Fashioning National Identity in 19th Century Britain

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to underline several features displayed in the representation of the nineteenth- century Englishness, which emphasize the constructedness of national identity.

For this aim I have chosen three materials that, in my opinion, are illustrative examples of the way Britain' s imperial mission was propagated through visual media.

The first one, 'Blacks celebrating the Emancipation of Slaves in British dominions' (1834), is discussed in close relation with the social impact of the abolition of slavery in 1833. Further on, I will focus on another colonial discourses—the cover image of True as Steel, an adventure novel written by G. A. Henty in the 1880s. Last, I have chosen for analysis an illustration from Heroes of Britain in Peace and War by E. Hodder (1894), which shows a clear shift of perspective: here, savages were no longer 'good', but, on the contrary, they could be civilized only by armed force.

Key Words*: imperialism, national identity, Britishness, discourse, politics*

National Identity—A Matter of Difference. First, a few considerations are to be made with regard to the notion of national identity and its fashioning, with a special reference to Britishness in the nineteenth century.

The institutional practices which articulate the discourse of identity as national (for "nations themselves are narrations", Said 1993: xiii) function ideologically. Therefore, national identity is one of the naturalized notions that work both ideologically and politically within a field of power relations that, as N. Fairclough has shown (cf. 1989: 34), are always involving struggle: one cannot speak about the existence of a single national identity, but rather of contesting national identit*ies* (Hall 1993: 240).

Apparently paradoxically, as T. Eagleton states in 'Nationalism: Irony and Commitment', in order to gain its centrality, the dominant discourse needs to set itself off against its other, to construct its sameness through a politics of difference (1992: 30).

With imperialism, European-made discourses on otherness, be them Americanist (cf. Todorov 1994), or Orientalists, or Africanist (cf. Said 1978, 1993), display the same political perspective on the white's necessity of giving shape and meaning and, ultimately, of disciplining and mastering. In fact, the imperial ideology itself "promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (The Orient, the East, 'them')" (Said 1978:43) in order to justify the European superiority and its right of ruling over the weaker.

British national identity constructed in the nineteenth century bears all the marks of the imperial project of providing the norm for the entire Empire. Defining it is a matter of representation, which means that the colonialist discourse is relevant for the way the British view themselves in relations with the colonized world at that time.

Said's (1978) considerations on the Orientalist texts are particularly important since they are also valid, by extent, for the Western representation of otherness in general. With him, the

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Western representation of the non-European peoples and culture are the product of their authors' exteriority, i.e. of their non-belonging to the world described, both in the existential and in moral sense:

The exteriority of the representation is always governed by some version of truism that if the Orient could represent itself, it would; since it cannot, the representation does the job, for the West, and *faute de mieux*, for the poor Orient. (Said 1978: 22)

The nineteenth-century celebrations of humanity, Christianity, civilization, of which S. Raven's paining is one example, were actually inscribing the Western discourse of difference onto the other, and, on the other hand, they shared all the features of a propagandistic apparatus meant to reinforce the middle-class ethos.

As C. Hall argues, at that time, national identity was articulated by middle class men:
Their search for a masculine independence, for a secure identity, was built on their assertion of their superiority over a decadent aristocracy; over dependent females; over children, servants, and employees; over the peoples of the Empire […]; over all *others* who were not English, male and middle class. (1993: 241)

At Said's suggestion, such representations as the one discussed below can also be thought of as 'protective enclosures' (cf. 1993: xiv) as they function as an ideological fuel for the fashioning of British nationality as an imperial identity.

Inventing and Representing Traditions. In his introduction to *The Invention of Tradition* (1992), E. Hobsbawn suggests that the national phenomenon—a suitably tailored discursive construct (cf. 1992: 14)—cannot be dissociated from 'invented traditions', a concept defined as

… a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with a suitable historic past.

British traditions invented in Africa helped the new settlers define themselves as natural masters and provided the colonized peoples new models of subservience (T. Ranger 1992:211).

Icons of invented traditions are present in Raven's painting in close relation to the promulgation of the Emancipation Act of 1833 and its humanitarian values associated with freedom: Christianity, education, free-labor economy—the promoter of the idea of self profit work (*homo oeconomicus*).
Raven's painting represents a family of former slaves enjoying their freedom: the central axis is marked by the stature of the black male waving his hands and stepping on a whip. The rest of the characters are positioned on his sides: on his right, his wife sits next to a book and holds her newborn child, while his other three children stand on the left. These young ones break a pair of handcuffs with a mining bit, an image similar with the one in the background in which the clouds are being scattered by the sunrays.
That the Western cultural discourse is grafted onto the 'savage' nature is made quite visible by all sorts of 'wrapping' textures as the written page on the palm tree, the 'holly word' in the Book, 'enlightening' sunrays on the landscape, and last but not least, the clothes on the black bodies.

Both the images of the book and of the newborn baby, on the one hand, and that of the black man's posture, on the other, recall the iconography of the greatest Christian moments:

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nativity and, respectively, crucifixion. These elements are completed by the light of the sun coming from above that stands for divine and, on another hierarchy, for white man's reason.

As for the necessity of clothing, there is at stake another Western conceiving of the naked body as vulnerable not only physically but socially, too. Conversely, clothing gives the body safety and prestige as markers of wealth and social class. In this case, the characters' clothes and their bare feet clearly define black people as servants.

The transparency of this discourse is obvious and this is meant to be so, for its function is highly propagandistic:

All propaganda or popularization involves a putting of the complex into simple, but such a move is instantly deconstructive, for if the complex *can* be put into the simple, then it is not as complex as it seemed in the first place; and if the simple can be an adequate medium of such complexity, then it cannot, after all, be as simple as all that. (T. Eagleton 'The Critic as Clown', quoted in J. Harley 1992: 43)

L. Colley sees the promulgation of the Emancipation Act of 1833 in closely relation to the first Reform Act of 1832 and to the Catholic emancipation of 1829, that marked Britishness as a redefined nation (cf. 1992: 321-362). In the years to come:

Successful abolitionism became one of the vital underpinnings of British supremacy in the Victorian era, offering […] irrefutable proof that British power was founded on religion, on freedom and on moral caliber, not just on a superior stock of armaments and capital. (359)

Heroes of Britain in War and Peace. The missionary discourse of the 1830s and 1840s promoted equality in order to suppress the resistant other, i. e. mitigated for another form of cultural racism in which black people were "all God's children, but younger brothers and sisters who must be educated and led by their older white siblings" (C. Hall 1993: 242). In the second half of the nineteenth century this type of discourse collapsed and a more militant and militarist one came to the fore.

A product of the fear of other militarist European nationalisms, the popularity of the army was infused by an appropriate ideology. Warfare became the principal medium through which the idea of racial difference was diffused to the public at large (cf. MacKenzie 1990:2-14).)

As E. Said suggests, imperial politics and culture are strongly connected (1993:7). For example, in popular literature, concepts of race were related to the imperative of conflict between cultures as sample of the white man's superiority. The outstanding model of master people that the British hero stood for strengthened a military cult of personality.

One of the most important literary genres, adventure books fed that interest in warfare by drawing on heroic exploits that blended armed conflict with exoticism. Correspondingly, the ideology of imperialism laid at the core of nineteenth-century juvenile literature.

The cover picture of *True as Steel*, one of G. A. Hanty's eighty-two boy's adventure novels, is demonstrative for the imperial ideology of the age. The focus is on the stature of the British soldier fashioned as the imperial superman ready to fight against no matter what in order to defeat the evil represented by the other colored men on his left. His comrade lies dead as his feet but it can only be an honorable death since the noble British deeds always occur under the protection of the Union Jack. All the characters are in fact mere stereotypes polarized around two distinctive models: the brave, self-confident white as opposed to the coward, evil black.

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The same power relation is depicted in the picture inserted in E. Hodder's *Heroes of Britain in Peace and War* (1894). The book draws on the myth of the hero-explorer that legitimizes knowledge of the outer world by the power he, as a British eyewitness, is endowed with. More precisely, the story is based on J. H. Speke's journey in Central Africa searching of the source of the Nile. This picture is sought to illustrate the moment when the King of Uganda, who sheltered him for several months, is about to strike his wife down with a thick stick.
This Africanist text constructs Britishness along ethnic, religious and gendered axes of power. Moreover, it indulges the readers to see the naturalized values of British culture as superior to the tyranny of the savage.

Once again, the colonial discourse inculcates the idea that "binary oppositions do indeed organize the world, along familiar racist and imperial lines" (J. Hartley 1992: 51).

Conclusion. The fact that pictures involve a certain politics is a theory admirably dealt with by J. Hartley, who explains that

Pictures are objective traces of socio-semiotic struggles (conflict). allegiances (consensus), and ideologies (sense-making practices), right across the spectrum from big-deal public politics to intimate personal culture. The material reality of picture allows for the recovery and critical interrogation of discursive politics in an 'empirical' form; pictures are neither scientific data nor historical documents, but they are, literally, *forensic* evidence. (1992:29)

This is why the pictures I have focused on in this paper are regarded as 'talking' of the institutions they have been produced and used by, for political purposes, both from the social and cultural points of view.

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