

## **IN SEARCH OF ENGLISH REGIONALISM: THE CASE OF THE NORTH EAST**

*John Tomaney*

### **IN WHAT SENSE A REGION?**

According to Tom Nairn (1982), 'The English enigma' lies at the heart of any explanation of the 'break-up of Britain'. The paradox at the heart of the current re-shaping of the British state is that the English, with perhaps typical complacency, have only just begun to identify their role in the evolving political drama. The debate about the meaning of England and the identity of the English has barely begun. But the contours of the debate have been rapidly inscribed in recent contributions on the subject of the English and their political culture. Ironically, these contributions both from the metropolitan elite and the 'Celtic periphery' show a certain symmetry in their treatment of the English regions.

For instance, in his recent book on the English, Jeremy Paxman (1998) has little to say about the whole question of regional culture and politics. The subject of regionalism barely rates a mention. Discussion of the north/south divide is restricted to a few pages which note, primarily, that dominant conceptions of Englishness exclude the North:

If you had to guess the whereabouts of the lane, small cottage and field of grain, where there'll always be an England, you'd decide pretty quickly

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*John Tomaney is in the Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies, University of Newcastle upon Tyne. This paper was drafted while he was a visitor in the Department of Geography, London School of Economics in the first half of 1999. A version of it was presented to the departmental research seminar. He is grateful to colleagues there for hosting his visit and discussing ideas. He would especially like to thank Andrés Rodríguez-Pose for his sympathetic critique of regionalism. He is also grateful to Lindsay Paterson, A.J. Pollard, R.A. Lomas, Simon Lee, Susan Schech, Brian Hall and James Cornford (as ever) for critical comments on previous drafts. None of the above-mentioned is responsible for the contents of this paper.*

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where it was not. You could instantly rule out places like Northumberland and Yorkshire, where fields would have dry-stone walls and are more likely to be full of sheep anyway. (Paxman 1998, p.156)

Paxman omits any attempt to explain why this might be so. He does make the, arguably, limited statement that the North is industrial and therefore unattractive, whereas the South lends itself to conceptions of a rural idyll (see Taylor (1993) for a more critical view of how 'the North' is excluded from its own national identity) <sup>1</sup>.

Perhaps more surprising has been the general dismissal of the possibility of, or even recognition of the history of, English regionalism coming from important voices in Scotland and Wales. Writing from a Welsh perspective, John Osmond has described 'the problem of England' as a failure to develop 'normal' democratic practices that are said to characterise Scotland and Wales (and, by implication, just about everywhere else). A particular failure of the English has been the absence of political regionalism in their culture:

Very early in the English experience an excessively powerful and centralised State system was established, starting with the Norman Conquest. From the start sovereignty was bound up with the monarch and only carefully and gradually to be extended outwards from a single centre. Never in this long process was the idea that political power emanates from the people and the localities from which they spring allowed to take hold. It is a major reason why, although the English people have strong attachments to their localities and a powerful regional sensibility reflected in accent and culture, these have rarely found political expression. (Osmond 1998, p.8).

But this view of English history is at best partial. At most, it applies only to the core regions of the English state. At worst, it completely overlooks the dynamic politics of the English periphery after the Conquest. The northern English periphery, in particular, had a strong political identity during the Norman period and throughout the Middle Ages. Its political identity was eclipsed only as a result of a determined policy begun by the Tudors and Stuarts and, simultaneously, the growing commitment of the region's

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<sup>1</sup> *In an otherwise entertaining and, at times, insightful book, Paxman is equally unconvincing on the subject of class.*

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capitalist elite to the British imperial project. This neglect of the development of English regionalism has important contemporary political implications. The tendency to reduce a complex and regionally variegated history of England to a version of the history of the southern core is a major obstacle to understanding the possible impacts of the contemporary reform of the British state on England and the English. For instance, the failure to address the growth of English regionalism is a feature of Labour's approach to its constitutional reform programme, that may, ultimately, defeat its declared objectives as far as devolution is concerned (Tomaney 1999).

The dimensions of English regionalism have been typically shaped by the broader politics of territorial development in the British Isles. My main aim in this paper therefore is to demonstrate that North East England has had a marked political identity for centuries and to situate contemporary North East regionalism in this context. In particular, I shall argue that the region's identity has been crucially shaped by its proximity to Scotland. The recent reassertion of the region's political identity is a response, in large measure, to the renewed salience of the Anglo-Scottish border in British politics as a result of devolution. Predictably, the demand for regional government in the North East has intensified, as the reality of a Scottish parliament has become inevitable. On the one hand, the existence of a powerful Scottish parliament is perceived as a threat to the region in the competition for investment and resources. On the other hand, proposed political arrangements that focus on an English parliament appear to have little appeal within a region that has an ambiguous relationship with 'Englishness'.

The following sections provide only a preliminary sketch of some of the main themes in the history of the region in order to indicate the elements of an explanation of the current emergence (or re-emergence) of North East regionalism. However, they provide a basis upon which to refute the notion that regionalism is not a feature of English history and politics.

### **BORDERLAND: REGIONALISM IN NORTH EAST ENGLAND BEFORE THE UNION**

The neglect of the history of English regionalism has been a long-standing feature of English historiography. Perry Anderson in his study of the rise of the Absolutist state provides a good example. He contends that in England the centralisation of Norman feudalism generated a regionally unified noble class, without semi-independent territorial potentates comparable to the continental states (Anderson 1974, p.115). In fact throughout the early

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Middle Ages, the Angevin monarchs found the northern nobility frequently antagonistic to central political control and this accounts for the strong presence of 'northerners' in the deliberations at Runnymede (Holt 1992).

Recent studies have begun to show greater sensitivity to the important regional aspects of English history (e.g. Kearney 1989). More recently still there have been attempts to identify a distinctive 'northern history' (Jewell 1994; Musgrove 1990). Both Jewell and Musgrove take a broad definition of the North seeing the Trent as a key political and cultural dividing line in England. However, both of these authors acknowledge the distinctive character of the border region even in relation to other parts of the 'north'. Musgrove identifies the Tees as a further dividing line, with the lands up to the Tweed having a marked political identity. Urwin notes further that:

while English kings may have laid claim to the sovereignty over the whole island group, their effective authority was more often limited to central and southern England. The northern English marches were not fully absorbed until the sixteenth century, remaining in association with, rather than being annexed by the south. For centuries northern England was a kind of no-man's land between the core areas of England and Scotland. It was to be a laboratory for central policies of integration that later would be pursued in other regions of the British state.  
(Urwin 1982, p.23; see also Calder 1998, p.19; Ellis and Barber 1995)

The integration of the North into the ambit of the English state was a long, uneven and highly problematic process. As late as the end of the 17th century England 'was only a partially integrated polity where intense local loyalties existed side by side with the acceptance of central authority and a central culture' (Bulpitt 1975, p.39).

The North East then demonstrated a marked political identity over many centuries. The kingdom of Northumbria, of course, predated both Scotland and England, although its disintegration in the ninth century was the prelude to a growing assertion of the influence of Wessex over the Anglo-Saxon heptarchy of states. However, the Norman conquerors rapidly came up against the residual power of the Northumbrians, perhaps symbolised by the fact that the coverage of Domesday Book stopped at the Tees (as, more or less, had the Danelaw before it). The Norman kings governed the North through viceroys who were members of the house of Bamburgh, now earls of Northumbria, who succeeded by hereditary right and paid no tribute to the English king. The power of the earls was itself exemplified by their role in appointing the bishops of Durham. Thus the Norman Conquest represented

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only a partial discontinuity in the political identity of Northumbria which 'survived into the medieval English state as a land honeycombed with palatinates and liberties (Musgrove 1990, p.57):

England's northern frontier was not an especially thick and reinforced line of royal power and authority: it was a region of gaps, discontinuities and lacunae in which the king's writ did not run. (Musgrove 1990, p.76; see also Lomas 1992, p.30)

At the centre of the liberties was the see of Cuthbert, later the palatinate of Durham, the residual powers of which were only removed on the death of bishop van Mildert in 1836. The regalities and liberties that characterised the North, including the bishopric of Durham, were recognised by the Normans in return for the role of border defence. The prince bishops periodically took to the field, notably at the Battle of Neville's Cross in 1346 where a northern army routed the Scots invaders, or less successfully at the battle of Otterburn in 1388. These conflicts contained elements of local clan rivalry (notably at Otterburn between the Douglasses and Percies, as immortalised in the ballad Chevy Chase (Tuck and Goodman 1992)), but also were themselves part of wider strategic conflicts on a European scale. The development of the English north was inevitably affected by the evolution of the 'auld alliance' during the Anglo-Scottish and Hundred Years Wars.

Devolved responsibility for border defence was formalised by the Angevin monarchs in the institution of the wardenship of the Marches, which gave a highly distinctive militarized aspect to the polity and culture of the region. For the most part of the Middle Ages the wardenships were the institutions which conferred significant political power in their holders. Until around 1200, English kings were willing to cede parts of the North to Scottish kings for various strategic reasons. At the same time northern support for the English Crown was ambiguous, with the Northumbrians prepared to make alliances with either party when the need arose in order to preserve local autonomy. Thereafter, the growing definition and salience of the border during the thirteenth century tended to reinforce the Englishness of the region. However, a pattern of politics emerged that was heavily conditioned by the region's border position. In particular, the evolution of the wardenships of the marches in the 14th and 15th centuries saw the rise of powerful northern magnates in the form of the Percies and Nevilles who exploited their military roles in pursuit of political power. The power of the Percies and Nevilles, arguably, was an exceptional form of a pattern of lordship identifiable in other parts of England such as the Welsh march and the Sussex shore:

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The essential prerequisites of noble power were the wealth which they enjoyed, and the lordship of land and men which they exercised in the regions, and it was to the maintenance of these, along with their privileged lifestyle of course, that their energies and expenditure were largely directed. In the connections they fostered, the religious houses they patronised, the bequests they pursued, they were continually cultivating and enriching that regional authority which was the bedrock of their status in the realm.

(Given-Wilson 1987, p.179)

The power of the regional magnates, however, depended on the support of knights and gentry, whose own role was to grow over the centuries. Pollard describes the resulting situation at the end of the 15th century:

By no stretch of the imagination was north-eastern England a remote, poor and backward corner of the land in the second half of the fifteenth century ... Yet the presence of the Scots to the north, the continuing state of war, and the threat of invasion helped weld the north-east into a region with a common identity. This identity was strengthened by the power of the great magnates who held estates in all three counties

[Northumberland, Durham and the adjoining parts of North Yorkshire], and who customarily led the region in war against a common enemy.

(Pollard 1990, p.397)

The power and influence of these northern magnate families reached its apogee in the late fourteenth century, when for a period the region 'was the arbiter of English politics' (Pollard 1990, p.314). While it is too simplistic to characterise the Wars of the Roses as solely a North-South war, this was undoubtedly a key aspect of the conflict. Underlying the conflict were divergent economic conditions between a declining North and prospering South. At the same time, the Crown was weak in the North East, possessing little land there until Richard of Gloucester became king, while the Nevilles and Percies had extensive land-holdings. Moreover, the authority of the Crown was further limited by the range of liberties exercised in the region and by the fact that the magnate families made many key appointments to Crown positions in their capacities as wardens of the marches. Above all the region was typically exempt from most of the taxation levied by the English crown in recognition of its military responsibilities. The marcher lords and their retinue of knights and others prospered directly and indirectly as a result of military service in Scotland and France. Thus:

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because of the innate might of its magnates the north-east possessed a potential to disrupt the whole kingdom. The concentration of power in their hands, so much the greater than elsewhere in the kingdom, gave the region a political importance out of all proportion to its distance from Westminster or its wealth. (Pollard 1990, p.403)

Edward IV in effect pursued a regional policy, which granted considerable autonomy to the north under his brother Richard of Gloucester, whose own power drew on the Neville clan's role as marcher lords. Pollard speculates that had not Richard made his bid for power in 1483, a possible, even likely, outcome would have been the emergence of a semi-independent border dukedom under the Gloucester line. In the event, Richard, through the Neville family, based his usurpation of the English throne on his extensive regional connections: 'Thus Richard made his bid for power in 1483 as the leader of an exceptionally large and powerful northern affinity' (Ross 1981, p.55). But the victory of Henry Tudor at Bosworth signalled the beginning of a political offensive to bring both Wales and the English periphery more firmly under the ambit of the Crown (Kearney 1989, p.110).

This process was anything but smooth. The Pilgrimage of Grace, in particular, while concerned in part with defending the old religion, is best understood as a rising of the gentry and commons, with belated support of the marcher families, against the centralising policies of Thomas Cromwell. Drawing support from the gentry and commons from across northern England, the Pilgrimage submitted a manifesto of northern grievances to the king in the form of the Doncaster Articles. Victory over the Pilgrimage was critical to the Henrician revolution and consolidated the power of the southern monarchy:

Victories over the Pilgrimage of Grace of 1536, the Cornishmen's revolt of 1549 and the Rising of the Northern Earls of 1569 brought under southern control areas of England which during the later middle ages had been largely autonomous. (Kearney 1989, p.112; see also Fletcher and MacCulloch 1997; Lomas 1992)

Elton describes the defeat of the Pilgrimage of Grace and the assertion of the authority of the Council of the North as signifying that 'for the first time the whole realm without qualification became subject to government from Westminster' (Elton 1955, p.176). Also, despite his earlier noted dismissal of the relative importance of territorial magnates, Perry Anderson reports that Henry VIII's summoning of the Longest Parliament was concerned with enhancing Tudor authority over, among other things, just such groups:

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Under Cromwell's guidance they also suppressed the autonomy of seignorial franchises by depriving them of the power to designate JPs, integrated the marcher lordships into the shires, and incorporated Wales legally and administratively into the Kingdom of England.  
(Anderson 1974, p.120)

So, Pollard concludes, 'one the principal achievements of the Tudors, if not the chief, was to tame the north east' (1990, p.405). In practice the results were slow in coming. This incorporation was never straightforward and local loyalties remained strong. Reporting to the Privy Council in 1569, Lord Hunsdon famously observed that 'throughout Northumberland they know no other prince but a Percy' (quoted in Jewell 1994, p.58).

The rising of the Northern Earls in 1569 further interrupted the integration process, but was, as Rachel Reid described it, 'a lost cause'. On this occasion, the gentry failed to rise in support of the Northern Earls. The defeat of the Rising reflected the declining power of the territorial magnates in the face of the growing authority of the central state and was a result of wider social and economic changes. The basis of northern military power was undermined by the new technology of war, while the culture of violence itself was under ideological attack. The new state structures asserted their authority, while the centre sought to develop its own patronage system in the North. Here land made available to the state by the dissolution of the monasteries was important, allowing the crown to distribute it to the gentry, thus weakening their reliance on the patronage of the magnates. The slow advance of market relations further undermined feudal loyalties. The new gentry-based elite (much of which was later incorporated into the aristocracy) was assimilated into national commercial and political structures and modes of behaviour - a lineage-based society evolved into a 'civil society' (James 1974). In particular, in the North East, the growing political importance of the coal trade became the key factor shaping the aspirations of the new elite. According to Bulpitt: 'The market for coal and the regulation of the coal trade became more important in Durham politics than the changing fancies of aristocratic interests' (Bulpitt 1975, p.31).

### **AFTER THE UNION: THE NORTH EAST IN THE IMPERIAL AGE**

The Treaty of Berwick in 1586 held out the prospect of a union of Crowns and signalled the declining political salience of the border. Thus, according to Musgrove,

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In 1603 the North became redundant. After five centuries its function was no longer to serve as a front-line of defence against the Scots. (Musgrove 1990, p.215)

The conditions for the integration of the North into the emerging capitalist political economy and civil society of the 17th century coincided with eventual incorporation of Scotland into the British imperial project (e.g. Calder 1998). In this respect the English revolution was a key event. As well as advancing the capitalist transformation of social relations, an additional effect of the Civil War was to further promote the integration of England. The aim of the oligarchs who dominated Newcastle's trading activities was primarily to avoid any disruption of the economy during the civil war (Howell 1967)<sup>2</sup>. The region, however, was not by-passed by events. The occupation of Northumberland and Durham by a Scottish army in 1640-1 illustrated that the shadow of Scotland still hung over the region. However, a chief consequence of the civil war, according to Christopher Hill, was the extension of the influence of London, especially through its role in financing the Parliamentary side (Hill 1980). The Parliamentary forces undertook the systematic destruction of the bases of northern militarism, with the northern expeditions of the New Model Army leading to the demolition of several key castles. Regional loyalties remained strong but were subsumed into broader commercial activities and became concerned with ensuring local representation in commercial and regulatory deliberations at the centre. An important consequence of the civil war, thus, was to bring the north more firmly into the parliamentary system. As Underdown put it:

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<sup>2</sup> *Although the North East during the Middle Ages can be fairly characterised as a militarised frontier society, Newcastle itself became a large and fairly prosperous city. Its prominence was determined partly by its strategic position and the benefits it derived from military fees. It was also, though, an important trading port for wool, cloth and, from the late fourteenth century, coal. There were significant links between the gentry in rural areas and the Tyneside merchant class (Tuck 1992, p.183). Hugh Trevor Roper gives one rather colourful version of the urban/rural links: 'It was the town of Newcastle upon Tyne, and in particular the merchant-freemen of Newcastle upon Tyne, who ... had gradually entrenched themselves into a firm and exclusive oligarchy of local families. It was they who, in a barbarous country, among illiterate and boorish squireens, constituted a single element of civilisation ... but still a civilisation, separating them from their elder brothers, who bit their fingernails in draughty castellated farmhouses, and murdered each other over the biting of a greyhound or some less important dispute ...' (1945, p.47).*

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For both the country gentlemen who provided the leadership of the parliamentary side in the Civil War and for the merchant oligarchies who governed the towns, it still required an effort to think in national terms. England in one sense remained a confederation of overlapping communities, politically united on the unusual occasions when the representatives of these communities were summoned together in Parliament ... A parliament-man was the representative of his community, sent by his 'country' to do his duty as their spokesman, not an obedient member of a political party organised on national lines. (Underdown 1971, p.24)

At the same time increasing industrialisation and the gradual development of a coal-based economy, accompanied by imperial expansion, bound the periphery to the English core around a British identity. The region's medieval history crucially shaped the pattern of its modern development. Although the authority of the marcher families had expired, an ascendant gentry class replaced their role as landowners. This group, exemplified by names such as Ridley, Grey, Bowes, Tempest, Lambton, Londonderry and Lumley, typically had been significant families for centuries, often fighting alongside the marcher lords in the Anglo-Scottish wars. But these gentry families were transformed into a new capitalist-aristocratic class by the end of the 18th century (e.g. Spring 1952). A distinctive pattern of paternalist relations between landowners and their bonded servants gave character to the organisation of production and, later, to the politics of the working class in the region (Beynon and Austrin 1992). The inter-penetration of the land-owning, merchant and, later, capitalist classes was a feature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which formed part of a wider pattern of ruling class formation in England (Benwell CDP 1978; Anderson 1992).

By the mid-19th century the North East had developed into one of the most productive and innovative regions in the world. Its success was based on the rapid growth of a complex of interrelated industries. The expansion of coalmining, iron and steel-making, shipbuilding and heavy engineering underpinned a virtuous circle of growth. The Great Northern Coalfield lay at the heart of growth. Initially the bulk of output was exported, mainly to London, but by the end of the century coal was consumed on a large scale by engineering and transport industries in the region. The main market for these goods was the Empire in one form or another. Imperial expansion framed the growth of the North East in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in a material sense and, to paraphrase Colley (1992), helped to forge the position of the region in the new British state.

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This process of industrialisation had thrown up a highly distinctive pattern of class relations which acted as 'regional markers' (Cooke 1985). The new, self-confident regional bourgeoisie formed regional industrial organisations (McCord 1998) and, in recognition of its distinctive heritage and identity, even promoted a 'Northumbrian revival' in the late 19th century (Colls and Lancaster 1992). Moreover, non-conformism, relative to Anglicanism, was strong in the region (Nossiter 1974). However, this milieu did not evolve into a political regionalism: political activity was focused on the House of Commons. The region's economic position precluded the emergence of a 'northern nationalism' in the late 19th century where the Empire provided the main frame of reference:

[T]he main reason why the North did not develop a separate national identity was that the economic conditions were not conducive. At the same time other people were forging their national identities throughout Europe, the North of England was the industrial heartland of the British Empire. The last thing the North needed was to impose barriers between itself and its markets ... Put simply people in the North of England had nothing to gain in the 19th century by regarding themselves as anything other than English. (Pringle 1993, pp.163, 164)

Similarly, the region's working class, despite developing highly distinctive labour traditions (Beynon and Austrin 1994) had little incentive to develop a conscious regionalism in the 19th century. Around the new industries intense social struggles were fought by the nascent trade unions both for the right to organise and for decent living conditions. (As Bulpitt (1975) puts it, the external integration of the region into the English polity had been achieved at the cost of internal cohesion.) But by the end of the nineteenth century much had been achieved by the labour movement:

It is perhaps hard for us to realise, after the inter-war depression, that for sixty years before 1914 the Durham pitman and the shipyard workers of the Tyne and Wear were among the most highly-paid workers outside the USA ... The decline into poverty of the inter-war years was from the heights into depths. (Hughes 1970, p.233)

The region became distinctively Liberal in political terms compared to other English regions. (Durham alone among the English counties resisted the Tory revivals of 1841 and 1874 (Nossiter 1974)). But, in short, the impact of the industrial revolution and the opening of imperial markets meant that neither of the principal classes in the region had a strong incentive to conceive of the world politically in regional terms.

## **THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CRISIS IN THE 20TH CENTURY<sup>3</sup>**

Through the 19th century the region prospered on the basis of its technological prowess in the chief industries of the age and its orientation toward imperial (and Empire related) markets. For instance, in the first decade of the 20th century, the region produced 25 per cent of global output of ships (McCord 1979). It was not until the demand for the products of the staple industries fell in the period after the First World War that the danger of this regional specialisation was revealed and its effects compounded by the powerful negative multipliers that were set in train in the regional economy. The North East spent most of the twentieth century as a 'problem region', the subject (object?) of myriad 'regional' policies. While the nature of the twentieth century regional problem owed much to the previous pattern of industrialisation, it cannot, however, be reduced to an over-dependence on a narrow range of industries.

This explanation does not address the question of why resources released from the declining industries were not shifted into new sectors. A fuller explanation of the long crisis in the twentieth-century North East would need to examine the disarticulation of the financial and industrial systems which is a characteristic feature of the UK political economy and the way this has marginalised the position of the region. The UK financial institutions failed to develop their role from that of financial intermediation via capital markets and the provision of short-term working capital, to one of financial intermediation via bank ownership and the management of manufacturing industries, and the provision of long-term investment capital (Leys 1985). Such a situation is the outcome of the historic role of the City of London - which predates the process of industrialisation - as an 'international clearing house'. This role, over the course of two centuries, has dominated the national political economy through a convergence of interest between the City and the most powerful element of the British state, the Treasury (Ingham 1984; Cain and Hopkins 1993a).

In the early stages of industrialisation, when capital requirements remained low, such a situation did not hinder - and may even have assisted - the development of domestic industry. However, the shift to monopoly forms of capitalism at the end of the 19th century led to a growing dissonance between

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<sup>3</sup> *This section draws on a longer paper by the author, 'The political economy of UK regional policy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century', available from the author.*

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the global orientation of the City of London and the requirements of domestic industry (Ingham 1984; see also Anderson 1992). Industrial growth in the North East during the 19th century was largely financed domestically. Small private banks had existed, often precariously, since the middle of the 18th century, and did provide a source of finance for emerging industries. As the 19th century progressed, however, and the scale of capital investment began to rise, new sources of finance began to be required. The Newcastle Stock Exchange was established in the 1840s. A number of joint stock banks were formed in the 1830s - and began to replace the role of the private banks - but remained oriented toward supporting local industry. The biggest of these in the early part of the 19th century was the Northumberland and Durham District Bank, which grew alongside the expansion of local industry, although it eventually collapsed in 1857. The joint stock banks were unable to avoid the financial crises that embroiled the small private banks, reflecting the chaotic character of economic growth during this time. However, they continued to be highly supportive of local industry and were involved in promoting the development and restructuring of key firms of the time.

Over time, however, the integrity of this regional financial system began to be eroded and this was to have implications for the regional system of innovation. Increasingly, the regional financial system began to fall into the orbit of the City of London. The interests of the City began to be asserted from a relatively early stage with the Bank of England establishing a branch in Newcastle by the end of the 1820s and gradually taking over responsibility for the issuing of notes from local banks. Following the series of banking crises in the mid-19th century, the Bank of England was called upon to support the regional banks and became 'the linchpin of local banking' (McCord 1979, p.147)<sup>4</sup>. The rising scale of capital costs in industry began to place severe burdens on the financial sector and the larger limited liability companies had to look further afield, fostering the development of the London stock markets (Best and Humphries 1986, p.226).

Moreover, both the region's private banks and joint stock banks were increasingly acquired by national clearing banks headquartered in the City of

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<sup>4</sup>*As the local banks became more committed to the particular industries in their regions, the lack of industrial diversification in their asset portfolios left them vulnerable during cyclical downturns in business activity' (Best and Humphries 1986, p.227). Nationally the major turning point was the collapse of the Bank of Glasgow in 1878, which led many local banks to stop long-term lending to local industry (Best and Humphries 1986).*

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London, so that by the first decade of the 20th century virtually the entire regional banking system had come under southern control. The process was virtually complete by 1908 when the Lambton Bank was acquired by Barclays, by which time nationally two thirds of the financial system's resources were controlled by the five major clearing banks. This process was one mechanism by which the region's business elite was absorbed in the national elite centred on the City of London (Benwell CDP 1979). Indeed an inspection of **Who's Who** even in the 1990s shows that the old gentry families with northern titles still figure on the boards of major financial institutions in the City of London. But as far as industrial development was concerned the results were clear:

The rationalization of the system of commercial banks and its centralization in the metropolis changed the scope of British commercial banking ... [T]he rise of the national branch banking system, centralized in London, reduced the independence of the branches, permitted the banks to diversify their portfolios across industries, and reaffirmed the principle of short-term industrial finance.  
(Best and Humphries 1986)

Thus, by the end of the 19th century, the link between the local banking sector and local industry had been broken. The financial sector as a whole, moreover, was reinforcing its global role through the mechanism of imperialism. The late Victorian period saw a large outflow of capital from Britain. Indeed industrialists in the North East were as likely as others to invest abroad during this period, as well as to move capital into property and, notably, via the creation of large country estates in Northumberland and Durham (Benwell CDP 1978).

By the time of the inter-war crisis, therefore, the region lacked the type of institutions that could promote adaptation of the industrial base. At the same time there was little political pressure to develop these institutions. Nationally, the limited forms of intervention in the region by central government were more concerned with precluding more radical demands (Heim 1986). On the other hand, the regional bourgeoisie had been fairly fully incorporated into the national elite<sup>5</sup>, while the regional working class

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<sup>5</sup> *There were of course important residual attachments to the North East on the part of the regional bourgeoisie, but by this time the economic and cultural absorption, especially through education at the top public schools, into the broader British ruling class was complete (Benwell CDP 1978). In this respect the experience of the region*

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sought solutions to the crisis through the strategy of 'Labourism' at the level of the UK state. For instance, North East miners, like miners in Scotland and Wales, supported nationalization, as the solution to the coal industry's crisis.

Within the context of the post-war Keynesian welfare-state, the North East occupied the role of 'state-managed region' (Hudson 1989). The basic industries were progressively nationalised and the region relied heavily on the national public sector as a source of job growth. A centrally operated regional policy sought to attract, increasingly, foreign-owned manufacturing firms to the region. As a result, the industrial structure of the region took on the characteristics of a branch plant economy. The limit of existing approaches to regional development were understood both by central government and within the region as early as the 1950s and, certainly, by the 1960s. At this time also the first voices in the region began to be raised in favour of regional government.

These limits were revealed from the end of the 1970s. Changing patterns of trade - the loss of Empire markets, the growing importance of Europe and the rise of new forms of competition - together with chronic productivity problems intersected with worsening international economic conditions in the 1970s. Nationalisation became the mechanism for the reduction of employment in the basic industries, rather than their modernisation. Employment in the new branch plants was subject to successive waves of rationalisation. The broader pattern of economic change, especially tertiarization, favoured London and the South which were able to (re)invent themselves as an international service economy. This was the fundamental underpinning of the North/South divide in the 1980s (although the process had deep historical roots (Cain and Hopkins 1993b; Lee 1984)). However, strategies of privatisation, deregulation and fiscal restructuring also contributed to the divide. Unlike Scotland and Wales, the region was not guaranteed a disproportionate share of public expenditure commensurate with its needs. In this respect, the modern North East elite has proved less adept at guaranteeing the fiscal privileges of the region that its mediaeval predecessor, or its contemporary Scottish neighbour. This failure deserves fuller treatment than can be given here but, by comparison to Scotland, part of the answer must lie in the way a distinctively Scottish service class has

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*was markedly different to that of Scotland where the preservation of post-union autonomy in the fields of religion, education, law and professional life, guaranteed the institutional conditions for the development of a Scottish politics (McCrone 1992; Paterson 1998).*

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developed around Scottish institutions and has provided the political basis for making demands about 'Scottish welfare' (McCrone 1992; Paterson 1998).

### **THE RETURN OF REGIONAL POLITICS**

Within the North East the rise of regionalism is a feature of the period after 1979 and has accompanied the development of Scottish nationalism (Tomanev 1995). In fact, the origins of the most recent manifestation of English regionalism lie partly in the conflicts surrounding the Scotland Bill in 1978. Labour MPs in the North East of England promoted the amendment to the Bill stipulating that a Scottish Assembly had to secure the support of 40 per cent of eligible voters in a referendum. Put simply, Northern Labour MPs at that time feared a more powerful neighbour would easily win the struggle for investment and resources. At this stage, key actors in the North East saw Scottish devolution as posing a basic threat to the region. Although the threat was seen in explicitly regional terms, the response was organised through Parliament.

Thereafter, the North East region played a key role in debates about English regional government. At the end of the 1970s the idea of a powerful government in Edinburgh - which, after all, is the North East's nearest capital city - was regarded as a threat by most economic and political interests in the North East. For a variety of reasons this attitude gradually changed during the 1980s. The region struggled to cope with its marginal role in the UK political economy expressed as rapid de-industrialisation and its social fall-out. It found itself politically and culturally at odds with Margaret Thatcher's supporters in Middle England. The region's Labourist voting traditions were reinforced and Scottish arguments about a democratic deficit began to resonate in the North East. Local authorities, trade unions and business, stimulated partly by European pressures, sought to co-operate and develop distinctive regional institutions in order to attract new industry to the region. Neither Labourism, nor New Labourism (to date), appeared to have anything particular to say to the specificities of region's predicament. Together, these conditions provided the seed-corn for the emergence of a new regional politics.

## **CONCLUSION: THE MAKING OF AN ENGLISH REGION**

English history and politics still seem imprinted with a spirit inimical to regional government.  
(Harvie 1991, p.106).

[H]istorically speaking most nations have always been culturally and ethnically diverse, problematic, protean and artificial constructs that take shape very quickly and come apart just as fast.  
(Colley 1992, p.5)

There is a pressing need to rescue English regionalism from the condescension of posterity. In this paper I have made a preparatory attempt to do so. My method for achieving this has been through a case-study of one English region - doubtless the exercise could be repeated in other regional contexts.

Historically the development of the North East has been conditioned by its position in the hinterland of the Scottish border. For several centuries the threat of invasion from the North and distance from the South conditioned the socio-economic development of the region and its political identity. Frequently, the threat of invasion was more theoretical than real, but the region's political class became adept at painting a picture of Scottish threats as a means of guaranteeing political autonomy and fiscal privilege. Of course North East society during the Middle Ages was founded on complex relationships linking the interests of the marcher families and the knights, gentry and others at one level, and temporal and ecclesiastical interests at another. But the notion that the Norman Conquest ended regional political traditions, on the basis of this argument is refuted. On the contrary, the final incorporation of the North East into the English state is fairly recent. The legal incorporation of the North occurred alongside that of Wales. The incorporation of the region's elite reflected its commercial interest, in the 18th century, in the creation of a single market and access to the imperial project. In this sense its motivations were no different to those of the Scottish elite.

In the 19th century some of the conditions existed for the emergence of northern 'bourgeois regionalism' (Harvie 1994) or even a 'northern nationalism' (not the least being that a dominant conception of Englishness was being formed that excluded northern identity (Taylor 1992)). For instance, Nairn (1982) has noted that regions such as Bohemia and Catalunya developed regionalist and then nationalist movements out of somewhat

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similar conditions in the 19th century. This nationalism of the relatively advantaged developed because of the failure of the imperial centre to liberalise the conditions for trade. That this type of regional-nationalism did not emerge in the North East can be largely ascribed to the fact that the economic interests of the region were closely tied up with, and largely guaranteed by, the growing imperial commitment to free trade in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Cain and Hopkins 1993a; Green 1999). This was the period in which economic growth was greatest in the North East. The fate of North East politics in the 20th century has been to live with this heritage in its many forms.

Marx says somewhere that England is the last colony of the British Empire. The framework that conditioned North East politics over the last 300 years, however, has now shattered. From the perspective of key interests in the North East the most important feature of the new political landscape is the existence of a Scottish parliament. It is the shadows cast by this institution that colour debate in the region. At the same time it is becoming more predictable that the North East should choose to frame its response in terms of a regional interest, rather than by taking refuge in an increasingly distant Englishness.

The demand for regional government for the North East has grown at an astonishing speed in the 1990s (e.g. Tomaney 1995). For instance, shortly after the narrow Welsh referendum result, the Campaign for a Northern Assembly published 'A Declaration for the North'. The declaration was supported by several hundred people in the North East (including MPs, MEPs, council leaders, academic and cultural figures and others) and called for an elected regional assembly (Campaign for a Northern Assembly 1997). This was an unprecedented initiative from an English region. Writing in the **Independent on Sunday** on 16 November 1997, Neal Ascherson described the publication of the Declaration as 'a big moment in the transformation of the British state, and in English history. For the first time an English region has demanded self-government'. The North East is struggling to find a place for itself in the post-Imperial, post-Thatcherite British state. There is undoubtedly strong resistance in the Imperial heartland to the notion of the natives winning control of their affairs. But, equally, it seems increasingly likely that, as things fall apart, the centre cannot hold. The last liberation struggle may have begun.

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