

## Unidentified National Objects

Ian McKay

Volume 28, 1991

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt28re01>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

McKay, I. (1991). Unidentified National Objects. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 28, 285–294.

# REVIEW ESSAYS / NOTES CRITIQUES

## Unidentified National Objects

Ian McKay

Raphael Samuel, ed., *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity. I: History and Politics. II: Minorities and Outsiders. III: National Fictions* (London and New York: Routledge 1989).

THERE ARE 57 ARTICLES, together accounting for over a thousand pages, in this History Workshop examination of patriotism. A diligent reader will emerge with fresh insights into the mythical John Bull and Britannia, into reggae and into "Greensleeves," into Joseph Conrad and into the English country garden. Here, as one has come to expect from *History Workshop*, are pages crowded with detail and brimming with life. They range from engaging first-person accounts of childhood and adolescence to highly abstract discussions of literature, from left-wing polemics against demagogic nationalism to pristinely academic dissections of obscure texts and mythologies. Some of the essays are fairly venerable reprints from other books, others are lightly edited comments from the 1984 Workshop which preceded this collection. One pulls up several old boots (the research for one piece was done in 1966!) and numerous new and undeveloped minnows when fishing in this vast heterogeneous collection, but when there is so much, and so much that is richly nourishing and suggestive, it seems almost churlish to lodge the inevitable complaints about unevenness, or to bemoan the looseness of the conceptualization, the self-indulgently confessional and "amateur" tone, and the complacency with which utterly opposed readings of nationalism and history are merely juxtaposed and never compared or assessed, or to lament the vagueness of the entire project's

Ian McKay, "Unidentified National Objects," *Labour/Le Travail*, 28 (Fall 1991), 285-94.

definition. (We never learn, for example, just what is meant by the phrase "national identity" which supposedly refers to the phenomenon whose "making and unmaking" we have been tracking over a thousand pages.) This is empiricist social history; theory, debates over method, definitions, and ideological starting-points are all obscured by the luxuriant undergrowth of empirical detail and fascinating anecdote. It makes for a wonderful, if often quite perplexing, read.

Where there is no unifying theory, decisions to include or exclude readings can and do seem capricious. This is most clearly the case in Vol. 2, on "Minorities and Outsiders," by far the weakest of the three, which reprints old stuff and dismisses the inconvenient Celtic fringe with two short articles, one an overly detailed examination of the exhausted topic of Sir Walter Scott, and the other a crudely utilitarian and panglossian apologia for the marginalization of the Welsh language. Perplexing, contradictory, fascinating, and occasionally dazzling: the qualities of this heterogeneous collection are like those of the nationalism it explores. The reader is advised to read Samuel's introductory essay and then pick and choose from the following volumes those pieces which pertain most to his or her own interests.

Nationalism and "National questions" have long represented one of the most glaring deficiencies of Marxist theory and the historiographies dependent on it. Marx proclaimed that workingmen had no country, then proceeded to counsel the proletariat to become the first class in the nation: and Marxists since Marx have been no less contradictory, as they have inched towards a comprehension of nationalism that avoids the twin traps of economism and elitism (compellingly intertwined when the Marxist theorist assumes the noble mantle of the Enlightenment and, from his or her position high above the cut and thrust of political debate, adjudicates the various degrees of "progressiveness" — or even the ontological status — of whatever nationalism has reached the top of the agenda). Marxist political economy and much marxist labour history dispenses with the national problem by placing national identity under a *ceteris paribus* clause. It is a simple matter of commonsense, of "pragmatic research strategy," to take national definitions for granted — to begin ("since one must begin somewhere") with the nation-state as a given. Other things being equal: the definitions of political economy work most happily when there is an unproblematical national boundary enclosing them. One speaks quite easily, for example, of *Canadian working-class history*, and proceeds to use categories from political economy and labour history, often developed in other national contexts, to construct the narrative of this "Canadian working class," which is taken to be a real entity with a history, common traditions, unifying interests. Yet how do we mean this word "Canadian?" Does it merely define a local stage where the universal and international drama of class formation happens to unfold (but then why should the marxist internationalist focus on so small and insignificant a stage?) Or does the Canadian stage structure in some sense the content of the unfolding class drama? An Enlightenment Marxism, disdainful of nationalism, particularism, and regionalism, instructs the labour

historian to marginalize questions of belonging which do not stem from class (or, today, "class-and-gender"). Yet, as often as it is expressed, the national question returns: it haunts the very definition of the central category of our analysis, "the Canadian working class," in which an ostensible internationalism is subverted by the (problematical and contestable) nationalist assumption that there is in a singular Canada such a unified social entity as "a" nation: that boundaries of class and "nation" (however defined) somehow coincide and reinforce one another. A kind of nationalism has been naturalized through the unexamined use of a highly ambiguous adjective. *Canadian working class history* remains a deeply ambiguous and problematical phrase.

These conceptual difficulties are not ours alone: there are plainly many parallels in Britain. Raphael Samuel's introduction to Vol. I is exemplary for honestly facing up to the dilemma faced by History Workshop in analyzing the problematical concept of the British national identity. The project of "People's History" contributed, he argues, to a certain nostalgic folk nationalism, in its fascination with the peculiarities of the English. Thus any debunking of "Englishness" would come perilously close to bringing the whole trajectory of History Workshop into question. Radical history has its own doctrines of essentialism, its own ways of assigning people in the past to their positions at the "core" and at the "periphery" of historical significance. Enthusiasm for the "Freeborn Englishman" appealed to the notion of a national essence of individual rights and freedoms; painstakingly detailed reconstructions of rural villages suggested a "true" English countryside. Samuel balks at the "invention of tradition" approach, which had initially inspired some of the contributors to the Workshop. (One could envisage an invention of the "English tradition" to parallel Trevor-Roper's famous dissection of the Highland Tradition of Scotland). For Samuel, what is wrong with the "invention of tradition" is that, in the case of England, national "traditions" are often of considerable age, and the approach does not lend itself to perceptive analysis of the uses to which various traditions are put. Yet Samuel clarifies the reasons for his rejection of the "invention of tradition" school, when he equates it with "debunking" or even with "deconstruction" (an equation which Trevor-Roper and Eric Hobsbawm might find rather mystifying). The critique of the "invention of tradition" (which in fact relativizes only certain wounded minority traditions, leaving unscathed the esteemed academics' own, and which implies a "natural" division between traditions invented and those somehow "uninvented") could have been taken in a very different and more interesting direction than this. In the end, and with many reservations, Samuel still wants to preserve the oneness of the nation, whose molecules and organs, in all their plurality, are visualized (via Edmund Burke) as the "little platoons" of a comprehensible British whole.

There seems to be no underlying ideological orientation to this collection, and yet again there is: the radical pluralism of post-Marxist social theory provides the writers with an implicit vocabulary, and underwrites the (implicit) idea that first-person confessions and narratives are entitled to the same consideration as the

academically researched paper. There is both crudity and sophistication here. Most of the historians seem largely to have shielded themselves from the Birmingham Cultural Studies tradition, from theorists and historians who have dealt with anti-modernism in comparative context, from Frankfurt critiques of cultural industries, and from Marxist and post-Marxist work on aesthetics. They have, surely consciously, distanced themselves from Gramsci, who has been eclipsed by more fashionable theorists (and who is even in one of these pieces dismissed, inaccurately, as a crude social control theorist!) One can see an easy fit between the vocabularies of neo-Thompsonian People's History and post-Marxist radical pluralism: the second radicalizes the anti-essentialism, voluntarism and democratic radicalism of the first. There are valuable theoretical gains here, a new awareness of multiple and shifting vocabularies of identity, a more conscious sense of the existence of oppressions irreducible to class, and an unavoidable acknowledgement of the contingencies and uncertainties of "belonging." There is also a tremendous loss: in so crudely dismissing Gramsci, the People's Historians condemn much of their analysis to political inconsequence, they commit themselves to an unrealistically plural notion of a thousand blooming identities, and forget that discourses of the state, armoured by legitimate violence and magnified a hundred-fold by the educational and propaganda apparatuses, set limits for those of everyone else. (That this process of official pedagogy is complex, subtle and dialectical does not mean that it does not happen). It seems bizarre, in a collection directly inspired by the political fall-out from the Falklands War, and dealing with something so intrinsically political as national identity, to find that the state is at best a shadowy presence, never theorized, never directly analyzed. We never learn how the state manipulates the "nation," and the battery of Gramscian concepts — which of course need to be handled subtly and carefully — which might have helped to give a theoretical depth to such inquiry have been cast overboard as so much excess Marxist baggage. Jettisoned with them is the possibility of synthesizing the hundreds of *aperçus* one finds in this collection — many of them valuable — into something resembling a political or social theory of British national identity. We "cover all the bases": all the major interest groups are represented here, even if sometimes rather meagerly (as in the cases of the "nations within nations" and the sexual minorities), in a kind of Cook's Tour of leading British identities, but the logic of identity-formation, and the place of the state as the decisive arena in which the language of identity is solidified, formalized, and then made a kind of official truth, escapes us.

According to Raphael Samuel, "We are all majorities or minorities, insiders or outsiders, aristocrats or peasants, depending on the optic under which we are viewed." But whose optic? Are "optics" equally powerful? Doesn't this leave us with a vast buzzing plurality of discourses, and with a sense of the social system that takes leave, not just of Marxism, but of the institutional realities of our own daily lives? Stuart Hall articulates a non-essentialist and non-reductionist counter-position to this radical pluralism very well in an important article on Thatcherism:

The social distribution of knowledge is skewed. And since the social institutions most directly implicated in its formation and transmission — the family/school/media triplet — are grounded in and structured by the class relations that surround them, the distribution of the available codes with which to decode or unscramble the meaning of events in the world, and the languages we use to construct interests, are bound to reflect the unequal relations of power that obtain in the area of symbolic production as in other spheres. Ruling or dominant conceptions of the world do not directly prescribe the mental content of the illusions that supposedly fill the heads of the dominant classes. But the circle of dominant ideas does accumulate the symbolic power to map or classify the world for others; its classifications do acquire not only the constraining power of dominance over other modes of thought but also the inertial authority of habit and instinct. It becomes the horizon of the taken for granted; what the world is and how it works, for all practical purposes. Ruling ideas may dominate other conceptions of the social world by setting the limit to what will appear as rational, reasonable, credible, indeed sayable or thinkable, within the given vocabularies of motive and action available to us. Their dominance lies precisely in the power they have to contain within their limits, to frame within the circumference of thought, the reasoning and calculation of other social groups. The 'monopoly of the means of mental production' — or of the 'cultural apparatuses', to use a more modern phrasee — is not, of course, irrelevant to this acquisition over time of symbolic dominance vis-a-vis other, less coherent and comprehensive accounts of the world. Nor do they have literally to displace other ideas with illusions in order to acquire a hegemonic position over them. Ideologies may not be affixed, as organic entities, to their appropriate classes, but this does not mean that the production and transformation of ideology in society could proceed free of or outside the structuring lines of force of power and class.

...The discursive relations of power cannot be constituted exclusively on the terrain of the state. They precisely crisscross the social body. There is no moment in which the powers that cohere in the state can ever exhaustively resume those that are dispersed through the plurality of practices in society. Nevertheless, the moment of the passage of power into the state and its condensation there into a definite system of rule is a critical historical moment, representing a distinct phase....Thatcherism, as a discursive formation, has remained a plurality of discourses — about the family, the economy, national identity, crime, law, women, human nature. But precisely a certain unity has been constituted out of this diversity.<sup>1</sup>

We could say in response to this collection: there are indeed a thousand molecular identities, a hundred different national histories, countless childhood appropriations of "history," yet this plurality of discourses is condensed, within the state, into a certain powerful unity, an official concept of the "nation." Some national fictions, some symbolic landscapes, some exemplary heroes are more powerful than others: and they are so by virtue of state power. This collection seems to have been structured around a silence about the state, and by an avoidance of

<sup>1</sup>Stuart Hall, "The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism Among the Theorists," in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press 1988), 44-5, 53.

the more powerful, non-essentialist Marxist theories of the state and history. Does this absence reflect a political position or the historians' persistent dismissal of the "Poverty of Theory"? Whatever the cause, it leaves us with a sense of the vast continent of Patriotism that is at once proliferous and impoverished. Thatcherite nationalism, the frenzied enthusiasm with which the British rallied round the flag in a pointless war over a remote island, haunts the various contributors to the collection, but not one picks up on the leading analyses of the phenomenon nor devotes sustained, critical attention to the nationalization of national identity itself. It is very puzzling.

Part of the Left response to Falklands Fever was to try to find out whether there was anything progressive to be saved from nationalism — to try, as some said, to place a "requisition order" on patriotism for the Left. (Christopher Hill is the most articulate exponent of a "Left Patriotism" in this collection). Whether the Left should attempt to draw upon "British nationalism" as a progressive force is fiercely debated, although the lines of debate are complicated (and rather more so than Samuel implies in his introduction). The debate between E.J. Hobsbawm and Tom Nairn in the *New Left Review* still echoes in these pages. Hobsbawm, echoing Lenin, had warned Nairn against "painting nationalism red," and insisted upon the true Marxist intellectual's duty to resist the nationalist temptation; yet he later suggested that the Left try to regain some of the ground of "patriotism" ceded to the Right. From this orthodox perspective, nationalism might serve the Marxist Left, but "it" would be an external "resource" ("ground to be captured," rather than a valuable, alternative "way of seeing," or an "optic" in its own right). Nairn, whose seminal *The Break-Up of Britain* constitutes (with Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*) one of the few theoretically innovative works from the British Left on national questions, is represented in this collection in a suggestive essay on the romance of the British monarchy. Nairn calls into question the possibility of a "progressive" English/British nationalism, and uses a revised (but still orthodox) sense of teleology to suggest that far from having transcended the nationalism that appeals to the primitive Celts on their borders, the English, with their pan-British Royal Romance, are locked in a kind of pre-democratic, pre-republican time warp, trapped in a centuries-old "transition" to the modern nation-state. Neither here nor in his earlier work is Nairn "painting nationalism red." He has always seen nationalism as a Janus-faced instrument of development, which the English, if they wish to join the modern world of liberal democracy, will ultimately have to use.

The central dilemma for the Left, in any attempts to validate "English" nationalism, is the somber record of British imperialism. The 'Freeborn Englishman' might be the staunch opponent of the overbearing tyranny of the ruling class and his own employer, and in this democratic guise inspired marxist history; but he is also seen here as the racist, sexist, and viciously francophobic bearer of traditions which could never be incorporated into any progressive politics. Among the less pleasant peculiarities of the English is the complacent naturalization of the idea that a tiny minority of white, privileged men should rule the world. Even

popular radicalism at the end of the Eighteenth Century — when some of the historians consider that modern “English” nationalism got off the ground, in the struggle against the French and the Scots — emerges from this new work as something more like Thatcherism than we had been led by an earlier romantic tradition to expect. (A persistent theme in the discussion of the volume on “National Fictions” is how often “Englishness” has been constructed through the demonization of the scrawny, unnatural, overcivilized — perhaps today we would add: overly abstract and insufficiently empiricist — French.) Mid-nineteenth century working-class imperialism and militarism might have reflected the breakdown of the working-class identity, or it might be seen (more paradoxically yet more persuasively) as the assertion of a different kind of working-class identity, as might the “white solidarity” on the very eve of the Great War, when British workers rallied powerfully to the support of their white comrades in South Africa, confronting the menace of “foreign” and black labour. As more than one scholar points out, there was always something insulting and one-dimensional about the view of Victorian workers as passive dupes of the rhetoric of Race and Empire.

The burden of these volumes is surely to make us far more cautious in making any easy connections between nationalism and class. The two interact and intersect in far more complex ways than any easy denunciations of the Fabians or Second International “patriotism” will allow. The debate over the “progressive” or “reactionary” qualities of nationalism was always simplistic and has now surely been superseded. The assumptions incorporated within this old debate (such as that of an unequivocal and universal meaning of “progress” and of a purely abstract language of progressive political economy uninfected by nationalist categories) are no longer persuasive. The formation of collective identities is too complex to be so neatly categorized.

The fascinating case of the “black identity” in Britain, for example, shows how an identity can be both “invented” and “real.” The people who arrived in Britain from various Caribbean islands had little in common with each other. They brought with them a complex notion of a hierarchy of human shades — a “multi-layered pigmentocracy,” through which one could establish identity and social status, according to quite precise measures of the amount of “white blood” in one’s ancestry. Once in Britain, however, they were all judged to be “blacks,” and they gradually came to see themselves this way, too, forgetting the complex typologies of “whiteness” which had once precisely determined their social identities. At the same time, they have not come to identify closely with Asians, with whom they maintain a peaceful but cold coexistence. It is a fine example of how identities are always relative, always simultaneously imposed from without by dominant social classes, and invented from within as ways of negotiating one’s way in a challenging world. Asking whether this complex labour of identity is “progressive” or “reactionary” seems to be a fine example of a badly posed question.

The more interesting debate examined in these volumes is that over the “Politics of Memory.” Like certain American conservatives, alarmed that the



young are not being properly indoctrinated in high schools and universities, some British commentators are alarmed over the breakdown of a sense of national history in Britain. Raphael Samuel himself evokes an eerie sense of a desolate Britain, as a kind of vast nostalgia theme park, in which North American individualism has eroded older identities and even the Rhondda Valley has been "heritaged" and aestheticised. It seems familiar — part of a transnational transition to retro chic that has far from run its course. The less the actual circumstances of the British resemble those of a national community, the more fiercely sound appeals to the "traditional" and "value-laden." (Thatcher, who notoriously denied the existence of "society," nonetheless also appealed to Victorian values.)

Here and elsewhere one wishes there had been a more sustained engagement in this collection with the literature on historical reconstruction and on both anti- and post-modernism. In this cultural moment, the very possibility of identity, whether personal or national, is eroding: Orwell's appeals to a "national essence" of decency, tolerance, and ordinariness now seem sadly dated in a post-Falklands epoch. (And Orwell is masterfully dissected as a conservative and sexist figure in this collection.) "History" as a great unifying narrative, as a source or a root, as an inspiration for individual action and the core of personal identity, is dying if it has not already expired; and what replaces it is randomness, spontaneity, and ecstatic sensation. Even attempts to resuscitate the dream of "national history," such as Alun Howkins' idea of preserving a (relativistically conceived) "nation" at the heart of the curriculum, seem light years removed from "nationalism." We have not had, at least since the early 1970s, a full-scale debate on the uses of history in Canada, but when it happens, it will learn much from the valuable papers here. Carolyn Steedman ("True Romances") soothes the conservatives (if no one else) by pointing out that, in the actual conditions of the classroom, children are still in touch with a highly conservative romance of history: what children actually do with the history they are taught is complexly related to their struggle to achieve their own identities separate from those of their parents. Her tentative attempt to describe the child's relationship to history is the collection's most theoretically original and useful contribution to the growing literature on historical reconstruction: a useful corrective for those of us who have too easily assumed that the state can write its histories on the *tabula rasa* of the public.

What is most valuable about *Patriotism* as a collection is that it provides readers with a sense of a wide panorama of theoretical positions and empirical work, from the commonsense, resolutely empiricist work of Rodney Hilton (who provocatively asks: "Were the English English?" — assuming, characteristically, that there is an "essence" of Englishness which we can know and which would allow us to adjudicate this question), Deborah Thom (who examines "Tommy's Sister: Women at Woolwich in World War I") and Louis James (who looks at "Inverted Emblems for Albion: Wellington and Napoleon on Stage"), to work directly influenced by contemporary critical theory, such as Stephen Howe on "Labour patriotism," Anthony Barnett on "After nationalism," Benita Parry on

"Conrad and England," Peter Stallybrass on "Time, space and unity: the symbolic discourse of *The Faerie Queen*," and Preben Kaarsholm on "Kipling and masculinity" (which draws on the work of Klaus Theweleit to illuminate the neurotic misogyny of an Imperial author whose British and Canadian impact was immense). Jeanine Surel's study of "John Bull," which stresses the polysemic nature of caricature, yet which retains a serious interest in tracking the connections between caricature and class, might be usefully read by those who are unconvinced by the extravagant claims made by various camps that marxism and the analysis of discourse might be unalterably opposed to each other. Peter Stallybrass's brilliant work on the metaphor of enclosure and the mapping of space, which echoes Ernst Gellner's insight that nationalism is not the awakening of nations to "self-consciousness," but the invention of nations where they did not previously exist, discerns in the *Faerie Queen* the construction of an imaginary civilized unity — One god, one rule, one kingdom, one isle — through the antithesis of England and barbaric Ireland, the "not-England" of sexual incontinence, lawlessness, Popery and poverty.

Of all the general assessments of the idea of national identity, Anthony Barnett's "After Nationalism" is the most eloquent. He argues forcefully against "monolithic, singular definitions of national identity," the source of historical yet essentially unchanging national character. He suggests rethinking the very concept of national "sovereignty": "What I am trying to argue is that the pooling of sovereignty does indeed mean the end of that aspect of it which cannot exist if it is shared — the monopoly claim that it makes on the souls and lives of the subjects that it rules — and this is welcome. Rather than seek to make the monopoly 'ours' we should prefer its dissolution as a monopoly, both physical and mental, over our political and historic identities." Dismantling sovereignty as a right held by the central state alone is the difficult (indeed "utopian") but also necessary step if the shattering experience of modernity is not to end in apocalypse. We should be able to refer to the "patriotisms" of such radically opposed figures as Christopher Hill and Margaret Thatcher, writes Barnett, or to the various "nationalisms" in today's England, yet these phrases do not ring true — they sound like grammatical mistakes. Nationalism denies the possibility of a plural form: to be a nationalist is to lay claim to speak the truth of a national experience.

More than any of the other contributions to this wide-ranging and stimulating collection, I found Barnett's critique of nationalism one which spoke to the collapse of "Canada" in the early 1990s. In the pages of *Labour/Le Travail*, and in so many other vehicles of progressive and enlightened opinion, we have dealt with the national question in Canada by not dealing with it. The conceptual apparatus we bring to the question, now that events must surely force all of us to look at it, is covered with cobwebs and rusted with disuse. (The mythologies of "two founding peoples" or "two nations" or "English Canada" stand in urgent need of critical scrutiny, particularly before we start writing constitutions around them!) Labour history in Canada, massively influenced by American models, assumed that, with

the odd and rather inconsequential regional variation, generalizations about class and state which applied in the United States would do as well in Canada. It was assumed that, when we studied Community X, we had found a local exemplification of a Canadian-wide social process Y (which was in turn a local working out of the development of North American capitalism). These assumptions seem overdue for critical assessment. The trope of synecdoche has been deployed too complacently. It surely no longer suffices to re-write the Empire of the St. Lawrence, even with a cast of thousands of workers rather than dozens of far-sighted Anglo-Saxon businessmen.

The assumption that "Canada" existed in the strong sense, as a nation-state among nation-states, as the powerful organizing principle of collective and personal identities, is wearing thin. That the Canadian working class, perhaps even a "Canadian working-class culture" (although this abstraction, once so central, seems to be in retreat these days) exists in the strong sense — that "it" has interests, an identity, a political philosophy, a future — seems to express a hope and an ideal more than it describes a reality. I doubt that the hope comes closer to realization by confusing our dreams with actually existing identities. The redefinition of "Canada" surely means that the marxist version of "Canadian working-class history" is being overtaken by events. It no longer seems possible to take the Canadian context for granted.

Inspired by a moment of crisis on the British Left, as British nationalism seemed paradoxically to thrive at the very moment that "society" (as something more than atomized individuals) was thrown into question, *Patriotism* surveys some interesting new and old positions on the history of national identity. Even if it offers no overarching theories, it deserves a sympathetic audience among Canadian historians, who face a much more severe, agonizing and troubling task in facing a future which appears likely to be post-modern, and, it appears quite possible, post-Canadian as well.