

The Economist redux

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During the 1980s, I read the *Economist* from cover to cover, week to week; during the 1990s I read it from the back, stopping with "Business"; since then I maintain my subscription like a Christmas card to an old [friend](#) [1] whose once passionate conversation I cannot quite rekindle.

"[Britannia Redux](#) [2]", its feature on Britain and globalisation published on 2 February 2007, reminds me why.

The issues that most concern Britons today - as the *Economist* notes - are cultural: race, immigration, integration. This is a summary of the argument in "Britannia Redux":

- Britain has successfully absorbed many migrants
- they make a net contribution to GDP
- grievances over allocations of jobs and housing have created some intercommunal violence

But:

- British Muslims (and particularly a radical minority of them) are the real problem - they are particularly disaffected with their host country, the young more than the old; homegrown Islamic terrorism is an extreme expression of this disaffection
- disaffection has no visible economic basis
- maybe "Britishness" can come to be made more attractive: British youth are currently very unattractive in their mores - some of the least attractive anywhere
- maybe education can deliver attachment to Britishness by creating open, unprejudiced minds: "Polls suggest that highly educated people tend to be more open and less prejudiced," reassures [Britannia Redux](#). "They are also likely to earn more money, which gives them more choice over where to live".

Also in openDemocracy's debate on the *Economist*:

Isabel Hilton, "[The "Economist" and Britain's future](#) [2]"
(2 February 2007)

Merril Stevenson, "[Britain and globalisation: a good marriage](#) [2]"
(2 February 2007)

The Economist report, "[Britannia redux](#) [3], is written by Merrill Stevenson and published on 2 February 2007

The *Economist's* self-declared aim since its founding in 1843 has been to take part in "a severe contest between intelligence, which presses forward, and an unworthy, timid ignorance obstructing our progress"

The great strength of the *Economist* in the 1980s was its relentless focus on economics: Britain's wealth was being destroyed, and the *Economist* played its role in the salvage. But the *Economist's* weakness today [4] is its economics: faced with a subtle problem of identity, sociology, phenomenology, a problem centred around attachment, community, meaning and the first-person perspective - faced with such a problem, the *Economist* resorts to a magic wand: "education".

It is as if the *Economist* has understood that we are faced with a problem of *mind*, and has applied its managerial statism accordingly:

- minds have public-good aspects
- an ordered society needs a sense of attachment
- ill minds might threaten the City through terrorist action
- healthy minds should be more productive
- minds are fashioned through education
- therefore government has a role in intervening in education to deliver its public-good benefits.

What is wrong with this view? The naivety of its sociology is as glaring as had become the economic naivety of the 1970s [5] Keynesian orthodoxy. How exactly does education make a mind? How is the influence of an "outsider" felt inside a community; might a development of Britishness [6] in schools backfire, by creating a greater target for rejection?

The most virulent terrorists - Islamic or not - have tended to be middle class and educated. Why? Can the path through modernity be micro-managed by government through the levers of education, as "Britannia Redux" suggests? And the unattractive Britishness "brand" that Muslims reject [7] today: can it be improved without reigning in the individualist spirit that the *Economist* so willingly helped to unleash twenty-five years ago?

Economics is not the place to look for answers (I say this having invested a PhD and half a career in the subject). Bagehotian liberalism [8] is a splendid tradition. Like one theme in the symphony of history, there are moments and places when it needs to be repeated loudly, to be embroidered upon. Britain today is not one.

Source URL:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-britannia_redux/redux_4319.jsp

Links:

[1] <http://www.billemmott.com/economist.php>

[2] http://www.economist.com/world/britain/displayStory.cfm?story_id=8582240

[3] http://www.economist.com/world/britain/displayStory.cfm?story_id=8582240

[4] <http://www.economist.com/index.html>

[5] <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/commandingheights/lo/story/index.html>

[6] http://www.fabian-society.org.uk/press_office/display.asp?id=587&type=news&cat=43

[7] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/01/29/nmuslims29.xml>

[8] <http://cepa.newschool.edu/het/profiles/bagehot.htm>



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