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Radical nostalgia, progressive patriotism and Labour's 'English problem'

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ABSTRACT

'Progressive patriots' have long argued that Englishness can form the basis of a transformative political project, whether based on an historic tradition of resistance to state power or an open and cosmopolitan identity. However, this article suggests that the politics of Englishness present a number of specific dilemmas for Labour. First the historical narrative of a radical tradition in British history is not straightforwardly English and cannot easily be used to support a competitive politics of nationhood, in the way that disaffected English identifiers might desire. Second, the deliberately alternative nature of this 'radical nostalgic' narrative makes it an unlikely basis for a unifying national story. It is also at odds with Labour's status as a successful party of government, committed to using the power of the British state, rather than opposing it. Finally, while 'everyday Englishness' may well align with core Labour values and be less socially conservative, intolerant or racially exclusive than it is often described, its very nature as an everyday practice, rather than a political identity makes it difficult for Labour to co-opt.

KEYWORDS

Labour Party, Radical nostalgia, Englishness, Patriotism, Labour movement history

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The idea that Labour has an 'English problem' has become a staple of political conversation. The immediate context for this debate was the rise of Scottish nationalism and collapse of Labour in Scotland. However, it also tapped into longer-standing concerns about the populist right and their challenge to Labour's connection with the white working class, particularly in the south of England. These concerns were articulated most clearly by Blue Labour in the wake of Labour's 2010 defeat, and have since been heightened by the election of Jeremy Corbyn to the Labour leadership, though his own position on the politics of Englishness is as yet unclear. So far, his professions of patriotism have been limited to Britain and 'British values' (Corbyn, 2015).

As Michael Kenny has suggested, much of this discourse has been based on the assumption that English nationalism has been a feature of an increasingly marginalised and resentful white working class, 'so that the injuries of class were being aired in the argot of disaffected nationhood' (Kenny, 2014: 109). However, he also shows that in fact the emergence of a grievance-fuelled form of English nationalism has come from the 'squeezed middle' rather than the poorest sections of society. Moreover, it is not the only form of popular English national identity. Kenny identifies three different strands: anti-establishment populist nationalism, everyday conservatism and liberal multiculturalism. As he suggests, this nebulous mix offers significant opportunities for any liberal and progressive thinkers who are prepared to engage with both political discontent with the constitutional settlement and with emerging cultural expressions of Englishness.

Amidst these possibilities however, I would like to suggest that the politics of Englishness presents a number of problems for Labour. First, the historical narrative of a radical tradition in British history is not straightforwardly English and cannot easily be used to support a competitive politics of nationhood, in the way that disaffected English identifiers might desire. Second, the deliberately alternative nature of this history, while useful in commending it to core supporters on the left, makes it an unlikely basis for a unifying national story. When Labour has succeeded in capturing and reshaping the national mood, as in 1945, 1964, 1997, this has been

based on a self-consciously 'modern' engagement with the British state, rather than expressions of radical nostalgia. Third, while 'everyday Englishness' may well align with core Labour values and be less socially conservative, intolerant or racially exclusive than it is often described, its very nature as an everyday practice, rather than a political identity makes it difficult for Labour to co-opt.

Encompassing all these problems, Labour has to think about how to reconcile the need to respond to an instinctive and emotional patriotism, with the imperative to turn this into a transformative political project. This is particularly difficult because the emergent English nationalism is based on a deep disaffection with the political establishment. Labour must therefore reach out beyond its own traditions and accept that it has often been part of the problem that must now be addressed.

Radical nostalgia and progressive patriotism

Patriotism in general and Englishness in particular have long been thought to be intrinsically problematic for the left. The first because it runs against socialist commitments to internationalism; the second because Englishness is assumed to be both a particularly conservative form of national identity, based upon an imagined mono-cultural past, and (somewhat contradictorily) because it is deeply implicated in the British imperial project. Despite Krishan Kumar's suggestion that Englishness is a more expansive identity than usually imagined (Kumar 2010; 2003) and evidence that younger Black and mixed-race voters are beginning to identify as English (Kenny, 2014), this perception is deeply engrained.

In his 2006 book *The Progressive Patriot*, Billy Bragg described the process by which he 'came to regard the icons of patriotism as symbols of oppression, imperial domination and exploitation' and explained that embracing Englishness remained 'something which, for many lefties, amounts to thinking the unthinkable' (Bragg, 2006: 2; 6). More recently, a group of Labour MPs have noted that Labour is still 'uncomfortable talking about our English identity' and once more encouraged the party to 'reclaim Englishness' 'as a positive statement of national expression and pride in England – not as negative, divisive and dangerous' (Red Shift, 2015: 3-4). The

pamphlet's title, *Looking for a New England*, was a direct reference to Bragg's 1983 song 'A New England'.

Another reason for the left's discomfort with Englishness is that it is often seen to be primarily a nostalgic form of identity. There is no reason for this to be (or indeed to remain) the case -- as Kenny notes 'a nation which possesses a past that has been so lengthy and prolific is very likely to have a future which is also replete with different cultural and political possibility' (Kenny, 2014: 242). However, this remains its dominant cultural form. The reason John Major found it so easy to co-opt George Orwell's description of England is because it was located primarily in the past. It is possible to be rather more misty-eyed about a country of labour exchanges and pin tables (although neither were explicitly referenced in Major's speech) than one of job centres and fruit machines.

The association of nostalgia with the right is located in the idea that political tendencies are identified, above all, by their attitudes to time: progressive and conservative. The one wants to leave the past behind; the other to live within it. This does a disservice to both political positions. First, because conservatism is better understood as a pragmatic defence of the present than a reactionary retreat from it. And second, because it overlooks the importance of the past to socialists. This manifests itself in various ways, from the remembrance of past struggles, to the defence of established ways of life. It is often described as radical nostalgia; that is, a form of nostalgia which uses the past as a resource for remaking the present, not as a refuge. Radical nostalgics do not want to return to the past, but instead use it to right historical injustices, both by honouring those who would otherwise be forgotten, and by continuing their struggles (Shaw and Chase, 1989; Bonnett, 2010, Glazer, 2005).

There are two distinct projects at work here, though in practice they have often been intertwined. First is the attempt to rehabilitate patriotism (and English patriotism in particular) and show not only that the left has nothing to fear, but that it is at its best when it embraces patriotism and seeks to remake national identity in

service of an optimistic, transformative, political project (Kenny, 2013). This can be future-oriented, as with the (British) patriotism of Attlee, Wilson and Blair, but it has also often merged with the second project, of radical nostalgia, by emphasising England's radical heritage. This project is concerned both with demonstrating that Conservatives do not have an exclusive claim to the past, and with drawing inspiration from a lineage of past struggles in order to inform the radical politics of today. However, it risks preaching to the converted. Beyond this, lies the need to show sympathy both with less obviously 'alternative' national traditions, and with the quiet customs of daily life.

From Blue Labour to English Labour

These ideas re-emerged within the Labour Party in 2010, as the party sought to come to terms with the end of the New Labour governments. 'Blue Labour' was framed as an attempt to reconstruct 'an English socialism that resists relentless commodification, values the land, believes in family life, takes pride in the country and its traditions: a conservative socialism' (Cruddas, 2011a: 142). It was thus both explicitly nostalgic, and explicitly English. The argument was that in the face of the universalism and statism of Blair's 'Cool Britannia', Labour needed to recover its sense of 'the local, the parochial and the magical as sources of political agency and power' (Cruddas, 2014b). As Jon Cruddas (2014a) put it 'I have always thought that the English are independent minded, sometimes conservative in sentiment, but also radical in outlook [...] But they feel powerless to shape the future of their country'.

The link between radicalism, Englishness and conservatism was key to this line of thinking. Yet, 'One Nation' Labour, which developed partly out of these ideas, was always more ambiguous. Its immediate context was the debate on Scottish independence and so it was framed around the need to embrace the identities of the constituent nations of the UK within an overarching framework of union. As Cruddas, head of Labour's policy review, put it in 2012:

Labour wins when it speaks authentically for Britain. We are defining the essential character of a Labour England, a Labour Scotland and a Labour

Wales. We will establish the identities of our cities: a Labour Manchester, a Labour Bristol, a Labour Birmingham. (Cruddas, 2012).

This patchwork approach soon developed into explicit calls for an English Labour Party, as Andy Mycock and Richard Hayton have detailed (Mycock and Hayton, 2012). Following the 2015 General Election, when the idea of One Nation was reclaimed by the Conservatives (Cameron, 2015), the idea of an English Labour Party was perhaps the most significant remnant of the 2010-15 Policy Review. It certainly played into debates during and after the subsequent leadership election. At the end of June 2015 Cruddas announced that such a party was to be formed imminently, a claim that was swiftly denied by the Labour leadership (Anon, 2015). The debate around English Labour has two different aspects - the politics of English patriotism and the politics of radical nostalgia. Blue Labour was based on a sometimes unstable conflation of the two: on the one hand asking Labour to embrace pre-existing lived attachments to nation and community; on the other insisting that this nostalgia was partisan, rooted in the struggles of the labour movement.

Jeremy Corbyn's position here is interesting. On the one hand he is squarely located within the radical nostalgic tradition. In the past year alone, he has spoken at the Durham Miners' Gala, the Tolpuddle Martyrs' Festival, and contributed to a collection of essays for Keir Hardie's centenary. He has been associated with Labour Heritage (Labour Heritage, 2006) and the organisers of Levellers' Day celebrated his election to Labour leader as one of their own (@Levellers_Day, 2015). Yet Corbyn is also an internationalist, with cosmopolitan instincts. It is here that the projects of progressive patriotism and radical nostalgia come apart. Under Corbyn's leadership, the 'English question' has fallen even further down Labour's list of priorities, though various figures associated with the One Nation project are attempting to keep it alive. The most noteworthy initiative in this area is the Centre for English Identity and Politics, which John Denham has established at the University of Winchester.

The English radical tradition

The articulation of a distinct lineage of English radicalism, running through the

Peasants' Revolt, the Levellers and the Diggers, the Luddites, Tolpuddle Martyrs, and Chartists, can be traced back to the Communist Party Historians' Group in the 1930s. This was an attempt to create an indigenous history of communism, as a counterpoint to Stanley Baldwin's evocations of an imagined English identity and in resistance to Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascism. It was explicitly rooted in a sense of radical English nostalgia, whereby Communism was imagined to be 'revealing itself as a legitimate heir of generations of great English fighters for freedom and progress' (Bramley, 1936: 134).

Yet, this explicit emphasis on Englishness was more ambiguous than it seems. Many of the publications associated with the Popular Front, including A.L. Morton's *A People's History of England* (1938) and Jack Lindsay's poem 'not english?' (sic) (1936) were really more about Britishness than Englishness. Although Lindsay, for example, was writing in order to restore 'England, our England / England, our own' to those 'disinherited' of their birthright, he addressed this to the Rhondda miners, and the workers of Glasgow and the Clyde, alongside their counterparts in Birmingham, London and the Durham coalfield. Similarly, the 1936 Communist Party March of English History was framed as an attempt 'to secure and safeguard English liberties and democratic rights which give us the possibility [...] of making England in real truth OUR ENGLAND, the England of the people' (Communist Party of Great Britain, 1936: 12). But not only were Scottish, Irish and Welsh events and heroes included in its pantheon, but the culmination of the entire story was 'the election of Willie Gallacher as M.P. for West Fife' (ibid: 10). This could perhaps be dismissed as an unthinking use of British history as a proxy for Englishness., as was common in this period. But it also illustrates the extent to which socialist history was necessarily cross-national.

In the introduction to his 1963 *The Making of the English Working Class*, E. P. Thompson apologised to Scottish, Welsh and Irish readers, noting that he had 'neglected these histories, not out of chauvinism, but out of respect' and adding that 'It is possible, at least until the 1820s, to regard the English and Scottish experiences as distinct, since trade union and political links were impermanent and immature'

(Thompson, 1964, 13). As Thompson hints here, any history which ran beyond this point would find itself inextricably tied up with the Newport Rising, Taff Vale and Red Clydeside. By the mid-late twentieth-century, it is impossible to separate the strands, as the iconic moments of labour movement politics – the 1945 Labour Government, miners' strikes and poll tax protests -- were all Scottish and Welsh as much as they were English.

Labour and the politics of memory

We can see this in action within Labour's own political culture. The 1962 Festival of Labour is a good example. This was staged as the party was preparing to fight Macmillan's Conservatives, and was deliberately designed to portray "'Labour in the 60's" [sic] – a forward looking movement' (Labour Party, 1962a). There was an interesting tension here between the inward-facing nostalgia of activists and the self-conscious modernity of Festival's intentions (see Robinson, 2012: 40-41). Yet the local and national politics of this Festival were also deeply revealing.

The London Labour Party organised much of the Festival and attempted to frame it as an expression of *London's* contribution to Labour history. Its brochure told a familiar story, beginning with the Peasants' Revolt, leading through the Putney Debates, London Corresponding Society, London Dock Strike and Match Girls' Strike and ending with the foundation of the Labour Representation Committee in Holborn. The municipal patriotism of this was acknowledged with the plea: 'Please pardon our pride. There's no arrogance about it', and softened with 'a warm welcome from Cockney comrades' (London Labour Party, 1962). However, the official programme shows a much broader sense of national identity, including the Welsh Miners' Choir, Welsh dancing, the Morlais Glee Singers from Merthyr Tydfil (singing with the Creswell Colliery Band, from Derbyshire), and Scottish folk singers Jimmie Macgregor¹ and Robin Hall (Labour Party, 1962b).

¹ Misspelt as 'Jimmy' in the programme

As this suggests, Labour's collective memory, and the basis of its radical nostalgia, has always been British rather than specifically English; this is why it has found it so difficult to abandon its commitment to Scotland and Wales. It is based on emotional connection as much as electoral calculation – even though Labour has clearly lost its claim to represent this cultural memory in recent years.

Yet, this shared culture should not preclude a specifically English form of radical nostalgia, as it has not in Scotland or Wales. In Scotland, a great deal of the energy of the trade union and labour movement has been rechanneled into the politics of nationalism. The memory of industrial decline under Thatcher has been fused with a much longer collective narrative of radical politics and national grievance, going back to the highland Clearances of the eighteenth century. A narrative of resistance to English rule has linked memories of the Stuart monarchy and deindustrialisation in the 1980s, with a programme for independence in the present (Perchard, 2013). There is no comparable story of political Englishness, with an appeal that can cut across ideological, regional and class divides, or which points to a clear political future. Other scholars have emphasised the extent to which both Scottish and Welsh nationalism are based on a left-leaning consensus against Thatcherism, which transcended class by drawing on nationhood (see Finlay, 2001). This has not happened in England. While the memory of the miners' strike, for instance, has fed into the story of Scottish (and to a lesser extent Welsh) nationalism, in England, it is associated with regional and class identities, but not with nationhood.

Perhaps, though, this is to look at the problem from the wrong direction. Ben Wellings has suggested that 'if we expect English nationalists to behave like Scottish nationalists then we will find little in England that resembles our idea of nationalism' (Wellings, 2012: 5). In his words, 'English nationalism does not always go by the name of England. It is a nationalism that defines itself in close relation to Britain's political institutions, which it equates with the continued existence of England's national character' (ibid: 41-42).

Nationhood and the State

At first glance, this would seem to suggest that the Britishness of English radicalism is an advantage rather than otherwise. It is in line with dominant understandings of Englishness as expressed through the institutions of the British state. However, the relationship between radical English nostalgia and British statehood is complicated. As Simon Lee has shown, even Gordon Brown's 'British way' was premised on a lineage of specifically English history. As he points out, there is a paradox here: by reinforcing the Englishness of the British state, such narratives negate the possibilities of a radical English identity (Lee, 2006). We might add that by reinforcing the achievements of Labour-in-government, this celebratory narrative also negates the possibility of a radical critique of the state and its forms. Just as radical Englishness has been co-opted into a British national story, so the successes of the labour movement have been absorbed into a rather Whiggish story of national progress.

This is the significance of 1945 as the 'wrong turn' in the thinking of Blue Labour. This was supposedly the point at which the Labour Party stopped thinking of itself as a movement and instead began to act as a national party of government – it marked the transition from a sectional mass party to a 'catch-all' party, which attempted to speak for and to the entire nation. This is not so much a question of policies but of attitudes. For Glasman, creating the welfare state was not the mistake; starting to talk about it as 'a right fulfilled' rather than 'an achievement won through sustained organisation and political action' was (2011: 29). H. M. Drucker made the same point in his *Doctrine and Ethos in the Labour Party*, noting that the NHS had been allowed to slip into *national* memory and thus ceased to be 'the exclusive political property of the Labour Party' (Drucker, 1979: 37).

Critics on the left have long identified a tension between Labour's radical traditions and its aim to be a national party of government. In 2011 Cruddas made a controversial speech hailing George Lansbury as Labour's greatest leader and arguing that his removal in 1935 was the beginning of Labour's wrong turn, marking the 'victory of the pragmatists and political operators over the prophets of Labour' (Cruddas, 2011b). He later recanted this view – arguing instead that Attlee's

government was itself a continuation of Labour's 'politics of virtue, romance and passion', in line with its tradition of 'idealism, William Morris and the ILP' (Cruddas, 2011c). However, Sunder Katwala has suggested that this is a contradictory position: Cruddas' emphasis on romanticism over rationalism is incompatible with his celebration of Labour as a party of government (Katwala, 2012). This argument has been revived around the idea that 'Corbynmania' represented a romantic attachment to oppositional politics at the expense of a credible politics of government.

Symbolic politics

Radical nostalgia is necessarily sectional. It is rooted in the need to tell an alternative story of national history. As Billy Bragg's 'Between the wars' (1985) put it: 'Theirs is a land of Hope and Glory / Mine is the green field and the factory floor.' Such distinctions are made necessary by the success of Conservatives in claiming the territory of patriotism: as Quintin Hogg famously put it, 'Toryism is only a special kind of way of being British' (Hogg, 1957: 9). Even in 2004, Michael Howard was able to suggest that 'Conservatives are deeply aware of the extent to which their history is also the history of their country' (in Seldon and Snowden, 2004: vii). Labour movement history was founded, in part, on the need to disrupt and dispute such assertions.

The kind of events that we might associate most clearly with expressions of radical Englishness – such as Levellers' Day or the Tolpuddle Martyrs' Festival – focus less on creating a cohesive national identity than on disrupting dominant conservative notions of England and Englishness. The political resonance of Levellers' Day, for instance, comes from the incongruous procession of communist, anarchist and socialist banners through a picturesque village in Conservative-dominated Oxfordshire – within David Cameron's constituency, no less. It invokes a deliberately alternative narrative of Englishness, which sustains a lineage of activists on the left – including Jeremy Corbyn, who has named John Lilburne as the historical figure he most admires (Vallance, 2015) – but is not intended to resonate with wider senses of nationhood. It is certainly not concerned with articulating an English nationalist

irritation with the constitutional settlement.

Since becoming Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn has been forced to reach beyond this constituency and make a claim to represent the nation as a whole, despite his well-known antipathy to the symbolic politics of the British state, most notably its monarchy. In his 2015 speech to the Labour Party Conference, Corbyn argued that kindness, care and a concern with justice are 'Labour values and the country's values' (Corbyn, 2015). In 2012 Ed Miliband had made a similar attempt to tie together 'the essence of English identity' with the 'great Labour traditions' of struggling against injustice. He made an explicit attempt to shift from the symbolism of the state – 'the grandeur of public office or in Westminster and Whitehall' – to the experiences of 'people com[ing] together to struggle to improve their lives and the lives of others'. His list here was expansive – stretching from suffrage and gay rights campaigners, to the organisers of Sunday League football matches and street parties for the Queen's jubilee (Miliband, 2012a).

These accounts are attempts to re-define national identity. They reassure Labour supporters that it is possible to 'embrace a positive, outward looking version of English identity' and to reclaim patriotism from 'the kind of nationalism that left us ill at ease' (Miliband, 2012b). Yet they are more convincing as a way of reconciling the left to English patriotism, than of winning English patriots to the left. Not only is there nothing in Miliband's list that could not equally be applied to the other nations of the UK, but the kind of everyday conservative Englishness described by Kenny (2014) is defined by the very fact that it is felt rather than thought; it is therefore not easy to co-opt into a political project.

The final item in Miliband's list, the jubilee street parties, is the most telling. It is of course intimately connected with the grandeur of the state, yet is placed here among the lived experience of people improving their communities. Labour as a party of government has never challenged the monarchy, yet it is difficult to reconcile with the traditions that underpin any project of radical nostalgia, as Corbyn's early difficulties with the symbolic politics of crown and military attest. This

is a clear illustration of the tension between accepting received notions of nationhood and seeking to remake them in service of a transformative and progressive political project.

Conclusion

In his 2014 study of *The Politics of English Nationhood*, Kenny suggested that a cultural and political contest for the soul of England is underway. While there are still possibilities for constructing an inclusive form of civic nationalism, within the framework of the Union, the left must engage with this debate, in order to prevent it being captured by 'populist politicians and street-level demagogues' (Kenny, 2014: 236). So far Labour has tried to deal with this problem in rather abstract ways, tending to divert any talk of England into a discussion about regional government. Although local and regional identities are a central component of Englishness, this is not an adequate political response to demands for recognition on the national level. Neither is discussion of governance structures a useful way of replying to a claim made in the emotional register of nationhood.

For all its many faults, Blue Labour's recognition that the politics of identity (and, indeed, politics in general) are primarily emotional was a serious and valuable contribution to British politics. The failure to develop this into a successful political platform demonstrates some of the problems of this approach, particularly for the left. Labour has been understandably wary of fuelling the politics of grievance, or of playing into the more divisive aspects of nationalism. It has also struggled to reconcile the tension between Labour's identity as an established party of government, at ease with the state and its people, and as the representative of a radical tradition, which is necessarily located outside and in opposition to the state.

Under Corbyn, the party has swung clearly towards the latter position. The pragmatic politics of the electoral machine have been replaced by pledges to return the party to its historic mission. As we have seen, Corbyn is located firmly within a nostalgic tradition, which draws heavily upon a narrative of England's radical heritage. He would seem very well placed, then, to construct a romantic narrative of

English nationhood, which could resonate with the anti-establishment side of the new English nationalism. Yet, as I have indicated, the problem is that the emphasis within nostalgic narratives of radical Englishness is on the radical, rather than the English (it is both inescapably British and unashamedly internationalist). It is thus unable to speak to either the competitive politics of nationalism, or received understandings of English nationhood.

'Progressive patriots' have long argued that Englishness can form the basis of a transformative political project, whether based on an historic tradition of resistance to state power or an open and cosmopolitan identity. This is clearly the case. Whether it can do this while also appealing to both discontented nationalists and everyday patriots is a rather more difficult question.

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