Locating *Ancestry* in Notions of Britishness/ Germanness: Beyond Waning Myths of Civic and Ethnic Nations

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Abstract

This article focuses on *ancestry* as a controversial marker of Britishness/Germanness. Considering developments in nationality law and large-scale survey data for England and Germany, it illustrates that macrocontextual distinctions into civic and ethnic nations tend to overestimate cross-national differences, while underestimating important within-country variations according to people's educational background. The fact that—in both countries—higher levels of formal education are strongly associated with more ethnically inclusive notions of legitimate national membership underlines the formative potential of formal education in contemporary multicultural societies.

Keywords

ancestry, national culture, civic–ethnic, education, national membership

Introduction

In contrast to Britain, Germany has often been portrayed as an ethnically exclusivist nation (Brubaker, 1992; Greenfeld, 1992; Ignatieff, 1994), roughly along the lines of "classic" distinctions into civic (Western) and ethnic (Eastern) forms of nationalism (Kohn, 1961; Plamenatz, 1976). Within this framework, ethnic nations (of which Germany is frequently cited as a prime example) are supposed to be built around anachronistic notions of ethno-ancestral communities, whereas civic nations are seen as having (more or less miraculously) evolved around ideas of individual rights and democratic principles (such as in the case of Britain).

At the time of their invention during the Cold War, such distinctions may have offered some intuitive solace in reducing the complexity of national phenomena around the world to a simple and clear-cut dichotomy—to a binary set of labels for whole nations and societies. In the course of intensifying processes of economic and cultural globalization, however, the civic–ethnic dichotomy lost much of its previously appealing touch. To further shatter an already feeble conceptual construction, various scholarly critiques have convincingly demonstrated that Hans Kohn's original idea of distinctively civic (Western) nations and distinctively ethnic (Eastern) nations can neither be sustained on theoretical nor empirico-historical grounds (e.g., Hansen & Hesli, 2009; Joppke, 2003; Kuzio, 2002; Nieguth, 1999; Shulman, 2002).

Arguably, the point to be taken from such criticism is not necessarily to categorically refute all analytical references to civic and ethnic dimensions in studies of national phenomena (e.g., people's national identities or the [re] invention of national myths) but to appreciate that in an increasingly interconnected world, whole nations and national populations cannot be meaningfully conceived in terms of monolithic agglomerates of either the civic or the ethnic type.

Around the globe, public opinion on different national phenomena varies within as much as across different countries and depending on people's individual experiences and perceptions, and more often than not legal definitions of national membership are subject to change over time. The present article aims to support this line of argument, with a particular interest in associations between people's level of formal education and their evaluations of *ancestry* as marker of Britishness/Germanness.

Ancestry as Marker of National Membership

In today's world, it is not at all unusual to hear of people who "trade internationally, work internationally, love internationally, marry internationally, do research internationally,

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and [whose] children are growing up and are being educated internationally" (Beck, 2002, p. 31). Through personal experiences of (voluntary or forced) migration, people can come to love and respect a country other than their parents' country of origin, with a strong sense of belonging and the desire for active citizenship. They can learn new societal rules and regulations—even to converse in a new language. Their ancestral background, however, might be "concealed but never realistically wished away or 'undone'" (Bauman, 2004, p. 60). It is in this sense that *ancestry* constitutes an exclusivist criterion for national membership that fails to do justice to the complex realities of contemporary multicultural societies.

The question as to whether ethnic components are vital "to forge a 'nation' today" (Smith, 1986, p. 17) evokes much debate. Ontologically speaking, ethno-national communities are imagined (Anderson, 2006). As symbolical constructs (Cohen, 1985), they rely on a myth of common ancestry (Smith, 1993) rather than on historically indisputable factual accounts. But even if there is good reason to conceive *ancestry* as a flawed (and unnecessarily divisive) criterion for national membership (Eller & Coughlan, 1993; Habermas, 1992; Kymlicka, 1998; Parekh, 2006), the potential appeal of ethno-national bonds can hardly be denied (Barth, 1969; Debeljak, 2003; Smith, 2004).

In people's perceptions, ideas of "ethno-national bonds" or a "shared ancestry" may well be mistaken for "historical truths" rather than recognized as socially constructed mythology, or to quote Connor (1993),

The sense of unique descent, of course, need not, and *in nearly all* cases *will not*, accord with factual history. Nearly all nations are the variegated offspring of numerous ethnic strains. It is not chronological or factual history that is the key to the nation, but sentient or felt history. All that is irreducibly required for the existence of a nation is that the members share an intuitive conviction of the group's separate origin and evolution. (p. 382, italics in original)

Consequently, people's notions of legitimate national membership can differ significantly from official definitions and laws. Their subjective realities and felt identities do not need to converge with preestablished ethnic categories or labels (Jamieson, 2002). A census, for example, may "fit" people into particular categories (e.g., "British" or "German"), but this does not mean that people actually identify themselves or others with these categories (Herrmann & Brewer, 2004).

The subsequent discussion focuses, therefore, not only on legal definitions of Britishness/Germanness but also on people's perceptions[1]—on whether and to what extent they consider *ancestry* as an important criterion for legitimate national membership. To begin with, however, let us take a look at some recent developments in British and German nationality law.

Developments in British and German Nationality Law

Non-British residents in Britain have long faced comparatively fewer legal and cultural barriers on the way to full citizenship status and recognition than non-German residents in Germany (De Wit & Koopmans, 2005; Piper, 1998). In the late 1980s, for instance, immigrants to Britain had to wait only half as long for permanent residency status as (nonethnic German) immigrants to Germany (Soysal, 1994). Not surprisingly thus, the naturalization rate in Germany has been comparatively low (Green, 2003).

Germany's 1913 Citizenship Act has been characterized as a "system of pure *jus sanguinis*[2], with no trace of *jus soli*[3], [which] continues to determine the citizenship status of immigrants and their descendants" (Brubaker, 1992, p. 165). Ignatieff (1994) paints a similarly bleak picture when reflecting upon his personal travel experiences in reunified Germany:

The criterion of citizenship remains one of ethnic descent on the basis of *jus sanguinis*. . . . To most outsiders, and to many Germans, it seems absurd that a Turk, born and brought up in Germany, should be unable to become a citizen, while a German from Siberia, with no history of residence in the country and little language competence, should be entitled to citizenship and to extensive settlement assistance. (p. 76, italics in original)

It is right to draw attention to *jus sanguinis*—a long-established marker of German nationality that entails significant privileges for ethnic Germans—most notably the immediate entitlement to full citizenship (Brubaker, 1992, 1998; Koopmans, 1999).

The legal foundations of German identity, however, do not—as Ignatieff (1994) suggests—"remain defined by the ethnic nationalist past" (p. 76). Following German reunification, a series of legal reforms (1990, 1993, 1999) "aimed to limit the discretionary power of officials in naturalization and to provide foreigners a legal right to claim entitlement to naturalization" (Anil, 2005, p. 455).[4] In summer 2010, during the FIFA World Cup in South Africa, football enthusiasts around the globe could witness "real-life-effects" of these reforms in form of a multiethnic German national team—a rather unlikely scenario until relatively recently.

Whereas late 20th-century developments in German nationality law have (re)established *jus soli* alongside *jus sanguinis*, major amendments to British citizenship legislation appear to have followed a reverse trajectory (Cesarani, 1996; Layton-Henry, 2003). Safran (1997) illustrates this point well:

Before the coming into force of the British Nationality Act of 1981, *jus soli* was applied to individuals,

regardless of their ancestry, born in the United Kingdom or in a British crown colony. But since then, British citizenship has been accorded predominantly on the basis of *jus sanguinis*, whether or not the child is born in the United Kingdom. (p. 324, italics in original)

These gradual developments toward increasing cross-national similarities in nationality law coincided with broader sociopolitical trends. Although in the late 1950s, the political culture in Germany (FRG) could plausibly be described as comparatively less "civic" than in Britain (Almond & Verba, 1963), such descriptions subsequently (by the late 1970s) lost their empirical basis and, consequently, their conceptual *raison d'être* (Conradt, 1989; Kavanagh, 1989).

Simple binary distinctions into civic and ethnic nations would not only misrepresent legal realities and sociopolitical trends in 21st-century multicultural societies such as Britain and Germany, but in evoking ideas of a "general national character", they would also distort the fact that different people—within and across different countries—ascribe different degrees of importance to markers of national membership. To illustrate this central point, the following section focuses on people's perceptions, drawing on representative survey data for England[5] and Germany.

Public Opinion in England and Germany

This section reports results from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) 2003. The ISSP 2003 comprises a series of questions on national consciousness and national identity and covers various countries around the globe, including England and Germany. The respective data were collected between February 2003 and January 2005.

General Population Samples

Table 1 lists the different levels of importance that ISSP 2003 respondents in England and Germany attribute to *ancestry* in terms of what they think it means to be "truly" British/German.[6]

As quickly becomes evident, the respective survey data hardly serve to support notions of a distinctively ethnic German nation. In both England and Germany, slightly more than 48% of respondents ascribe little or no significance to *ancestry* as marker of national membership. The respective results for England and Germany differ on some answer categories ("fairly important" and "very important") and are close to identical on others ("not very important" and "not important at all")—with no consistent trend of cross-national divergence.

Although for many people—in England and in Germany—*ancestry* does not appear to constitute an important criterion for national membership, Table 1 also shows that slightly more than every second respondent does indeed consider

Table 1. Public Opinion in England and Germany (%)

	England	Germany
Ancestry	ISSP 2003	ISSP 2003
Very important	30.4	21.5
Fairly important	21.3	30.0
Not very important	28.4	29.9
Not important at all	19.9	18.6
Number of observations	677	1,241

Note: ISSP = International Social Survey Programme.

ancestral ties as fairly or very important in terms of what he or she thinks it means to be "truly" British/German. Before getting back to this finding in the concluding section, it will be interesting to see to what extent the respective results vary according to respondents' level of formal education.

Public Opinion by Respondents' Level of Formal Education

Institutions of formal education play an important part in the formation of national identities (Bernstein, 1996; Dewey, 1963; Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1992). They can promote intercultural encounters and global learning, while challenging antiforeigner sentiment, national stereotypes, and racial prejudice (Byram, 2003; Luchtenberg, 2007; Pöllmann, 2009). Across different national contexts, higher levels of formal education have been shown to correlate with lower levels of ethnic exclusionism, nationalism, and xenophobia (Coenders & Scheepers, 2003; Hjerm, 2001; Van Peer, 2006).

To examine associations between people's educational background and the importance that they ascribe to *ancestry* as marker of national membership, let us now compare sub-samples of respondents with comparatively low and comparatively high levels of formal education. For the purposes of this article, I define those ISSP 2003 respondents who classified their level of formal education within one of the following categories as having a high level of formal education: "higher secondary completed," or "above higher secondary level," or "university degree completed." Furthermore, I regard those respondents who classified their level of formal education within one of the following categories as having a low level of formal education: "no formal qualification," or "lowest formal qualification," or "above lowest."[7]

Table 2 shows significant variations in people's perceptions of *ancestry* as marker of Britishness/Germanness depending on their level of formal education.

In England as well as in Germany, respondents with comparatively high levels of formal education are significantly less likely to regard *ancestry* as important in terms of what they think it means to be "truly" British/German. Lower levels of formal education, however, are strongly associated

Table 2. Public Opinion in England and Germany by Level of Formal Education (%)

| | England (ISSP 2003) | | Germany (ISSP 2003) | |
Ancestry	Low level of formal education	High level of formal education	Low level of formal education	High level of formal education
Very important	40.4	16.3	24.4	10.2
Fairly important	24.1	17.4	31.6	24.2
Not very important	25.1	33.0	28.4	35.5
Not important at all	10.4	33.3	15.6	30.1
Number of observations	394	282	980	256

Note: ISSP = International Social Survey Programme.

with perceptions of *ancestry* as a key marker of national membership. The proportion of those who perceive *ancestry* as "very important," for example, increases in England from 16.3% among respondents with comparatively high levels of formal education to 40.4% among respondents with comparatively low levels of formal education—and in Germany (by a virtually identical factor) from a proportion of 10.2% to a share of 24.4%.

Notwithstanding the fact that a multivariate statistical analysis would do more justice to the complexity of people's personal characteristics, experiences, and perceptions, the cross-national comparisons in Tables 1 and 2 serve to illustrate that macrocontextual distinctions into civic and ethnic nations tend to overestimate cross-national differences, while underestimating important within-country variations according to people's level of formal education.

Conclusion

In contrast to Britain, Germany has long been seen as a "classic" example of an ethnically exclusivist nation. Accordingly, it would have been plausible to find a pervasive emphasis on *ancestry* as marker of Germanness in public opinion and nationality law. Yet, neither large-scale survey data nor legal provisions confirm this expectation. If anything, public opinion in Germany seems to reflect recent developments toward more ethnically inclusive legal definitions of Germanness.

As a matter of fact, respondents in Germany do not tend to ascribe more importance to *ancestry* as marker of national membership than respondents in England. While the respective ISSP data reveal only minor cross-national variations in public opinion (see Table 1), they do provide conclusive evidence that—in both countries—respondents with comparatively high levels of formal education are significantly less likely to regard *ancestry* as important in terms of what they think it means to be "truly" British/ German (see Table 2).

However, even if in the eyes of many respondents— particularly the comparatively "more educated"—*ancestry* does not seem to constitute an important criterion for national membership, the respective survey data also demonstrate that a majority (albeit a narrow one) does indeed consider ancestral ties as fairly or very important.

Based on a simple answer to a survey question, it would, of course, be inadequate to stigmatize respondents who ascribe a high importance to ancestral ties as (potential) racists or xenophobes. And yet, the respective results cannot be entirely separated from the fact that ethnocentrism, racism, and xenophobia are alive and well in contemporary multicultural societies— including Britain and Germany (Chakraborti & Garland, 2004; Cole, 2009; Kühnel, 2003; Wieviorka, 2010). All too easily, the perceived right to national membership can be grounded in exclusionary notions of a "shared ancestry"— often paired with an emphasis on what Weber (1968) calls the "esthetically conspicuous differences of the physical appearance" (p. 390)—skin color being a pertinent example.

In a time of increasing global interconnectedness, with soaring levels of international migration across ethno-cultural boundaries, research on civic and ethnic dimensions in people's notions of legitimate national membership—of what they think it means to be "truly" British, German, Chinese, Indian, Russian, or Mexican—deserves a sustained academic interest. International comparative research on the explanatory impact of people's educational background seems particularly promising in this context. In any case, however, future research can do without crude distinctions into civic and ethnic nations.

Notes

1. On the importance of people's perceptions in studies of national identities, see for instance, Brubaker (2006), Reicher and Hopkins (2001), and Shulman (2002). Pöllmann (2008)—to give a more closely related example—shows how levels of national attachment can vary depending on subjective notions of legitimate national membership.

2. "[Latin: law relating to blood] The principle that the nationality of children is the same as that of their parents, irrespective of their place of birth" (Martin & Law, 2006, p. 300).

3. "[Latin: law relating to the soil (of one's country)] The rule by which birth in a state is sufficient to confer nationality, irrespective of the nationality of one's parents" (Martin & Law, 2006, p. 301).

4. Moreover, since January 1, 2000, "a person born in Germany to a foreign parent, who has resided in Germany lawfully for 8 years or has held an unlimited residency permit for at least 3 years, would automatically be granted German citizenship" (Anil, 2005, p. 454). See Nathans (2004) for a comprehensive historical analysis of developments in German citizenship laws and policies.

5. The population of England accounts for more than 80% of the total population of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (Office for National Statistics, 2010).

6. The respective question reads, "Some people say that the following things are important for being truly [British/German]. Others say they are not important. How important do you think each of the following is"[:] "To have been born in [Britain/Germany]"; "to have [British/German] citizenship"; "to have lived in [Britain/Germany] for most of one's life"; "to be able to speak [English/German]"; "to be Christian"; "to respect [British/German] political institutions and laws"; "to feel [British/German]"; *"to have [British/German] ancestry"*. [Main answer categories:] "Not important at all"; "not very important"; "fairly important"; "very important" (italics added). For more details, see ISSP (2003).

7. The full list of educational categories includes an additional item "other education (CH)." However, the number of cases in this category is negligible (i.e., less than 0.1%). For further details, see ISSP (2003).

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