



## Book Review

Sociology

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DOI: 10.1177/0038038515621680

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David McCrone and Frank Bechhofer

*Understanding National Identity*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, £18.99 pbk (ISBN: 9781107496194), 236 pp.

**Reviewed by:** Tariq Modood, *University of Bristol, UK*

This book is a study of three ‘national’ identities, Scottish, English and British, and their inter-relationship. It consists of a fine set of empirical studies, carefully analysed and interpreted and exhibiting considerable methodological sophistication and innovation. Its argument is that Scotland and England are not as different as widely believed. While nearly all Scots have an identification with Scottish nationhood, the majority also have some (lesser) identification with Britain; a strong sense of Scottishness does not automatically mean voting for independence.

Despite the empirical sophistication a case can be made that there is a gap between their data and their conceptualization of it. It hangs on the question of what kind of identity is ‘British’? McCrone and Bechhofer stipulate that British is a ‘state’ identity, and reserve the label, ‘national’, for Scottish and English. Despite this being fundamental to their work, they do no more than simply state that this is how ‘British’ is understood in Scotland (pp. 22–23). But what if that is not how it is understood in England?

They are right to query the view of some political theorists, such as the late Bernard Crick, or the Habermasian idea of the ‘post-national’ that equates national identity with political institutions and leaves out the wider historical and literary culture that sustains debates about those institutions, including critiques as well as identifications. So, if it is indeed the case that British is just a state identity, then it is not a national identity. But that Scottish-British may be a different kind of couplet to English-British is not really entertained – if the Scots thought British was a state identity and the English thought it was a national identity? In their theoretical discussion they seem to dismiss the idea with the suggestion that the English do not find it easy to distinguish English from British, and query Krishan Kumar’s view that England has never developed a strong English identity, which if true would be suggestive of the idea that the generality of the Scots and English may have different perspectives on British being a *national* (and not just a state) identity.

Some of the basis for arguing this is to be found in their book. They acknowledge that most ethnic minorities in England and Protestants in Ulster think that their national identity is British (indeed, they are the two groups in the UK most likely to do so) but they

do not note that their discussion of Scottish debates too only makes sense if British was a national and not just a state identity.

They show that identity politics in Scotland is a passionate debate between mono-nationalists (those who think of themselves as 'strongly Scottish') and the bi-nationalists (those who describe themselves as 'strongly Scottish' and British). It is clear that for many Scots part of the intensity of the debate is in the fact that their attachment to Britain is not reducible to questions of state. Actually, McCrone and Bechhofer argue as much themselves. Indeed, towards the end of the book they speak of 'British' as a national identity as well as a state identity (p. 197) without noticing that they are undoing a key assumption of the book. Moreover, they argue (with considerable plausibility) that even if Scotland was to become independent, many, perhaps a majority of Scots for one or two generations at least, would continue to think of themselves as British in 'geographical-historical-cultural' terms, that is, in terms which to me look like a definition of a non-state national identity not unlike Scottish today.

So, as empirical fact as well as conceptualization, there is no reason to treat British as only a state identity and not also a national identity (even if a declining one). It can be the latter as part of dual or multiple or a nest of identities (together with, not instead of, regional, local, ethnic, class or religious identities).

If it was the case that before the rise of Scottish nationalism of the last few decades many Britons, especially in England, unreflectively thought of Britain as an internally undifferentiated national identity, Scottish nationalists have forced Britons to recognize that Britain is a multi-national state. Yet, that is hardly the end of the matter. Many Britons (including some Scots), people we might characterize as 'bi-nationalists', have responded by emphasizing that besides being a multi-national state Britain is also a multi-national nation, what some call a nested nationhood. McCrone and Bechhofer have some understanding of this and have collected successive series of data to bear this out but impose what I might call an ideological conceptualization on it which makes it more difficult to understand aspects of recent trends.