



## Exclusiveness and Inclusiveness in the British National Identity

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### **Abstract**

The issue of identity has been a fundamental one in virtually all human societies. The binary questions “who are we?” and “who are not we?” are constitutive of the meaning of any identity formation. Identity is an elusive concept that generates more questions than answers. Multifarious challenges face identity formation and consolidation which makes those two processes hard multidimensional tasks. In Britain, the concept of identity is central given the complex multinational and multicultural character of the nation. In their contact with different nations and peoples (the imperial experience), the British found themselves constantly negotiating their identity. They defined themselves with what they are and with what they are not as well. The British national identity or what is widely known as Britishness, has been a fuzzy and a difficult-to-define concept. It has been defined in different ways by different political sociologists each focusing on a distinctive aspect of the concept according to one’s perspective. It is a legal and political notion for politicians, an important cohesive concept for sociologists and a major source of identity for cultural critics. However, we propose in this article to broach the concept from an historical race-related perspective. We argue that the concept has been a useful index of the changing character of post-war race-related British politics. Historically, British race politics can roughly be divided into two major phases: the Assimilationist phase (starting from 1945 till the end 1970’s) and Multicultural phase (1980 till now). The assimilationist Britishness was based on a racial definition that excluded the different “other” (the alien, the immigrant) whereas the multicultural Britishness has been more tolerant and inclusive of difference. This article attempts to trace the ups and downs of the British national identity (Britishness) within the context of contemporary multicultural British society. This allows us to show how the same concept is capable of excluding and including the same set of ideological assumptions according to changes in the “structure of feeling” of those who believe in it.

**Keywords:** Britishness; Identity; Exclusion; Inclusion; Assimilationism; Multiculturalism

### **Introduction**

Post war Britain witnessed considerable waves of immigrants which seem to have created new socio-cultural problems. Those immigrants came from different cultural contexts which embodied new challenges to the established British cultural community. Different ethnic minorities were in many respects bearers of different cultural, religious and social traditions. Consequently, the changing demography of the nation along with the shifting cultural landscapes ushered into a crisis within national

identity which has always been vulnerable. The British needed to redefine themselves in the light of those changes. New cultural forms and representations seemed to take shape and the self-identification processes were no longer taken for granted. The British political analysts Andrew Gamble and Tony Wright churned out such crisis of identification. They wrote: “The British have long been distinguished by having no clear idea about who they are, where they are, or what they are. Most of them have routinely described England as Britain. Only business people talk about a place called the United Kingdom...it is all a terrible muddle” (2001: 1). A clear care was thus given to the terminology of identification and that of identity. So, Britain was no longer England and the United Kingdom seemed to refer to another politico-cultural entity. New politics of naming and identity came to the fore.

The emergence of ethnic identities presented an influential challenge to the hegemony of national identity (Rex., 1996 and Favell., 2001). Cultural boundaries lost their “sacred” fixedness and cultural negotiations between the new ethnic minorities and mainstream white majority were gathering momentum. Yet, those negotiations were not always that tenable and easy. Post-War Britain has witnessed a number of what was diagnosed as “race riots” that endangered the already perceived British cultural “purity” and unity. The result was a tension between the need for social cohesion and cultural diversity. Adrian Favell neatly expounded such a liberal need when he inquired “How can a political system achieve stability and legitimacy by rebuilding communal bonds of civility and tolerance – a moral social order – across the conflicts and divisions caused by the plurality of values and individual interests?” (Favell., 2001: 2). Within the British context, a national identity, based on common and shared public culture, seems to be the answer. Cultural belonging was measured by the extent ethnic minorities were ready to adapt to the requirements of the established British identity. Though important, by no means were multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity the sole defiance that faced British national identity. Other factors have had their role in putting Britishness into question if not jeopardy. The impact of supra-national entities such as the effects of globalization and Europeanization meant that Britain was no longer secure in its national identity. There was an urgent need to rethink the concept of Britishness as a unifying identity that is able to provide social and cultural glue to the real and perceived socio-cultural fragmentation. Discourses of nationalism and national identity were reconstructed so that to help forging a sense of unity and security. The nation was thus imagined as “a unified cultural community” and it was constructed as “homogenous in its whiteness, yet precarious and perpetually vulnerable to attack from enemies within and without” (Gilroy., 1992: 87). Importantly, the British “imagined community” to use Benedict Anderson’s expression was at the same time exclusive and inclusive: exclusive of the culture of the “THEY” and inclusive of that of the “US”.

### ***The Ambiguity of the Concept***

By ambiguity of the concept we mean that Britishness has been a multidimensional concept whose complexedness was indicative of the difficulty of producing an objective comprehensive definition. The concept seems to have been caught within a plethora of divergent, if not conflicting, array of representations, ideologies, accounts and narratives each of which constructs the concept according to particular socio-cultural and political parameters. Those parameters served well-determined objectives for different agents. Thus, nothing is to be taken for granted when broaching the concept of Britishness. Hence, the concept has become hyper-ambiguous. Multifarious interrelated, overlapped factors of national, continental and global traits affected the meaning and relevance of Britishness considerably. Many cultural critics have diagnosed an increasing crisis in Britishness (Giddens., 1990 and Billing., 1995). The nature and credibility of British national identity have been put into question. The nation-state itself, being the anchor of national identity, has been deemed as insecure. The more recent Brexit movement (2016) can be interpreted as a tangible expression of the fear of the dissolution of the British nation-state within the larger European Union and the subsequent disappearance of Britishness as a distinctive national identity.

As stated above, the emergence of globalization along with the outgrowth of transnational immigration contributed to the diversity of British society. 2001 census shows that about 5% of the general population is of ethnic origin. Such demographic multi-ethnicity was equally reflective of cultural diversity. Hence multiculturalism has become the new rhetoric of governance during 1980's and 1990's. Cultural diversity was given a free reign and there was a move from multiculturalism to Multiculturalism (Malik., 2001)<sup>1</sup>. The rhetoric of multiculturalism as a lived experience set the stage for Multiculturalism as a political ideology. The multicultural ideology has become an important tool in nourishing social and cultural fragmentation with the social fabric of contemporary British society. The cultural politics ushered into identity politics which contributed to highlighting differences more than similarities. The British sociologist Tariq Modood commented that: "By 2004, it was common to read or hear that the cultural separatism and self-segregation of Muslim migrants represented a challenge to Britishness and that a "politically correct" multiculturalism had fostered fragmentation rather than integration" (Modood., 2005).

Different cultural groups seemed mutually exclusive and the atmosphere was ripe to social and political clashes. The race riots of 2001 and the London bombing of 2005 could be read as indicative of the intercultural malaise in Britain. Social cohesion has been diagnosed as the victim of such ethnic fragmentation. A new rhetoric of governance should be adopted if Britain is to continue as one nation. The discourse of Britishness seems to be the solution to such real or perceived lack of cohesion. To the purpose of this paper, Britishness is approached from its ethno-cultural dimension. However, one should not relegate other factors to a subordinate position. For instance, Britishness has been under pressure from other non-ethnic forces such as the impact of Americanization, Europeanization, the forces of globalization and the nationalist demands of devolution. Yet, the ethno-cultural dimension of the concept has been given the priority in media coverage and political discourses and is constructed as the major cause of social fragmentation. There has been a grave crisis of identity and widespread pessimism concerning the future of Britain as a unified nation. The Scottish nationalist Tom Nairn went as far as to declare that Britain lives in the period of "after Britain" (Nairn., 1999).

In general, the concept of Britishness has always been problematic (Ward., 2004). Being an identity, Britishness has not been easily defined. It has undergone continuous metamorphosis and broached from different perspectives. There has been a number of interpretations and conceptualizations of the term. The historian Linda Colley investigated the historical origins of the concept to show that Britishness was closely connected and bound up with Protestantism. Thus, Britishness was forged between 1707 and 1837 in conflict with an external catholic 'other'. That other was catholic France. The Protestant faith, thus, was the major core of what it meant to be British. Importantly, the notion of Britishness was the result of self-delineating versus a different other. The presence of catholic continental powers like Spain and especially France was a catalyst to the crystallization of a distinctive British identity. Excluding the different other was thus a strategy to define the boundaries of national identity. Such exclusion/inclusion stuff has always been the simultaneous processes in creating identity and its sustenance as well. In-group inclusion and out-group exclusion are quite familiar in identity theory. In his Social Identity Theory, Henri Tajfel (1979) argues that social groups need to create and maintain positively perceived social identity. Yet, importantly, such collective identity can be achieved only via a continuous process of comparison to an out-group that is often characterized negatively. Arguably, no "us" can exist without "them".

Coley wrote: "Great Britain was an invention forged above all by war. Time and time again war with France brought Britons into confrontation with an obviously hostile Other and encouraged them to

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<sup>1</sup> Kenan Malik distinguishes between multiculturalism with small (m) and another with a capital (M). The former refers to multiculturalism as a lived experience whereas the latter refers to multiculturalism as a political ideology. Malik accepts the first and sees it as source of cultural diversity and richness but he considers the second as trigger of socio-cultural division and conflict.

define themselves collectively against it. They defined themselves as Protestants struggling for survival against the world's foremost Catholic power. They defined themselves against the French as they imagined them to be, superstitious, militarist, decadent and unfree.... Britishness was superimposed over an array of internal differences in response to contact with the Other, and above all in response to conflict with the Other." (1992:5-6).

Britishness was the outcome of a conflict as well as an ideological and nationalist shield that guaranteed a certain degree of internal cohesion. Such internal cohesion was vital to manage a real or perceived external threat. Moreover, Colley suggested in her book *Britons: Forging the Nation: 1701-1837* that the Scots were responsible for the creation of the notion of Britishness so that they could project themselves in the position of active junior partner within a wider nation-state. Along with Colley's statement, Britishness emerges as the product of first an external threat of religio-ideological war and second as an internal (within British Isles) endeavour to manufacture a collective nationalist identity along with local ones (Scottish, Irish, English and Welsh). What we might deduce from Colley's thesis is that, historically, Britishness was at the same time an exclusive and inclusive concept. It included the Scottish, Irish, English and Welsh under a common nationalist and ideological umbrella. Yet for the same reasons Britishness was exclusive of the 'other' France. It seems from Colley's account that Britishness and Otherness are mutually constitutive but also exclusive (Coley., 1992). The other has no place in Britishness, yet it is indispensable in defining it. The Other for Coley was not static; it was first the Irish, the Scottish, then the French and now the oriental. According to Coley the Scottish, the Welsh, the Irish and the English felt more British when they met an "other" who is not white-skinned, Christian and western. She wrote in her article "Britishness and Otherness: An Argument" (1992) that "Whatever their own individual ethnic back-grounds, Britons could join together vis-a-vis the empire and act out the flattering parts of heroic conqueror, humane judge, and civilizing agent" (p 324). Thus managing the empire seemed to breed a sense of common identity for the Britons and set the stage for racialist definitions of British identity, and also helped to shape the ideas of British racial superiority. The empire becomes the "other" against which the British "I" is constructed and maintained. Coley assumes at the end of her article that no Britishness is possible without being juxtaposed with a real or even imagined "other". She stated "But for historians to reconstruct British development in the past without paying close attention to the effect of the outside world, both as Britons experienced it and as they imagined it, would be a grievous mistake-not just a march out of history, but a retreat into blinkered parochialism" (329). Consequently, Coley's definition of Britishness seems to be a negative one. British identity is defined not by what it is but rather with what is not; not by what it includes but rather with what it excludes.

Other sociologists and historians interpret Britishness as a form of economic and cultural imperialism imposed (internally) on Wales, Scotland and Ireland (Haseler., 1996 and Brown, McCrone and Paterson., 1996). They argue that the essence of Britishness is Englishness and other identities (Irishness, Scottishness and Welshness) were relegated to a subordinate position. If right, Britishness turns out to be an England-centred hegemonic project that strives to perpetuate the dominance of England over other neighbouring identities. Richard Weight and Robert Colls go further and argue that Britishness as concept has declared its bankruptcy and it has been attacked from various and different perspectives. Weight explained how the inhabitants of the United Kingdom have stopped identifying themselves as British and opted for more local and nationalist identities (narrow exclusionary versions of national identities). The people who consider themselves British have decreased from 52% in 1997 to 44% in 2007 (Johnson: 4). The multi-referentiality of Britishness renders it a very elusive concept. The Welsh author John Osmond stressed the ambiguity and elusiveness of Britishness. He suggested the use of the expression "Anglo-British" to capture such complicated complex nature of the concept. Such dual identity (Anglo-Britishness) was to refer simultaneously to English identity and to belonging to political supra-national entity Great Britain. In this dual perspective, Englishness and Britishness seem to complement each other. Yet, this is not always the case. The two identities generated more confusion than clarification. Englishness seemed to dominate Britishness and relegated other British national identities to

a second position. This fact, we believe, created a fragmented and fragmenting Britishness. Kevin Davey commented on such terminological confusion when he wrote:

"Once they were simply 'the English', with the Home Counties as their core, whose overarching identity, Britishness, concealed the hierarchy, the extent and the heterogeneity of England's evolving empire. The Scots, the Welsh and the Irish may have dual identifications, but for the Anglo-British, Britain serves as another name for the ambitious and self-confident England that has existed as a nation since the fourteenth century" (Davey., 1999:6).

Being the end-product of capitalism, imperialism and Protestantism, Britishness declined as they declined. From Weight's perspective, Britishness was enforced on working classes, colonies and non-Protestants. When British economy declined, and the empire came to an end and Protestantism was challenged by secularisation and the growth of non-Christian faiths, Britishness became so fragile and vulnerable.

Colls denied the existence of a collective British identity. He stressed the weaknesses of national identities and their inevitable destruction. For him Britishness does not exist and if it exists it cannot cohere with other identities. He wrote: "it is difficult to think of a national identity-any national identity-that can be pluralist and normative at the same time". (2002: 379). The contradictory and essentialist nature of national identity renders it unable to encapsulate the dynamic and flexible character of identity formation. What emerges from Weight's and Colls' interpretation is that they both share the belief that Britishness is a fussy and ephemeral identity. They stress its exclusionary nationalist and even jingoistic character which is likely to trigger its destruction. Weight and Colls affirm that Britishness is beset with an irreversible crisis. To use Nairn's phrase, Weight and Colls anticipate and set the theoretical stage for an "after Britain". The eminence of multicultural discourse and the onset of the devolution process as well as the integration into European community can be read as symptoms of the decline of Britishness. If Britishness is a set of values that are based exclusively on an England-centred mono-ethno-culture and a nationalist creed, it will go no further as an operative concept. Arthur Aughey seems to share the same idea when he wrote that « If the old idea of Britishness was a narrative of integration, recent challenges to it have encouraged a narrative of dissolution" (2003: 45).

What is evident from the above consideration of the concept of Britishness is that Britishness has been a problematic and controversial issue; an exclusionary as well as an inclusionary concept. It has been viewed from different perspectives which yielded different outcomes. Nevertheless, whether Britishness exists and whether it is weak, it is still an important concept that measures the attitudes and the dominant consciousness in Britain.

### ***The Role WWII in Creating the Myth of Cultural Similarity (Island Race)***

The Second World War played a major role in creating stereotypes and images of unity and cultural homogeneity. The appalling atrocities of the war as well as the widespread war propaganda forged a sense of social cohesion which was a priority of Churchill coalitional government. All capacities and efforts were mobilized in order to create a unified internal front to face the Nazis. All social and cultural divisions were blurred or at least adjourned. The presence of a military Other (Germans) propelled a need for internal unity and national cohesion. Explaining how external danger can incite internal cohesion, the historian Eric Hobsbawm wrote in his *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* that "There is no more effective way of bonding together the dis-parate sections of restless peoples than to unite them against outsiders" (1990: 91).

The economic depression of the 1930's was so severe. It created social division and mass unemployment. Moreover, the Second World War was so devastating that a sense of a national unity and

community was created. Every effort was mobilized to exceed such social divisions and fight the Germans; a myth of homogeneity emerged as an influential source of social cohesion. Paul Ward wrote “It is a myth that foregrounds homogeneity, community, pulling together and standing alone against the might of Nazi-dominated Europe. The divisions of class, region and gender were overcome, it is suggested, and the nation not only survived six years of war, longer than any other belligerent, but emerged triumphant” (2004:123).

The traditional social distance between classes seemed to vanish. The working class came to the fore as central to winning the war. The war propaganda enhanced in them a feeling of jingoism which was mainly based on the need to feel British to fight for Britain. Movies like *Millions Like Us* (1943) and *The Gentle Sex* (1943) depicted the role played by different social classes (males and females) in backing the nation (Ward: 123).

Alistair Bonnett showed how the working class claimed their rightful position in national community and moved from the position of marginality to a paramount role in the myth of national and cultural homogeneity. Prior to the war, the working class was generally constructed as the dark-skinned population of Britain. They were excluded from the benefits and social prerogatives of “whiteness”. Thus whiteness was equated with power and influence which were the monopoly of middle and upper classes. However, as mentioned before, the realities of the war cemented British society. British national identity became more inclusive. And thus, the working class was ‘whitened’ and a new sense of Britishness emerged: Britain as culturally homogenous and socially cohesive and more importantly racially pure. Though many non-whites contributed to the war efforts, they were regarded as aliens and inferior. David Cesarani shows how the war helped to set boundaries between the British and the “non-British”. He wrote:

“The resonances of war in British national identity continue to divide the population along racial lines. Thousands of West Indians and Indians served in the British armed forces in 1939-1945, but this fact hardly registers in public memory of the war... The war is taken to evoke the British at their best, the qualities of Churchill’s ‘island race’... It helps construct a sense of a nation and nationality that excludes the bulk of post-1945 immigrants” (Cesarani., 1996: 69).

The war helped to disseminate images and stereotypes of British difference and superiority. The then conceptions of national identity were ones based on the exclusion of the different “other” and a perpetuation of a myth of national distinctiveness and superiority. Just when immigrants started to enter in considerable numbers, British mainstream population was equipped with an identity that is largely self-centred, exclusionary and cohesively knit. Ward neatly described the situation when he argued that: “The Second World War, therefore, encouraged migration at the same time as it created a new sense of a socially cohesive British identity. When black and Asian migration began to arrive in greater numbers in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, many of the British had already constructed a sense of their identity against which the 'other' would be compared” (Ward., 2004: 124). Thus, Britishness as a cultural project has been largely defined negatively. We mean the concept is often defined with what it is not rather than what it is. The British social scientist Robin Cohen argues that the British and their identity have been continually shaped and reshaped by the contact with a real or virtual other. He wrote that:

As the asylum-seeker, foreigner, stranger or alien is silhouetted and identified, the British are, so to speak, delineating one or other aspect of themselves. Their national identity is thereby being continually defined and redefined. The processes of exclusion and rejection uncover and reveal and become constitutive of the national identity itself (1994: 198).

So the same mechanisms of exclusion are used to include. There seems to be a reciprocal process of influencing and being influenced that takes place simultaneously. This permits us to expose and investigate the various conceptions of Britishness during the post-war era in Britain.

### ***Post-WWII Conceptions of Britishness:***

In this section, we focus on the different conceptions of Britishness after the Second World War. This temporal cut is selected as it best broaches the major problematic of this article. Generally, the race or ethnic thesis has gathered momentum after the arrival of great waves of immigrants immediately after the Second World War. The noticeable presence of new comers along with their different phenotypification (language and culture) and genotypification (physical and biological traits) constituted a clear and present danger to British national identity. Ethnic challenge added to the already established difficulties of Britishness with as international and national pressures. Britain had to cope with its new ethnic minorities and new understandings of national identity were offered.

The contemporary conceptions of Britishness could be roughly divided in two distinctive phases: the assimilationist exclusionary phase which extends from 1945 till 1981, and the multicultural inclusionary one that starts from 1981 till 2001. This binary division is justified by methodological and historical considerations. Divided into distinctive phases, post war British race relations politics could be easily managed and scrutinized. Also, historically speaking, the early 1980's witnessed violent race-related disturbances which managed to make ethnic causes visible and officially recognized (Brixton events in 1981 and subsequent *Scarman Report*<sup>2</sup>).

#### ***a. Assimilationist Britain:***

In post-war Britain, and with the increase of British ethnic minorities, race thesis has become so paramount as an outstanding defiance to British national identity. The new waves of immigrants confused the traditional concepts of Britishness. New languages, religions and ways of life were seen as a breach to the conventional British values and culture. The new immigrants who came in great numbers were treated with a double-faced policy. They were welcomed economically but refused culturally. The post war British governments were in need for cheap labour force but at the same time unready to amend the national character of Britishness. New comers' cultures were seen as a threat to what was conceived as British common culture. Cultural heterogeneity was corrosive of the British cultural homogeneity. Thus, Britishness as a concept was built on racial bases. There was a widespread belief in the generic superiority of British culture and values. What was expected of the new immigrants was to assimilate into mainstream culture and become "British", and thus they would pose no problem to race-based Britishness. To be included in the national community, immigrants had to exclude their past cultural heritage. Similarity was the essence of what it meant to be British. Socio-cultural boundaries were set up to delineate the perceived or real differences between the British host community and the new ethnic minorities. There seemed political, cultural and social tendencies to keep Britishness away of what was perceived as alien cultures and identities. Those attempts allocated certain meanings to the identity of the "US" and to that of the "THEM". Cohen suggested that "The difference may be arbitrary or fictive: it is enough that 'we' have set up the boundaries of 'us', for 'them' to become 'they'. 'They' have a culture or an identity incompatible with ours" (1994: 199). Nothing is objective or primordial in the creation of identity or its maintenance. Yet, those ethnic minorities, with their cultural difference were to be contained by and assimilated into the mainstream British socio-cultural fabric.

Theoretically, there were numerous paradigms that tried to account for the process of integrating and dealing with race relations in Britain (Favell., 2001). One of the most important models was the "Immigration-integration Model" (Richardson and Lambert., 1985) which was based on the pivotal conservative idea that given enough time immigrants would ultimately assimilate within the socio-cultural fabric of the British society.

The model was built upon the following major premises:

1. Britain is a stable mono-cultural society.
2. Immigrants are aliens by virtue of their alien cultures.
3. Such aliens would trigger social unrest and instability.
4. When given time immigrants would submerge into mainstream culture and adopt its values and ways of life.
5. When such assimilation takes place social stability and peace will be restored and Britishness confirmed.

This paradigm clearly shows how cultural sameness and homogeneity were so central to the constructions of post war concept of Britishness. There was no room for difference to be a part of such conceptualizations of what it means to belong to Britain. Difference was excluded from socio-cultural constructions of British national identity. Thus the concept of Britishness was built against the background of new waves of immigrants. Those immigrants who came from diverse cultures and countries were represented and essentialized in monolithic and static stereotypes. They were indifferently constructed as alien and a potential threat to a widely-believed in homogenized and well-defined national identity. The conservative politician Enoch Powell went as far as to represent immigrants and mainly their offspring as “rivers of blood” in his notorious speech with the same title. He warned:

“We must be mad [he said], literally mad, as a nation to be permitting the annual inflow of some 50,000 dependants, who are for the most part the material of the future growth of the immigrant-descended population. It is like watching a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre” (Powell., 1968).

The same nationalist discourse was expressed by Margret Thatcher. The passage of the Nationality Act in 1981 was to be seen as a reinvigoration of British nationalism. The conflicts with the European Commission as well as the events of the Falkland war were excellent occasions of displaying nationalist tendencies and indulging a belief in the common British identity. Being in a state of war, the Thatcher conservative governments were able to capitalize on the uniqueness and imperialist heritage of the former British Empire. Once again the nation had an opportunity to revitalize its imperial history and stress the myth of common and unique origin. David Mason wrote: “A key feature of the conceptions of Britishness deployed on these occasions was an emphasis on the antiquity of British national culture, traditions and institutions. Not only were these portrayed as being under threat but they were also represented as a slowly evolving network of mutually supporting elements that were interfered with only at the nation’s peril” (Mason., 2000: 128). Thus there was a renewed celebration of the exclusionary mono-cultural foundations of national British identity. However, Britishness, though projected a mono-cultural, was not mono-racial; other non-white ethnic minorities were able to belong to mainstream identity provided they embrace its basic cultural claims. During the 1983 General Election campaign a Conservative Party’s poster, depicting a black man, declared “Labour says he’s black, we say he’s British”. Such poster could be read as an attempt to assimilate ethnic minorities into the new myth of national identity. Yet members of ethnic minorities were to feel British more than ethnic to fit into mainstream Britishness. According to Mason, such approach left the non-whites with an intricate choice: to choose between being British or ethnic. He wrote: “They could be British, with all the cultural allegiances that implied, or they could be ‘ethnic’-and therefore potential outsiders who might even threaten to ‘swamp’ the nation with ‘alien cultures’” (2000: 128). Equally, Stuart Hall criticized the imagined unity of Britishness in particular and national identity in general. He argued that:

Instead of thinking of national cultures as unified, we should think of them as a discursive device which represents difference as unity or identity. They are cross-cut by deep internal divisions and differences and ‘unified’ only through the exercise of different forms of cultural power (Hall, 1992b: 297)

Cultural identity is basically a socio-cultural construct. Nothing is primordial or fixed in it. However, the myth of national identity has often been strong in creating national unity. Such unity is the outcome of allegiance to national and cultural symbols and conceptions of what means to be British. The question of allegiance and loyalty to Britain was of paramount importance to the then exclusionary politics of Conservative government. The conservative politician Norman Tebbit suggested a test to immigrant and ethnic minorities’ loyalty to Britain via what came to be called the “cricket test”. When England played versus Pakistan or India in cricket, the true British were to emotionally side with England even if they were of South Asian origins. Justifying his test Tebbit told *Los Angeles Times* that «A large proportion of Britain's Asian population fail to pass the cricket test. Which side do they cheer for? It's an interesting test. Are you still harking back to where you came from or where you are?» (Howe., 2007). What Tebbit’s test tells us of the 1980’s in Conservative Britain is a renewed tendency to construct national identity against a foreign “other” whose identity, culture and loyalty are put constantly into question. Though Britain was no longer an empire, it continued to invoke imperial experiences to construct its particular national identity. Aughey argued “There was a return to the particularism of national identities. Britain stopped to see itself through imperial lens as an exemplary and an exception. Immediate post war British identity was still working with such universal imperial legacy that saw British experience as an exemplary to be imitated by less virtuous and advanced nations” (Aughey., 2003).

The nationalist assimilationist model was basically built on different constructions and visions of otherness and difference. The “Other” is represented negatively and his/her difference is seen as a threat to the purity and originality of the “I” and its cultural integrity. The cultural anthropologist, Mary Louise Pratt showed in 1986 how European travelers’ depiction of the San of South Africa presented them in negative and mainly static images. The San’s difference was codified and fossilized. Their cultural patterns were read as atemporal: outside the logic of time. Their culture is thus outside the rational logics of Europeans. Yet, the European observer changes, develops and is rational in his/her observation. This process of objectification of the “Other” is dehumanizing. Robin Cohen aptly commented that “By suggesting that members of ‘the Other’ are incapable of change, they become unamenable to reason, incapable of change, adaptation or assimilation » (Cohen., 1994: 197). This logic is detrimental to the destiny of ethnic minorities within the new host societies. Accordingly, even the ideology of assimilationism fails to accommodate those minorities since assimilation is not possible to them. This may reflect the unpromising essentialist nature of assimilationist/racist discourses. Those discourses were considerably defied with the emergence of alternative discourses of cultural pluralism and multiculturalism.

### ***b. Multicultural Equalitarian Britain:***

In this section, we consider the shifts that the concept of Britishness witnessed as the result of the advent of multiculturalism and equality rights phase. By multicultural equalitarian Britain, we roughly mean the early 1980’s and mainly 1990’s Britain. However, the 1997 New Labour government, with its equalitarian and anti-exclusion rhetoric could be deemed as a turning point in race related politics in contemporary Britain. New strategies to create a New Britain in which mainstream population as well as ethnic minorities could take a part and be included in the narrative of national community. The Blair Government acknowledged the existence of urban inequalities and disadvantage and prepared a strategy to fight against them. In September 2000, the Prime Minister announced the creation of a new Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (NRU) to work with others to implement the Social Exclusion Unit’s

(SEU) National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (NSNR) Action Plan. The major aim of the plan was to bridge the gap between the most deprived areas and the rest of England in the key fields of employment, education, crime reduction, the physical environment and health. Ethnic minorities would be most benefited since they constituted the bulk population of those deprived zones. Two years earlier (1998), a New Deal for Communities (NDC) had been launched. It constituted an important item of the Neighbourhood Renewal agenda.

The NDC targeted 39 of the most deprived neighbourhoods in Britain and had “a specific focus on race equality as part of its general agenda of promoting social inclusion within the neighbourhood” (Foreign & Commonwealth Office., 2000: 4). In February 2000, the Race Equality Guidance Programme was set up to implement and monitor race equality throughout the life of the NDC programme. In education and employment, the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) commissioned a report, *Business Benefits of Race Equality at Work*, which showed that discrimination by employers was a major cause of the ethnic minorities’ relatively high unemployment. The DfEE established the Race Education and Employment Forum to advise local and national authorities on matters relating to the progress of ethnic minorities in employment; training and education (see Foreign & Commonwealth Office., 2000). Those policies seemed to provide a new atmosphere which made the concept of equality a basic goal of the Government of the day. Socio-economically, there were numerous plans to demote exclusion and promote inclusion. Such official multicultural equalitarian endeavors project a new sense and meaning of what it means to be British: Britishness became more inclusive and less exclusive. There were even new attempts to rethink “the national story” and anticipate the future of Multicultural Britain. The New Labour acknowledged that a new race relations politics should be adopted to promote social egalitarianism. The 1999 Macpherson Report (which investigated the way the metropolitan police handled the murder of a black teenager Stephen Lawrence) detected the existence of institutional racism in Britain. Lord William Macpherson defined institutional racism as “the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes, and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people” (Macpherson., 1999). Just one year after a new the government responded by the passage of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act which sought to strengthen existent legislation to fight against discrimination and promote racial equality.

### **c. *The Parekh Report: Britishness in Perspective (2000)***

Within the same agenda, the Runnymede Trust published a report entitled *The Future of Multicultural Britain* (2000) also known as the *Parekh Report* which, unlike the assimilationist version, constructed Britishness in terms of cultural diversity and ethnic heterogeneity. The Parekh Report is composed of three major parts which make up 21 chapters. The report was the outcome of a longitudinal investigation of the contemporary state of race relations in Britain. A group of eminent and diverse contributors chaired by Professor Bhikhu Parekh stated their views and understandings of the past, present and future realities of race relations and Britishness. The first part entitled “A Vision for Britain” is of vital importance since it tries to rethink the foundations and contours of British identity. The report in general was engaged in revising and “Rethinking the National Story” (14) so as to highlight its inclusive and multi-ethnic character. The report stresses the fact that Britain just like all other nations and communities is an “imagined community”. The concept of imagined community was developed by the Irish political scientist Benedict Anderson in his seminal book *Imagined communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983). Anderson presented a detailed account about the creation of national identity and its maintenance. He believed that what is considered as a national identity is in fact an assemblage of different cultural symbols and rituals tightly connected with certain territorial spaces

and administrative entities the outcome of which is a collectively envired and imagined national identity. Anderson explained the imagined-ness of the community. He stated:

It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the images of their communion.... The nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them encompassing perhaps a billion living beings, as finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations.... It is imagined as *sovereign* because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely ordered, hierarchical dynastic realm.... Finally, it is imagined as a *community* because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately, it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings. (Anderson., 1983: 15-16).

This lengthy quotation stresses the fact the national identity, though limited in space and governed by the context of its production and operation, remains mainly a socio-cultural construction. It is elastic and necessarily changeable. Such “imagined-ness” is set against the essentialist and static conceptions and constructions of national identities. The logic is that if the nation is imagined it can be re-imagined. The identities out of which the community is composed are in a state of flux or to use the report’s phrase “identities in transition” (27). Historically, the report shows that all the historical events and acts, upon which an understanding of traditional Britishness was based, were neither unanimous nor unproblematic. For instance, the Act of settlement (1701) and the Act of Union (1801) were, according to the report, “continually contested” (20). Parekh criticized the unidirectional and race-oriented concept of Britishness. He stressed that conventional and traditional conceptualizations of the notion/nation were systematically constructed to include the mainstream white majority while excluding the other non-white minorities. He wrote: “Britishness, as much as Englishness, has systematic, largely unspoken racial connotations” (38), and he added that for those non-white minorities, whose native countries were once under the British imperial system, “Britishness is a reminder of colonization and empire” (38). However, he argued that compared to Englishness, Britishness is a preferred source of identification for them as Englishness entails whiteness. Ethnic minorities tend to combine Britishness with other identities, thus, creating what can be called hyphenated identities such as British-Indians, British Muslims and so on.

Parekh and his group considered that 21thc Britain was at the crossroads regarding its identity. They declared:

“Britain confronts a historic choice as to its future direction. Will it try to turn the clock back, digging in, defending old values and ancient hierarchies, relying on a narrow English-dominated, backward-looking definition of the nation? Or will it seize the opportunity to create a more flexible, inclusive, cosmopolitan image of itself? Britain is at a turning point. But it has not yet turned the corner. It is time to make the move.” (Parekh., 2000: 15).

For Parekh the concept of Britishness is “less unified, more diverse and pluralistic, than imagined” (36) which means that ethnic minorities with their diverse cultures can take a part and find a place in the imaginings of British national identity. Just as British national identity is dynamic and diverse so is those of ethnic minorities; they make up heterogeneous and multidimensional entities. What Parekh laid down in his report was an attempt to refine and redefine the concept of Britishness to stress it inclusive, pluralist and civic character. This would make the concept more dynamic and inclusive.

Civic values were considered as the basis of this new Britishness. In multicultural Britain, cultural difference was recognized and thus there have been a gradual shift from a mono-cultural Britishness to a multicultural one. The report stressed six tasks that were to be addressed. These tasks were:

- “\* the need to rethink the national story and national identity;
- \* the need to recognise that Britain comprises a range of ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ communities which are internally diverse and which are changing;
- \*the need to strike a balance between the need to treat people equally, the need to respect the differences and the need to maintain shared values and social cohesion;
- \*the need to address and remove all forms of racism;
- \*the need to reduce economic inequalities;
- the need to build a pluralist human rights culture.” (Parekh quoted in Pilkington, 2003: 265-266).

Indeed, the *Parekh Report* was a turning point in the definition of British identity. It was to use Pilkington’s phrase “Radical Hour” in which a new reading of British identity and history was to emerge. According to Parekh multiculturalism had to be acknowledged as an irreversible fact in contemporary Britain. The new multi-ethnic Britain was accordingly envisaged as a “community of communities and a community of citizens” (56). Such new conception seems to strike a balance between different concepts: cohesion, equality and difference. Thus, Britain is a community that shares common values and conceptions of the world, but it is also composed of many communities which stresses its diverse nature. This co-existence of cohesion (unity) and diversity (difference) seems to make the two ends meet: the majority is satisfied by cohesion and the minorities get their diversity recognized. The myth of ethnic essentialism and distinctiveness was debunked for the sake of a new conception of race relations. Andrew Pilkington wrote: “Thinking of Britain as community of communities challenges the conventional view of Britain as a divided into two seemingly homogenous groupings, a White majority and ethnic minorities, and urges us instead to recognise that Britain comprises a number of fluid, overlapping and internally diverse national, regional and ethnic communities which cut across any simple majority/minority division” (Pilkington., 2003: 266). To conclude the *Parekh Report* was an attempt to revise race relations in contemporary Britain with a special focus on the irreversibility of the multicultural nature of the nation. With the formula of Britain as “a community of communities and a community of citizens”, the report presented a new understanding of the cultural and ethnic realities that emphasize diversity while asking for a set of common values that preserve the inter-and intra-cohesiveness of Britain. Hence, Britishness, from Parekh’s perspective is a dynamic cultural diversity-based indemnity that virtually excludes none and includes all.

## **Conclusion**

This article tried to highlight and scrutinize the concept of Britishness. We attempted to chart the various aspects and conception of British national identity. It is suggested that the concept has been ambiguous. Britishness in particular -and the notion of identity in general- is an elusive and difficult to define concept. The contemporary Britain faces many challenges such as the devolution and the resulting questions concerning regional and national identities (Englishness, Scottish-ness and Welsh-ness), globalization with its post-nationalism and corrosion of national sovereignty. However, British national identity, just like all identities, has been a fertile background for manifesting exclusionary and inclusionary tendencies. To use Raymond Williams’s phrase, Britishness meanings have been constructed and constructing by/of the “structure of feeling” of British people. To claim that Britishness was more exclusionary than inclusionary at a given British historical epoch is simply a question of focalization, a question of perspective and degree. Importantly, we should not forget that the notions of exclusion and that of inclusion are two faces of the same coin. Just when we exclude, we include and vice versa. The excluded “Other” is in crucial aspects necessary to construct the essence and the meaning of the “I”. The

politics of boundary formation and maintenance need these two ends of the identity spectrum: the “I” and the “Other”. The social theorist Edward Sampson attacked the self-centred and ethno-centrist propensities of Western cultures. In his seminal book *Celebrating the Other* (1993), Sampson argued that, in silencing the “Other” and the “Different” Western cultures distort their own situation and stunt their potentialities for growth and diversity. According, the West needs the “Rest” to understand and develop itself. Sampson wrote in an assuring and hopeful tone that:

We are obliged to work together with others in a responsible way because who and what we are and who and what they are intimately and inextricably linked. We cannot be us, nor can they be they without one another: our responsibilities, then, are not simply to avoid the other but of necessity and in recognition of this inherent bonding, to work together on our collective behalf.

This hopeful tone reminds us of the primordial truth that no culture or civilization is an island and that different cultures, identities and civilizations rely on and complement each other. The boundaries that identity and identification seem to create are very elastic and ever-changing. They are characteristically flexible, variable and permeable. Those traits render identity boundaries in continual flux and highly responsive to changes. Boundaries to use Robin Cohen’s phrase are “legitimated not legitimate” (1994:200) which permits us to argue that Britishness, being a cultural boundaries creator and legitimator, is just an imagined identity with imagined boundaries that both include and exclude.

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