

Stuart Cartland

CONSTRUCTING



REALITIES

Identity, Discourse and Englishness

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Constructing Realities: Identity, Discourse and Englishness

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Introduction

This body of work will critically investigate contemporary concepts and constructions of English national identity, or rather, Englishness. It will suggest that within the contemporary context, discourses of English national identity are dominated and characterised by a prevailing and assertive conservative approach. This work will examine theoretical and conceptual approaches to national identity and nationalism from a particular conservative interpretation of Englishness in relation to key contemporary themes. It will then suggest that within the contemporary context and in relation to relevant topic areas of investigation, Englishness is dominated by a specific sense of insecurity of identity, one that is characterised by a sense of defensive exclusivism.

The aim of this body of work is not to produce a reductionist account of what constitutes English national identity; instead, it is a critical, empirical and theoretical examination of determining themes behind dominant conceptualisations of Englishness in the contemporary period. Within this context, it will be argued that discourses of Englishness are overwhelmingly dominated by a conservative interpretation and understanding. These discursive articulations are constituted by a predominantly ethno-nationalist and deeply historicised account of national identity that are largely ideologically informed by a defensive account towards long-term and ongoing processes such as globalisation and immigration and operate as exclusive rather than inclusive identity signifiers. Relatively recent developments and themes such as devolution, the European Union and a wider context of political and social flux, fluidity and uncertainty are symbolically used to further an ideologically conservative interpretation of Englishness within a context of identity insecurity and anxiety.

When locating discourses of Englishness in the contemporary era, this specifically refers to discursive representation, narratives and understanding of Englishness informed by ongoing and recent events, developments and processes that can widely be viewed as political, ideological, social and cultural. Moreover, the central element of investigation concerns the specific development of a politically and ideologically constructed sense of Englishness that has been formed and has coalesced since the late 1990s but more specifically from the late-2000s. Arguably, there has never been such interest, debate, discussion and confusion over what it means to be English. The fluidity and multidirectional

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politics of identity within the English context requires an urgent need for critical investigation and demystification of this subject area. Concepts of Englishness, or constructs of English national identity, are not based upon fixed or singular meanings. They are both fluid and contested; however, in the current discursive environment, they have become dominated by a particularly conservative ideological interpretation and narrative.

The methodological approach adopted within this body of work will be to employ an underlying use of discourse analysis to critically investigate the characteristics and the constructed nature of discursively constituted ideological and empirical articulations of Englishness. Although this research is predominantly a theoretical and conceptual analysis of competing narratives, it will utilise empirical evidence to substantiate these claims and the tangible effects of ideologically constructed conceptualisations of national community. These empirical forms of evidence will be drawn from a range of sources, such as opinion polls, voting behaviour, interviews and public attitudinal surveys, media coverage and the politicised approach taken by large sections of the media, political and social commentary and the wider national public, political and social debate concerning issues relative to the constructed conceptualisation of Englishness.

This body of work will draw upon and engage with key social, cultural and political theorists of nationalism and national identity such as: Umut Ozmirkiri, John Breuilly, Tom Nairn, Thomas Hyland Eriksen and Benedict Anderson. This will not seek to be an exhaustive account of identity; it will instead be situated within the contemporary English experience and will utilise writers and theorists within this specific area such as: Craig Calhoun, Arthur Aughey, Bridget Byrne and Krishnan Kumar. This work will also be heavily informed by the use of discourse as a means to analyse and examine dominant national narratives and understanding around concepts of Englishness, particularly from theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe but also drawing upon the work of Jacob Torfing, Thomas Diez and Frederic Jameson to facilitate an evaluative understanding of the character of a dominant narrative within this field of enquiry.

Brexit, devolution and immigration reflect politicised narratives shaping the conceptualisation of Englishness. These ongoing developments require discursive analysis to examine their influence on identity formation. This subject area requires investigation to understand how these processes inform a specific politicised identity. Identity, particularly concepts of national identity projected in the public realm, is political. Arguably, England is in the midst of a crisis of political, social and cultural identity, however, lost in this conjuncture seems to be that identity, particularly a sense of national identity is something that is created and constructed not empirically given.

It will be argued that England is dominated and held to account by a narrow conservative social, cultural and political imagination and narrative. The emphasis and targeting of issues such as immigration, multiculturalism and Europe are presented as 'denaturing' (Balibar, 2002) in terms of a specific interpretation of national identity from a conservative ideological perspective. These key issues are used as sites for ideological and discursive affirmation and legitimacy for a conservative dominated conceptual account of Englishness.

In an era of ongoing processes such as the break-up of Britain and a disassociation with Europe, England has become exposed both politically and in terms of identity, and is forced to come to terms with a position of unpreparedness, yet this debate and national conversation has become dominated by exclusionary and divisive rhetoric and discourse dominated by a sense of English grievance, loss and anxiety. England has become dominated by a very tangible form of conservatism, not just discursively but also politically, a vote to leave the European Union which was most notable within England, an overwhelming dominance of Conservative MPs within England, the rise and legacy of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and its deep incursions into the political environment. Coupled with this is the fundamental split of the United Kingdom along political and ideological grounds with the SNP constituting an overwhelmingly dominant position within Scotland while the Conservative Party maintain a similar position within England.

A mediated understanding of Englishness and English national identity is dominated by a specific conservative interpolation, interpretation and narrative. Dominant conservative concepts of Englishness can be characterised by an archaic and backwards looking position driven by a decline in a primacy of Britishness, yet tentatively opposed to the break-up of Britain, motivated by a deep-seated Euroscepticism and driven on by cultural and social reactionism. Thereby, being an inextricable link between the intersectionality of conservative positions towards key contemporary themes of devolution, Europe, immigration, multiculturalism and dominant discourses of Englishness whereby exceptionalism and separateness has become naturalised and normalised to the point that it is almost impossible to reimagine it any other way.

Within the context of a post-Scottish independence referendum, post-European referendum, post-‘end-of-multiculturalism’, post-UKIP ideological terrain of social commentary and national imagining, national discourses have hardened and have become receptive to a politics of exclusion, a sense of loss and political incorrectness. Concepts such as a politics of exclusion are crucial when analysing the discursive representation of a dominant conservative Englishness. The creation, belief and dominance of this form of Englishness can be viewed as a means to systematically rationalise and come to terms, in a self-serving form of coherence what it means to identify as English and how and where this is situated in the context of present challenges. This process also enables a vernacular of ‘injured Englishness’ acting as a vehicle for a shift towards a more ethno-nationalist identity of disaffection and resentment.

Although it is difficult to disentangle Englishness from Britishness, particularly in an historical context, what has become clear is that the present era represents an historic moment when the English are becoming to discover a clear conception about a distinction between Englishness and Britishness, even if this choice has been impelled rather unwillingly. Dominant discursive forms of Englishness are often formed and informed against a plural and highly multicultural society that is experiencing a relatively high degree of flux, yet this background has helped create social and cultural anxieties which have become manifested politically. Concepts of Englishness, therefore, can be viewed as experiencing a paradoxical

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relationship between identity and cultural imagination. This can also be viewed as a means of informing national narratives of perceived decline and perceptions of the present and the use of narratives of nostalgia.

Contemporary conservative discourses of Englishness validate an ontology of identity within a narrow ideological framework. It becomes the dominant lens through which the entire social, cultural and political landscape is interpreted. Simplistic narratives and ideological accounts of complex sociocultural lives have long been contested, but in our post-truth hyperreality, discursive representations of belonging and place have become highly politicised. These representations are driven by narratives of fear, uncertainty and anxiety, often detached from reality. This body of work will critically examine theoretical constructions of English national identity, exploring their mediation through place and experience; it will also investigate the impact of ideologically driven narratives on public discourse and concepts of identity, particularly in relation to belonging and exclusion. It will be suggested that dominant conservative discourses are often contradictory and confused while at the same time marginalise the everyday experiences of many within contemporary English society.

Why Discourse Theory

Discourse is the construction of a framework for understanding a particular subject area within a particular context. As a general working definition of the term, discourse can be described as the creation and articulation of dominant forms of narrative used to give an understanding of our social, cultural and political world, located within an ideological framework. Discourse is the articulation of knowledge, and knowledge is located within discourse. Therefore, it is constantly fluid and open to contestation and manipulation. Discourse is primarily linked or concerned with meaning; this is crucial when discussing or critically analysing concepts of identity and narrative.

What is common throughout all definitions of discourse is that it is something that frames experience and understanding and gives meaning to experience. Discourse provides a medium through which thought, meaning and action, and alternately, action, meaning and thought take place. Hence, such significance can be placed upon discourse when considering concepts of nation, nationalism and national identity. These conceptual realms cannot exist outside of discourse.

Discourse is the ideological symbolic representation of place, people, institutions, behavioural codes and norms. In this sense, it is a mediation of understanding experience both as lived reality but also as part of an imagined social community. It is, therefore, inescapable within the realm of national identity and the conceptualisation of place, inclusion and exclusion. In a specific conservative and right-wing context, it relies upon a particular historicised national narrative; it also relies upon the use of a mythscape binding landscape to a specific symbolic representation.

Discursive narratives form an important resource for individuals and groups in the construction of identity. It provides a self-legitimising and often self-replicating feedback loop of understanding and meaning which happens on both an individual

and group level, making narrative a critical cognitive instrument for making one's own lived experience legible. Nationalist narratives, to be effective and to resonate, are often characterised by persuasion. Carefully cultivated national narratives seek to resonate with existing social norms and values but also operate within an ideological framework for understanding and providing action towards desired conclusions. Crucially, in terms of a conservative discourse of Englishness, narrative can operate as a discourse of defensiveness or loss which can therefore be easily identified and located within conservative forms of nationalism informed by specifically historicised or radicalised understandings and interpretations.

Discourses of nationalism and national identity provide a space for unlimited ideological social significance and imaginary. Theoretical conceptualisations surrounding discourse will be used in conjunction with other approaches to critically engage with Englishness in the contemporary period. Discourse theory is explored here as a tool to unpack contested and challenged political and ideological conceptualisations of identity. Moreover, the contested, debated and challenged nature of discourse and the substantive content in which people identify with it is what makes national identity an area of investigation so vital to evaluate and understand, particularly within the context of a contested conceptualisation of Englishness.

Discourse is the articulation and practice of ideology; therefore, it would be meaningless to focus solely upon ideology alone. Discourse also highlights the constant state of contested meaning; it operates as a system of belief. Indeed, political ideology is expressed through discourse, and this in itself defines contested meanings of nationalism and national identity. Discourse analysis is particularly important when considering concepts of Englishness as discourse informs and leads us in how we interpret and understand national identity but is also a manifestation and expression of identity; in other words, national identity and nationalism are a direct product of discourse around the topic or subject of nation. At the same time, as there can be no complete, unified and entirely suitable national identity, there can be no complete, unified or entirely whole discourse. Likewise, all identities can also be viewed as being relational and dependent to varying extents on systems of difference within which they reside or operate.

Discourse presents (an often simplified) understanding of 'truth', 'fact' and 'reality'. As Foucault observed, 'each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth; that is the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true' (Foucault, 1980:131). Discourse is never just a mere description; discourse is pre-loaded with what we already know about the world in order to give some sort of explanation or understanding. Discourse is also often pre-loaded with certain purposes, aims, objectives, motives, interests and strategies, all of which are almost never consciously apparent, but all of which make the analysis and examination of discourse in this context particularly necessary.

Discourse is constitutive of social relations in that all knowledge, all discussion, all argument takes place within a discursive context; this is of central importance when considering concepts of identity and community within a national context. This also helps explain why discourse theory, and particularly as

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a critical analytical approach, is so specifically valuable within the context and in relation to the topic of Englishness or constructions of dominant narratives of English national identity.

Central to this idea of discourse and discursive articulation is the idea of cultural politics and dominance of the debate and discussion which Stuart Hall et al discuss in terms of hegemony or the practise of theory, translation and audience. Through this particular interpretation, discourse operates as a form of verification. Through repetition and reaffirmation, a particular discursive representation becomes legitimised as a justified 'common sense' means of understanding.

Laclau and Mouffe's analytical approach to the social constructivism of discourse is central here to understanding why an ideological approach to particular topics and attitudes frame understanding, particularly the competition for meaning within the social and different forms of articulation.

A wide selection of content and an ideologically generated discursive output will be critically analysed and examined within this body of work. Locations of discourse such as powerful and influential sections of the media, high profile political and social debate and discussion including social and political commentary will be utilised and examined as specific locations of discourse. However, this will also be accompanied by public opinion and attitudinal reactions and responses from sources such as opinion polls, surveys and interviews alongside analysis and interpretation of public displays of mood and opinion such as voting behaviour in relation to areas pertinent to this research.

The ideologically directed nature and the specific focus on particular ideological characteristics is why the arguments and ideas of political figures and commentators form an important and relevant unit of analysis alongside and as part of a wider discursive field relative to their intended area of focus. As Guy Debord (1998) suggests, once one achieves dominance over the methods of social and political discourse, one achieves a social and political verification for the universal recognition and verification of their views. In a disjunctive field of analysis, political and social commentators express particular ideologically constructed approaches to inclusivity/exclusivity and direct debate and produce a narrative in a contested field of meaning, yet they also reflexively articulate populist mood. This often operates in a symbiotic discursive feedback loop of message meaning and motive. One cannot view discourse through determinist or reductionist means as a simple top-down process; however, it is neither simply as bottom-up and instructive process either. Throughout this body of work, discourse will be discussed and understood as a complex, multidirectional and reflexive means to understand debate, discussion and the construction of contested conceptualisations of Englishness within the contemporary era which deeply inform understandings and interpretations of self, others and community.

Contribution to Field of Knowledge

The crux of this research is not to try to find some definable sense of Englishness or essence of English national identity but instead to uncover and demystify the

dominant defining characteristics of the discursive forces and symbolic positioning that this topic is situated within. To create, maintain and further a dominant sense of Englishness is a social, cultural, political and ideological process underpinned by a normalised and naturalised understanding and interpretation of place, history, community and people. Dominant discursive articulations of identity propose such a symbolic order. This is particularly applicable in the current case of Englishness and its discursive relationship to conservative representations of it as a naturalised and reified symbolic account. This work will develop the argument that within England, conservative ideological representations have almost become unquestioned and naturalised in its relationship and representation of Englishness.

Contained here is a synthesis of previous academic and empirical research and theory that will be applied to contemporary developments concerning identity politics within England. It will be suggested that developments and challenges to the British nation state such as devolution, debates around Europe, ongoing processes of multiculturalism, immigration and a wider context of globalisation have become dominated by a conservative response and narrative and have exposed and problematised conceptual definitions of England, English national identity and a sense of Englishness more than ever before. The culmination of these factors has made the question of Englishness unavoidable, immediate, confusing, contested and overtly ideologically motivated.

Conservative discourses of Englishness can be viewed as being informed by an anxiety of loss, a loss of empire, global position but also an anxiety of a sense of powerlessness in relation to a wider development of globalisation which includes processes of ongoing migration, a perceived blurring of cultural boundaries and economic uncertainty. Englishness has become reimagined within and in relation to a series of contemporary and long running processes and developments. This provides an ideological narrative through an essentialisation of culture, geography, history and a sense of nostalgia within a popular imagination and becomes a reterritorialised identity.

Although this can be viewed as an analysis of contemporary accounts of English nationalism, it is far more complex and nuanced than a simple study of nationalism. It draws from a series of unique and complex social, cultural and political developments particular to the geo-political environment and a very specific response and interpretation to these from a particular ideological standpoint.

A renegotiation of Britain has provided an opportunity for the conservative right to solidify its discursively dominant position within a reimagining of England. The inherent vagueness of Englishness has been left to be defined by reactionary forces on the political right. England or Englishness has largely become positioned as a political and cultural reactionary response to conceptions of Britishness associated with notions of cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism and outwardly directed civic and cultural values of inclusion. In other words, Britishness can be viewed relatively as more receptive to a differentiated population (arguably, this being historically a colonial necessity), whereas Englishness through a conservative dominated discourse has become far more exclusive. The

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paradox being that England is a very multicultural and pluralist society of immense and longstanding diversity.

Within the contemporary era, an Englishness based upon a liberal, modern, outward looking sense of inclusivity has arguably become sidelined, instead a narrative of essentialised dualistic myth, traditionalist conservatism has firmly established itself. Concepts of Englishness are arguably abstract, contextual and unstable entities, often contradictory, ambiguous and are constructed in a conceptual sense through the presence of ideologically constituted discourses. Discourses of identity and a perceived 'common sense' have become fundamentally entwined and dominated by a conservative interpretive position, one that relates to a deeply symbolic manner where meaning is attached to varying ideological reference points. In this regard, a national identity or narrative is discourse. It is a way of constructing meaning which influences and organises both our actions and the way we conceptualise ourselves, others and the community in which we live. This is the fundamental importance of why these social and political constructs must be examined and held to account.

It will be postulated that Englishness has developed into a particular conservative nationalism whose construction has led to an exclusive rather than inclusive identity. This has been reinforced and has positioned itself as the dominant narrative and means to conceptualise Englishness as an ideologically based identity. As Stuart Hall suggested, 'we only know what it means to be "English" because of the way "Englishness" has come to be represented, as a set of meanings' (Hall, 1995). To identify with being English instead of British (as research suggests the majority of English now do) is to imagine oneself metaphorically as there is nothing natural or genetic about this categorisation. It is a cultural, social and political process which becomes part of our essential narratives and natures. What these symbolic meanings are, how and why they are produced and are then able to carry such purpose is the very point of this body of work. This is not a top-down or bottom-up determinist process; it is one where the English as the symbolic community participates.

Theoretically Situated Within Existing Body of Literature

In analytical terms, Englishness can be viewed as an empty signifier rather than an ideologically fixed category. Moreover, as a signifier, it is complex and fluid. It has been associated and expressed through a variety of different ideological and political approaches including socialist, radical and liberal representations. However, within a contemporary context, Englishness has become dominated by a defensive and insular conservatism. This does not necessarily equate to a manifestation at the ballot box; indeed, the political aspect is just one of a multi-level and interdisciplinary element that this work will consider. What is crucial is that as a dominant and normalised meta-narrative, this position incorporates the political as just one of its intersectional characteristics. Discourses surrounding Englishness constitute forms of national identity, yet these are informed by wider discursive processes taking place.