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From mood to movement: English nationalism, the European Union and taking back control

Dr. Jack Black, Academy of Sport and Physical Activity, Faculty of Health and Wellbeing, Sheffield Hallam University, Collegiate Hall, Collegiate Crescent, Sheffield S10 2BP

From mood to movement: English nationalism, the European Union and taking back control

Jack Black, PhD

Academy of Sport and physical Activity, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK

Abstract

This article considers whether the 2016 EU referendum can be perceived as an English nationalist movement. Specifically, attention is given to examining how memories of the former British Empire were nostalgically enveloped in anxieties regarding England's location within the devolved UK state. The comments and work of Enoch Powell and George Orwell are used to help explore the link between nostalgia and anxiety in accounts of English nationalism. Despite their opposing political orientations, when considered together, it is argued that both men provide a unique cross-political perspective on Englishness, empire and nostalgia. By way of exploring these themes in relation to the EU referendum, Aughey's assertion that English nationalism can be perceived as both a 'mood' and 'movement' is used to highlight how a sense of English anxiety regarding its lack of national sovereignty (mood), as well as a desire to reclaim this sovereignty by renegotiating trade relations with the 'Anglo-sphere' (movement), were conjoined in the popular referendum slogan, 'take back control'. In conclusion, it is argued that the contextualization of the referendum can be predicated upon an orientation to empire that steers away from glorifying pro-imperial images of England/Britain, towards a more positive and progressive appropriation of the EU referendum as a statement of national change and belonging.

Keywords

English nationalism/national identity, 2012 EU Referendum, George Orwell, Enoch Powell, nostalgia, British Empire

Introduction

On 23 June 2016, the United Kingdom and Gibraltar held the United Kingdom European Union membership referendum (EU referendum). With 51.89% of the votes opting to 'leave' the European Union (EU), the result reflected clear disparities in the United Kingdom (UK); with Scotland and Northern Ireland voting to remain in the EU and England and Wales voting to leave.[1] After the referendum, the Irish journalist, Fintan O'Toole, suggested that:

> It is a question the English used to ask about their subject peoples: are they ready for self-government? But it is now one that has to be asked about the English themselves. It's not facetious: England seems to be stumbling towards a national independence it has scarcely even discussed, let alone prepared for. It is on the brink of one of history's strangest nationalist revolutions. When you strip away the rhetoric, *Brexit is an English nationalist movement*. (O'Toole 2016 [italics added])

The belief that the referendum could be viewed as 'an English nationalist movement' was one shared by Barry (2016):

> Although NI [Northern Ireland] voted to stay in (as did Scotland), the UK as [a] whole voted to leave, leaving many to comment that this was not the UK but England (and to a lesser extent Wales) voting to leave the EU.

Both O'Toole (2016) and Barry's (2016) assessments are just two of the many accounts which have sought to explain the EU referendum result. Indeed, since the Treaty of Maastricht in 1991, the UK has been committed, in principle, to Europe (Kumar 2003). What became clear from the referendum, however, was that this commitment was not shared across the UK. Consequently, by way of examining this disparity, this article will consider to what extent the EU referendum can be perceived as an English nationalist movement (Barry 2016; O'Toole 2016). Specifically, this will elaborate upon the following.

First, this article will draw upon Aughey's (2010) assertion that English nationalism can be perceived as both a 'mood' and a 'movement'. In particular, it will consider that if one is to understand English nationalism as reflecting a clear and distinct national 'mood' – evident in English anxieties regarding English nationalism – and if there is the potential for Englishness to form part of a broader political 'movement' – as reflected in the EU referendum – then examining the ways in which feelings of anxiety and nostalgia are played out in interrogations of England's national past, and, specifically, England/Britain's imperial past, can help to elucidate upon both the EU referendum and English nationalism.[2]

Second, in contrast to Aughey's (2010) analysis, consideration will then be given to exploring the relationship between English nationalism and its former imperial past (Black 2016a, 2016b; Bryne 2007; Gilroy 2004, 2005; Kumar 2003, 2006; Webster 2005; Wellings 2010). In order to offer an alternative, yet illustrative interpretation of this relationship, attention will be given to the comments and work of two opposing individuals: George

Orwell and Enoch Powell. Whereas both men were politically very different, when considered together, their accounts of English nationalism can offer a unique perspective on the relationship between England and empire and, more importantly, how this relationship has been perceived, post-1945. It is argued that their consideration provides a demonstrative example of how English nationalism and the empire share a number of similarities when examined across opposing political positions.

Third, consideration will be given to examining how post-war discussions on English nationalism have often highlighted a number of cultural anxieties within England (Aughey 2010; Black 2016b; Garner 2010, 2012; Kenny 2014; Skey 2011). While previous research has detailed 'a variety of English anxieties about losing ground, both economically and culturally vis-à-vis other groups' (Garner 2010, 18), it remains clear that these sentiments are frequently embroiled within 'a language of (in)equity' that is 'used to mark the distinctions between England and the devolved nations with Britain' (Skey 2011, 122). In fact, Aughey (2010, 506) contends that 'without major party mobilization of these anxieties and the promotion of an English Parliament, English nationalism is likely to remain a mood not a movement'. The penultimate section will consider how these themes found expression in the popular referendum slogan: 'Take back control'. Following this, the conclusion will discuss how debates on England's past can be reconciled with both an English 'mood' and 'movement'.

From mood to movement

Drawing attention to the '*political and cultural anxieties* found mainly in the arguments of writers and journalists', Aughey (2010, 506 [italics added]) notes that 'Their significance lies

in the *mood* they convey'. Accordingly, at the heart of Aughey's (2010, 506) analysis is the 'political and cultural anxieties' which underlie accounts of English nationalism. Here, Aughey (2010, 507) draws our attention to 'four mutually reinforcing English anxieties which [have] foster[ed] a mood of national uncertainty' in England. For Aughey (2010, 512), these anxieties, while proving culturally salient, remain politically ambiguous, presenting calls for 'independence outside the United Kingdom or greater self-government within it'.[3] Despite such ambiguity, efforts to encourage English nationalism as a distinct political 'movement', can be seen in the aims of the Campaign for an English Parliament (CEP), which has argued for a separate English Parliament or some form of English independence (Aughey 2010). As noted by Aughey (2010, 520), the 'mood is more querulous but … it may not develop into a movement.'.

In view of the EU referendum, there is a pertinent opportunity to examine Aughey's (2010) English anxieties in commentaries on and analyses of the referendum and its result. However, while Aughey (2010, 507) contends that these anxieties 'are as much about English self-understanding as about England's relationship with other parts of the United Kingdom', he fails to contextualize these anxieties in relation to England's former imperial past. In fact, while references to and comments on the empire remain ignored in Aughey's (2010) account, there remains further opportunity to explore how accounts of empire underlie English anxieties regarding the EU – an English 'mood' – and, as evident in the referendum slogan, 'take back control', how such calls could be perceived as an English nationalist 'movement' (Barry 2016; O'Toole 2016).

To this extent, the following sections will consider Aughey's English 'mood' in accordance with work that has considered the impact of England's imperial past by drawing links with contemporary English anxieties regarding English nationalism. Following

Aughey's (2010, 506) reference to 'the arguments of writers and journalist', the former will be considered with regards to two writers on English nationalism/imperialism, the writer, George Orwell, and the politician and author, Enoch Powell. These two will be considered in order to explore how Aughey's (2010) cultural anxieties can be traced to accounts of English/British imperialism. With this 'imperial' direction in mind, consideration will then turn to the EU referendum in order to consider how anxieties regarding England's imperial past formed part of debates on the referendum and to what extent these anxieties, when reflected in the EU referendum, depicted an English nationalist 'movement'.

English nationalism and empire: An imperial nationalism

The argument that English nationalism is a decidedly imperial nationalism, can be traced to England's monopolization of the British Isles, which, under the reign of Edward I (1239-1307), succeeded in establishing an English Empire that incorporated Ireland, Scotland and Wales 'into a centralized polity and society with a relatively homogenous type of "English self"' (Van Krieken 2011, 33 see also Davies [2000]). As a result, the English can be viewed as 'The creators first of an "inner empire" – the United Kingdom of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland – and later of a second "outer empire" – their vast empire overseas' (Kumar 2006, 427). While English nationalism became embroiled with notions of imperial prestige and a history which closely followed its emergence as an imperial and industrial power (Hyam 2010; MacKenzie 1984, 2001, 2010; Ward 2001), like the 'Germans in the Habsburg Empire and Russians in the Russian Empire, the English identified themselves with larger entities and larger causes in which they found their role and purpose.' (Kumar 2003, 36). This can be seen in the work of Sir John Seeley, whose *Expansion of England*, published

in 1883, called upon its Victorian audience to embrace England's imperial destiny (Seeley 2010). What is apparent, however, is that 'Such an identity carried with it suppression of, or better yet indifference to nationalism', resulting in what Kumar (2006, 427) refers to as 'a conspicuous absence in the English case of any sustained tradition of reflection on English nationalism and English national identity'. Instead, for the English, 'they did not have to claim their specificity as a nation, a mark perhaps of a quality which is said to be typically English namely reticence or restraint' (Reviron-Piegay 2009, 2).

Subsequently, while the impact of the British Empire has been widely examined within the literature on both Britain and England (Black 2016a, 2016b; Kumar 2003; 2006; MacKenzie 1984, 2001, 2010; Ward 2001; Webster 2005), the post-imperial decline of the UK continues to occupy a prominent place in analyses of British, and, specifically, English nationalism. Although some have sought to examine how the representation of empire remains a constitutive feature of the UK's post-imperial decline, and as a residual resource for English national prestige (Black 2016a; Gilroy 2004, 2005; Webster 2007), others have argued that references to empire have been grounded in denial and confection rather than acknowledgement (Preston 2014).

Both of these perspectives, however, can be seen in debates on the EU. Here, the EU would serve to dissolve Britain 'from a global sense of Britishness' (Meaney 2003, 124), which for the former Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, had made: 'the British character … quite different from the character of the people on the continent – quite different' (cited in Parekh 1999, 323). As can be noted in Thatcher's remarks, examples of euroscepticism would act 'as the guardian of powerful national myths [… by drawing] on assumptions about British political identity that appeared to further the process of post-imperial decline' (Gifford 2008, 10). In one interview, the former German Chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, stated

that ‘Winston Churchill was a great European but he was quite clear that Britain was not joining because it had the empire. But it’s gone, even though you think it still exists’ (Elliot 2013). This is reflected in the imperial rhetoric of certain politicians who, when commenting upon ‘Brexit’ negotiations, have highlighted the prospect of Britain creating an ‘Empire 2.0’ in trade arrangements (Olusoga 2017).

Therefore, while evidence of a lingering ‘imperial mindset’ can be identified in the remarks of certain UK politicians (El-Enany 2017; Lis 2017); more broadly, such sentiments may point to an underlying sense of English ambivalence, particularly when accounting for, but also when interpreting, their national past. If English nationalism was, for much of England’s history, substituted for pride in empire (Kumar 2003, 2006), then examining English anxieties in accord with the UK’s post-imperial decline, can help to provide one way of exploring the relationship between English nationalism and the 2016 EU referendum.

Consequently, by way of exploring the relationship between English nationalism and its former imperial past, the following section will draw upon the work and comments of two opposing individuals: the British politician, Enoch Powell, and the novelist, George Orwell. While both declared certain interpretations of English nationalism, what is significant is that collaboratively they provide an insight into English perceptions of the British Empire, and, specifically, accounts of England’s past. When considered together, it will be noted that both individuals reflect a particular form of ‘English nostalgia’, and, as a result, can provide a backdrop to interpretations of English nationalism post-1945 and a segway to English perceptions of the EU in 2016. For the latter, this will be considered in relation to Aughey’s (2010) English ‘mood’ and ‘movement’.

Empire and nationalism in the work and comments of George Orwell and Enoch Powell

In his analysis of George Orwell, Colls (2013, 3-4) refers to Orwell's national identity as follows:

> Orwell belonged to a generation who took their Englishness for granted. … Brought up in a distinctly old-colonial family, he believed in Englishness like he believed in the world. It existed. It existed like ships in the Channel, the king in his castle, money in the bank. It existed as a sort of public poetry to be intoned insistently, regularly, nationally, all one's life through, … to remind you of who you were and where you lived. … In other words, being English was not open to question. It could not be avoided, and, whether one was for it or against it, one was never less than conscious of it.

For men of Orwell's generation, Englishness was an identity that 'was supposed to be held in check', it was 'supposed to be implicit, assumed, not easily put into words, indefinable' (Colls 2013, 6). For Orwell, 'Britain' was too abstract an identity to define (Colls 2013). Instead, Orwell's (1982) lack of attention to 'Britain' was reflected in work that sought to define, and, indeed, articulate, a particular sense of Englishness. Accordingly, in *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Orwell aimed to encourage an 'English mission' that would reinvigorate a socialist post-war Britain (Orwell 1982).

While Orwell's (1982) work can be considered in relation to Kumar's (2003) account of the 'missionary nationalism' which underscored Englishness, and which found its ultimate purpose in the British Empire; for Powell, the British Empire was 'unique', but, it was unique 'in a way that few commentators had noted' (Oluosga 2016, 11). Indeed, the historian, David

Olusoga, has argued that Powell's views on empire suggest that while Britain had 'assembled the greatest empire the world have ever known' (Oluosga 2016, 11), the empire had caused no impact upon British society, and for much of this history the British, but, more specifically, the English, had been largely ignorant of it. Instead, according to Powell, 'the deep, inner core of the English character and essential nature of England's national institutions had passed through four centuries of empire-building largely unchanged and unaffected' (Olusoga 2016, 11). Oluosga (2016, 11-12) adds:

> To England, the empire had been a dream from which the nation was only now, in the post-war era, awakening. At this historic juncture, with the colonies breaking away one by one and at a disconcerting rate, England had the opportunity to rediscover her true, inner self … Awoken from the colonial dream and home once again, the English could now commune with their distant ancestors and perhaps even revert to being the people they had been before the ships of Elizabethan and Stuart England had set off to forge the foundations of the first British Empire in the Americas and on the shores of Africa.

Certainly, in accord with Orwell, Powell's life was intricately tied to the British Empire. Whereas Orwell was 'Brought up in a distinctly old-colonial family' (Colls 2013, 3), 'Powell served in India in the late 1940s and retained an abiding affection for the country.' (Kumar 2016, 359). Furthermore, while Kumar (2016, 359) highlights that Powell's 'early political career was marked by a defence of empire', he notes that 'In the face of Commonwealth immigration he [Powell] turned against it and attempted to expunge empire

from the English historical record, claiming that the British Empire was an artificial excrescence grafted onto a native Englishness.'

In contrast, Orwell's work can be considered as a decidedly 'English' attempt to locate the British Empire as part of a wider tradition of English radical patriotism (Baker 2015). In fact, while remaining largely ignorant of nationalism, or, embarrassed by the patriotism that nationalism has incited, attempts amongst the political Left have sought to encourage a more plural, yet, decidedly political, form of English nationalism that seeks to align with an English radical history (Baker 2015; Bragg 2006; Perryman 2009; Thompson 1963). Recently, this tradition has been directed at the effects of globalisation and the expansion of the EU as orchestrated by 'political elites' who, in some form or another, have degraded English nationalism by opening it up to global, and, specifically, European and US homogenisation (Bragg 2006).

However, what seems to be expressed in such accounts of English nationalism, and, as highlighted in the work of Orwell (Hatherley 2016), is a sense of English nostalgia which is intricately tied to English perceptions of national sovereignty and identity. What is often missing, or, perhaps, even ignored in these accounts, is a discussion of how such 'radicalism' was shaped in accordance with the British Empire. Consequently, what is left unconsidered is the relation between England's imperial history and a 'radical' and progressive account of English nationalism.

Therefore, while aware of the obvious political differences between Orwell and Powell, what is significant is that each reveal a particular perception of 'Englishness' that serves to emphasise its 'felt' aspects. For both men, Englishness reflected a 'true, inner self'; indeed, a reality that was tangibly felt by its possessors. According to Orwell (1982, 36 [italics in original]):

> When you come back to England from any foreign country, you have immediately the sensation of breathing a different air. … The beer is bitterer, the coins are heavier, the grass is greener, the advertisements are more blatant. The crowds in the big towns, with their mild knobby faces, their bad teeth and gentle manners, are different from a European crowd. … The clatter of clogs in the Lancashire mill towns, the to-and-fro of the lorries on the Great North Road, the queues outside the Labour Exchanges, the rattle of pin-tables in the Soho pubs, the old maids hiking to Holy Communion through the mists of the autumn morning – all these are not only fragments, but *characteristic* fragments, of the English scene.

What is striking in Orwell's remarks, is that when compared to 'Powell's vision of a return to some pre-colonial England of village churches and Norman architecture' (Olusoga 2016, 14), their accounts present a shared vision of 'England' that is widely nostalgic and deeply confident of a clear and distinguishable English feeling. That is, in their interpretations of English nationalism, we find a noticeably nostalgic depiction of a decidedly English 'mood' (Aughey 2010).

Indeed, while the two men would take opposing views on how this 'mood' would relate to empire, with Powell taking a famously racist form that would maintain a clear detachment from England/Britain's imperial project; similarly, for the ardent anti-imperialist Orwell, this detachment would be reflected in his own ambivalent approach to the British Empire. While remaining critical of imperialism, Orwell (1984, 19) would maintain that the British Empire was 'a great deal better than the younger empires that are going to supplant it'.[4] In accord with his English sentiments, Colls (2013, 188) highlights that, for Orwell, 'the

British Empire is always a knowable corner, a village or a club or a custom'. Here, the empire, and later Commonwealth, would act as a form of Socialist Federation, an indicator, of what Hatherley (2016) refers to as the '"benevolent bureaucracy" narrative' which framed British perceptions of the empire/Commonwealth in post-war Britain.

Subsequently, while the political Right attempts to return to the national traditions of earlier times, equally, the Left is indebted to nostalgic evocations of class action and collective response (Hatherley 2016; Wright 2009). In either case, both Orwell and Powell's interpretations of England – reflected in the effort to dissociate England from empire (Powell) or in benevolently encouraging the Commonwealth's 'family' aspects (Orwell) – collectively reveal 'a distinct nostalgia for empire', which in the case of Powell, existed 'even as he attempts to bury it' (Kumar 2016, 359); and, for Orwell, in an 'anti-imperialism [that] hardly shows any sign of anti-patriotism' (Alam 2006, 58). Consequently, although the following comments from Kumar (2016, 359) are made towards Powell, they serve as an accurate appraisal of both men:

> There is a clear case here of 'the return of the repressed'. Empire continues to haunt the efforts to suppress it. It is hard to imagine a version of Englishness than can completely ignore a 400-year history of global imperialism.

The above sections have sought to examine how the relationship between England and empire forms an important part of English nationalism. What is evident, however, is the way in which this relationship has been perceived. With regard to both Powell and Orwell, it is clear that both men share a particular perspective of Englishness that, while ignorant or ambivalent of its imperial past, served to present a nostalgic depiction of English nationalism.

Indeed, the ghost of empire would provide an underlying factor in both their accounts of Englishness, and, perhaps more tellingly, in post-war interpretations of English nationalism (Kumar 2016). As the following section will discuss, it is a relationship that continues to haunt contemporary anxieties.

Empire, nostalgia, English anxiety and the EU

Scarred by its imperial past, the English are left with the burden of empire, yet are also tied to it as a cultural, historical and national resource. To remove, or, even ignore it, is to risk emptying England (and the rest of the UK) of an important national imaginary. This puts the English in a complicated position, one that is clearly articulated by Mason (2017), who contends that 'It is impossible to become passionate about a nationalism that did not exist when you were at school; whose key symbols have had to be cleansed and re-cleansed of association with xenophobia and racism'. He adds:

> At school, we were taught about the British empire, its crimes and victories. I learned that, at Waterloo, the Gordon Highlanders clung to the stirrups of the Scots Greys as they charged. Nobody told me that image would one day have to become something 'other' to my own national identity. (Mason 2017).

What is important in Mason's (2017) remarks, is how accounts of the British Empire are viewed as 'something "other"' to English national identity. Indeed, the extent to which interpretations of the national past can stand as 'something "other"' (Mason 2017 see also Author in print), are closely tied to Britain's post-imperial decline and its diminished world

role. Echoing Mason (2017), Cowley (2013) highlights how the decline of the British Empire had a defining impact upon his (and his father's) own recollections of England:

> As someone who was born in the 1960s, the son of wartime evacuees from London, I had a sense from an early age that England, or Britain (during my childhood the two nouns seemed to be interchangeable), was oppressed by a lost greatness. As my father grew older, he seemed to become ever more nostalgic for an England that no longer existed – or had never existed, except perhaps as a construct of the imagination.

As can be seen, Cowley's (2013) account of his father's 'imagined' England – indeed, an England that may have never existed – echoes Dunning and Hughes (2012, 145) assertion that the 'degree of comfort, emotional warmth and satisfaction' that can be imparted upon a nation, is often conductive of its location within 'a cold, impersonal, rapidly changing, complex and puzzling social world'. Furthermore, the resultant feelings of 'lost greatness' and the nostalgia 'for *an England*' (Cowley 2013 [italic added]), are resonant of Powell and Orwell's English 'mood' (Aughey 2016).

Certainly, Mason (2017) and Cowley's (2013) accounts contradict Fox's (2017 [italics added]) assertion that 'we tend to *overlook* the baggage we carry from the past, the ideas of who we are and where we belong – which are not artificial constructs but patterns of emotive thinking inherited with each nation's language and culture.'. While both Mason (2017) and Cowely (2013) clearly display a level of 'emotive thinking', Fox (2017) contends that examples of English euroscepticism can be historically linked with England's fraught relationship with Catholicism and its role within the continent, the Reformation and the establishment of the Church of England as well as the First and Second World Wars. Here,

the ‘Failure to recognise the historical roots of Euroscepticism in England is a failure to understand one of the fundamental reasons why so many English voters put their cross in the Brexit box’ (Fox 2017).

Indeed, while historical interpretations do not necessarily have to be understood as some form of perpetual England VS Europe antagonism, it is perhaps more accurate to assert that a failure to recognise or comprehend the historical roots of England’s imperial past is why voters put their cross in the Brexit box. Here, attempts to ‘alig[n] […England’s] imperial past with its post-European future’ (Wellings 2016, 371) can continue to offer an insight into contemporary forms of English nationalism, post-EU. Moreover, while being subsumed within a larger British identification and with English nationalism being tied to a history that emphasized ‘superior force abroad’, in the UK, England continues to occupy ‘a peculiar kind of liberty at home’ (Colls 2012, 102). Evidence of this ‘peculiar kind of liberty’ can be seen in the lack of self-governance which has been afforded to England since devolution in 1997. In such instances, ‘a disconcerted and increasingly disaffected identity toed to an overwhelming English public dissatisfaction with the constitutional and social status quo in post-devolution Britain’ has emerged alongside broader criticisms of the EU (Evans 2014).

Taking the above into consideration, the following sections will examine the commentaries of writers and journalists, as well as academic commentators, in order to explore how discourses pertaining to the post-imperial decline of Britain and English anxieties regarding its national/imperial past coalesced in examples of an English ‘mood’ and ‘movement’ during the EU referendum.[5] Specifically, this will be considered in relation to the popular campaign slogan ‘take back control’; a slogan which served to align an English

'mood' (evident in a particular sense of English anxiety and nostalgia) with a decidedly English 'movement' (the EU referendum) (O'Toole 2016).

The EU Referendum and the English mood: Imperial decline, 'England's place in the world' and national sovereignty

Did the EU referendum reveal a more general trend in England's inability to accept the decline of the British Empire? As noted by Gilroy (2004, 2005), a post-imperial melancholia has been reflected in attempts to recapture the former imperial period and the sense of stability and community that this provided. For Gilroy (2005, 99), 'the multi-layered trauma – economic and cultural as well as political and psychological – involved in accepting the loss of the empire' is evident in the 'geopolitical shift[s]' (*The Guardian* 2017) that have shaped the UK's post-war decline. Echoing this, *The Guardian* (2017) stated that the referendum was 'the country's fourth big geopolitical shift since 1945'. It noted that:

> First we withdrew from empire, beginning with India in 1947. The second was joining what was then the European Economic Community [EEC] in 1973. The third was the ending of the cold war between 1989 and 1991. They changed the world in ways no one could predict and we are still living today with the results. (*The Guardian* 2017).

Here, references to the changes brought about by empire, the EEC/EU and the cold war, evoke a level of global insecurity, which, for England, has found expression in its perceived lack of national, cultural and political autonomy. This is reflected in Leddy-Owen's (2014, 1449) contention that 'the English are in the peculiar position of dominating the UK in many

respects yet experiencing their Englishness as politically and culturally unformed or inhibited'. Garner (2012) has highlighted how such experiences have coalesced in a sense of animosity amongst the English. Garner (2012, 456) found that 'A number of English interviewees express[ed] a form of jealousy about the constituent UK nations' capacity to celebrate their identities, mixed with resentment that there is no official means of identifying oneself as English outside of sport'.

This level of insecurity was echoed in Bragg's (2016) contention that the referendum was the result of a particular English dissatisfaction:

> Our imperial history has left the English with the assumption that we should be respected, that our reputation should go before us, ensuring we eventually come out on top. That's how it was in the days of empire and that's how it's always been in the United Kingdom. In the past decade, however, that expectation has been challenged by expansion and integration in the EU, and by a confident independence movement in Scotland. In response the English have turned inward. Last year this tension was made manifest in the least British election of modern times. Voters disillusioned with the status quo reached out to smaller parties. … Now the referendum has levelled the playing field. For once, the votes of all of the English electorate will actually mean something. Having been ignored by Westminster for so long, is it any surprise that many are angry?

Citing the British historian, Linda Colley, Margulies (2016) supported Bragg's (2016) contention, arguing that English euroscepticism was unsurprisingly reflected in 'the only national grouping in the UK that lacks its own parliament or assembly' (Colley 2014, 135

cited in Margulies 2016), suggesting that English 'anxieties are bound up with the new complexity of British governance after 1998 and with the uncertainty of how England fits' (Aughey 2010, 507).

However, deciding where England 'fits' within the UK, was a theme that found particular relevance in Kenny's (2016) assertion that 'many see the UK leaving the EU as the chance to regain the UK's previous role as an outward-facing global power, unfettered by the binds associated with the EU'. While Kenny (2016) argued that any normative connection between England and an inevitable euroscepticism should be avoided, writing before the referendum, Jones (2013) had sought to align examples of English euroscepticism, English anxiety and England's position within the UK, by noting that 'euroscepticism is merely one manifestation of a wider sense of anxiety among the English about England's place in the world'.

Certainly, while the imperial histories of England, France and Germany point to a number of differences in each nation's post-war relationship with Europe – with Germany and France using European integration as an opportunity to overcome their own imperial/fascists pasts – for England, closer European integration has usually been discussed under a rhetoric of defeat, indeed, a concession to Europe of its sovereignty and a confirmation of its decline from global-power status (Kumar 2006; Marquand 2013). Wellings (2010, 501) notes that it is possible to identify a 'post-imperial melancholia with anti-European sentiment', which, when coupled with a sense of English anxiety, has resulted in a dichotomous perception of Europe that delineates between the positive potential of binding a post-imperial UK to a larger continental bloc and the problems in aligning with a European superpower bent on diminishing English liberalism (Pireddu 2017). As a result:

> On the one hand, England appears as the liberal nation resisting restrictive collective policies imposed by a totalitarian EU regime of faceless Brussels bureaucrats. On the other hand, England seems to resurrect its *imperialistic superiority* against the purported democracy and horizontality of European institutions. (Pireddu 2017, 3 [italics added]).

Here, examples of an 'imperial superiority' were noted by Outhwaite (2016), who argued that 'The UK's sense of itself as distinct from the European continent is largely imaginary and grounded in a reading of history which stresses its maritime character and glosses over its permanent imbrication with the rest of Europe'. In fact, the coming together of maritime supremacy and imperial decline, were evident in Morris's (2016) reference to the former Conservative prime minister, Edward Heath, who, in 1975, remarked that: 'All the talk of sovereignty, … would only make sense if the Royal Navy ruled the waves and gunboats could be dispatched anywhere in the world'.

Indeed, discussions on national sovereignty were often allied with accounts of England/Britain's past. Finn (2016) noted that for the 'leave' campaigners and Conservative politicians, Michael Gove and Borris Johnson:

> Britain is the nation who stood alone in 1940, a great nation, heir to Anglo-Saxon culture and 'first in the world for soft power', owing to Britain's supposed 'invention' of representative democracy. For Johnson, Churchill was a man of 'vast and almost reckless moral courage', the encapsulation of all that is good about Britain, not least British pluck. As Gove puts it, those who believe that the prospect of Brexit is a terrible idea are actually arguing that Britain is 'too small and too weak ... to succeed

> without Jean-Claude Juncker looking after us.' Johnson went further, comparing the European project to Hitler's attempt at territorial domination. Both agree that, as in 1940, Britain can, and should, stand alone.

The notion of a 'Britain' standing alone was echoed by Morris (2016):

> The EU, they argue, is now trying to do through rules and regulations what Napoleon and Hitler tried to do through violence, and must be stopped. Once again, Britain stands alone against a would-be European hegemon. But this is a disastrous misreading of history.

Both Morris (2016) and Finn (2016) reveal how discussions on national sovereignty were closely tied to historical anxieties enveloped in a threatening Europe (Napoleon and Hitler) and in the English propensity to recite the Second World War as a prominent moment when 'Britain' stood alone. Wellings (2010, 489) has argued that it is 'resistance to European integration' which 'has laid the ideological foundations of a contemporary English nationalism by legitimising the defence of parliamentary sovereignty through the invocation of popular sovereignty'. In doing so, the idea that the sovereignty of parliament should be defended 'against the encroaching powers of the European Union … has informed and illuminated nationalism in England … providing the ideological content for the most organised expression of contemporary English nationalism' (Wellings 2010, 489). This was echoed by Ash (2016), who stated that:

> When a British shopkeeper tells me ‘we should be governing ourselves’, he draws on a tradition of parliamentary sovereignty that reaches back to the English revolution of the 17th century, and beyond. That is different from, say, Germany, which from the Holy Roman Empire onwards has been accustomed to multiple layers of authority, all the way up from the medieval city with its own city laws to a multi-state Reich.

Consequently, discussions regarding national sovereignty proved a pertinent issue during the referendum campaign, with attempts to *regain* a sense of national sovereignty being closely related to perceptions of England/Britain’s ‘place in the world’ (Jones 2016; Kenny 2016) and its national/imperial past (Morris 2016; Outhwaite 2016). In fact, while ‘Returning … from Japan’, Shani (2016) noted that she ‘was shocked at the rise of unabashed imperial nostalgia in the UK’. Whereas in Shani’s (2016) analysis, the desire for national sovereignty had a taken a decidedly imperial character, what became clear was how discussions on such sovereignty coalesced with interpretations of Britain’s imperial past and a desire to ‘take back control’:

> The Empire appeared to be striking back and had found an audience with affluent Asians and other post-colonial minorities alienated by perceived favouritism shown to white European migrants. Indeed, a post-colonial argument could be made for the Brexit. Britain’s continued membership of the EU, it could be argued, strengthens its ‘European’ white Christian identity at the expense of its multicultural, post-imperial past. A closer examination of that past, would reveal that the wounds inflicted by centuries of colonial exploitation and racism have not yet healed and are obscured by

successive waves of migrants from eastern Europe. Taking the country back, meant reasserting the primacy of the colonial bond to British identity.

The significance of the desire to 'take the country back' will be returned to shortly. For now, however, attention will be given to examining how references to national sovereignty began to take the shape of an English 'movement'.

The EU Referendum and the English 'movement': Self-governance and the 'Anglo-sphere'

It has been noted that a clear sense of English sovereignty has underscored left-leaning accounts of English/British nationalism, with the deep roots of a radical English politics being reflected in the work of E.P. Thompson (Thompson 1963). More recently, this has been envisaged in the efforts of the song-writer and left-wing activist, Billy Bragg, who has sought to promote a progressive patriotism within England (Bragg 2006). In either instance, Hatherley (2016, 46) highlights how 'The intended effect [… is] to make radicalism a specifically English virtue', one predicated upon the assumption that, 'we can, just by tapping into our own history, find a real people radicalism that resonates with ordinary people'.

However, when perceived as an English movement, such radicalism is often divided between a sovereignty that resides with 'the people' or with *a* 'parliament'. For some, therefore, 'The conclusion … that England needs its own Parliament in order to address a democratic deficit within the devolved United Kingdom and to give the English a sense of themselves sufficiently strong to find their "real" England again' (Aughey 2010, 510) sits contrary to perceptions which argue that such sovereignty should remain with the UK's

Westminster government. To date, the Conservative party is the only UK party to have considered the potential for some form of English self-governance.

Therefore, what became apparent in accounts of the EU referendum, was that when such an English movement was presented, this remained tied to conservative interpretations of the former British Empire. While Macphee (2013) has noted that both 'the devolution/independence projects associated with the SNP in Scotland and Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland' are two projects that have attempted 'to deal with [… Britain's] imperial legacy'; within England, what was promoted was a decidedly 'English-Centric' perspective of British internationalization that mostly focused on relations with a north-eastern Atlantic archipelago. By focusing on the 'Anglo-sphere' – a collection of states who, through the British Empire, share a common history, heritage and language with the UK (Wellings 2016) – such sentiments remained grounded in the assertion 'that Britain does relatively more of its trade and investment outside of the EU' (Dennison and Carl 2016). For Dennison and Carl (2016) this was 'due at least partly to the size and economic development of its former empire, the status of English as the global business language, and its particularly close ties with the United States.'. In other words, 'The English past is absolutely essential to the Anglosphere worldview. In England, this past is crucial for imagining Britain outside the EU.' (Wellings 2016, 368). As a result, 'Advocates of the Anglo-sphere', stated:

> that it is not too late for Britain (and Ireland) to turn their backs on Europe in favour of building a network commonwealth of the English-speaking peoples. … It has an emotional pull for many British people that Europe seems unable to match (Gamble 2012, 477)

Accordingly, while ‘memories of empire’ proved increasingly preferable to an EU that was perceived to be dominated by German and French interests (Finn 2016; Morris 2016; Outhwaite 2016), such examples highlighted how an:

> expansive collective self-identification continues to inform the content of contemporary Englishness when faced with major dilemmas. Defending British sovereignty against European integration – and the consequent search for an alternative political community – sustains the British and imperial element of a politicised English imagination, blurring the boundaries of English nationhood. (Wellings 2016, 370).

While such sentiments echo Orwellian accounts of the British Empire (Hatherley 2016; Orwell 1982), the desire to associate the UK with an ‘alternative political community’ (Wellings 2016, 370) was echoed by prominent ‘leave’ campaigner, Boris Johnson, who, in comments made before the referendum, supported a UK immigration program that promoted Commonwealth over EU migration. According to Johnson, changes to UK immigration provided ‘a vital opportunity to recast our immigration system in just this way. And the first place to start is with the Commonwealth’ (Mason 2014).

What we see in these examples, however, is a continuing conflation of ‘England’ with ‘Britain’ (Wellings 2016). Although efforts to leave the EU were framed as an opportunity to look towards a world outside the EU, such rhetoric was predicated on, or, linked with, Britain’s former imperial past and the assumption that the UK could easily redirect EU trade relations to the Commonwealth and the ‘Anglo-sphere’. This highlights a particular paradox in the UK constitution, one that draws together English anxieties on its lack of devolution,

English nostalgia for a past when such anxieties did not matter, and a politicisation of Englishness torn between the UK and a form of English independence. The following section will examine how this was brought to light in the slogan, 'take back control'.

The EU Referendum and English nationalism: Taking back control

For Fox (2017), 'the slogan of "taking back control" from Europe, so powerful during the campaign, carried an emotional appeal to the English founded on their cultural heritage'. In view of the hostility that is often projected at the EU, Preston (2014, 217) echoes this 'emotional appeal' in the following:

> One answer to this question can be found in the habits of thought of these irreconcilables and this points to matters of political culture, where the preoccupation with 'sovereignty', the concern for 'independence', the antipathy towards 'Brussels' and the invocation of 'the bulldog spirit' all evidence a deep-seated historical amnesia; specifically, a failure to understand that the British Empire and the cultural baggage of that apparatus is long gone and that the polity is deeply enmeshed in wider political and economic networks. A reluctance to confront the implications of that loss feeds the repetitive-compulsive habit of harking back to the supposed intellectual, moral and political resources of that period.

If the hostility that is projected onto the EU can be read as a form of 'historical amnesia', indeed, a form of 'loss', then, for Kenny (2016), the 'take back control' slogan was particularly 'potent because it [spoke] simultaneously to [those] different facets of

Englishness, allowing some to present a high-minded, democratic case and others to craft a highly racialised appeal to fear of "the other"'. In fact, 'A suspicion of the Other and a need to control the definition of that Otherness have been integral elements of the creation and legitimation of British imperialism and colonialism.' (Alam and Husband 2013, 237). Accordingly, whereas, this 'other' would find itself reflected in references to immigration (Carter 2016; Harris 2016); in part, the 'take back control' slogan provided a prism through which UK-EU relations could be projected through English anxieties regarding its imperial decline.

Consequently, while being used against an image of Europe as encroaching on the sovereignty of the UK, the UK's politics and history were ultimately devalued, and, in the case of England, was notably paradoxical (Samuel 2012). As seen in Shani's (2016) example, national and economic sovereignty were forged in relation to Britain's expanding empire (Richards and Smith 2017), and, as highlighted by Wellings (2016, Wellings and Power 2016), the 'defence of British sovereignty' is often linked with 'The memory of Britain exercising unfettered sovereignty in its imperial heyday' (Wellings 2016, 375). As a result, the notion of 'control', when perceived as a correlate of empire, was itself a desire for stability that ignored the historical struggles embedded in England/Britain's imperial past, in favour of one that presented a depiction of pre-EU Britain as one of continuous stability. In such instances, a particular reading of 'British' history was paradoxically employed to support the argument for a national sovereignty that, under present circumstances, would fail to offer an English political movement a distinct parliament or national assembly to organise such sovereignty (Bragg 2016; Wellings 2010).

Certainly, this is not to undermine the claims from those who sought to use the referendum to take back some form of control from a political elite deemed largely

insensitive to the issues of particular communities. Rather, it highlights how legitimate concerns were outplayed and appropriated by a virile anti-immigrant, right-wing rhetoric that in presenting the need for national sovereignty, consistently refrained from contextualizing the British Empire and its imperial legacies. As a result, the 'take back control' slogan was, for Ramm (2016), 'three words [that] offered everything and promised nothing.'. Instead:

> They appealed to the desire for dignity and autonomy, but allowed voters to project their own grievances and remedies. The slogan appealed to the precariat as powerfully as it did to the aristocracy, because it suggested that order could be (re)established in an age of dizzying instability. (Ramm 2016)

Moreover, in the case of England, the 'take back control' slogan failed to elaborate on where such sovereignty would lie: with Westminster (the UK government) or with an independent English parliament?

Summary and Final Comments

This article has attempted a number of aims. First, it sought to highlight the importance of empire in accounts of English nationalism. Second, this relationship was considered in connection with the comments and work of George Orwell and Enoch Powell, both of whom were noted for their shared nostalgia when defining Englishness amidst a declining British Empire. This was related to how memories of empire were enveloped in anxieties regarding England's global power and its location within the devolved UK state. Third, consideration was given to commentaries and debates on the EU referendum, which identified anxieties

regarding a lack of national sovereignty ("mood") and a desire to regain a sense of national sovereignty, however misguided, by renegotiating trade relations with the 'Anglo-sphere' ("movement"). Finally, this was considered in relation to the EU referendum slogan, 'take back control'; a slogan which reflected the paradoxes surrounding the UK constitution and the dilemmas facing English nationalism. In helping to navigate these aims, Aughey's (2010) distinction between an English 'mood' and 'movement' was used to highlight how the EU referendum provided a pertinent opportunity for English anxieties and feelings of nostalgia (an English mood) to find expression in – what some commentators referred to as – an English nationalist movement (O'Toole 2016).

As is clear from the above discussion, such a 'movement' – while becoming embroiled with the EU referendum and marked by a decidedly English 'mood' of national dissatisfaction, anxiety and nostalgia – remains indebted to a constitutional arrangement that fails to provide the political capacity for the English to express such a 'mood'. Certainly, one could ask whether such a movement matters? Especially when, regardless of Scotland and Northern Ireland's decision to remain in the EU, the vote of both England and Wales meant that, ultimately, the result was 'leave'. However, what we see in the above commentaries, debates and discussions, is that such a decision, when perceived as a 'movement', was closely tied to England/Britain's former imperial past and a preference for the Anglosphere. To this extent, if England's relationship to both empire and its national past remains complicated, what effect will a post-EU future have for both England and the UK and what impact will this have on English nationalism?

In answer to these questions, it is clear that complications surrounding English nationalism and its relationship with its former imperial past remain pertinent to cultural anxieties regarding Englishness. Certainly, this is not presented as an all-encompassing

account of English nationalism, but instead, serves to highlight that such a relationship can prove particularly fruitful in aligning the gap between an English 'mood' and 'movement' and in helping to achieve a progressive form of English patriotism that does not ignore nor promote its ties to Empire.

Accordingly, analyses and commentaries of the referendum highlighted how references to the British Empire were latently tied to concerns regarding the UK's constitutional arrangement, its post-imperial decline and its move towards Europe (Wellings 2010, 2016; Wellings and Power 2016). That is, a latent imperial history continued to limit and frame accounts of English instability, multiplicity and ambivalence. What is important here is that the empire allowed England and the UK to easily imagine itself both 'inside' and 'outside' of Europe. While the history of the British Empire could be mobilised as an argument for Britain's unnecessary relationship with the EU, alternatively, the post-imperial decline of the UK was presented as a precedent example for why closer EU integration was required. For the latter, the British Empire provided 'an interpretive trope which is particularly popular with leftist scholars and critics who often perceive a perpetually regressive and nostalgic Englishness as the product of the trauma associated with imperial loss.' (Kenny 2016, 369 cited in Aughey et al. 2016, 369).

However, while accepting Kenny's views that such interpretations can present a rather negative and undermining account of Englishness, from which the 'escape' from empire seems impossible, this article argues that in the context of the EU referendum, both the British Empire and its significance for English nationalism were, in short, largely used as an 'interpretative trope'. Indeed, this suggests that a far more fundamental incorporation of empire is required in accounts of English nationalism.

That is, while according to Kumar (2003) the empire served to *inhibit* English nationalism, in contrast, Wellings (2016, 369 [italics in origional]) argues that 'the Empire *informed* English nationalism'. Here, 'Englishness merged with Britishness and the idea of the "English-speaking peoples" through the formation of the United Kingdom after 1707 and the operation of the Empire itself, which in turn informed the content of English national narratives' (Wellings 2016, 369). When one considers that 'The problem in any possible switch from "regressive" to "progressive" patriotism is *context*' (Hatherley 2016, 48 [italics added]), then Wellings's (2016, 369) 'informed' approach can be allied with wider attempt to promote a more progressive form of English nationalism by contextualizing English nationalism and the empire in accord with 'the content of English national narratives'. These narratives can *interpretively* draw upon the former British Empire in making sense of the present (Black 2016a, 2016b; Kenny 2014; Wellings 2016; Wright 2009).

This does not mean that the past, and, in particular, certain interpretations of the past, should be simply transferred to the present, guided by the assumption that they can be readily adopted by a population who, on most occasions, have no experience or tangible connection to this past other than simply living in and/or being born into a specific national community.[6] Instead, it is to understand the importance of historical context, so that a process of contextualization can side-step the:

> kind of characterisation [that] almost invariably overlooks the long-standing and enduring traditions of thought and sentiment through which the English have made sense of, and navigated, the peculiarities of their own national position, and the structures of governance and constitution which they inhabit. (Kenny 2016, 369 cited in Aughey et al. 2016, 369).

Such contextualisation can serve to locate England's imperial past as an informative and 'navigated' part of England's national history and identity. This can help bridge the gap between 'mood' and 'movement' by accepting the nostalgia that characterizes English nationalism, not as a conservative attempt to reclaim the past, but, as a form of identification that accepts, and, more importantly, *understands* the changes that such a past represents (Benjamin 1999). Politically mobilsing the past in 'Revived and re-imagined notions of English nationhood', which as Kenny (2014, 243) highlights, 'are being forged from such materials, and informed by the contemporary social and cultural make-up of the country', can 'help [to] nudge England away from delusions of exceptionalism and imperial grandeur … towards a more normal position as an average sized wealthy country on the edge of Europe' (Ramsay 2014).

It is in this vein that the contextualization of the EU referendum can serve as part of a broader 'national redefinition' within the UK which, for the English, can be predicated upon an orientation to empire that steers away from glorifying pro-imperial images of England – from which xenophobia, racism and fear of 'the other' are frequently enacted – towards a more positive, and, indeed, progressive, appropriation of the referendum as a statement of national change and belonging.

Endnotes

[1] This was in contrast with the British Overseas Territory of Gibraltar, where 96% voted to remain in the EU.

[2] Certainly, the aim here is not to suggest that the British Empire was a complete invention of the English. Rather, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all maintained their own complicated relationships with empire (Ward 2001).

[3] Aughey (2010) identifies four English anxieties which are prevalent in accounts of contemporary English nationalism: an 'anxiety of absence', 'anxiety of silence', 'anxiety of anticipation'; and, 'anxiety of imitation'.

[4] This quote is taken from Orwell's essay 'Shooting an Elephant', published in 1936, but cited here from Orwell's (1984) collected essays.

[5] Articles were obtained from the following sources: *New Statesman*, *openDemocracy*, *The Guardian*, *Discover Society*, *Harvard Business Review* and *LSE's* '*British Politics and Policy*' and '*Brexit*' Blogs. These various sources provided a number of appraisals regarding the referendum and its result.

[6] Hatherley (2016) applies this critique to recent attempts by 'the left' to evoke memories of 1945 and the emergence of the Welfare State.

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