

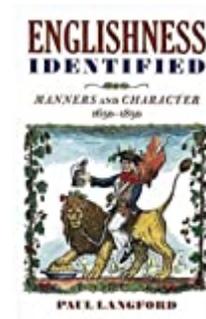
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**J.C.D. Clark.** *English Society 1660-1832: Religion, Ideology and Politics during the Ancien Regime.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. xii + 580 pp. \$74.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-66627-5.



**Paul Langford.** *Englishness Identified: Manners and Character 1650-1850.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. 402 S. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-820681-1.



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Reading these two treatments of English national identity concurrently prompts one to reach for the game-show denouement: “Will the real English please stand up.” J.C.D. Clark’s English emerge as a people whose lives revolve around an obsession with Christian dogma and ecclesiastical practice. Paul Langford’s English, in contrast, are a study in contradictions – industrious yet leisured; candid and hypocritical; individualistic, eccentric, and free spirited yet slaves to custom; informal but stiff; domestic, unsociable, and taciturn yet clubbable; barbaric and polite – in fine, only consistent in their unpredictability.

Clark unravels the tangle of history and ideas that he sees as having formed the English’s orderly corporate ca-

capacity, while Langford rolls out an unwieldy mess of individual traits attributed to the English by contemporary, primarily foreign, observers and tries to find some ordering principle therein. Neither, for different reasons, actively places his study within the context of current historical controversies. Each book attempts to stand apart like the kingdom on the sea that it seeks to represent, so being thrown together in a review is a bit like having a reminder of close neighbors whom one hopes to dominate but who nevertheless express an inconveniently divergent perspective.

Clark’s second, revised edition of *English Society*, presents the same model of an old regime that survived until 1832, but employs new tactics and strategy in re-

sponse to the considerable critical reaction that his first edition provoked. Whereas in 1985 he directed his full artillery against historians whom he perceived propped up Whiggish or Marxian paradigms, he now tactically eschews any sort of direct engagement. Clark rounds up selected opposition into one footnote prefaced, "However one might debate particular conclusions, in no sense is the present book an implied dismissal of the research agendas embodied in a wide range of recent studies," then concludes coyly, "Nor is it merely the intention of the present book to fill in gaps in that historiography" (p. 38). His only citations to other works point to particular passages that support his arguments. As for his larger strategy, Clark moves his starting date back from 1688 to 1660 in order to underline the continuity of the long eighteenth century, and builds his model of English society in a language he has sought to cleanse of anachronism, prolepsis, and teleology. Indeed, he deploys entries from Johnson's Dictionary in the way that eighteenth-century polemicists wielded scripture. *Ancien rgime*, patriarchalism, paternalism, and consensus follow radicalism, liberalism, and other abstract nouns sent into banishment in the first edition. The nineteenth century's polarizing labels, he argues, obscured "the middle ground of English life: that social form which presented itself as both constitutional *and* royalist, libertarian *and* stable, tolerant *and* expressing religious orthodoxy, innovative *and* respectful of what was customary" (p. 17).

Clark describes how the conflicts of the seventeenth century shaped a Protestant constitution supported by an Anglican-aristocratic hegemony, the idea of divine Providence, and a national identity centered in a strong monarchy. It was religious dissent, Catholic Emancipation, and repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts that destroyed this order and brought parliamentary reform, not those collective hallucinations of hindsight that historians dubbed the Industrial Revolution and the rising middle class. Increased mobility, Clark maintains, was geographic rather than social. The notion of urbanization as an agent of change, however, he finds equally phantasmagoric, as English people of all classes long lived an amphibious existence between town and country. Class had more to do with the duties of one's station than one's economic position. All activities, including political opposition, were subsumed, and thus tamed, within the Anglican framework and the gentlemanly ethos underlying the social hierarchy. Clark prefers to use the word disaffected rather than radical to describe opponents of the old order before the 1820s, lacking as they did a theory of natural rights.

While for Clark, English identity lies in religion, Langford's foreign observers suggest that the English passion for politics and commerce is the key to understanding their manners and character. In fact, Continental travelers observed the English to be phlegmatic, even irreverent and fickle, in their devotions. Practicality, rather than devoutness, appeared to be the English *modus operandi*. How else to explain an extreme and stultifyingly dull Sabbatarianism than a means of recovering after a week of energetic industry, considering that most of those observed spent the better part of the day in a roast-dinner induced stupor?

The pictures that Clark and Langford present do converge in their depictions of the social utility of politeness and manners. Langford's evidence suggests that a man's political "radicalism" would be tolerated as a harmless eccentricity as long as he continued a suitable dinner companion, while indecorous religious enthusiasm marked one as a public menace. Langford's data, however, shows patrician hegemony under threat as early as the 1770s. While Clark sees social emulation, moral criticism of aristocratic values, and diatribes against social interlopers as evidence of the success of elite control, Langford finds evidence of increasing social anxiety in the upper ranks from the 1770s manifested in their increasing self-isolation through heightened reserve, snobbishness, and exclusivity. "The 'cut' as a weapon of social warfare was invented in the 1770s" (p. 263).

Each of Langford's chapters focuses on one of the six traits that dominate characterizations of Englishness: energy, candor, decency, taciturnity, reserve, and eccentricity. He discusses the contexts in which these traits appear and the explanations that observers of everyday English habits offer in their interpretation. Although the book offers fascinating depictions of manners and mores from the mid-seventeenth to mid-nineteenth centuries, the anecdotal material overwhelms his analysis. The irritatingly fatuous drawings at the beginning of each chapter, best described as caricatures of period caricatures, seem deliberately calculated to reassure the sort of general reader who immediately relegates anything carrying the least taint of academic seriousness to the realm of the boring. I cannot imagine why Langford did not instead include visual satire in his analysis, given his previous research on political prints. Nonetheless, he does succeed in his first aim of bringing to light new material on observed rather than prescriptive behavior as a foil to didactic literature and advice manuals. His second aim, to contribute to current debate on the history of identity, requires readers to perform their own anal-

yses of his data. Although he sometimes points out the biases of his observers, his presentation of foreigners as impartial spectators, even when supplemented by opinions of English contemporaries themselves, seems a bit reductive. In many instances, foreigners describing English peculiarities appeared to be using them either as a flattering glass or a flaw-finding dressing room mirror. Relating these constructions of national character to current debates on the roots of English nationalism would have made for a more academically interesting book but would have undermined its popular accessibility.

It is interesting how often in these two very different studies interpretation rests upon etymological judgments. Clark insists that historians have been led astray by Whig caricature of the Tory doctrine of passive obedience as meaning complete submission. He explains that it delineated a middle ground between obedience and resistance “what is today called civil disobedience, patiently accepting any penalties for inactivity” (p. 58). Coupled as the doctrine was with that of non-resistance (see for example the Bishop of Chichester’s deathbed declaration of 1689 reproduced on p. 85), this seems a teleological slip. The OED defines civil disobedience as “the refusal to obey laws, pay taxes, etc., as part of a political campaign” which is a very different thing indeed from its first definition of passive obedience as “a surrender to

another’s will without cooperation.” To my mind, disobedience requires visible resistance, and passive obedience lies closer in meaning to dissimulation: outwardly complying while inwardly resisting. In contrast to Clark’s rigid pinning down of meanings, Langford emphasizes the instability of the words used to describe English traits and behavior as the source of their significance. “It is in the ambiguities of these characterizations and in the evolving purposes they served, that some of the most interesting features of perception and self perception are to be found” (p. 27).

These divergent approaches to national identity do call into question the notion’s value as a category of historical analysis. Langford considers it significant as a preoccupation of the time, a manifestation of Enlightenment social science. Yet I cannot help but wonder whether both works are counterblasts to the campaign for a British history that incorporates the experience of the Welsh, Scots, and Irish. The two studies do agree in one respect: that constant negotiation, compromise, and definition were a feature of English society. Perhaps historians should not be so resistant to the linguistic turn.

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