

Can the Monarchy be abolished?

Can Britain fully embrace modernism and become a Republic with an elected Head of State? In order to reach a conclusion I want to consider what it is that “makes the British the last people in the modern world to be subject to the authentic forms of monarchy”(Hitchens, 1990: 6). A good place to begin would be to explore the original justifications for the monarchy .

In the feudal age the dominant ideology was the *great chain of being*. People believed that they were appointed to their station in life by God. Mediaeval monarchs were believed to be God’s representatives on earth who possessed special powers beyond the ordinary person. Such ideological beliefs protected the monarchy against envy. The monarch was not hated for his/her powers of authority and privileges. Zigmund Freud argued that the super-ego resolves the issue of envy by supplying an object for identification. So “‘what was originally envy’ is psychologically transformed into hero-worship. Envy is repressed from the consciousness and there is a ‘reversal of what was first a hostile feeling into a positively toned tie in the nature of identification’” (Billig, 1992: 117). So rather than the poor rising up against the monarch, many believed that a brush with royalty would cure them of their ills and bring them good luck. In order to keep the super-ego from being unmasked, and envy rising to the surface, the monarchy has continued to reinvent itself and *move with the times*.

In *moving with the times* the monarchy has had to become part of today’s celebrity age and sell the individuals at its heart and once it began to sell that product it could not control the hunger for it. It could not say, thus far and no more; it could not reserve anything for private individuals at its core. Is this what Anthony Giddens meant when he wrote: “ ...nothing is more dissolving of tradition than the ‘permanent revolution’ of market forces”? (2002:15). As Johann

Hari succinctly puts it: “ The days are gone when the Windsor family thrust themselves and their newborn babies into the public spotlight and expected nothing but praise in return” (2002:12). Indeed, “The royal family, ... has entertained but hardly inspired its loyal subjects with antics fit for soap operas and C-grade movies” (Simpson, 1999 :Internet). In the twenty-four-seven media era the monarchy has been exposed to the public glare. Majesty has been stripped away and the super-ego has also been left wearing no clothes.

Having done that, it must contain those envious impulses, which are part of itself. There must be other thoughts and expressions to settle down the ordinary person into ordinary life. There is an ideological job of settlement to be done. (Billig, 1992: 118)

The ideology of nationalism has been the job of settlement that has rendered ordinary people unrebelling. In short the monarchy and the *nation* became synonymous. The development of nationalism is concomitant with the development of the modern state and in order to understand why the monarchy remains at the core of the British national identity one can use the insight of totemism theory. According to Freud, in Totem and Taboo ,(1913) totemism derives from the unconscious symbolization of the repressed memory of the *Primal Father's* murder at the dawn of society. Darwin claimed that early ape like humans lived in small hordes consisting of one powerful patriarch and his females. For Freud that the rivalry for females pushed the younger males to kill and eat the old father. After killing their father, the sons felt extremely guilty, and so transformed him into an authority figure - who ended up more or less ruling the tribe from the grave.

When one analyses the first bourgeoisie revolution one can see that something very similar happened. Charles 1 was able to exercise absolute power because it belonged to him - he

had received the *gift* of power from God. By 1649 the newly rich bourgeoisie were competing to consecrate power and thus they cut off the King's head, justifying the act with the rantings of the Old Testament Prophets. Although the King could not be brought back to life from the grave the institution of the monarchy could, and by 1660 the Monarchy was restored, along with King Charles II, because "the radical chaos of the 1640s and 1650s rendered this traditional social taxonomy more appealing rather than less" (Cannadine, 2000 :26). Like the dead *Primal father*, who no longer visibly ruled, the monarch no longer rules the *nation* with absolute power. It is her symbolic power, which most people believe is 'just an harmless bit of fun', but maintains a certain kind of *primitive* national identity - one conducted through the language of images that enshrines the worst values of a semi-feudal class society.

In Civilization and its Discontents (1930) Freud concluded that people identify themselves as members of a group by libido-attachment to an object taking place on a mass scale. Individuals put one and the same object in the place of the super-ego. They identify with one another in their ego. Because the monarchy has become identical with 'Britain', for many millions of people, opposition to it means shutting oneself out of the British *nation*, or what Benedict Anderson (1983) calls the *imagined community*. This isolation is extremely difficult to bear and as Erich Fromm writes: "By conforming with the expectations of others, by not being different these doubts about one's own identity are silenced and a certain security is gained" (1955: 219). "However much a (British subject) may be opposed to the principles of (monarchy) if he has to choose between being alone and feeling that he belongs to (Britain) most persons will choose the latter (Fromm, *ibid* : 181). Here one can draw upon the work of Adorno et al (1950). In The Authoritarian Personality In order to maintain the cohesion of the *nation* the group stores up unexpressed anger at royalty. The hostility can't be expressed towards the monarchy, however, so it is displaced to an outsider who is different - a scapegoat. In recent years we have seen in the media how asylum seekers have been labelled 'scroungers' Unconsciously, the authoritarian says, "I don't hate the monarch; I hate asylum seekers."

Furthermore the *nation* is understood as distinct and separate from all other nations. It is a relational term; like any sign one *nation* consists in being what the others are not. The concept belongs in fact to the realm of political signification: nations have no essential or intrinsic properties - each is a discursive construct whose identity in its difference from others. In order to understand how Britain came to be constructed as being powerful and pervasive one must look back to the colonial age.

In the 19th century, when Britain was an important world power, her self-image was being defined in relation to the cultures, of other countries, and races. Edward Said describes in his book, Orientalism, (1995) how Orientals were constructed as the binary opposite of British people. So to be British meant to be civilised, active and subjects of knowledge. However, Oriental people were constructed as barbaric, passive and objects of knowledge. As the British Empire expanded these values of binary opposites, were exported all over the world, and many countries became objects of the “colonial gaze” (Danaher et al, 2000. p.110). Like the myth of Narcissus, the beautiful youth who fell in love with his own image, the nation’s participants fell in love with the constructed self-image. Is Britain still in love with the image of the *nation* as a world power? It would seem so when one contemplates the fact that honours are still given out by order of the British empire. History is the equivalent of humankind’s memory. The Historian Arthur Marwick invites to

Try to imagine what everyday life would be like in a society in which no one knew any history. ...it is only through knowledge of history that a society can have knowledge of itself. As a man without memory and self-knowledge is a man adrift, so a society without memory.... and self knowledge would be a society adrift. (1970: 13)

Following Marwick we can understand how the monarchy creates the myth a nation of great antiquity and thus Britain is a nation that can not be at drift. However, with the development of globalization, it is becoming increasingly difficult to define one nation's culture in relation to another because national boundaries are being eroded and thus to "remove the monarchy (would be to) remove the very thing which distinguishes this country from other countries". This was a ideological theme that was uncovered in Billig's (1992,:30) empirical study of the way people thought about the monarchy. Today, Britain has declined as a world power and the concept of *Orientalism* is no longer the dominant ideology. Instead, as (Billig, ibid: 55) points out,:

This narcissism has changed. Narcissus is still looking into the pool, but he is too knowing to be fooled by his own reflection... Bent over the pool's edge, he sees something else. As he gazes down, Narcissus imagines the whole world looking up from the waters with envious admiration

According to Billig the tourist argument is a rationalisation of for nationalist concepts. Britons want to believe that the whole world is gazing at as them .