

## My unease with flags

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As the [Guardian reported](#) yesterday:

*Just weeks after many people in England united around its national flag as the country's female football team won the European championships, the cross of St George and the British union jack are being raised again in communities across the country. This time, however, it is part of an increasingly organised campaign that claims to be purely about patriotism but which many fear – amid a climate of anti-migrant protests and rising far-right activity – could be much more divisive and dangerous.*

The campaign, which seems to be centred around Birmingham, has the aim of hanging the flag of St George, as the flag of England, on lamp posts. The Guardian features pictures of this happening, and apparently, funds are being raised to make it commonplace.

As the Guardian notes, those raising these funds say:

*"This is NOT racist never has been never will be."*

They added, apparently:

*"We have members of the community of all ethnicities and religions stopping by and praising what we are doing so please don't call this racist."*

The defensiveness of the language used is quite extraordinary, and would appear to be a perfect example of the commonplace right-wing technique that [I noted yesterday](#) when saying:

*It is worth noting what I say there about the way the far-right and fascists use [DARVO](#) — deny, attack, and reverse victim and offender — as a deliberate gaslighting technique.*

But let me take these statements at face value and presume that they are not racist. Instead, let me describe how I feel about them. I find them profoundly intimidating and intimidatory.

There is, I acknowledge, a good question to be asked about why so many people who live in England are unsettled by their own flag, and the answer appears to have nothing at all to do with patriotism. It is, instead, in my opinion, about the political economy of identity in England and about how unsettled national stories shape bad economic choices.

The English flag, the cross of St George, does, after all, carry baggage. Unlike the dragon of Wales or the saltire of Scotland, the English flag was entwined with empire and domination. It does not easily symbolise community or solidarity. It recalls power imposed, at home and abroad. That legacy means it cannot be waved without raising ghosts, and in this respect, I most definitely believe in ghosts.

There is, to add to this concern, the reality that has to be faced, which is that since the 1970s, the cross of St George has been adopted by far-right extremist groups in England. I have lived through the eras of the National Front, the British National Party, the English Defence League, and others, who have used this flag as a banner to symbolise their demands for exclusion and division. Like it or not, that stain has not been erased. To wave the English flag can still be, and is, read as an act of aggression.

This can be contrasted with the situations in Wales and Scotland. Their identities are shaped by survival and, to some degree, resistance against England, which has, rightly in my opinion, been seen as their oppressor over centuries. Their flags do, as a consequence, symbolise culture, community and care.

That is not the case with the English flag. Too often, and for too long, that has seemed to be a symbol of oppression against others. Whether it was once in the Empire, or now in its use to symbolise opposition to immigrants, Europe, the Welsh, Scottish and Irish, the narrative always appears to be the same: it is one of aggressive oppression. The English flag is not one that symbolises inclusive belonging; it is instead a sign of intended exclusion.

This identity gap has political and economic consequences. As a matter of fact, politicians have and still are using this identity gap to exploit unsettledness.

The Conservatives wrap themselves in the flag when convenient, offering nostalgia and division in place of substance.

Labour now wraps itself in the union flag, fearful of being tainted by English nationalism, but nonetheless succumbing to the narratives of exclusion as a result, most especially when seen by all those who view this country as an oppressor. and around the world, billions of people have reason to think that.

Reform and Farage's predecessor parties have all used flags with the deliberate intention of symbolising difference, boundaries, borders, and so exclusion. There has been nothing accidental about them doing so.

I, amongst millions living in England, do feel threatened by that. And why wouldn't I? This flag has been used as the symbol of the oppressor of the country from which large parts of my family come. What else are we meant to think when it is waved by those who deliberately want to promote it as patriotic and shout that doing so is not racist, indicating at the same time that even if it is not, it is most definitely about creating division, which division is undoubtedly harmful to the cohesion of society in this country.

The resulting vacuum leaves Englishness without an anchor in progressive politics, and that vacuum spills into economics.

Austerity was sold as "standing tall" and "living within our means", not as an economic argument (there are no economic arguments for austerity), but as an appeal to a wounded national pride. The inference is that we must show a "stiff upper lip" and all that.

In the same way, Brexit was framed as "taking back control", again, not an economic case, but as an identity claim.

And if it can be argued that even made-up "fiscal rules" and claims such as "the need for credibility with markets" are dressed up as the economic version of waving the flag. There are ways in which politicians without ideas pretend to long-suffering people that endurance and sacrifice are virtuous in themselves, and so agony is worth enduring.

What they actually reveal is a society that now has no confident or inclusive national story. The result is that politics has to lean on myths, and right now those myths are being used to sell economic harm.

What can be done about this? If England is to have a healthier politics and economics, it needs a new story about itself. That would need to be one that shows that its flag represents care, solidarity and fairness and that ties belonging to the work of building sustainable well-being, not to nostalgia for empire. Until that story exists, I think the use of the English flag will remain profoundly unsettling, and the politics built on it will keep doing damage.

The unease around the English flag is not, then, just cultural. It is about political economy in action. An identity left hollow is easily filled with myth, and myths have been used to sell austerity, Brexit and inequality. If England is to have an economy that works for all, it needs a flag that symbolises community and a story to match. We are a long way from there right now.