

WHY ARE THE BRITISH SO PECULIAR?
REFLECTIONS ON SPORT, NATIONALISM, AND HIERARCHY

DAVID N. GELLNER

What has made sport so uniquely effective a medium for inculcating national feelings, at all events for males, is the ease with which even the least political or public individuals can identify with the nation as symbolized by young persons excelling at what practically every man wants, or at one time in his life has wanted, to be good at. The imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people. (Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and nationalism since 1780*, p. 143)

Sport and the modern nation

Sporting contests are the ideal way to carry on international competition in the modern world.¹ Orwell called serious sport ‘war minus the shooting’ (‘The Sporting Spirit’, 1945). That war may appear as ‘sport plus shooting’ can be seen from the response of my seven-year-old son to a description of the battle of Agincourt: ‘So which team won?’ It is therefore highly welcome and not before time that experts on sport should have begun to turn their attention to questions of nationalism. Certainly historians and sociologists of nationalism may be rebuked for not devoting enough effort to understanding sport. One of the few who has taken it seriously is Eric Hobsbawm. He identifies the period between the two world wars as the time when international sport stopped being the student and middle-class pastime of individuals, or an attempt to integrate multi-national empires, and became instead ‘the unending succession of gladiatorial contests between persons and teams symbolizing state-nations’ (Hobsbawm 1990: 142).²

In a world of legally equal nation states, matches or athletic competitions allow representatives of different nations to meet on equal terms and to achieve a definite result: either a win for one side, or a draw. Whatever the result, the key points are that (a) nations meet on equal terms and (b) there is a clear and unambiguous result. The result itself is not a matter of opinion, however much the justice of it may be debated. In those sports where

¹ This paper was originally written for a conference on ‘The Nation and Sport’ held in Brunel University in June 2001. For various reasons it was not published at the time and still bears the marks of the year in which it was written.

² Two other scholars of nationalism who mention the relationship are Kellas (1991) and Billig (1995). Scholarly work on sport, on the other hand, has dealt extensively with the relationship between it and various forms of belonging (among many possible references, see MacClancy 1996, Jarvie 1999, Bairner 2001).

graded judgements have to be made (skating, boxing), methods have been devised of providing official judges with the means to come up with clear and unambiguous results. Sports contests thus give full play to the pursuit of individual prowess,³ while simultaneously allowing international competition and systematic, on-going, never-ending comparison. Whatever the past, there is always hope for the future. Whatever the dire state of the national team in the present, there are usually proud memories somewhere in the past. Or for very small countries, there is simply the pleasure of being pitted occasionally against world-class opposition. The same logic can apply within nation states, between states within the USA, or between regions in Spain.

Even where large nations opt out of international competition there is a kind of logic to it. American exceptionalism – that is to say, the belief of many citizens of the USA that their country is qualitatively different from all others – is both symbolized and, perhaps, perpetuated by the fact that the two most important sports in the USA (baseball and American football) are predominantly played by US teams, and the USA has comparatively rarely and recently had the experience (which is normal for everyone else) of having its national team being beaten by other countries at its favourite sports.

Like all rituals, sports competitions are liable to be made use of politically. In fact, because they can involve beating foreigners, they are perhaps especially likely to be used in this way. David Kertzer (1988) has described and analysed the political uses of ritual in great detail. But unlike the choreography of great political rituals, there is relatively little scope for politicians actually to choreograph what happens in sports events. All politicians in France attempted to profit from the patriotic fervour surrounding the winning of the World Cup in 1998. But it was particularly difficult for Le Pen to make political capital out of it, given that so few of the players were white and that the captain and overall hero, Zinedine Zidane, though born in Marseille, is actually a Berber whose parents came from Kabylia in Algeria.

Anyone who has seen the wonderful ethnographic film, *Trobriand Cricket* (Leach and Kildea 1973), will immediately recognize the differences between modern and pre-modern attitudes to sport. The Trobrianders have taken the game introduced to them by missionaries and adapted it to their own worldview. In their form of the game, the number of participants on each side can be forty, fifty, or more. The focus is on the displays of dancing which precede the ‘match’. During the match the ball is bowled underarm and a ‘runner’ runs for the

³ And they permit the pursuit of excitement and aggression, in a cathartic way, within suitably genteel frameworks (Elias and Dunning 1986).

batsman. The convention is that the home side always wins by a small margin. After the game there are ceremonial exchanges of yams.⁴

It is, therefore, no coincidence that international sports competitions have grown and developed as the nation-state system has spread throughout the globe, nor that many, perhaps a majority, of modern sports can trace the origins of their modern form to the country that first experienced modernity, namely the UK. Today, having a national sports team and national representation at the Olympics is a key symbol of national identity, like having a flag, a national anthem, a national museum and a currency. For small nations, simply taking part or being recognized by FIFA is a crucial symbol of independence and existence. For large nations, prowess in one or other sports arena, measured by tangible success in international competition, is taken very seriously indeed.

The question of which individual could represent which national sports team took a surprisingly long time to be regulated. Between 1947 and 1962 Alfredo di Stefano played for Argentina, Colombia and Spain, before FIFA had imposed a worldwide set of regulations. The current rules for most sports are that once someone has represented one nation at senior level they are disqualified from representing any other, unless they change their nationality. The normal criterion is that one can represent any nation in which one is born oneself, or where one of one's four grandparents were born. Thus there is here an interesting compromise between reality and the 'one and only one national identity' model. The model is upheld once a choice of nation has been made: you are not allowed to represent a different nation unless you go through the process of naturalization. However, up to the moment of choice, the fact that people often have multiple identities and allegiances is acknowledged and given some considerable play.

Paradoxically, the nation that gave the world so many modern sports because it was the first nation to be modern is distinctly un-modern in its political and sporting organization. Such un-modern inconsistency has given rise to considerable confusion over English-British identity. This confusion is expressed in, and possibly exacerbated by, the number and overlapping constituencies of national teams in different prominent sports. In cricket, though it does have its own team, Wales is effectively part of England. In football (soccer) it is not, and in rugby it is most definitely independent. In football there are four national teams and no UK team; despite leading politicians expressing their personal support for the existence of a UK football team, there is no realistic prospect of one being set up or entered for the

⁴ The classic study of how the Japanese have remade baseball is Whiting (1989).

Olympics, for example. For some rugby purposes (selection for the British or Irish Lions) northern Ireland is part of the island of Ireland, even though this means that its players do not participate in the British rugby team made up of players from England, Wales and Scotland – and even strong Unionists have been able to live with this. In the Olympics, Northern Ireland is part of the UK (though some athletes from Northern Ireland have represented the Republic). In the Commonwealth Games, Northern Ireland is its own separate unit.

The closeness and interrelatedness of the four ‘home nations’ of the UK means that many individuals have a wide choice of which international team to play for, given the rules of eligibility outlined above. Individuals from the Channel Islands or the Isle of Man have a free choice over which of the four nations to represent. In March 2000 the papers were full of the case of Dave Hilton, who played rugby for Scotland 41 times before it came out that his supposedly Scottish grandfather actually came from Bristol. Jackie Charlton famously revived the Republic of Ireland football team by scouring the English and Scottish leagues for players with an Irish grandparent, one of whom, Tony Cascarino, admitted long afterwards that he had never had one at all. If Northern Ireland and Wales can have teams representing them in international competitions, why shouldn’t the Catalans and the Basques as well? The only answer is the historical accident that Northern Ireland and Wales got in first, before the international rules were written (even though at that time Ireland was one and undivided for football purposes, and Northern Ireland as it is today did not exist).

Models of the nation

Reflecting on national identity is not – or at least until recently *was* not – encouraged in England. Nationalism is something that other people have: foreigners with unpleasant and extreme political movements, or alternatively peripheral Celts with chips on their shoulders. For generations the English have been brought up to believe that theirs is the normal and natural way of being and behaving. The English believed themselves to have the best of all possible political systems: it had evolved while remaining true to itself, avoided violent political revolutions, conquered the globe, and provided progress and decency that were the envy of the world. To be born an Englishman was to have won first prize in the lottery of life – so thought Cecil Rhodes. It was an essential part of this view of English-Britishness that it was not analysed, not taught and not reduced to a catechism.⁵ British schoolchildren may learn the names of the kings and queens of England. They do not have ‘civics’. They are not

taught how the British Constitution works. English-British identity was formed very largely in opposition to the French. The French go back to first principles, argue deductively and have a totalitarian education system churning out citizens. The English see themselves as the opposite of this in every case: inductive, empiricist, liberal – and consequently more practical. The British education system was meant to be both more moral and more manly. Only very recently – astonishingly late for an industrialized country – has a national curriculum been imposed, more than a hundred years after the French, the Germans and the Italians.

For a model of what the modern nation and its state are supposed to be, we need to cross the Channel. The idea is simple enough. Every person is born into a particular nation and has one and only one national identity. The right and proper political arrangement is for everyone with that national identity to be united into one political unit: so that all French men, women and children live in one French state, with no one else. It may be possible to combine some kind of local identity with being French, but there should be no contradiction between that identity and one's national identity. This 'one and only one national identity' model is extremely pervasive and important, and is the baseline of my argument.

What is also crucial is that this model diverges from reality quite markedly (French-speakers in Belgium and Switzerland are not united with the motherland). And this generates the well-known paradox that nationalism as an ideology presumes that nations already exist, but nationalism as a social practice sets about creating them. In the French case, it is well established that at the beginning of the Third Republic in the 1870s less than half of the French spoke French: they had to be pushed hard to do so by generations of schoolmasters (the classic study of this process being Eugen Weber's *Peasants into Frenchmen*). In the case of the French, these schoolmasters and mistresses believed, and still believe, that by propagating French they are advancing the cause of civilization. They have succeeded in imparting this belief to their students, so that although Breton is currently the Celtic language with the largest number of speakers, in a generation or two it will be confined to a handful of enthusiasts (McDonald 1989: 352-3 n. 4). In the French case, the connection between a universal, modernizing and liberating ideology and propagating a specifically French national identity was very close, so much so that the French attempted to turn numerous peoples of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds into Frenchmen, sometimes with disastrous results, as in Algeria.

⁵ Jeremy Paxman has recently analysed the 'paucity of national symbols' for England (as opposed to Britain) in a witty and entertaining account (Paxman 1998).

The French example does not just show that nations have to be created. It also shows that the majority view in the age of nationalism has been that there are some nations which are more advanced, stronger and more worthy of being assimilated to than others. This was taken for granted in the nineteenth century and is probably still the commonsense view of many people in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. That is to say, the French schoolmasters took it for granted that their educative and civilizing mission, in weaning their students off various non-French dialects, was good for the students and good for the country. Likewise, the English middle class assumed that it was right and proper for Welsh-speakers to become English-speakers if they so wished. It was taken for granted in central Europe that German was the language of science and progress, which many migrants to the cities adopted in preference to the Slavonic or Yiddish dialects of their ancestors. The same process is going on today in many developing countries.

This view that some national identities are more evolved and more suitable for the modern world than others is no longer politically correct. It is no longer permissible to argue this out loud and in unequivocal terms, though the actions of millions of people around the world – the idioms in which they choose to educate their children – bear witness to the fact that many people still believe it.

Today the official view is that all cultures are to be treated equally.⁶ Within nation states all ethnic groups should be given equal treatment, and between nations all nations should be treated equally. This is notwithstanding the fact that nation states are patently not equal, whether in size, population, wealth, or anything else. The only respect in which they are equal is that each has one seat and one vote in the United Nations (though even here ideology has had to bow before *Realpolitik*, with the institution of the five permanent members of the Security Council).

So there are two models of national belonging: the nineteenth-century evolutionist and hierarchical model of the nation which presupposes the existence of ‘big’ nations and ‘little’ nations; and the more recent multiculturalist model which supposes that nations and cultures are all equal, or at least are to be treated as if they were equal, regardless of their size or antiquity. Both models presuppose that individuals are born as members of nations and that it is right and proper for nations to rule over their own territory. The hierarchical model allows perhaps for more individual movement – from one national identity to another – a detail that will be seen to be significant below; but both models take as their baseline the assumption that

individuals can have one and only one national identity: cases of migration, dual nationality and so on are treated as exceptions to the normal nature of things.

Britain as a pre-modern nation

There are many aspects of England-Britain (or ‘Ukania’ as Tom Nairn called it, 1994) which are odd in the light of the modern nationalist model, especially given the assumption of a unitary nation state in which all citizens have an equal and intersubstitutable status. The relationships of the four constituent parts of the UK to the centre are not, and never have been, symmetrical. With the devolution introduced after 1997, this inconsistency of treatment has become ever more obvious: Scotland has a parliament that can raise taxes; Wales and Northern Ireland have assemblies that can spend money but not raise it. London has an elected mayor, but most other cities do not. The regions of England have no representative assemblies; there is particular resentment about the fact that the Scots have more per head spent on public services and now pay their teachers substantially more than, say, those in the neighbouring north-east of England. As a legacy of Conservative reorganizations of local government in the 1990s, some towns and cities have no relationship to the counties, while others are part of two-tier authorities.

It is not just that, administratively, the UK is a jumble. The British Constitution is, famously, a non-constitution, a set of precedents and assumptions stretching back to Magna Carta. It is all ruled over by a monarch, who until 1992 was, if not above the law, at least above income tax (Nairn 1994: xv). George Orwell noted long ago in his essay ‘The Lion and the Unicorn’ that the plethora of names, and the confusing and overlapping way in which they are used, reflected this uncertainty.

Dumont and the notion of hierarchy

The world in which Britain emerged as the first modern nation was, by definition, non-modern. More precisely, it was hierarchical both in its values and its practice. By virtue of being the first industrialized and modern nation, Britain also remained significantly non-modern, as noted. Many of the seemingly contradictory and confusing organizational features described above can be understood by bearing these hierarchical presuppositions in mind.⁷

⁶ This view has attracted scorn in some circles, summed up in a remark attributed to Saul Bellow: ‘When the Zulus produce a Tolstoy, we will read him’ (cited in Taylor 1994: 42).

⁷ Many of my social anthropological colleagues are nowadays highly sceptical of dichotomies such as the modern and egalitarian vs. pre-modern and hierarchical. However, I would hold that, as long as they are used sensitively and not essentialized – i.e. providing they are not used as some kind of deductive master key which

The leading theorist of hierarchy within sociology and anthropology is undoubtedly Louis Dumont, in his great work, *Homo Hierarchicus: the caste system and its implications* (first published 1966, full revised English edition 1980). Dumont went to India as a kind of Alexis de Tocqueville in reverse. Just as de Tocqueville had gone to America to understand equality, the condition that represented the future of the world, so Dumont went to India to understand hierarchy, the world's past. He carried out extensive fieldwork both in south India and in the north; he wrote painstaking and detailed studies of caste, kinship, marriage and ritual. He worked hard to master an enormous ethnographic and historical literature. He concluded that India had worked out and theorized hierarchy to an extent unmatched elsewhere.⁸

In his 'Postface: toward a theory of hierarchy', Dumont wrote:

The hierarchical relation is, very generally, that between a whole (or a set) and an element of this whole (or set): the element belongs to the set and is in this sense consubstantial or identical with it; at the same time, the element is distinct from the set or stands in opposition to it. This is what I mean by the expression 'the encompassing of the contrary'. (Dumont 1980: 240)

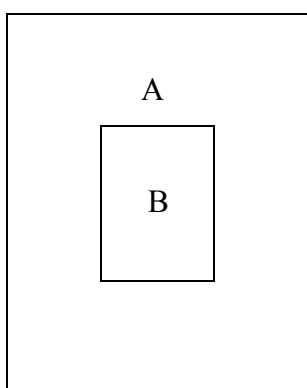
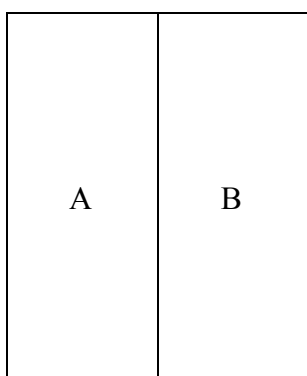
What this highly abstract statement means may become clear by considering an example and a diagram. The clearest example Dumont could think of, to illustrate the fact that the nature of hierarchy is not, as Westerners tend to think, a military-style chain of command or a taxonomic tree diagram, was the creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis. Adam is created first – as an undifferentiated Man. Then from Adam's rib comes Eve, and Man becomes both man and woman. The relationship of Adam and Eve is a perfect illustration of the ideology of hierarchy because:

- man and woman are opposed to each other; at one level they are equal and opposite;
- as complementary opposites, they constitute a whole;
- man is (in the model) superior to woman;
- man is simultaneously opposed to woman and at a higher level includes woman as part of his own substance; Adam is both Man and man.

explains everything – they cannot be avoided if the aim is to carry out some kind of comparison and analysis, rather than simply documenting particular cases.

⁸ In fact, Dumont rather wobbled in his analysis, never seeming entirely sure whether India was unique among pre-modern societies in the nature and degree of its hierarchical institutions, or whether it was typical.

The fact that the same word is used at both levels is not a coincidence, but illustrates the evaluative claim being made. Dumont illustrated the same relation diagrammatically. Egalitarian logic sees only A opposed to B (first diagram). Hierarchical logic sees that A is opposed to B at one level, while containing B within it when the whole is taken into account (second diagram).



Dumont was at pains to stress just how repugnant this ideology is to modern ideology, because of its anti-egalitarian implications. He insisted many times on how difficult it is for those brought up in the modern West or in Westernized milieus (which includes most people nowadays) to understand or appreciate hierarchy properly. And he has been roundly abused by several critics for even attempting to understand hierarchy ‘from the inside’.⁹

Much has been made of the supposed confusion between England and Britain (Paxman 1998: 44-5; Davies 2000: xxviii-xxxviii), but once the hierarchical point of view is properly understood, it can be seen that there is more than simple confusion at stake. In the diagram A and B can stand for England and Scotland or England and Wales. At one level they are separate and equal; from the hierarchical point of view, there is another superordinate level

⁹ For sympathetic (though not uncritical) presentations of Dumont’s ideas, see Quigley (1993) and Parkin (2003). For typical unsympathetic critiques, see Berreman (1971) and Appadurai (1986).

where England stands for Scotland and Wales and includes them within itself. The gendered reading of the diagram is also appropriate. Although women's national sports teams exist, they are very far from being popularly accepted as equally valid and worthy representatives of the nation.

The decline of hierarchical views of Britain

The hold and pervasiveness of the hierarchical view of British nationhood can be seen if one reads Norman Davies' acclaimed history of Britain, *The Isles: a history*. He decided that any name for the area he was describing begged too many questions: hence 'the Isles'. To have one's schoolboy history presented in a consciously un-hierarchical and anti-hierarchical way is both a pleasure and a shock. Each historical chapter includes a special historiographical section that reviews the way the period in question was treated by later historians and public opinion: the way, for example, in which nineteenth-century histories of Roman Britain were always written from the Roman point of view because of the affinity of one multinational imperial identity with another. The way in which history has been taught in England (perhaps Wales and Scotland have been different) has been deeply imbued with hierarchical assumptions. I would hazard a guess that in English secondary schools one is more likely to be taught Japanese or Sanskrit than Welsh, and more likely to have experimental sports lessons in Aikido than in Gaelic Football or Cornish Wrestling. Davies' history does not just show how history should be written, it is also a passionate polemic against the unthinking hierarchical presuppositions of English historians over so many years.¹⁰

How could and can so many metropolitan intellectuals be blind to Celtic history and literature for so long? Dumont's notion of hierarchy may help us to understand how many people were able to accept the unequal and unsystematic relationships between Wales and England, Scotland and England, for so many years. The fact that many people, even many people living in the UK (not just foreigners), continue to use 'England' to refer to Great Britain, or to the UK, doing so quite unthinkingly, illustrates the unconscious hierarchical model that they hold of the relationship of the nation's constituent parts.

For many years now the Scots have resented, resisted and contradicted this assumption whenever and wherever they could. But for those who did not venture to Scotland or the more assertive parts of Wales (it was always recognized that Northern Ireland was different), it was

¹⁰ It is also a pleasure to see that good historical method – interpreting the distinctions of each period in terms that made sense at that time and not reading back the present into the past – coincides with the precepts of anthropological method.

possible to continue in the old way. England football fans always used to carry the Union Jack. The England football team is still thought of by many as *the* national team. In cricket ‘England’ is indeed the name of the national team, as it is of the national bank. It was only during the Euro 1996 football tournament, hosted by England, that, for the first time, one saw more St George crosses than Union Jacks. The idea of England as a separate entity within Britain had arrived, partly as a reaction to the success of Scottish self-assertion, which itself was a reaction to rule by Thatcherism from London.¹¹

The old hierarchical assumptions – the facile understanding that ‘British’ and ‘English’ are the same thing and can be substituted for one another (an assumption that once was perfectly acceptable even to Scots [Davies 2000: 616]) – are no longer acceptable. As long as they were in place, the English, unlike the Scots, the Welsh or the Irish, did not need to think about who they were. But now they do. As columnist Mark Lawson observed (*The Guardian*, 25 March 2000), just as Dave Hilton had woken up one morning, like a character from Kafka, to find he was no longer Scottish, ‘millions are rising to the realisation that they are no longer British, even if our grandparents were born there.’ Sport, and in particular football (soccer), has arguably played a leading role in the perpetuation of nested ‘imagined communities’ within the British state and in the gradual break-up of those identities into four separate nations. The census, the map and the museum may have been the crucial tools in the formation of modern nations where there were none before (Anderson 1991); sport is surely the key symbol for nationhood today.

Conclusion

I hope to have shown that the basic nationalist model has been understood in two broadly contrasting ways, and that there has been a definite progression from one to the other as the dominant mode over the last hundred years or so. As the more egalitarian way of interpreting nationalist assumptions has become stronger, the UK has moved closer to a federal model of government – for all that the ‘f’ word has remained taboo within Britain’s political class. Sports teams representing different, overlapping and conflicting geographical units could seem quite natural and acceptable from, say, 1870 to 1990, when the hierarchical mode was dominant. But it seems increasingly anachronistic in the egalitarian and federalist world of today. It may follow from this argument that establishing a UK football team – on the model of the British Lions rugby team – would be the single most effective move politicians in

¹¹ Clinton’s, the card shop, only started selling St George’s Day cards in 1995, but they quickly took off. See

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Westminster could make to ensure that Scottish devolution does not lead to Scottish independence. On the other hand, it could provoke that very result.

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