

Imagining Britain – Past, Present, and Future (Cologne, 12–13 Nov 20)

Cologne, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, Nov 12–13, 2020

Deadline: Mar 15, 2020

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Current debates about Brexit are apparently about the future of Britain – whether in- or outside the European Union. However, they are just as much about the present and the past of the country. At the heart of recent controversies lies the question of what it means for something or someone to be British. Opinions diverge over whether the current situation reflects these ideals of Britishness and what traditions from the past should be preserved for the future or need to be overcome in the present. How is Britain's past, present, and future imagined? The interdisciplinary conference sets out to answer this question for different epochs and different spheres, accounting for historically changing images of Britain as a political, economic, and social entity.

In this endeavour, Benedict Anderson's famous claim that the nation is imagined serves as a common starting point: "It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lies the image of their communion." (Imagined Communities, 2006) In line with Anderson, we refrain from positivist claims about "nation-ness" and focus on the shared but constructed images that national feelings of belonging draw on. We assume that the nation can only exist as a community as long as people are able to imagine it. We set out to explore what such images looked like in the past and whether they still exist in the present. While scholars have often emphasized the importance of collective memory and traditions, we acknowledge that the cohesion of national communities cannot only build on perceptions of a shared past but can similarly emanate from common experiences in the present or the expectations of a joint future.

The adopted perspective cuts across the time horizons of the past, present, and future in a two-fold manner: It refers to images of Britain created at different moments in time and to different moments of time as imagined. We therefore welcome contributions from scholars concerned with the recent or future state of politics, the economy, and society, as well as from those who work on these issues from a historical perspective. "Imagining Britain" refers quite literally to visualizations, paintings, and (photo)graphic and architectonic representations of Britain, but it also covers more cognitive images, such as ideas, frames, expectations, traditions, narratives, or perceptions, of what is supposed to be British. The conference theme therefore crosses many disciplinary boundaries and invites contributions from e.g., history and art history, cultural studies, literature, ethnography, sociology, political sciences, and economics.

Three keynotes – by Astrid Erll (Goethe University, Frankfurt), Colin Hay (Sciences Po, Paris/University of Sheffield), and Richard Toye (University of Exeter) – will provide stimulus for discussion

from a cultural studies, social science and historical perspective.

By depicting how differently Britain has been imagined across time and by contrasting the various images, we hope to develop a better understanding not only of what it meant and means to be British, but also of what role established images of Britain play in the rupture the country is currently facing.

We particularly invite contributions engaged with the following areas of interest, but we are also open to other, related perspectives:

- How was Britain's future imagined in the past? How is Britain's past imagined in the present?
- How does Britain imagine its relations to the wider world? And how is Britain imagined from the outside?
- How do images of Britishness vary across the social strata or across the political spectrum? How have these differences evolved?
- What techniques have actors employed to actively change images of Britain or Britishness?
- British virtues and traditions: free trade, political and economic liberalism, rolling back the state, parliamentary democracy, sovereignty, religious tolerance, the open sea, British influence; how are/were they imagined as being British?
- British institutions: NHS, parliament, BBC, constitutional monarchy, the Commonwealth, British industry, British working class; what images of Britishness are/were they associated with?

Please submit your title and abstract of no more than 400 words to the organizers by March 15, 2020. If your contribution is accepted, we will require an extended abstract of 5-8 pages to be submitted two weeks prior to the conference.

The conference will take place at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne. If no other funding is available, the organizing institutions may cover travel costs for presenting participants. If you require a travel grant, please indicate this when submitting.

Organizers:

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Reference:

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