

Modern British: The Disunited Kingdom?

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Abstract

This paper will detail a preliminary exploration of aspects of the culture(s) of the United Kingdom, and attempt to relate them to the forces, centrifugal and centripetal, acting on political union within the nation. It will use the media to identify aspects of British culture(s), both in terms of media discourse related to British culture(s), and by examining how the media enacts aspects of British culture. This will be achieved with two key foci: the term “immigration”, and the popular TV series *Doctor Who*.

Introduction

“The UK is dead,” declared a panellist at the Interaction conference in Glasgow in 2005.⁽¹⁾ This news will no doubt come as a surprise to people around the world, not the least many of the inhabitants of the British Isles. Even if the statement itself is hyperbolic, it is important to examine what circumstances might lead someone to make it at a conference with a theme of “The Matter of Britain”.

Such a simple statement actually enfolds a multitude of meanings. To begin with broad categories, the sense in which the UK is dead could be economic, political or cultural. However, even such distinct categories are by no means clear. Much that is political is actually an expression of economy and culture in power terms, and much of culture is the fruit of political and economic activity. This interaction between the economic, political and cultural identities of a people/peoples is present all over the world, but it becomes more accessible and easy to analyse where there are fractures.

This paper will attempt to use such fractures to trace some of the meanings of the term “British culture”, and to offer hints as to how these meanings may continue to transform in the future.

Terminology can throw up difficulties here, so some clarification is required to reduce confusion. Firstly, “UK” is an abbreviation of “The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland”, the name of a sovereign state comprising the larger part of the British Isles. The state has four parts: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The first three are regarded as “countries”; Scotland and Wales have their own governing bodies, which have a certain amount of political power independent of that of the United Kingdom as a

whole, but they are not independent states. Northern Ireland is not considered a “country” on its own, as it is only a part of Ireland (the geographical island). The remainder of Ireland is occupied by the Republic of Ireland, an independent nation-state (which was, however, a part of the United Kingdom until 1921). “The United Kingdom” is thus an essentially political term.

Secondly “British” is a term which is rather ambiguous in political terms and which is, therefore, better understood in cultural or geographical senses. It denotes the island of Great Britain, its people and their culture(s).

Problematically, Northern Ireland appears to be excluded from this definition of “British”. Although many Irish people would consider the practice anathema, “British” can be extended to denote the whole UK. This can be justified on the grounds that Ireland is a part of the British Isles. In this paper, for convenience “British” will be used to refer to the culture and peoples of the UK. This does not mean the writer is unaware of the hugely complex array of identity issues involved in the relation between “British” and “Irish”.

Culture

The word “culture” is widely regarded as one of the most complex in the English language (Eagleton, 2000). Thus any investigation of UK culture is fraught with peril from the outset. Here, some of the complexity will be indicated by the use of an optional plural with the word “culture(s)”, modifying the totalizing effects of the uncountable version. This formularization is intended to convey that there are “high” and “low” cultures, regional cultures, traditional cultures, modern cultures, immigrant cultures, metropolitan cultures, rural cultures and yet, nevertheless, we can talk about British “culture” in the belief that it does have a recognizable meaning.

Partly this is because one of the defining characteristics of British culture is its heterogeneity. There are few things in the field more absurd than a die-hard right-wing nationalist asserting that Anglo-Saxon culture has a single, unchanging character. Anglo-Saxon is, of course, a fusion of two different tribal groupings from among the many invaders of the British Isles following the retreat of the Roman occupiers. The unitary-culture apologists are simply masking a racist agenda. In point of fact, there is as long a history of Africans in Britain (as part of the occupying Roman presence) as there is of Anglo-Saxons (Leach, Eckardt, Chenery, Muldner, & Lewis, 2010).

Yet it is clear that there is a widely shared belief in the existence of a shared British culture, and it can be asserted that the existence of the belief itself necessitates the culture. It should be stressed here that this does not mean that every belief about British culture is the same. What subjects identify as the defining traits of British culture will vary drastically, being contingent on the specific backgrounds of the subjects themselves. Some, for example, will consider the game of cricket, and a predilection for tea served with milk, to be defining

characteristics of British culture, while others will not deem them worthy of a mention (note that cricket is rare in the UK outside England). If we imagine, however, that all of the traits considered characteristic of British culture by all those who have an opinion on the matter were plotted on a chart, organized in such a way that “similar” traits were located close to each other, there would be one or more areas of relative “density” of traits: areas where there was a relatively wide congruence of opinion. No individual trait would be perfectly representative of British culture, but it would be possible to say that one trait was more representative than another. This idea is similar to that of a *prototype* used by Burke & Stets (2009) to describe “the set of features that distinguishes ingroup members from outgroup members” (p. 118). The prototype does not deny differentiation between ingroup members. Rather, it represents the way in which a typical group member is “most like ingroup members and simultaneously most different from outgroup members” (p. 118). While Burke and Stets are examining social identities at a relatively small scale, I argue that the same principle can be applied to a culture which is, after all, basically a social identity on a very large scale. Burke and Stets’s analysis adds the notion that a culture is identified not only in terms of internal resemblance, but in its difference to the excluded other. Bhabha (1993) argues that “the ‘locality’ of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in any relation to itself, nor must it be seen as simply ‘other’ in relation to what is outside or beyond it. The boundary is Janus-faced and the problem of outside/inside must itself be a process of hybridity.” (p. 4)

Cultural borders are therefore unclear, but that doesn’t prevent us from identifying “hot spots” well within the borders, so long as it is understood that these are not absolutely defining properties; everything is partial.

While it is not possible to conduct the survey of all such subjects alluded to above (nor to plot their answers on a chart, which would surely have to be non-Euclidean), there are ways in which an approach can be made to identify some of these hot spots, areas of congruence, prototypes. Maybe the most obvious would be to examine the themes that have dominated media discourse on the nature of British culture(s) and British identity. In this respect, we quickly discover “immigration” to be a current “hot spot”. This discourse explicitly identifies who can be recognised as British, and who can’t; it also often defines British culture(s) against others, especially European and Islamic cultures.

A second way also employs the media, but rather than examining what the media has to say about Britain and its culture(s), it looks at how the media *enacts* British culture(s). This paper will feature a highly specific example of this approach, making the case that the television series *Doctor Who* is emblematic of British culture(s).

An interesting approach is that followed by Wierzbicka (2006), whose analysis of language enables the spotlight to be thrown on certain areas of importance to the cultures that formed the language. In English, for example, the word “reason” and its cognates contain some highly culture-specific loading which, Wierzbicka argues, derives primarily from the development of thought in England after the Enlightenment. In the present circumstances,

this offers a salutary caveat when examining the media, and its discourse about, or enactment of, British culture(s). But Wierzbicka shows us more than this: the English language itself is constitutive of a large proportion of the culture(s) of the British Isles, certainly if those cultures are viewed diachronically rather than synchronically. English may be the “world language”, but it nevertheless carries embedded within it much that can be identified as British culture.

Before looking at what the media can reveal of British culture(s), some comments are in order regarding the nature of the supposed break-up of the United Kingdom.

Fracture

I have dealt with the public debate on the future of the Union and the meaning of Britishness in an earlier paper (Mason, 2005). To summarise my conclusions at that time, one of the essential points about the “British” identity is its constructed, recent nature. Although politically speaking, the countries comprising the UK have been joined for several hundred years, the concept of a single “British” entity is very recent. Indeed, some argue that it essentially came into being as a result of the creation of the British Broadcasting Corporation, and the two World Wars, and was a part of the Imperial project (Crick, 1991). “[T]he Second World War was the culminating moment in the history of a multinational state which ever since the eighteenth century had drawn the English, the Scots and the Welsh into an ever closer union—and the Irish into rebellion.” (Addison, 2005) Thus the whole concept of Britain as a nation with a long history is largely illusory; and yet despite the widespread anxiety about the national identities and cultures at play within the UK (for example Crick (1991), Dalyell (1977), Davies (2000), Hague (1999), Haseler (1996), Heffer (1999), Hitchens (1999), Marr (2000), Nairn (1977), Paxman (1998) and Redwood (1999)), the multinational state still holds together, showing few signs of splitting into its component nations.

It is true that the Scottish Parliament was reconvened, and a Welsh Assembly set up. It is also true that these have led to differences in policy between different parts of the UK (though it should be noted that Scotland has always had significant legal and policy differences to England and Wales). That is not in itself, however, any reason to suppose that the UK is disintegrating. After all, there are significant differences in policy and governance between US states, but few would seriously suggest that the US is in danger of coming apart at the seams.

In my previous paper, I suggested that most of the arguments put forward to support an increased tendency towards devolution are skewed by partisan misinterpretation. I gave the example of a 1997 poll into Scottish identity, in which the results were interpreted as suggesting that “63% indicated that they felt that they were Scottish or more Scottish than British” (Trueman)—in other words that the Union was weak—as being statistical misdirection. The results of the poll actually revealed that “70% of respondents considered

themselves British, and more remarkably, 35% considered their Britishness at least as important as their Scottishness.” (Mason, 2005)

Thus I suggested that the political union is stronger than it might appear: that the very strain adduced by some to show its weakness, in fact is testimony to its strength. This is true notwithstanding the recent Scottish National Party victories which may lead to a referendum on Scottish independence. On the cultural side, the whole notion of a national culture is itself very recent, dating back to the 18th century German thinker Johann Gottfried Herder, and his concept of *bildung* (Eldridge). Such national cultures are inevitably projected back into the past, but this is part of the act of constituting the myth, and this does not mean that they should be judged as long-lived, unchanging institutions rather than the provisional constructions they actually are. British culture is an ever-changing, multi-faceted phenomenon: hence British “culture(s)”.

Media Discourse

If in 2011 we look to media discourse for an idea of what British identity (and thus British culture(s)) is understood to mean, we frequently find the word “immigration”, and its associated terms (especially “asylum seeker”, which is often given a negative connotation by attaching the word “bogus”). One reason for this is that “what writers often call ‘our history’ [is] the story of an ethnically homogeneous nation” (Webster, 2005). That is to say, the dominant narrative of British identity has been one which focuses exclusively on a single ethnic group. More than this, as the analysis mentioned earlier suggests, British identity, as an Imperial project, was conceived of almost entirely in terms of the (Oxbridge) elite which was responsible for its formal expression: the BBC and politicians. For the first half-century of BBC broadcasting, the epitome of a “British” accent was received pronunciation—also called “BBC English”, an accent alien to the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of the British Isles (Trudgill (1974) argued that only 3% of the population spoke with received pronunciation; 37 years later the figure has certainly not increased).

If received pronunciation was a marker of Britishness which failed to mark the majority of Britons, we can see that other markers would assume a compensatory importance. Such was the case with the marker of ethnicity, especially where such ethnicity was visible (black and Asian immigrants) rather than the less obvious differences associated with white immigrants (Eastern Europeans, for example). In the latter case, the English language itself often becomes a marker, but as discussion on British newspaper forums makes clear, some “immigrants” have a command of English (written at least) superior to that of many “natives”. We can see here that one issue has been concealed behind another. What appears to be a discussion about changes in population deriving from an influx from overseas is in fact often a discussion about the extent to which people of different races can get along with each other.

Even before this hidden agenda is considered, immigration is a highly complex topic. The number of residents of the UK born abroad has steadily increased. The proportion of the population of London speaking languages other than English has increased. But this is largely a corollary of the free borders of the European Union. Moreover, the “cheap labour” that is the target of the anti-immigration lobby’s ire is essential for many UK industries, such as fruit-picking, which would be unable to employ British workers at such low pay conditions. In 2009, more EU nationals left Britain than entered, demonstrating the cyclical nature of the effect (Home Office, 2009). A common component of media discourse on immigration is widespread anxiety about asylum seekers: the idea that the country is being flooded with illegal entrants. In fact, applications for asylum have dropped drastically since 2000 (80,315 applications in 2000, 24,485 in 2009). Asylum granted dropped by a similar proportion.

The racial nature of the concern over immigration is demonstrated by a glance at the history of the UK. Despite the popular narrative of a single Island Race, the reality is that of successive waves of invasions (peaceful as well as warlike), continually altering the racial and ethnic character of the islands. From the original inhabitants, about whom little is known, through the Celts (generally called “Ancient Britons”) and their conquerors the Romans, one might say the “basic stock” of the British is derived. And yet the name given to the “ethnically English” is “Anglo-Saxon”, an amalgam of two groups of invaders who took over the country following the withdrawal of the Roman legions. Even when the Saxon kingdom of Wessex was rising to prominence, large swaths of Britain were ruled by a Danish king, and other Scandinavians had settlements. The mixture didn’t cease with the last major invasion of the country, that of the Normans in 1066, for there has been continual population movement over the centuries. In the last century, the World Wars led to such movements, often invited, whether that of displaced persons from Eastern Europe, or the British citizens of the Commonwealth, epitomised by those who arrived on the *Empire Windrush* in 1948 (Webster, 2005). As Webster points out, however, among all these arrivals it was the latter—a ship full of black British citizens from Commonwealth countries in the West Indies—which led to the most government concern over immigration, indeed, which led directly to successive laws from the 60s on, which tackled the “problem” of immigration by effectively stripping Commonwealth citizens of their British citizenship.

The issue refuses to go away. In April 2011, the Prime Minister of the UK, David Cameron, made a speech in which he argued that “significant numbers of new people arriving in neighbourhoods ... [have] ... created a kind of discomfort and disjointedness in some neighbourhoods” (Cameron, 2011). This followed on from a speech in Nuremberg, Germany, in which he attacked the idea of multiculturalism, thus effectively asserting that there should be a unitary “British” culture. Yet the same politicians who court right-wing public sentiment simultaneously support the businesses which want immigration as a source of low-wage labour.

“Immigration” has here been used to represent a crucial part of the media representation

of British identity, primarily because it entails such a lot of discussion of exactly what British identity and culture is. There are obviously many other topics which could be used to gain further insight into the markers of British identity, which cannot be followed up here for reasons of space.

The Media Enactment of Culture

There are often contradictions between what people say and what they do. As noted above, the present British government is using the immigration issue to attempt to win votes, even though in practice it is supportive of British business's use of foreign low-wage workers. This is an interesting reversal of the situation after the Second World War, when British politicians publicly described Britain as a fair, tolerant place, ready to welcome suitable immigrants; while at the same time, in private, they were enacting discriminatory policies designed to curb immigration and deprive British citizens of their rights of abode (Webster, 2005).

Thus the media narrative about British culture(s), while perhaps a good representation of British identity in the sense of self-image, doesn't capture all the aspects we need to provide a rounded picture. So we can turn instead to less explicit representations of British culture(s) by examining the content of the mass media, specifically television.

The first point which should be made here is the proportion of the media which is UK-sourced. 75% of the content shown on terrestrial-broadcast television is UK-produced (Arthurs, 2010). This is a relatively high proportion, but it does reveal that a quarter comes from abroad, primarily America. Here we encounter a key feature of culture in an age of communication: a local culture is both defined against, and partly constituted by, external cultures. The American shows that appear on British television perform a dual role. On the one hand they present British viewers with an *other*, an outgroup which may be used to clarify what British culture *isn't*. On the other hand, they constitute a part of modern British culture in their own right. An example of this would be the experience of the author, watching programmes such as *Star Trek* and *Alias Smith and Jones*, in the late 1960s and early 1970s. On the one hand, these programmes were clearly not set in the UK, nor did they draw on what was considered to be British culture; in the case of *Star Trek* it was a future society clearly modelled on liberal American idealism, while *Alias Smith and Jones* was set in the mythical Old West. On the other hand, for the author as well as his contemporaries, these programmes were a part of our childhood, a part of our lived experience: unquestionably a part of our culture. As Bhabha indicated, cultural boundaries are Janus-faced and ambiguous.

A certain proportion of British television output is exported, and this might be expected to provide an interesting demonstration of what British culture is perceived to be in other countries. However, "The idea that TV exports might function as a showcase for Britishness and British life is contradicted by the realities of the marketplace where Britishness is not a

major selling point.” (Steemers, 2004) It appears that overtly “British culture” is not attractive to other countries at present. In the past, period dramas were considered a strong point, as well as comedy, but this is no longer so. Nevertheless this absence may yield clues about British culture. The formats that sell at present are primarily game shows, “reality” shows, and lifestyle shows: formats considered to be unrelated to British culture. And yet, like the culture embedded in the English language that Wierzbicka identified, it may be that this is illusory. One of Britain’s most successful exports is *Top Gear*, a programme ostensibly about cars, but which is surely better identified as a conduit for the cultural ideas of its producers and presenters, most famously Jeremy Clarkson. Perhaps the period dramas such as the BBC’s lavish *Bleak House* are too clearly marked as British, a characteristic which is not in fashion at the moment; remove the overt marking and something equally “British” can be popular, drawing on a culture of irreverent humour.

One window into contemporary British culture(s) is provided by the programme *Doctor Who*. Despite an expansion in the number of channels on which television is broadcast, “[h]igh budget peak-time programmes on the BBC still get made, such as the popular ‘family’ sci-fi drama *Dr Who* [sic]” (Arthurs, 2010). The current viewing figures for *Doctor Who* are as high as at any time in the series’ history, save for two episodes in the mid-1970s, and this is despite the proliferation of channels and competing forms of entertainment. [Doctor Who ratings 1963–2009].

Why is *Doctor Who* emblematic of British culture? Firstly, it has a connection with the past. For many modern British people, *Doctor Who* is a part of culture because it has always been there. No one under 49 years of age can remember a time when *Doctor Who* did not exist. Although they may remember a 14-year period when it was off television screens (save for a single, abortive television movie), the fact that the programme returned so successfully in 2005—and as a “continuation” of the original show, rather than a “reboot”—is testimony to the fact that it did not disappear from British peoples’ consciousness. Indeed, it has been described as “something of an institution within British cultural life” (Tulloch & Alvarado, 1983).

Secondly, “[i]ts concepts and metaphors have invaded our language” (Sweet, 2006). An entire lexicon deriving from the programme is in wide use in Britain. It is unlikely there are more than a handful of people in the UK unfamiliar with the word “Dalek”, even if they have never seen *Doctor Who* on television. The police call box, the outward shape of the TARDIS, the time and space machine used by the Doctor (the programme’s alien protagonist), is now recognised by more British people as a TARDIS than it is as a former feature of British streets, and this was recognised by the decision in 1996, opposed by the police, to recognise the image of a police box as a trademark of the BBC (Bradshaw, 2008). The familiarity of the word is also such that TARDIS, although an acronym, is now commonly written Tardis, having made the same leap to “word” status as “laser” and “scuba”.⁽²⁾

Thirdly, *Doctor Who* is recognised both within the UK and outside it as being distinctively

British. In the sole episode of *Doctor Who* made outside the UK with international finance, the 1996 television movie, a character says of the Doctor that he is British. “Yes, I suppose I am,” replies the Doctor. When the programme returned to British screens in 2005 with Mancunian Christopher Eccleston in the title role, one exchange involved the ridicule of his claim to be an alien, on the grounds that he spoke with a northern (British) accent. “Lots of planets have a north,” he replies (Davies, 2005).

Doctor Who is put together in such a way as to provide a view of British culture(s) from both the outside and inside, as it were. “From its earliest incarnation, *Doctor Who* has reflected upon issues central to British social, cultural, and political life. Exile and wanderer, a traveller passing through, the Doctor is positioned textually as social commentator and catalyst” (Garner, Beattie, & McCormack, 2010).

Doctor Who has increasingly been the subject of academic investigation (see, for example, Hills, 2010) and the rich resource of material available in such a long-running programme means that changes can offer us as much insight as recurring features. Thus the character of the Doctor himself, through the series’s convenient notion of “regeneration” (the Doctor, being alien, is capable of regenerating his body—turning into a different actor—when he suffers apparently fatal injury), has explored a number of different forms of hero, from the elderly dispenser of wisdom of the original Doctor, to the man of action—almost James Bond figure—of the third, all the way to the eccentric demigod of the present, eleventh, incarnation. These changes, in part, track the way that the idea of “The Hero” has changed since the sixties, when Britain was still in the shadow of the Second World War. Remarkably, however, certain characteristics of the Doctor are clear: he believes in science rather than superstition, civilisation rather than barbarism, and intelligence rather than violence. In this respect, he is a hero that offers a marked contrast to the prototypical American hero; the Doctor famously eschews firearms: in the show’s history he has only used them on a bare half-dozen occasions.

Despite being an alien, it is clear that the Doctor himself not only espouses quintessential British values of tolerance, reason and justice; he considers them universal. He comes from a race of beings so powerful that their technology has conquered time and space; he tries to spread civilised values to the universe. In these traits some critics have seen a hangover of the arrogance of the British Imperial Project (Green, 2010). And yet the same critic points out that the Doctor is a fractured hero. He is never simply one thing. Like the UK itself, he is multi-faceted and multi-valued.

Synthesis

Two angles of approach have yielded two ways of looking at and expressing British culture(s). Combining the two yields interesting results, revealing the instability and contradiction at the heart of culture. Even though Britain was formed by successive waves of

invaders, the narrative of British identity is based on a single “Island Race”, denying the essentially multicultural nature of the society. As Britain’s influence on the world stage declines, a pride and sense of self that was formed by the Imperial project is threatened. The reaction is that of most cultures under threat: to blame the outsider. In this case, the role of “outsider” is conveniently played by the immigrant: the alien before one’s eyes. This process has continued over the last sixty years in various forms. Though there is much anxiety about immigration and multiculturalism now, it should be remembered that the sixties and seventies saw widespread social unrest, and racially-motivated violence.

Over much of this period *Doctor Who* has offered a vision of what Britain thinks about itself. For the first 6 years of the programme, the race of the Doctor was unclear: he was simply alien. When his background was revealed, it turned out that he was from an ancient race of extremely powerful beings who were able to travel in time and space, yet whose civilisation was in decline: they had effectively withdrawn from the universe. The Doctor had rejected this and become a renegade: though essentially pacifistic, he believed in intervention.

The Doctor, therefore, offers an idea of what Britain can be, as well as what it is. At the same time as he is the alien before one’s eyes, he is also the epitome of British self-image: rational, reasonable, decent, yet passionate and committed. In the programme he can, in a single episode, both be identified as an outsider, and act as a representative, a spokesman for the humans (in this case meaning Britain). In the same way it could be said that he mirrors the people of Britain themselves, simultaneously the descendants of immigrants, as well as natives.

Conclusion

If British culture is understood in terms of a unitary, privileged white identity deriving from the public schools of the early 20th century then the speaker at the Interaction conference was quite right to declare that “The UK is dead”. But such a definition would be as absurd as the equivalent political definition, in which the UK has to be a single political entity, unchanged from the form established when the southern part of Ireland gained its independence in 1921. To declare that the UK is “dead” simply because it has changed—something which it has done continually since James VI of Scotland became King of England in 1603—is meaningless.

If anything, the divisions within Britain, both political and cultural, serve to draw attention to the remarkable cohesion and continuity that remains. The idea of a unitary Britain, both in political and cultural terms, has always been a myth; what is surprising is how potent a myth it is, and how successfully it has managed to sustain itself in the face of the evidence. In short, it appears that the myth of British unity persists because a sufficiently large number of people want it to persist. British culture(s) offer the people of the British Isles

a form of identity that they are reluctant to lose.

Notes

- (1) Ian McDonald at “Fractured: Is British Politics too Broken to Stay Together” at Interaction, the 63rd World Science Fiction Convention, Glasgow, 6th August 2005.
- (2) Respectively, “light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation”, and “self-contained underwater breathing apparatus”.

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