

Discuss some of the ways that British imperialism has shaped Britain and British identity.

Introduction:

The British Union Jack was created through superimposing the Scottish flag of Saint Andrew, the Irish flag of Saint Patrick and the English flag of Saint George. It is meant to represent the unity of the nations of the United Kingdom (UK). Many Brits today don't know how their flag was made or what it represents, and know even less about their imperial history (Sanghera, 2021). In his book *'Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism'*, Benedict Anderson discusses the creation of national identity, nationalism and the nation. In this book he defines a nation as an *"imagined political community"* that is limited and sovereign (Anderson, 2016, p. 6). It is imagined because *"even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion"* (Anderson, 2016, p. 6). It is limited because it acknowledges that all nations have *"finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations"* (Anderson, 2016, p. 7). It is sovereign because the concept of the nation *"was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm"* (Anderson, 2016, p. 7), necessitating an institution that insured religious freedom as well as the other inalienable rights that were being spread during this times. 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"* (Anderson, 2016, p. 7). Today, the West, mostly the anglophone nations, are in the midst of a 'culture war' between the political right and the political left, making the understanding of the concepts discussed in Anderson's book all the more important. In Britain, these culture wars have triggered a revival of interest and contention surrounding the topic of the British Empire (Sanghera, 2021). This essay is going to examine some of the ways in which the imagined British national identity was shaped by its era of imperialism. This exploration will take place in a relatively chronological manner, starting by looking at the colonial practices and legacies that led to the creation of Britain in the 18th century. Following this I will continue to examine the effects of imperialism on British identity during the Victorian era. Finally, I will look at current British identity, and why I believe that Britain is in the midst of a national identity crisis. Throughout the essay I will provide and discuss the differing historical perspectives on empire, such as traditional imperial history and postcolonialism, both of which play a significant role in the current culture wars.

The origins of 'Britishness':

Britishness and imperialism have always been deeply interconnected. The word 'British' originates from the Latin word *Brittani*, which in turn came from the Latin word *Britannia* (Harper, 2021). *Brittani* was the word the Romans used to discuss the Celtic natives of the British Isles (Harper, 2021). Quickly after the departure of the Romans, the word went out of use but was revived by James I, when he was crowned King of Great Britain in 1707, unifying England and Scotland (Harper, 2021). Today, the word 'Britain' is often used interchangeably in referral to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the British Isles and England (Engstrom, 2003). The confused and incorrect usage of the word reflects the uncertainty surrounding its meaning, and the meaning of being 'British'. The British national identity, like all other identities, is an invented one, however, unlike most other national identities, it was invented with a very specific goal in mind (Anderson, 2016). Once James I came to power, unifying the three nations under God and the law, the creation of the British national identity began (Koditschek, 2002, p. 391). The British identity was created by the English, Scottish and Welsh elite with the purpose of unifying the colonised Celtic fringes (Koditschek, 2002). Unfortunately, this unification was not created in order to establish a multinational state, embracing and celebrating the histories and cultures of Britain's four nations. Instead, the purpose of this unification, was to impose English "*cultural and political hegemony*" (Colley, 2005, p. 6) upon Scotland, Wales and Ireland. During this time, the success of Britishness was built upon two foundations; trade, and Protestantism (Koditschek, 2002, p. 390).

With the unification of the four nations came the formation of a free trade zone throughout the island. This in turn gave people from all social classes and from each nation a "*direct self-interest in the political union of 1707*" (Koditschek, 2002, p. 391). The establishment of the free trade zone within the nation, as well as the many trading missions outside of the country, financially benefited the British population greatly, resulting in the British having the highest living standard in Europe at the time (Koditschek, 2002, p. 390). One of the most lucrative British oceanic trade missions was the slave trade. The legacy of the slave trade is still very much present in contemporary British culture with many British celebrities and politicians having come from slave owning families, such as George Orwell and David Cameron, as well as countless estates, cities and streets having been built with money created from the slave trade (Hall, 2014, p. 2). Not only did the slave trade bring an enormous amount of wealth into Britain, but it was also the origin of some of the first black people living in Victorian Britain. During the American war of independence between the thirteen colonies of British America and Great Britain from 1775 to 1783, there were a number of former black slaves that were offered their freedom if they fought for Britain. They were known as

'Black Loyalists' and many of them once freed emigrated to Britain with the other troops (Sanghera, 2021, p. 73). This economic growth and the success of British maritime trading ventures made free trading ideologies a prominent feature of British culture, and instilled in them the notion that they were the pioneers and protectors of free trade and civilisation. This fed into the sense of arrogance and superiority that many British men, especially those of higher social class, held, playing a role in the ways in which many future imperial excavates played out (Bell, 2007, p. 2).

Protestantism was the other main unifying force between the nations of Great Britain, however, almost more significantly than the religion itself, was the rivalry that this religious difference sparked between the British and the French (Thompson, 2007, p. 456). The British identity has long been dependent on the othering of a group as a unifying force between the four nations. Throughout history Britain has created many 'others', however, one of the first and most formative 'others' were the French. The concept of 'othering' was conceptualised by the Palestinian postcolonial-theorist, Edward Said (Said, 1979). In his theory on the 'othering' of the Orient, coining the term Orientalism, Said discusses how European powers constructed an Oriental identity in opposition to themselves in order to further the semblance of superiority and difference between Europeans and the rest of the population, specifically, Arabs in this case (Said, 1979, p. 52). This perceived difference, no matter whether it's based on reality or not, is a powerful weapon that is used to further the power of those in control of this perception, which for hundreds of years has been Europeans and their decedents in North America and Oceania. The purposeful othering of a group creates a fictional binary, the civilised versus the uncivilised, the barbarians versus the Brits, dismissing any chance for nuance or hybridity. This othering of the French was essential to creating the sense of comradeship between the English, Scots and Welsh, and to an extent the protestants in Ireland however it is important to note that the case of Ireland is unique to the other three nations (Colley, 2005, p. 5). History professor Eric Hobsbawn discusses how this new form of British nationalism emerged parallel to, and in competition with, French nationalism (MacKenzie, 2017, p. 3). Unity against, and animosity towards the French was essential in protecting the freedom and the trade of the British Isles during wartimes. The elites of the four nations knew this, and thanks to their control of the medias of the time and much of the nation's wealth, they proceeded to create and promote new invented rituals and traditions displayed through public ceremonies, architecture, literature and art (MacKenzie, 2017, p. 4). The success of the spread of this newly created British identity and patriotism to the working class of the nation however, was instilled mostly through war between Britain and France (Koditschek, 2002, p. 394).

'Britishness' during the Victorian era:

During the Victorian era British imperialism was at its height, establishing itself as the largest empire the world had ever known, encompassing nations on every continent and controlling the lives of hundreds of millions of people (Bell, 2007, p. 1). It was a truly multicultural empire, and this was reflected in Britain in both intentional and unintentional ways. When walking around any major British city, empire could be seen everywhere. In the food eaten, such as sugar from the Americas or tea from Southeast Asia (Sanghera, 2021, p. 95). In the architecture, with the popularisation of including oriental features in estates and houses, and, throughout the cities, with many streets being named after imperialists or far-away cities of the empire (Sanghera, 2021, p. 131). This was also reflected in the fashion, with the introduction to and popularisation of moustaches and cashmere shawls being directly due to imperialism (Sanghera, 2021, p. 50). Empire also became engrained in the life of British children. Many children's books romanticised life abroad in the empire, or told stories of adventure against unheard of beasts and barbarians in the far corners of empire, or even in the Boy Scouts, a children club created in order to prepare little boys to be 'good' 'manly' colonists (Thompson, 2007, p. 457). The biggest way that empire effected the lives of British children and future children however was through the education system.

The huge popularisation and rise in attendance of British public schools occurred during the Victorian era and was a direct result of imperialism (MacKenzie, 2017, p. 3). It was imperative to British expats that their children were not 'tainted' by their foreign surroundings, and that they receive a standardised British education. The best way they thought to do this was to send their children to boarding schools 'back home' (Sanghera, 2021, p. 98). Boarding schools played an essential role in shaping the colonial attitudes of the future generations, as well as establishing "*a network of associations sustaining a gentlemanly ethos of privilege manifest in the practice of elite domestic and imperial rule*" (Sanghera, 2021, p. 173). Like today, there was a small group of elites who controlled and majorly benefited from colonialism, and an extremely successful way of preserving the continued power of this group was through a common education. Not only were these schools ideal for networking with the other members of high society and the soft promotion of empire, but they were also the perfect environments to instil within children the great 'British' values of "*fair play, resilience and duty*" (Sanghera, 2021, p. 173), training them to be obedient and effective soldiers in the "*civilising mission*" (Bell, 2007, p. 13) of empire. The 'civilising mission' was a belief that was widely held by many Europeans at the time and continuously pitched in British schools. This belief was based off of the conviction that whites,

and specifically the British, were the superior race and the chosen people by God to 'civilise' the rest of the world. The popularity of the belief in the 'civilising mission' was supported by the rise of "*scientific racism*" (Bell, 2007, p. 32) that was sweeping across Europe at the time. It was this racist belief and "gentlemanly capitalism" (Porter, 2011, p. 265), according to imperial historians Peter J. Cain and Antony G. Hopkins, that were the two main drivers of imperial expansion at the time (Porter, 2011, p. 267). Gentlemanly capitalists were a newly emerging social class that were rapidly gaining wealth and influence through the booming growth of the service and manufacturing sectors, both of which were deeply interconnected with colonial expansion (Hopkins, 1987, p. 3). As Britain has always been, and continues to be a deeply classist society, even though this emerging social class had financial capital, they didn't have the cultural capital of the British upper class, and a way for them of trying to integrate into the highest sector of society was by sending their children to the 'best' public schools of the country, continuing the cycle of imperialist thinking.

'Britishness' under crisis:

Since Queen Elizabeth II came to the throne, Britain experienced a huge decline in global power and relevancy, leading to what I call, a national identity crisis. Following the Second World War, Britain reached out to the citizens of her empire, asking them to emigrate to Britain and aid in the economic revival of the country (Black, 2019). Thousands answered their call, leaving their homes and moving to Britain from all the corners of the world expecting to be welcomed with open arms. Instead, they were greeted with hatred, discrimination and violence. Despite outright racism being unseemly following the horrors of the Nazi regime, many Brits, consciously or unconsciously, still held onto the belief of white British superiority. This mindset is still very much apparent in Brits today (Sanghera, 2021, p. 89). One of the best examples of the continuity of the British imperial mind is the way in which Brits travel. Britain is the country with the biggest diaspora from the global north, with one in ten Brits, between 5 or 6 million people, having immigrated, often to countries that were once British colonies (Sanghera, 2021, p. 91). Once living in a new country, Brits are famously known for their aversion to integrating with local communities, preferring to stay amongst themselves in exclusive and close-knit expat communities. Brits are also "*the world's fourth most enthusiastic tourists, spending \$71.4 billion on tourism every year*" (Sanghera, 2021, p. 91). When visiting abroad, Brits have also developed a distinct stereotype of the drunk and aloof tourist, refusing to mix with local people or try local cuisines. This is also a legacy of empire, records recounting stories of the offensive British tourist dating back as far as the Mughal Empire (Sanghera, 2021, p. 95). Before empire, travelling for leisure was extremely rare, only done by the most adventurous of wealthy men, while since empire, Britons have become

permanently internationally minded, while also making them *"insular and close minded"* (Sanghera, 2021, p. 106) once abroad.

The white upper-class British identity, which has been the dominant identity in the country since its creation, has always been defined, in part, by its mobility and the fact that it has mobility in comparison to others. The British ability to move freely around and through any space that it desires and to not only move through it but transform that space according to its desires is a very powerful legacy of empire, a power that was reflected in the power of the British passport (Sanghera, 2021, p. 93). This ability is now being challenged by Brexit. The British have been made into the 'other' (MacKenzie, 2017, p. 2). As discussed in this essay previously, the British identity has always depended on the 'othering' of another group in order to maintain unity. At first it was the French, then, during times of Empire, the 'others' turned into the non-white colonial subjects, however during decolonisation Britain lost their external 'others' (Arnold, 2004). No longer able to unify against a common external other, white British identity has turned in on itself, deciding to create a new 'other' out of its own non-white citizens leading to Brexit and the national splintering that Britain is experiencing today. A hugely influential component of this fracturing of the British identity is the differing views on empire within Britain. White British identity is clinging onto a traditional imperial historian view of empire, believing in the complete separation of empire and 'home', while British multicultural identity believes in a postcolonial view of empire, understanding the deeply interconnected relationship between Britain and empire, viewing them as one in the same. Brexit is a direct consequence of the imperial thinking still lingering in the minds of 51.9% of the British population, (Commission, 2019). This portion believes in the uniqueness and the excellence of the white British nation, taking great pride in the British Empire, and wishing to return to this level of independence and power, finding it belittling having to listen to the European Union or anyone else (MacKenzie, 2017, p. 6). This unwillingness to cooperate with others also originates from empire, dividing the world into the dominant and the submissive, the coloniser and colonised, unable to see a world of equals (Sanghera, 2021, p. 114). Even the way in which Britain has responded to the covid19 pandemic can be traced back to empire, with *"every stage of the crisis being characterised by the idea that Britain is a special case"* (Sanghera, 2021, p. 122).

Conclusion:

This essay has explored some of the ways in which British imperialism has shaped British identity throughout the centuries. Britishness was essentially created by imperialism, with the British identity first being fabricated by elites of the four

nations in order to unify the newly conquered 'Celtic fringes' in an attempt to enforce English culture onto Scotland, Wales and Ireland. The main motivating forces the elites used to unify the four nations were the communal benefits of trade, and the 'othering' of the catholic French. During the Victorian era, when empire was at its height, this common 'other' turned into the colonial subjects of empire, unifying the white British identity against these 'uncivilised' and inferior races of empire. During this time, these racist sentiments, as well as the 'glory' of empire were everywhere, creating new ways of eating, dressing, building, travelling and teaching in Britain. Everything was either directly or indirectly connected to empire, and this unity and pride surrounding empire became the backbone of British identity. After the Second World War the decolonisation movement began to sweep across the globe in earnest and Britain lost its common *raison d'être*, slipping into a national identity crisis. By the 1970s Britain was unrecognisable. It had gone from owning over a quarter of the globe and being the leading economy of the world to an empire-less and indebted island nation, surpassed by the United States of America, its former colony, and Russia, the once strange and 'uncivilised' nation of Europe. Britain had lost its 'other', and instead of unifying behind the beauty of the multiculturalism created by empire, it turned against itself, pining for an all-white and all-powerful Britain. Today, Britain has become the laughingstock of Europe, watching it bumble and stumble through Brexit and the pandemic, with many questioning if this might be the end of the union.

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