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# Careful what you wish for: thinking through the neoliberal nation

Graham MacPhee

*West Chester University of Pennsylvania*, [gmacphee@wcupa.edu](mailto:gmacphee@wcupa.edu)

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## Careful what you wish for: thinking through the neoliberal nation

[Graham MacPhee](#) [1] 7 May 2013

*The destructive power of neoliberal globalization has prompted renewed interest in nationalism on the left. But the legacies of empire and the political nature of the neoliberal project itself suggest that enthusiasm for English nationalism needs to be tempered with a sober analysis of its unintended political consequences.*



Despite its devastating effects, the global economic crisis nonetheless offers some urgent political and intellectual lessons. The absolutism of recent accounts of globalization—which confidently pronounced nation-states to be redundant along with the modes of political agency associated with them—now seems not only willfully blind, but recklessly passive and reactive in the face of neoliberalism’s agenda-setting activism. As the imposition of austerity regimes has made very clear, nation-states are used by elites as key drivers of neoliberal globalization, often in concert with (rather than in opposition to) transnational structures and institutions. But this also means that nation-states may constitute a terrain upon which the increasingly autonomous nexus of state and corporate power can be challenged, and some measure of democratic agency reclaimed.

This shifting political understanding underlies renewed attention on the left to nationalism in the United Kingdom. However, I want to inject a note of caution into this discussion. For although critical responses to neoliberalism have quite properly identified the activist role of the neoliberal state in capitalizing on catastrophe, we need also to register the role of impulses to national sovereignty, community, and autonomy in enabling neoliberalism’s extraordinary success. That is, I would argue that as well as identifying the role of the state in driving neoliberal globalization, we also need to attend to what I have elsewhere called the [‘neoliberal nation.’](#) [5]

Jamie Mackay’s [opening salvo](#) [6] in the ‘Rebirth of the Nation?’ series does a valuable service in reminding us of the vital conceptual distinction between ‘state’ and ‘nation.’ In everyday conversation ‘nation’ and ‘state’ can often function interchangeably, as for example when we talk of international relations but mean interstate relations. However, this habit elides the uneasy and composite nature of the nation-state, and erases the complex differences between polities. Not only have there been different state models historically (city states, imperial states, monarchical states, and in theory at least, ‘political states’), but the contemporary national-state is neither uniform nor the only existing model: we might think of the bi-national state proposed for Israel/Palestine (often called the ‘one-state solution’), and perhaps more challengingly the quasi-national, transcontinental states of the US, Russia, India, and China.

The fundamental insight available once we remember the distinction between state and nation is that modern nation-states (if that’s what they are) are in fact different configurations of ‘state’ and ‘society’; it’s just that, as Hannah Arendt observed in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, we have come to understand and give meaning to ‘society’ through the language of the nation. This is not to say that nations aren’t ‘real’ in the sense of having powerful effects in our lives and in the structuring of our world, nor that they are without enormous emotional, cultural, and motivational appeal. It is rather to say that the nation can never capture or include the myriad and mutating social differences that criss-cross (and often extend beyond) particular societies—as class conflict, gender differences, regional variation, sectional interests, or sub- or trans-national identities. Such social differences may momentarily coalesce around the nation, especially for example in times of war or revolution. Indeed, this is one of the ways in which social dynamics can reorganize and recalibrate the relationship between state and society where the political dispensation has come to exclude important social constituencies and impulses.

However, the nation may also play a political role by absolutizing the atomization of modern societies. That is, it can function to depoliticize the multiplicity of social interests by rendering them as private differences between individuals, who are said to be unrelated to one another except as members of the nation. In this case, the nation redraws the state/society configuration so as to insulate the state from the expression of social conflicts, thereby depoliticizing them. Once the state loses its role as an arena for

negotiating social differences it becomes available for direction by other imperatives, whether economic, ideological, bureaucratic, elite-based, or some combination of the above.

This is precisely what is going on in neoliberalism, and it explains its notoriously schizophrenic attitude to the state and the public good. When it comes to economic justice or democratic accountability, the state is presented as a life-draining bureaucratic monster to be fought at every opportunity; but when it comes to the military, punitive, and security functions of the state, it is cast as the last bastion of civilization and freedom which brooks no qualification or oversight.

Jamie Mackay's opening contribution to this series invokes the distinction between state and nation in order to place the discussion of nationalism in the UK within a more expansive historical and geographical frame. This is a welcome move because it reminds us that the political dispensation of the British Isles (or north-eastern Atlantic archipelago) is in many ways a living legacy of Britain's imperial history. However, I would question significant points in his account of this history and of its meaning for us today.

[In Mackay's rendering](#) [6] British identity emerged as a 'national' cover for an imperial state whose primary purpose and function was the imperial project. In its contemporary guise, British national identity simply reprises this role, acting to justify a neoliberal state formation while denying 'the autonomous expression of collective identity' embodied in the 'alternative nationalisms' of England, Scotland, and Wales. Far from being a throwback to the past as its critics are said to claim, English nationalism promises an escape from Britain's imperial legacy.

In my view, this account rests upon a number of unspoken assumptions that simplify imperial history in ways which may prove politically debilitating. The first unspoken assumption is that Englishness emerges *after*—or at least towards the end of—the imperial period. In fact, as scholars like Ian Baucom have shown, Englishness was *always* a (sometimes more and sometimes less visible) component of imperial Britishness. The power of imperial Britishness lay precisely in its claim to rise above 'particular' nationalisms (and so provide a home for them under its overarching banner), while at the same time giving its supposedly inclusive framework a decidedly English character. [As I have argued elsewhere](#) [7], what this meant was that Britishness could sustain an appeal to universal political ideals (legality, freedom, justice) while inflecting these ideals in terms of the habits, values, and interests of a particular social coalition, an intra- and cross-class alliance centered on South-East England but with varying levels of penetration across the British Isles. While Britishness is much more English than it is prepared to admit, Englishness is much more imperial than it likes to remember.

The second unspoken assumption here is that in order to pursue the imperial project, the British state insulated itself from social demands and acted simply at the behest of transnational capital. In fact, the resilience of the British political dispensation has in large part rested on its concern to involve a variety of social constituencies in state policy and its ability to moderate or qualify the imperatives of transnational capital (albeit by offsetting costs on others). In the late imperial period, this propensity was realized most visibly in the construction of the welfare state.

This political dispensation is precisely the target of neoliberal elites today, who have been happy to exploit the language of British national identity in justifying its dismantling. But there is no reason why the language of English nationalism should not serve the same purpose; indeed, the nature of its historical involvement in empire suggests it might be better suited to the task. By providing a particular character or local flavor to what were ostensibly universal claims to justice and civilization, Englishness developed a flexibility towards legality and principle that insists on the letter of the law for others while casting its own singularity as mysteriously exempt. This inheritance is apparent in the (barely-concealed) English nationalism of Conservative Eurosceptics, who berate the financial ill-discipline of Eurozone states while exempting the City of London from even the most minimal financial regulation. But in being able to present itself as a 'suppressed' nation, Englishness also has the capacity to act as a conduit for the powerful resentments generated in an atomized society, where state structures are used to pulverize social bonds and the infrastructure of public provision is converted into an ATM for transnational corporations. Without a redrawing of the state/society configuration, the form of 'community' and 'sovereignty' promised by English nationalism—with its inbuilt hostility to the British political dispensation *tout court*—will only deepen resentment at the state and the vestiges of public provision, legality, and accountability it continues to maintain.

In my view, the lessons of Britain's imperial history do not work straightforwardly either to support a 'new' English nationalism, or to encourage allegiance to the current composite UK national-state form. What immediate lessons there are come from two other attempts to deal with this imperial legacy, namely the devolution/independence projects associated with the SNP in Scotland and Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland. In both cases, albeit in different ways and as yet to very limited degrees, national projects are most politically productive when they move beyond rearranging the constitutional deck chairs to involve a renegotiation of the state/society configuration. That is, where incipient constitutional reorganization drives and is driven by an expansion of the state's openness to the plurality of social claims and the consequent restriction of the imperatives of transnational capital (outcomes that necessarily involve commitments to global legality and the pooling of sovereignty, although not in their current neoliberal form).

Whether these projects prove successful, still less come to provide models for the restructuring of the UK political dispensation as a whole, of course remains to be seen. But one clear lesson can be drawn from British imperial history, namely the error of equalizing the components of its legacy by casting them as equivalent 'alternative nationalisms.' Englishness played a very different role not only in the imperial period but also in the period of decolonization and the transition to US global hegemony than did national claims in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales (which is not to say these were not bound up in the imperial project in various ways).

This is not to cast every possible version of Englishness as necessarily xenophobic or reactionary; but rather to be more sober in anticipating the unintended consequences latent in the language of English nationalism in light of the current depoliticization of the state/society configuration. Resentment at the historical suppression of Irish, Scottish, and Welsh national identities under the overarching banner of Britishness is tempered by the recognition that the UK dispensation involved both the hegemony of a particular national identity (namely Englishness), and the state-based negotiation of social demands. Without this compensatory awareness of the depoliticizing potential of nationalism and the state's capacity to adjudicate social differences, Englishness may be far more amenable to neoliberalism than its proponents might wish.



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