

---

**WHO'S NOT ETHNIC?**  
**Filling the void of post-imperial identities**  
**in a Europeanising Britain and an Asianising Australia**

**John Milfull**

**Growing Up**

Parenthood is one of the most difficult tasks, both for the parents and the parented, that we have inherited from the Enlightenment tradition and its redefinition of family and education. The autonomy and freedom, the *Mündigkeit* which is its ideal goal is coupled with an equally revolutionary emphasis on the "caring family" which, like Freud's psychoanalysis, creates new and deeper bonds to be transcended, in their turn, in a relationship of mutual acceptance and tolerance of the "selfness" of the other, ex-parent and ex-parented. We are all familiar, from our deepest personal experience, with the often tortuous ambivalences of dependency on both sides. And many of us share the Utopian vision of a genuine "adult" and equal friendship in which we can somehow reward one another for the long haul of growing up with an open, unfettered communication between the selves which have been shaped and transformed in the process.

Australia and Britain are both currently engaged in a difficult phase of "transference", redefining themselves, externally and internally, in terms of a rapidly changing global situation in which the "New" that is programmatically attached to "Labour", "Britain" and "Europe" seems less a statement of fact or even intention than of necessity. Equally, Australia's reorientation to the Asia-Pacific is not a matter of choice, but simply a recognition of realities which could no longer be ignored. But if Britain is part of Europe and Australia belongs in the Asia-Pacific, what are "Britain" and "Australia"? It is impossible to separate the compulsion towards "external" redefinition from the redefinition of what it is that is being reorientated, not only because the factors that lead to the compulsion have already had a decisive impact on the character and composition of our societies, but because the old definitions were premised on realities that no longer exist, the parental conditions of Empire. It is not surprising that cries of betrayal have been heard on both sides, from the cracked record of Aussie complaints about Britain's (unwilling) complicity in the absurdities of the CAP to the accusations of *lèse-majesté* with which Fleet Street has peppered Australia's attempts to discover its "self". And the "ambivalences of dependency", as I have termed them above, have always presented a Pandora's Box of Oedipal nasties to be fired off in both directions, in a display of post-colonial "sledding" of which the Australian cricketers are uncontested masters, no doubt because they are only too aware who taught them the Great Game.

This is the kind of childish behaviour to which parents, too, are all too susceptible. But the relations between Britain and Australia, between parent and parented, are far too complex to be resolved in an adolescent slanging match. As Jim Potts, the British Council's Director in Australia, persuasively

argued at our conference on *Britain in Europe* last year,<sup>1</sup> there are some very significant credits in the ledger of Empire, often the very values in whose name the ex-imperial parent is attacked. A Republican movement in Australia which is essentially anti-British, or perhaps more accurately, anti-English, will miss the whole point of "growing up", the liberation from cringe and condescension, with their attendant aggressions, to a mature friendship between people who still have a lot to talk about, who can define and defend common values in the new and different environments in which they increasingly function and honour their shared past with productive alliances in the present and future. Blaming your parents or your children for your own sins of omission and commission leads nowhere.

### The "(In)visible Anglo" - Home and Away

But Australia and Britain are not individuals, [English] parent and [Anglo-Australian] child; they are diverse and relatively *disunited kingdoms*. Most curious of all: as Norman Saadi Nikro writes in a recent dissertation, while there is no doubt that Australia exhibits a dominant "Anglo" culture, Anglo-Australians have been "de-ethnicised" within a self-styled multicultural society in which only non-Anglo-Australians are "ethnic" and represent a [problematic] "cultural variability", while "Anglo-Australians [predominate] as the major signifier of Australian nationality" and "cultural unity":

As long as Anglo-Australian forms of identification are not regarded as particular ethnic cultures, then their peculiarities will remain abstract generalisations dominating the Australian cultural and historical landscape.<sup>2</sup>

These "abstract generalisations", which stand in marked opposition to the history and diversity of Anglo-Australian communities - Nikro warns against "underestimating the violence perpetrated on [Anglo-Saxon culture]" - are the key to "structures of power that have much to do with the maintenance of binary oppositions that measure cultural diversity from the standpoint of cultural unity defined by a(n) (in)visible Anglo-Australianness".<sup>3</sup> In the last analysis, they are a relict of the ideology of Empire which corresponds neither to present geopolitical nor social realities, and condemn Anglo-Australians to an unfortunate mix of arrogance and cringe to mask their crippled identities, while presenting the ever-increasing non-Anglo contingent with a troubling vacuum at the centre of "cultural diversity". It is, after all, a parental ideology which has survived the departure of the parent and an unimagined reconstitution of the family. Its most obvious manifestation is the extraordinary difficulty Australian foreign policy has faced in projecting an Australian position which is at once adult and autonomous and free of the delusions of Empire - a

---

<sup>1</sup> *Britain in Europe*, a cross-disciplinary conference organised by the Centre for European Studies, University of New South Wales, in collaboration with the British Council, the EC Delegation and the Goethe Institute Sydney, 25-27 July 1997. This paper is a revised version of the introduction to an ex-conference book, *Britain in Europe*, currently under consideration for publication.

<sup>2</sup> Norman Saadi Nikro, *Shifting Margins, Imaginary Journeys: Writing Migrant Experience*, Ph.D. thesis, University of New South Wales 1997, p. 234

mixture, again, of insecurity and over-compensatory arrogance which quotes the condescensions of imperialism without the power base that gave rise to them. To embrace Australian independence means, above all, to come to terms with the reality of a minor power whose only real hope of "influence" in the international scene of the future can stem from its successful development of an innovative, culturally diverse and productive society which will act as a bridge between Europe (in the broadest sense) and Asia.

But the "(in)visible Anglo" is (not) at home in Britain just as much as in Australia. As Krishan Kumar writes:

All subjects of the Empire might be designated 'British', but that paradoxically served only to emphasise the distance separating the British of Great Britain, the colonisers and carriers of "the white man's burden", from all the other British of the British Empire. The imperial connection promoted the sense not just of difference but of superiority, even of uniqueness. For the British people must be most powerfully and peculiarly endowed if so small an island could become the ruler of the greatest empire since Rome.

There was one other consequence of the imperial contribution to Britishness. The Empire drew more closely together the different ethnic groups inhabiting Britain, English, Welsh, Scottish, Irish. They were joined in common governance of the far-flung empire. They were also united, one might say, by their equal share in the plunder of empire...

Britishness was undermined by the end of the empire and by Britain's decline as a world power. Lacking the stimulus and the bracing influence of a world role, Britishness capitulated in the face of an assertion of Scottish, Welsh and Irish nationalism. England, the core nation, stood exposed, no longer protected by a surrounding carapace of Britishness.<sup>4</sup>

The post-colonial debate needs to be directed back at the metropolitan culture not only in the sense Edward Said advocates in *Culture and Imperialism*, to uncover the hidden role of colonialism and the colonised in the shaping of British society, but to penetrate to its crucial "pilot project", the process of internal colonisation within Britain itself.

It was in this light, fresh from our conference discussions on regional inequality and devolution in Britain and Europe, that I first read Nikro's acute comment on the "abstract generalisations" to which a de-ethnicised dominant culture has been reduced in Australia. What, after all, is "British culture"? Simply "devolving" its Scots, Welsh and Irish components, however desirable or expedient it may be, will only address the most blatant legacies of internal colonisation. The relicts of social and cultural imperialism, in England and elsewhere in Britain, reach far deeper and coexist awkwardly with a new economic order which, well before Blair, had already begun to jettison the illusions of Empire and world Anglo dominance for autonomy and pragmatic

---

<sup>4</sup> Krishan Kumar, "'Britishness and 'Englishness': what prospect for a European identity in Britain today?", in *British Studies Now*, anthology issues 1-5, The British Council

partnerships. It was perhaps the ultimate paradox of Thatcherism that it was able to mobilise, in the name of modernisation, both a deep-seated antagonism towards an [English] establishment which stretched well beyond the traditional élites, but still clung to the hierarchies of Empire, and a crude post-imperialist chauvinism among social groups who had once served as cannon-fodder for Empire and whose gains from the type of modernisation pursued were transient at best. *Sidere mens eadem mutato*, "the same mind under a different star", reads the depressing motto of the University of Sydney; there are inescapable parallels with the Australian situation discussed above, where radical economic change coexists with a troubling vacuum at the cultural centre. In Thatcherite mode, John Howard, the current Australian conservative prime minister, constantly attacks a "black armband view" of Australian history which seeks to uncover and address the wrongs of the past, while himself presiding over an even faster erosion of shared social values and the structures in which they had found expression.

Perhaps successful reform and reorientation demands, above all, the coming to terms with past failure, the abandonment of false national pride? Last year, I welcomed the Spanish Ambassador to Australia, Emilio Fernandez-Castaño, to a lecture with what I thought a suitably diplomatic reference to David Ringrose's thesis of the "myth of [Spanish] failure",<sup>5</sup> only to be told with great elegance and at some length that failure was the really constructive force in history, and that Spain's current resurgence in Europe sprang, above all, from "freeing [it]self from the past". "History", as a former Vice-Chancellor of UNSW once put it to me, "can sometimes be a positive disadvantage." I am sure Tony Blair would agree. But "freeing oneself from the past" demands, above all, an insight into its failures and its injustices which alone can serve as the basis for genuine reform. To parody Walter Benjamin, the real task of the historian is to explode the false continuities of history and expose the unfulfilled promises of the past which lie buried under its rubble heaps. I wish the "New Britain" luck and courage in the attempt.

### Filling the Gap

There may be valid, even obvious, political reasons for New Labour's rejection of history, especially recent history, but as Rodney Smith argued at our conference, it cannot last. Ultimately, Britain will need to rewrite its history, to review it from the perspective of a New Britain and a New Europe and uncover past alternatives which can be made productive in present and future. This is a project far too large for any conference, but it nevertheless had some suggestions to make; for instance, to part the Red Sea of British exceptionalism in the quest for a time before "Britain" and "Europe" were invented, when English, Scots, Welsh and Irish artists and scientists held pride of place in a European "republic of letters". The impoverishment which followed the embrace of Empire and insularity is only more obvious in music, as Roger Covell demonstrated; like the reality of the colonised, the links with

---

<sup>5</sup> cf. David R. Ringrose, *Spain, Europe and the "Spanish miracle," 1700-1900*,

Europe were driven underground (my Professor of English at Sydney University wrote in the margin of an essay in which I had quoted Goethe: "Do not parade your knowledge of foreign cultures"!).

But for all the attractions of Enlightenment universalism, there may be more future in unearthing histories and stories of a different kind, ranging from the largely forgotten contribution of Cambridge economists in the 1920s to proposals by the League of Nations for world economic integration to interactions between occupying armies and the occupied and to football fans experiencing the current "Europeanisation of English football". If "Europe" and "Britain" are to acquire real content, it will not be on the level of sublime abstraction, but of lived lives. When Siegfried Kracauer spoke of the need for "sensuous concepts" (*sinnliche Begriffe*), he might have been criticising the "fleshlessness" of Eurospeak.

### **Citizenship and Identity**

"Do you mean", a colleague of mine asked a visiting apologist for European integration, "that the Germans will stop being German?" I wanted to add: "or Swabians, Saxons, *Berliner* or Upper Franconians?" and butt in with a resounding "No!". My visitor simply looked pained - his whole motivation and argument had been misunderstood. But the misunderstanding is symptomatic, and often enough encouraged by a false rhetoric of European unity, a phrase which should not be allowed out in public without its complement "in diversity".

How could there ever be a European *identity*? And if there could, what kind of atrocious homogenisation would it involve? Europe itself, as Agnes Heller has written,<sup>6</sup> is hard enough to define, even geographically; but there can be no doubt whatever that what makes Europe "European" is above all a rich and extraordinary cultural diversity which even national borders define quite inadequately, a diversity of ethnicity, social strata, language, religion, of land- and cityscape.

The source of the misunderstanding arises in the confusion of *citizenship* and identity. In a remarkable article, James Donald<sup>7</sup> has pointed out that there is a fundamental difference between citizenship, which has, of necessity, a universalising, abstract tendency, and identity, which is constituted by the often multiple environments in which we grow up, live and work. However noble his motivation may have been, Jürgen Habermas's concept of "constitutional patriotism", born from the fear of a New German nationalism, thus remains a contradiction in terms; we may value, and even feel a strong commitment towards, the principles of good citizenship, but they do not create identification, through their very generality they even tend to inhibit it. For all the bad press he received after German unification, Günter Grass was on

---

<sup>6</sup> Agnes Heller, "Europe: An Epilogue?", in *The Idea of Europe. Problems of National and Transnational Identity*, ed. B. Nelson et al., New York/Oxford: Berg 1992, pp. 12-25.

<sup>7</sup> James Donald, "The Citizen and the Man About Town", in Stuart Hall and Paul du

surer ground with his 1967 vision of a "communicating plural",<sup>8</sup> a Germany which resisted the future seductions of "national unity" by building on the strengths of West German federalism, a federalism which, as Hans Joachim Meyer writes, is not about surrendering rights, but protecting them. It remains a major historical irony that the rapid unification process Grass, like the rest of us, did not foresee and found hard to digest, did the "right thing for the wrong reason". In the haste to absorb and delegitimise the GDR, five new East German states (*Länder*) were created and granted accession to the Federal Republic under Article 23 of the Basic Law, which was never intended for this purpose. The convention to draft a new constitution for a united Germany called for by Article 146 was never held. Yet in the mean time, it seems as if it is precisely, and only, on the level of the new East German *Länder* that the economic, social and psychological problems of unification may be resolved. If it is too difficult, and even inherently dangerous, to try and define a "German identity", I, for one, have no problem with the persistence of that successful strategy with which the bulk of West Germans made do for so long, as *Münchner*, *Berliner*, Bavarians or Swabians and citizens of Europe.

The dangers may be less obvious, but is it really much easier or more useful to define a "British" identity? For most "Britons" (the term can only survive in abbreviation as "Brit", returned to the warmth of the street) it is probably the most difficult and least productive form of identification. Regional and group identities survive all attempts to repress them, and I can only agree with Donald that a) we all need such identifications, transient and "fuzzy" as they may be, and b) the answer is not to attempt to erase them, but to embark on the far more complex and productive task of affirming them and relating and reconciling them to a broader concept of citizenship. This citizenship may, indeed, be better defined as "European" than British, if the British government(s) can finally take up the challenge and fight for the realisation of their own proud, if slightly damaged, democratic traditions in the governance of Europe. They will find many allies. But "citizenship" will remain only an abstract and vulnerable concept unless "subsidiarity", that appalling term which conceals the most vital signpost to European unity, is given a human face. As in Italy and Spain, devolution and regional autonomy are not just a stratagem, but a pre-condition for survival and the emergence of trust in the process of integration, British, German and European. And integration is surely both necessary and inevitable; the point is to ensure its quality and success. I hope that Australia may play its part, with Britain *in Europe*, in a dialogue on the *New Federalism* without which, I suspect, none of our countries will succeed in retaining some sense of humanity and social justice amid the challenges that lie ahead.

---

<sup>8</sup> Günter Grass, "The Communicating Plural" (1967), in *Two States - One Nation?*, San