Englishness and the Countryside

How British Rural Studies Address the Issue of National Identity

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ABSTRACT

The countryside is a central feature in national symbolism and rural images often serve as signs of the Englishness. Social scientists set out to question and to challenge the symbolic naturalization of the social order. Who are the groups that produce such images? What interest do they have in disseminating such representations? Under what conditions is this symbolic work effective? A whole series of academic studies in the UK highlights the dual construction of a legitimate national and rural order, a dual ideological construction that is both a bone of contention and the source of forms of domination. In reviewing studies of the rural aspects of national identification in England, this paper looks to emphasize in what way rural studies contribute to a critical analysis of Englishness. The paper is largely based on research since the early 1990s into deconstructing the dominant perception that combines countryside and Englishness by emphasizing the phenomena of exclusion it involves and particularly the distancing of ethnic minorities and the working class.

The countryside is a central feature in national symbolism and rural images often serve as signs of the Nation. This allegory of the Nation became particularly widespread when Europe's nation-states were forming. Whether in literary output or in ideological accounts of the national community and its origins, the symbols of the Nation and of the countryside are commonly bound together. This is especially true of England where the countryside is traditionally associated with the 'national identity'. Englishness, which is taken here simply as the set of representations associated with being English,[1] is closely tied in with an imagined rural world. A feeling for country life is supposed to relate to a feeling for the Nation according to the dominant ideological schemas circulated particularly from the 19th century onwards. And this dual identification of Nation and countryside is captured in the vocabulary as 'countryside' contains 'country'.[2]

Unlike artistic output that seeks to reinforce it, the social sciences set out to question and to challenge the symbolic naturalization of the social order. Social scientists endeavour to deconstruct dominant images by relating them to the rationales by which they came to be constructed and accepted. Who are the groups that produce such images? What interest do they have in disseminating such representations? Under what conditions is this symbolic work effective? A whole series of academic studies in the UK highlights the dual construction of a legitimate national and rural order, a dual ideological construction that is both a bone of contention and the source of forms of domination. The prevailing vision of rural worlds imposes a definition of what it is to legitimately belong to the national entity and sets apart various groups. In that they are not part of the representations associated with the English countryside, those groups are generally excluded from Englishness.

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[1] Englishness is taken here not as a scientific concept but an ideological notion whose meaning changes with the uses made of it. It is not an unequivocal term, its meaning depends on the socially and historically determined standpoint taken.

[2] 'In English, "country" is both a nation and a part of a "land"; "the country" can be the whole society or its rural area' (Williams, 1985, 1).

The renewal of British rural studies

From the 1950s to the 1980s British rural studies gravitated around two perspectives: the study of village communities and the analysis of the modernization of farming. Since the 1990s there has been a renewal in research topics on rural areas. The adoption of new subjects for study is part of the growing refusal of the segregation between rural studies and urban studies. Social scientists are working to import into rural studies forms of questioning so far used mainly in urban areas. It is particularly in ethnic studies and gender studies that this transfer of perspectives has taken place, based on the idea that these issues are just as relevant in rural as in urban areas. The fact that these are particularly dynamic sectors of research in the social sciences, with a large number of workers looking for new domains of enquiry is not unimportant, of course, for this renewed interest in rural areas.

In terms of disciplines, geography is at the forefront of this renewal of rural studies. Much research belongs to the strand of cultural geography with geographers trying to prove its heuristic value for rural worlds. The emphasis is on the multiple social meanings of landscapes as opposed to an unequivocal and merely aesthetic conception of space. With an outlook that is sensitive to the relations between physical geography and moral geography, rural landscapes are first considered as imaginary places expressing and conditioning cultural attitudes. In this perspective of revealing the power of meaning of rural landscapes it is the national identification processes that are spotlighted in particular. Several authors show that the symbolic construction of the nation and its legitimation are related to the joint production of a certain image of the countryside (Daniels, 1993; Lowenthal, 1991; Matless, 1998). Rural and national rhetorics alike are closely allied, as captured by evocation of 'England's green and pleasant land'.

British rural studies, influenced by a 'cultural turn', apprehend rural areas as cultural constructs, points of contention and sources of power. These studies show that as an instrument for legitmizing membership of a specific nation, representations of the English countryside rely on the symbolic staging of a socially pacified and ethnically pure place, that is a place without class conflict and without non-white populations (Sibley, 1998). Rural scenery is mobilized as a symbol of English national identity: like whiteness or Anglo-Saxon character, they are part of the construction of a legitimate order. Thus the predominant rural image is one of a place that is white, orderly, pacified, unchanging, and so on.

Historical studies, particulary those of Kumar (2003) and Colley (1992), show that the association between countryside and Englishness dates essentially from the 19th century, a

period marked by intensive urbanization and industrialization. It was in this particular socio-economic context that a discourse on rural heritage arose and that a new form of nationalism appeared based on rural scenery and the forms of social life connected with it. Just when the traditional landowning elite was losing power and the country's wealth lay in trade and industry, attachment to the land remained a symbolic foundation of Englishness. The truth about England is seen in a disappearing world, in a world that is supposed not to be corrupted by urban and industrial civilization. In a distinctive movement specific to the identity-finding process, Englishness tends to be defined by what it is not—celtic, European, Catholic—and in particular by its remoteness from the urban world, which is associated with poverty and the break-up of community ties. So as Williams (1977) points out, the image of an unchanging, timeless English countryside is itself a historically situated, social construct. The predominant rural image is in constant movement, it is subject to social change and is part of processes of reproduction and re-invention. The supposed timelessness of the countryside is a modern-day weapon.

As well as being historically situated, the association of Englishness with the countryside is geographically situated too. It does not encompass all of the English countryside without distinction but is centred on specific rural areas, essentially the southern English counties (Scruton, 2000). Far from the Midlands or the moors of the North, it is above all the Home Counties, the counties around London, that are at the heart of the rural image of Englishness. This centrality of southern England is illustrated by the country scene on Newbould's wartime poster 'Your Britain, fight for it now!', an icon of rurality and of England featuring a painting of the South Downs. The symbolic imposition of one part of England as a symbol of English rural life and so of English identity is made that much more powerful as it tends to cover all of Britain, beyond just England. Britishness, structured around the values of the dominant English group, is often reduced to Englishness. The southern English countryside is equally at the heart of representations of British identity circulated in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The discursive power of rurality

The staging of the feeling of national identity runs through the discourse on rural heritage and the discourse allows city dwellers, whether they visit the countryside or not, to symbolically appropriate something that, none the less, remains economically in the hands of traditional elites. Englishness in its contemporary form is closely tied in with this eigheenth-

century invention of rural heritage. This timeless image of the countryside as the national heritage *par excellence* is found nowadays in political writing especially. Versions may differ. On the left, it is crafts, farm labour or community spirit of togetherness that is put to the fore. But generally it is above all on the conservative side that the image of rurality as the heart of Englishness is mobilized through the idea of a supposedly natural order that is to be maintained. The countryside, then, reflects the traditional hierarchy, country-houses, the role of the Church. Extreme-right groups defend the idea of a withdrawal into English villages seen as white racist bastions where the English way of life is preserved and kept away from the 'tainted' way of life of cosmopolitan conurbations. Norwich, the main city of Norfolk, is viewed by these organizations as England's last white city.

That Englishness is generally racialized has much to do with the place held by country life in the symbolism of the English nation. By enhancing in the definition of Englishness the image of the countryside, a place that is implicitly associated with white populations, what is signified in particular is that the 'true' England is white (Short, 1991; Milbourne, 1997). It should be emphasized again that this process extends to the whole of the British Isles: the implicit association of rural world and white population is equally relevant in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Far from all the talk about the multi-ethnicity of the United Kingdom that relates essentially to the big cities, the representation of rural areas remains marked by the traditional picture of a homogeneous white community (Halfacree, 1997).

Being supposedly free from any 'coloured' population, the dominant image of the countryside is of a problem-free place too. A haven of peace and tranquillity, the countryside is seen as a place that escapes the problems of the contemporary world. Problems that surface in public debate, under the influence of political and journalistic agendas, such as anti-social behaviour, immigration, terrorism or pollution are constructed as being essentially urban. By contrast with an image of the city and of its social problems, the predominant vision of the countryside, conveyed particularly by TV programmes, refers to an idyllic place with a close-knit community.

Rurality and otherness

Since the 1990s above all, much rural studies research has followed a general line of thought about what is considered as legitimately belonging to rural areas or not. Understanding the dominant vision of the English countryside reveals the omissions, the troublesome presence of groups that, being marginalized from the countryside, are

marginalized too in terms of 'national identity'. Confronted with the peacable, timeless image of the English countryside, an image that is mobilized as an attribute of Englishness, social scientists try to emphasize that the countryside is not a neutral place—that is purely aesthetic, socially peaceful, culturally homogeneous—but that it is on the contrary a political place marked by social struggles to appropriate it, involving conflictual relations of class, race and gender.

Rural studies thus progressively position the diversity of rural populations and shed light in particular on the transgressive elements of rural areas, that is, on problem groups within the dominant scheme of representation of the English countryside. Philo (1992) is the work that symbolizes this determination to redirect research at the consideration of the rural 'others'. Philo regrets that rural geography remains focused on traditional objects, that is, on socially powerful groups such as farmers, political decision-makers or even on middle-class newcomers He reviews the 'neglected rural geographies' that deserve more attention, these 'others' who are thought illegitimate in the countryside: gays, blacks, singles, etc. These groups are excluded from a zone of sameness dominated by Englishness, whites, heterosexuality and the middle class. They are transgressive elements relative to a romantic construction of rural worlds. To understand the symbolic and practical exclusion of these groups, Philo argues the analysis must be directed at the process that marginalizes them, the 'othering' process.

Generally, this appeal to a better understanding of phenomena of domination and exclusion from rural worlds is tied in with a 'post-modernist' problem. For workers taking this perspective, it is a matter of questioning the dominant languages and showing the multiple possible viewpoints of a single subject. They are part of the geographic cultural turn with emphasis on the power of discourse and on 'post-structural' phenomena. Their references are to French 'deconstructivist' authors like Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze or Jacques Derrida (Cloke et al., 1994; Cloke and Little, 1997). In short, the definition of rurality is considered as a practice of order: it imposes an idea of the countryside as a purified place where difference is viewed as deviance.

This development in rural studies is part of a general trend in British social sciences. While issues of domination related to class and property, notably with the work of Newby, prevailed in the 1970s and 1980s, since the 1990s thinking has turned more towards a more general study of marginalization in terms of gender, race, lifestyle, health and sexuality. British rural studies have come to apprehend more the question of national identity at the same time as they address above all the cultural aspects of social phenomena. Far from the

quantitative research sensitive to heavy economic and social factors that marked earlier decades, these studies rely primarily on interpreting texts or images and are interested mostly in the cultural construction of reality.

Ethnicity in the village

In this strategy of throwing light on the 'different others' ignored in the dominant image of the countryside, attention is focused above all on ethnic minorities. Counter to the common understanding that race is not an issue in rural areas because the population is necessarily white, several recent studies emphasize the ethnic heterogeneity and the phenomena of racial exclusion in the English countryside (Chakraborti and Garland, 2004). The main idea is that ethnic minorities are invisible in rural areas not because they are absent, on the contrary they are very much present, but because they are marginalized by the white population.

Tyler's (2006) ethnographic survey of a village near Leicester describes how the white middle class excludes south-east Asian families from the local social networks. These families, who are also well-to-do, are attracted to the area to set up businesses. They fall foul of the white commuter-residents' plans to form a 'village community'. In this suburban village, Asian shopkeepers are seen as a hindrance to the construction of the village as a site for reproducing a white middle-class homogeneity. In a similar perspective, Askins (2006) studies visitors belonging to visible minorities in national parks, emphasizing the relevance of the idea that natural areas belong to the white middle class. This stereotype of a necessarily white rural population is powerful too in Northern Ireland (Connolly, 2006), Wales (Robinson and Gardner, 2004) and Scotland (Lima, 2006), even if this is less true in Scotland because of declining local demography associated with the drive to create a multicultural identity.

This orientation of British rural studies to take account of rural racism reflects not just a direction in the social sciences towards this type of topic but also the emergence of these issues in public and political debate. The idea of rural racism came to the fore in 1992 with the *Keep Them in Birmingham* report published by the Commission for Racial Equality (Jay, 1992). This first report was followed by other reports on racism experienced by ethnic minorities in other regions such as *Not in Norfolk* (Derbyshire, 1994) published by the Norwich and Norfolk Racial Equality Council. It should be emphasized too that these racial issues were put on the academic agenda at the same time as anti-racist public campaigns were

underway particularly with the setting up of the Rural Anti-Racism Project in 1994 to promote racial equality in rural clubs and associations.

Notice that several militant associations for promoting the presence of blacks in the British countryside, whether permanently or as visitors, emerged in the late 1980s around a growing sense of ethnic minorities' environmental concerns. If several academics, like J. Agyeman turn to the history of the main such association, the Black Environnement Network, it is because they are part of this mobilization, which is essentially urban and middle class (Agyeman and Neal, 2006a : 110-119 ; Kinsman, 1997).

Anti-establishment rural counter-cultures

Besides the 'visible' minorities, rural studies cast light on various undesirable groups whose presence in the countryside is itself a potential source of challenge to the legitimate rural order. These are Gypsy Travellers and New Age Travellers or again ravers, who challenge the dominant definition of rurality. By focusing on these groups that are carriers of national narratives other than the dominant ones, several studies describe contemporary English countryside which, far from being a pool of ancestral traditions, may also be seen as a place of anti-establishment culture.

Gypsy Travellers are an unusual case in that they are illegitimate rural figures although they have long been present in the English countryside. For New Age Travellers the situation of exclusion is even more marked because these individuals of urban origin, recently established in particularly remote rural areas, are dismissed by their detractors as middle-class and juvenile (Lowe and Shaw, 1993; Hetherington, 2000). They are even less legitimate as countryfolk than Gypsies because unlike Gypsies they cannot successfully claim an ethnic origin and long-standing association with the countryside. They are denied any nomadic identity and any unusual religious belief: being remote from tradition and imagined rural sociability, they are associated with artificial demands related to urban, petty-bourgeois circles.

For Hetherington (2006) these people are trying to construct an ethnic, nomadic and rural identity that expresses a sense of belonging that is different from the dominant one because it rejects class and nation. In rejecting the idea of suburbia as they do, New Age Travellers mean to oppose not just the urban world but also more generally the British identity (Hetherington, 2006 : 183–184). They do not claim any particular national identity but rather form part of a loose collective identification marked by references drawn from Gypsy and

aboriginal peoples' culture or from celtic symbols: ancient sacred pagan sites, uninhabited old forests, Stonehenge, etc. Far from South-East England-centred Britishness, the rural areas at the heart of the image of New Age Travellers are the upland and moorland areas of Scotland, Wales and Cornwall, or the old droves and remaining pieces of common land. Hetherington thus endows New Age Travellers with a nomadic ethnic status that is not confined to the land of a nation-state, with a sense of belonging to a place without national identification.

In the face of rejection many New Age Travellers have left the United Kingdom, especially since 1994 and the passing of the Criminal Justice Act that imposed stricter regulations on setting up and moving in rural areas. The Act seeks to punish trespassing, to increase the power of the local authorities and the police to expel undersirable rural dwellers who, like New Age Travellers or ravers, are perceived as a threat to the way the countryside is viewed and used (Davis, 1997). What rural studies put their finger on is that the government and traditional rural elites work to impose an idea of rurality against other groups that are preceived as urban and are deemed not to be legitimately rural.

The historical struggle to appropriate the countryside

This topic of the political control of rural worlds leads us on to another issue at the centre of research on 'rural others', that of conflicts for the appropriation of rural areas. Contemporary rural studies highlight various social movements that aim to claim better access to the rural world. And defending one's right to be in the countryside is, for these workers, also a way of demanding access to national identity. Significantly Neal and Agyeman (2006b) pick up on the concept of 'social citizenship' as formulated by Marshall (1992) to propose lines of enquiry into the idea of 'rural citizenship'. Marshall identifies three forms of citizenship: civic (fundamental human rights and rights of citizens), political (right to elect one's representatives) and social (social rights and search for economic well-being). These three types of rights refer to various principles of equality and have been successively won by an evolutionary model associating citizenship with the Welfare State. For Neal and Agyeman, 'rural citizenship can then be drawn on here as a useful concept through which to describe the rights and entitlements to the symbolic geographic and social spaces that make up rural England' (Neal and Agyeman, 2006b : 102).

Several historical episodes are then mentioned or rediscovered by British ruralists, for there is a long history of popular struggle for access to rural areas down to the present day. In his enquiry on New Age Travellers, Hetherington (2006) shows how they stage-manage a

tradition of resistance which they see themselves as continuing. They attach the defence of their way of life to a history of popular protest that dervies from reactions to the Enclosure Acts by which landowners closed access to their property. As the heirs of 'commoners', they see their movement as part of a centuries-old struggle for the defence of rights to common land in a history of conflict over access. Apart from the Gypsies already mentioned or other nomads like the Tinkers (Irish Travellers), they refer also to the Diggers of the English Civil War or to illegal camps of religious communities.

The historical episode particularly mentioned by social scientists when evoking conflicts over the appropriation of rural areas is that of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries involving urban workers. These working class struggles for the right to roam are seen as a legacy for contemporary struggles. Given its impetus initially by preachers, this working class entry into the countryside was for an edifying purpose: it was to get workers away from public houses and to promote their appreciation of nature and noble leisure. Then, between the wars, the movement became more political with the setting up of socialist rambling organizations. The Liverpool, Sheffield and Manchester federations took mass illegal action for access to unfarmed land, moors and uplands (Bunce, 1994 : 180 ; Darby, 2002 : 136)

The biggest conflicts were in the Peak District (Derbyshire) between landowners and ramblers from the workers' associations of the surrounding localities, Sheffield and Manchester. Helped by the local railway network, they organized mass demonstrations on the moor. The emblematic event was the Mass Trespass of Kinder Scout in the Derbyshire Peak District on 24 April 1932 at the instigation of the British Workers Sports Federation, a communist organization. It was a mass invasion of private property on the tops of Kinder Scout, moorland near Sheffield where access was prohibited to the public as the landowners wanted it for grouse shooting. The trespass, denounced by the conservative press as a Jewish and Communist plot, involved 300 people, several of whom were re-offenders, and led to many convictions.

This urban movement against the closure of public rights of way and of common land and for the right to roam is seen as the continuation of the rural movements against enclosure. Such struggles were an opportunity to re-assert a customary Anglo-Saxon law and to claim the right to full British citizenship. They are considered a founding event, a mould from which other contemporary moblizations can be understood, such as that of the Black Environnement Network referred to above.

Behind thematic innovations, what classificatory categories are there?

Before concluding, let us very briefly underscore some unusual aspects of the work referred to compared with French research. My reading of British literature has been from a French position, a country where the themes mentioned in this paper are quite simply not addressed. French rural sociology is struggling to free itself from typically agricultural subjects and problems in terms of modernization. It has developed as a sub-discipline, essentially in seclusion, meaning that there is no trace of issues like racism that derive rather from urban studies.

While, from a French standpoint, it seems obvious that British research is of interest in terms of the renewal of topics of study, the same is perhaps not true of the way these new areas and the 'rural others' are apprehended. The work of Pierre Bourdieu and, more specifically for the understanding of national identification processes, of Noiriel (2005) means that an introspective attitude with regard to the categories used has gradually imposed itself in France, an attitude that has no currency in most British rural studies. There is no escaping the observation that British rural scientists adopt classificatory categories arising in political debate in the ordinary meaning without questioning their scientific relevance. The usage of ideas of 'ethnic' or 'visible' minorities to essentialize groups can only make French readers feel uneasy. Ethnicity is applied loosely to various groups with no understanding of what the characterization is based on: colour; a sense of belonging; a different country of origin? It is applied equally to New Age Travellers or to 'Asians', so termed when they are British citizens who do not live in Asia, or again to Blacks who would seem then to form a separate ethnic group because they have what is perceived as a different physical appearance.

This troublesome categorization relates more generally to a more literary than sociological approach taken by British rural studies. The cultural turn claimed is reflected by a reduction in the materials for analysing discourse, images and other cultural productions: the studies often skimp on the sociology of the groups studied and their social practices. We are a long way from the founding sociological works of Newby, for example. Notice in this respect that the interest in phenomena of domination in rural areas was already found in some works in the 1970s that looked more especially into relations between newcomers and already established country dwellers. This domination was then apprehended in terms of class or in problems of suburbanization around the break up of village society into various groups. In contemporary work, on the contrary, relations of dominance are often reduced to a simple decontextualized symbolic imposition. More generally, 'rural' is not apprehended as a

specific *context* in which socio-economic processes are studied but as a discursively constructed *concept* relating to multiple meanings. Postmodern analyses seek less to identify groups and to analyse their practices than to emphasize that nothing henceforth is sure and that the interplay of multiple identities around 'rurality' must be brought to the fore. The sociological shortcomings of such research, concerned primarily as it is with discussing concepts like fludity, otherness or place, by mobilizing allusively a little survey material (interview excerpts, an image) are considerable.

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Growing allowance for cultural aspects in British rural studies since the 1990s has led social scientists to shed light on the image of the countryside that goes to the heart of Englishness. They emphasize how the dominant norms of rurality convey a definition of legitimate membership of the nation and examine 'rural others'—the urban working class, young anti-establishment protesters, nomads, ancient colonized peoples—whose problematic presence in the countryside questions Englishness itself.

In concluding it can be mentioned that by taking an interest in phenomena of dominance in the rural world, British researchers are progressively led to address a new question, that of the challenge to the dominant order in the countryside. Apart from the fragilization of the farmers' position (Milbourne 1997), the progressive 'othering' of hunters with the fox-hunting ban is the symbol of this (Woods, 2005). Thus, if the emphasis since the 1990s has been on 'rural others' this is also because the traditional elites of rural areas are less and less dominant.

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