the rightful managers of, the nation. As Ghassan Hage observes,

Familiarity is particularly associated with practical spatial and linguistic knowledge. When the [individual] feels that he or she can no longer operate in, communicate in or recognise the national space in which she or she [lives] . . . the nation appears to be losing its homely character (1998: 40).

The importance of these ordering processes to an ongoing sense of familiarity and security may also be used to explain some of the vitriol that has been directed at institutions, notably government, that are popularly seen to be unwilling (or unable) to respond to these (perceived) threats to national culture and territory. As Alanna Krolikowski has argued, the legitimacy of institutional actors is partly dependent on their ability to provide (and guarantee) security, by ordering social relations in a way that generates mutual intelligibility and, hence, certainty (2008).

In the final section of this paper, I shift focus away from the links between daily routines and ontological security so as to provide further evidence for my overall argument. In drawing attention to the increasing visibility and intensity of events designed to celebrate the English nation over the past decade or more, I examine the reasons that might lie behind the growth of these ecstatic displays.

‘We knew who we were’

Having argued that displays of nationality might be important in realising the idea(l) of nation during times of uncertainty (2006), I was keen to ask my respondents to account for the rise in such events, which they all agreed were far more evident than in the past.

© The authors 2010. Journal compilation © ASEN/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2010
Barry: See years ago they didn’t, years ago they didn’t fly it because they didn’t fucking have to. We knew who we were. (Middlesbrough Group)

Garry: . . . maybe we’re just trying to show we’re an . . . um . . . an indication, that there is still an English identity . . .
Katie: Yeah, I think people are starting to get a bit paranoid, that English is . . .
Tina: . . . fading out.
Dave: . . . so like bringing out proof to show you’re still here . . .
Tina: . . . it’s like it’s fading, isn’t it, really. They’ve gotta try and hold on . . .
Garry: It’s like, it’s like you’re trying to prove something . . . trying to prove something but forty years ago you wouldn’t have to prove anything. This is England. (Enfield Group)

Janet: It was . . . wasn’t in your face But it’s now in your face and you think ‘Hang on a sec, this is my country, so therefore I celebrate what my country is.’ (South London Group)

One of the striking aspects of these discussions is the way in which they again draw a distinction between two groups living ‘here’. The speakers locate themselves – and people like them – as the de facto, and rightful, symbolic owners of the nation through a series of possessive statements, ‘we are here’, ‘this is my country’ and ‘this is England’. The use of the term ‘you’ in the Enfield Group’s extract operates as a powerful metonymic device, the individual who has to ‘prove something’ standing in for the nation as a whole. This sense of identity and place is seen to be under threat from a seemingly powerful ‘other’ that has arrived ‘here’ in the past forty years.

The agency of the ‘other’ is demonstrated through their ability to wave their flags, to the extent that they are now ‘in your face’. Crucially, these processes generate a tangible sense of anxiety or insecurity, as indicated by the use of the term ‘paranoid’. As a result, there seems to be a concomitant desire to counter the threat of an increasingly undomesticated ‘other’, so that these overt expressions of nationality may be viewed as attempts to re-establish the visibility, symbolic power and status of the in-group. As Kong and Yeoh write:

... given that identities are conjunctural and socially constructed ... it follows that at particular times and under particular conditions, the sense of national identity is particularly threatened. In other words, the need to foster and assert the sense of identity may be stronger at some times than others (1997: 214).

This argument is also echoed in the following exchange between members of the Liverpool Group:

Peter: It [England’s world cup campaign] actually provided an outlet for people to say ‘we’re in danger of losing something’ that we value. And it’s being eroded over time.
Interviewer: And what’s been lost, do you think?
Diana: I think, I think what’s been lost is a sense of pride, a sense of where you belong in the world in terms of history, context. [emphasis added]

The palpable feelings of loss and disorientation articulated in this extract indicates the extent to which the nation has underpinned a relatively stable
sense of identity and place for these individuals and, moreover, that this ontological framework continues to matter because of the role it plays in ‘anchoring people’s existence’ (Noble 2005: 112). The phrase ‘eroded over time’ echoes the idea that long-term changes are beginning to generate a response among some sections of the English population. Finally, the statement also reinforces the idea that such ecstatic events represent a “space” where individuals can manage wider feelings of uncertainty or loss, by actively embodying and, thereby, concretising the “imagined community” of the nation.

**Concluding remarks**

Recent studies of globalisation, in emphasising the significance of new forms of interaction, organisation and solidarity, sometimes overlook why established forms of (national) identification and organisation might still matter. In this paper I have tried to explore this idea by drawing on the concept of ontological security. This is ‘a sense of confidence and trust in the world as it appears to be’ (Dupuis and Thorns 1998: 27) and is largely dependent on the ability to manage ongoing social relations, across space and time, with a degree of certainty.

For many people, in places such as England, self, “other” and place continues to be understood and articulated in relation to a largely taken-for-granted national framework, which is underpinned by everyday practices, embedded symbolic systems and institutionalised arrangements. Crucially, it is those who position themselves (and are recognised) as belonging without question that are provided with a more secure sense of identity and agency. This is generally defined in relation to “others” who are seen to be less national. In the case of England, the significance of this established framework can be evidenced by widespread debates concerning the threat that undomesticated “others” pose to previously taken-for-granted practices, objects and social spaces. Recent displays of nationality have also been identified as attempts to reassert the dominant group’s identity in the face of (perceived) challenges.

The examples that I have used in this paper have tended to focus on anxieties concerning racialised “others”. However, it is important to note that while such expressions are supported by related studies in Britain (McLaren and Johnson 2007), continental Europe (Blokland 2003) and beyond (Brown 2008), there is no necessary connection between racial categories and national ontological security. Indeed, a useful avenue for future investigation would be examining how debates around national belonging are negotiated in different national contexts.

For example, Avril Bell’s (2009) work in New Zealand points to the insecurity that some of the (white) Pakeha majority increasingly feel in relation to Maori claims to represent the established and legitimate in-group. The changing status of minorities in Scotland and Wales has also been examined in relation to processes of devolution, where it is sometimes
Englishness, rather than race or religion, that is used to define the out-group (McCrone 2002: 311). Similarly, there is some evidence in both Britain and the US that previously marginalised non-white groups are beginning to assert their own sense of belonging and entitlement in relation to recent migrants from Eastern Europe and Latin America, respectively (Phillips 2008).

A further issue that requires greater scrutiny is the notion of the ethnic majority, which has been under-theorised in this paper (Brown 2008). Although, similar concerns were expressed by a wide variety of the groups I interviewed, more attention needs to be given to the ways in which other relevant social identities (class, gender, age, locality) may impact on ideas around national ontological security, notably during times of economic or social upheaval.

Finally, shifting attention to the relation between national subjectivity and ontological security is not meant to either authenticate the dominant groups’ arguments or underplay the very real, and sometimes brutal, consequences of such categorising. Instead, it may be seen as part of an attempt to understand how ‘ordinary [people] . . . cope with the larger worlds with which they are so suddenly confronted . . . [where] . . . the very shaping of history now outpaces the[ir] ability . . . to orientate themselves in accordance with cherished values’ (Wright Mills 1970: 16).

This places such articulations within a wider socio-economic and historical framework and emphasises the means by which people attempt to make their own lives both meaningful and viable in a changing world (Hage 1998: 21). As Caterina Kinvall asserts, we must ‘recognise and deal with the real structural insecurities for many people as they . . . [attempt] to cope in increasingly complex and globalised societies’ (2004: 763). In drawing attention to the significance of such formulations in people’s everyday lives, it also offers potential avenues for exploring how the iniquities they generate might be more effectively challenged.

Notes

1 England’s population in 2006 was 84% of the total population of the UK. According to the last national census, whites comprised 92.1% of the English population (Office of National Statistics 2003: 8/96).

2 These threats tend to shift over time. For instance, 25 years ago it was Irish republican terrorism and/or civil unrest associated with “black” communities that dominated most media and political agendas in Britain.

References


© The authors 2010. Journal compilation © ASEN/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2010


© The authors 2010. Journal compilation © ASEN/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2010