

ALMUTH EBKE, *Britishness: Die Debatte über nationale Identität in Großbritannien, 1967 bis 2008*, Ordnungssysteme, 55 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019), x + 372 pp. ISBN 978 3 11 062405 2. €64.95

The cohesion of the United Kingdom has seemed fragile over the last few years. The UK European Union membership referendum in 2016 revealed internal divisions resulting in majorities for Remain in Scotland and Northern Ireland, but majorities for Leave in England and Wales. The UK's withdrawal from the EU has renewed the pressure for Scottish independence and Irish unification, and raised concerns about the viability of a British nation and the concept of British national identity. Challenges to the Union, predictions of a 'break-up of Britain', and far-ranging reflections on the nation state, however, did not start with Brexit. British politicians, academics, and journalists had widely discussed Britishness in the 1990s and 2000s. Almuth Ebke's stimulating thesis on Britishness and the debate on national identity from 1967 to 2008 is a timely reminder of this.

A speech delivered by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, to the Fabian Society in January 2006 marked a high point of the debate on Britishness. He called for a clear statement of British values, arguing that these could foster a new patriotism going beyond ethnicity, race, and institutions. Starting with Brown's speech, the study traces the origins of the debate on Britishness back to the 1960s. After the Second World War, in the words of Dean Acheson, Britain had lost an empire and not yet found a role. According to Ebke, the ensuing search for a new self-understanding pertained not only to international affairs, as Acheson had in mind, but also to the domestic political debate. Discussions about national identity, which culminated in the 1990s in the search for 'Britishness' and British values, she suggests, reflected this search (p. 310). From the perspective of a new history of ideas, the book draws on a broad range of published and archival sources: in addition to the classic documents used in culturally inspired political histories (parliamentary minutes, government documents, diaries, speeches, articles in newspapers and magazines), it also considers contemporary research in history and the social sciences. On this basis, the study shows how political, public, and academic debates on national identity interacted and brought together different – and sometimes contradictory – notions of nation and belonging. The author is careful to place each strand of the

debate into its historiographical context, allowing the reader to contextualize the findings in current research.

Based on the concept of the 1970s as a time 'after the boom',<sup>1</sup> Ebke interprets the decade as a threshold to a problem-orientated history of the present (*Problemgeschichte der Gegenwart*). Based on this concept, she sees the debate on British nationality as a comprehensive renegotiation of the social order, triggered by a sense of crisis and far-reaching economic, political, and demographic transformations from the 1960s onwards (pp. 12–15). Ebke analyses the debates addressing these changes, focusing on those she considers as precursors to New Labour's Britishness project: societal affiliation and citizenship, nationalism and devolution, and the renegotiation of concepts of class, race, and identity in academia. Ebke also examines the changes in terminology used to describe national and societal affiliation. From this perspective, she historicizes analytical categories, such as 'national identity', which are still in use today. Her interpretation of Britishness as not only a spatial but also a socio-political concept enables her to grasp the social imaginary – the dominant image of social order (pp. 17–20).

Covering an impressive forty years and bearing in mind relevant developments beyond this period, the study identifies two phases: first, the debates on societal affiliation, citizenship, and nationalism in Scotland and Wales between 1967 and 1983, deliberately bridging the 'classic' caesura of 1979; and second, the years from 1988 to 2007–8, when commentators on national identity explicitly used the term 'Britishness' (pp. 9–10). In order to address the relevant strands of debate, the presentation proceeds in three chronological steps (pp. 24–6).

The first part discusses post-colonial immigration and devolution as the historical roots of the Britishness debate from the 1960s. Both show that the social imaginary – the accepted 'normal' order of things – was challenged by decolonization, migration, and calls for devolution (p. 101). Debates on the 1981 riots in English cities and the British Nationality Act of the same year serve as case studies to show how immigration from the 'new Commonwealth' was handled. Ebke finds that decolonization as a broad historical process was complex,

<sup>1</sup> Anselm Doering-Manteuffel and Lutz Raphael, *Nach dem Boom: Perspektiven auf die Zeitgeschichte seit 1970*, 2nd edn. (Göttingen, 2010).

generating various competing ideas of community and belonging. She identifies three different and partly conflicting factors that constituted belonging to society: adherence to social norms and values, work, and shared culture (pp. 35–6). Debates about the British Nationality Act 1981 saw the collision of two profoundly different ideas: a widely held view imagining the kingdom to be ethnically White, and an imperial territorial approach to citizenship. The Nationality Act was an attempt to reconcile these conflicting views. However, a definitive concept of cultural community and consensus on the definition of national affiliation were still lacking (pp. 99–101).

The electoral successes of the SNP and Plaid Cymru in the late 1960s brought up the question of Scottish and Welsh devolution. The ‘constitutional settlement’, which had hitherto provided a balance between various economic, political, and cultural claims, was challenged by emerging nationalisms. Two different approaches to dealing with nationalisms existed, as can be identified in reports by the Royal Commission on the Constitution (1969–73). The widely accepted majority report presented Britain as a centralized nation state, underpinned by a sovereign central parliament. However, this interpretation acknowledged the existence of different regions with claims to nationality and self-government, and thus recommended devolution. The Home Rule debate of the late nineteenth century served as an important backdrop to this interpretation (pp. 135–44). In contrast, the minority report failed to generate far-reaching support. It negated Welsh and Scottish national aspirations and recommended comprehensive constitutional reform based on regional principles instead. When the Labour government’s devolution legislation failed in the Scottish and Welsh referendums in 1979, devolution was removed from the political agenda. New Labour’s devolution legislation of the 1990s, however, took up the issue of constitutional redefinition once more (pp. 159–60).

The second part of the book looks at how history and the social sciences dealt with the processes of transformation. It traces the introduction and emergence of national identity as an analytical concept. As established concepts could no longer adequately explain the changes underway, social scientists increasingly questioned the hitherto central category of class, while other approaches, such as identity and race, gained in importance (p. 166). The combination of new questions from cultural studies, conceptual reorientation, and crisis

awareness explained both the incipient debate on British national identity and its emergence as a category in historical research (p. 170). From the late 1970s, Anglo-American research introduced national identity to the arsenal of British historical and social studies (p. 201). This set the stage for historical research on the British multinational state. Works on the construction of British identity, such as Linda Colley's seminal *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (1992), laid the foundations for the Britishness debate of the 1990s, reflecting the close exchange between scientific and political debates (pp. 214–15). The political environment of the early 1980s—especially the Falklands War, but also the debate on the value of British cultural heritage—stimulated this conversation (pp. 215–34).

The third part deals with the political debate on Britishness under New Labour. Ebke treats the term 'Britishness' as a source and examines its terminology. Until the late 1980s, it described rather unspecific cultural affiliations in territorial conflicts. From the 1990s, it served mainly as a synonym for British national identity, and it has been applied to specific British values and symbols since the 2000s. As such, it became the term for communicating concepts of belonging to the British nation (p. 239). Ebke identifies two phases in the treatment of Britishness under New Labour. First, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown's programme of reform used British national symbols and rhetoric to market its politics. Britishness was used to communicate an ambition to strengthen the social cohesion of British society by emphasizing citizenship and community. In this way, national identity became a malleable political commodity (p. 246). At the same time, an official discourse on multiculturalism acknowledged the previously marginalized claims of immigrants (p. 316). Beyond the casual use of British symbols, however, academia and politics reflected on the implications of new constitutional arrangements, especially devolution, for the different national identities. The position of England and Englishness in a devolved kingdom was of particular concern. Ebke traces how an opposition arose between English and European identity, and how Englishness merged with a growing Euroscepticism. She observes that the Conservative Party aligned itself with Englishness and Euroscepticism, while Labour, Plaid Cymru, and the SNP adopted a pro-European stance (pp. 271–6). The second phase began with the terror attacks of 11 September 2001, after which concerns about ethnic diversity and the integration of

Muslims in particular marked the debate (pp. 286–7). It was against this background that Gordon Brown called for the development of genuinely British values to serve as the glue of society. The aftermath of the financial crisis, however, put an end to such efforts (p. 305). Ebke points out that the question of Britishness persists, but has recently shifted to the European dimension. However, this shift does not belong to the author's period of study (p. 318).

Ebke is not the first person to examine 'Britishness', but she is the first to study its origins systematically from a longer historical perspective, delivering a new and important contribution to the historiography of the debate. She shows convincingly how ideas and topics from the late 1960s on shaped debates in the 1990s and 2000s, drawing on an informed selection of long-term debates that reveals unexpected connections. However, this selection also means that she has decided against other options, and in a work of such wide scope, it is to be expected that readers will question Ebke's priorities. This reviewer finds three points strange. First, the book focuses on domestic debates. This is perfectly legitimate, as it provides an impressive depth of perspective and offers a point of reference for further comparative research. However, further evidence from other countries, or more detailed references to them, are required to substantiate Ebke's claim that the British debate on national self-assertion exemplifies similar debates in other western European countries (p. 9).

Second, the book devotes a chapter to Wales and Scotland, but Northern Ireland is not treated separately. This is justified by pointing to the 'othering' (*Alterisierung*) of Northern Ireland, which was considered an alien and negative comparative foil in the debates of the 1990s and 2000s (p. 26). Admittedly, some aspects of the Irish dimension appear elsewhere—for example, in the chapter on home rule since the 1880s (pp. 135–44). However, one wonders whether a focused examination of public discussions regarding the other, 'foreign' part of the UK might not have allowed some conclusions to be drawn on Britain's self-image.

Third, the book treats European integration before 1990 rather marginally. Except for the last chapter on New Labour, it presents Europe as a mere motivator, rather than as the subject of debates on national identity. This stems from the author's assumption that although Europe played an important role in the debates on Britishness, it was not until the 1990s that this issue had a significant

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impact (p. 26). Recent research on the UK-wide referendum on EC membership in 1975, however, indicates that a whole array of themes on British political, social, cultural, and historical identity were strongly connected to debates on European integration.<sup>2</sup> This suggests that a closer look at the pre-1990 discussions of European integration might add further insights to the renegotiation of British identity. Britain's controversial accession to the EC in 1973, for example, marked the failure of Britain's erstwhile global strategy. The polarizing debate on European Monetary Union in the late 1980s raised pressing questions about British sovereignty and the value of national symbols, such as the currency. This was not only controversial within the Conservative Party, but was also an issue between Gordon Brown and Tony Blair.

I should like to mention a further, minor point. Occasionally, the author has the habit – not uncommon in the history of ideas genre – of merely enumerating collective attitudes, which makes it difficult to identify the actual actors behind them. However, it would be uncongenial to dwell on the gaps in a book that covers so many areas, and this objection does not detract from the merits of the work. Historians interested in contemporary British history – whether from the perspective of the history of ideas, or social or political history – will find this book immensely useful.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Saunders, *Yes to Europe! The 1975 Referendum and Seventies Britain* (Cambridge, 2018).

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