

## Cornish identities

What do we mean by 'Cornish identities'?

First, it will help to establish exactly what is meant by the word 'identity'. Identity is used in two ways and has two somewhat contradictory applications. First, we talk of our identity as an individual, implying that which makes us a distinctive human being, with characteristics that set us off from all those other individuals with which we share our world.

However, our identity as an individual will necessarily involve a combination of identifications and affiliations with larger groups and categories. These include large-scale imagined collective groups (imagined as we cannot know everyone else in the group personally) like social classes or nations. Or it could more prosaically be a genre of music, a sporting team, a town or a village, a style of dress or a family group for example. This type of identity brings us together with other people.

Identity therefore has aspects of distinctiveness – those things that mark us off from other people, most obviously seen in our individual identities - and sameness, those things bring us together with other people who share our social identity. Furthermore, any one social identity will possess both aspects. It will involve a language of inclusion, of equivalence, of homogeneity and sameness, building a coherent group of like-minded people who share that identity. At the same time employs a language of exclusion to differentiate 'us' from 'them', from those who do not share our identity. In the process the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' tend to become overdrawn; we emphasise the differences and ignore the similarities in order to draw out the distinction. This is what some academics mean when they write of 'othering'. All social identities involve some sort of othering, constructing an out-group against which we define ourselves.

The words 'building' and 'constructing' above in reference to social identities implies that identities are actively produced, or socially constructed. This introduces a further aspect of identities that perhaps runs counter to common-sense assumptions. Identities are not fixed, unchanging or in some way 'essential', meaning they are given to us as part of our 'essence' and we have no conscious power over them. Identities actually change in two ways, as a moment's reflection will indicate. First, they may change according to context. In the home our primary social identity may be as 'mother' or 'father'. But at work this identity is overshadowed by that of 'worker' or 'manager' or 'office administrator' or whatever. If we were to go to Exeter to watch Cornwall play Devon at rugby our primary identity might well be expressed as Cornishman or woman. If we are holidaying overseas and we meet other British people in a restaurant we might all identify ourselves as British. We, as individuals, can be located within a network of identities, the importance of which change depending on what we are doing and who we are communicating with.

Just as we can actively select from amongst a smorgasbord of identities on offer to us so do those identities themselves change over time. If we consider identities linked to phenomena such as youth culture, popular music or fashion for example we can see that some identities can be very ephemeral indeed: introduced, amplified by the media and then sometimes all but forgotten in the space of a few years or even months. But even social identities seen as more fundamental and enduring change over time.

Think of religious identity. In the 1400s people in the British Isles were all members of the same church, looking to Rome for their spiritual leadership and guided by a priesthood that shared broadly similar rituals across these islands. That all changed after the Reformation in the 1530s and 40s. By the 1800s religious identities had fragmented into different non-conformist Protestant denominations, different Established Churches in England and Scotland, and a popular Catholicism in Ireland. Since the middle of the twentieth century society has become more secular and the role of religious identities changed once again. While Christian sects continue to fragment we now have other religious identities available to us along with 'faiths' such as new age religions. We might also add in those other belief groups that operate in ways reminiscent of faith-based identities, such as the community of UFO believers.

Even identities that are viewed as essential are not so in reality. Here, we think particularly of gender identities or ethnic or national identities, over which we are seen as having little control. Yet work by historians over the past couple of decades convincingly demonstrates that ideas about what it is to be a man or a woman and their appropriate behaviour and roles have changed considerably since the Middle Ages – and still vary across cultures now. The more interesting thing is that gender roles are read as 'natural' as are national identities to some extent. Yet they are not given to us at birth as part of our DNA code. In terms of gender, there are clearly biological constraints. However, to a greater or lesser degree we learn our social identities from the society around us, from our parents and from others that we interact with, from the media and the institutions that have the power to influence and shape our ideas about the world around us and our place in it.

So what are the implications of all this for Cornish identities? Mark Stoye subtitles his groundbreaking book *West Britons* 'Cornish identities and the early modern British state'. Yet the chapters in this book focus mainly on one identity – the ethnic identity of Cornishness. He is not alone. Many confine Cornish identity entirely to that one meaning. The tendency to equate Cornish identities solely with the Cornish ethnic or territorial identity (and then often with just one variant of that) is an understandable reaction given the widespread ignorance about Cornwall and its people and their unique and individual history. But Cornish identities do not end with Cornish identity. We might term the perspective that insists on seeing Cornish identity as confined to the ethnic/territorial identity as involving a tight definition of Cornish identities, in contrast to a broad definition that would expand the definition.

The clue lies in the plural **identities**. This implies a number of identities. It also opens up the discussion of identity in Cornwall to wider horizons, refusing to restrict discussion of Cornish identities to a relatively small (though hardly unimportant) area of everyday life. Instead of this tight definition I am proposing here that we define Cornish identities as those identities held in both the present and the past by Cornish people, whether in Cornwall or outside. I am taking the Cornishness of people in Cornwall for granted and asking what other identities they also have, whether religious, political, family, class or status for instance. We can then ask how these identities overlap and interact with their Cornish identity (singular).

For example, how far is Cornish Methodism Cornish? Was/is it different in Cornwall than in any other places and if so, what makes this Cornish? Is this just an accident of geography or are other deeper meanings involved? What applies to Cornish Methodism can also apply to Cornish Liberalism or Cornish rugby or Cornish musical identities for example. The list is potentially a very long one. Furthermore, why is it that we refer to Cornish Liberalism but would we less likely to employ the words

Cornish conservatism or Cornish socialism despite the fact that thousands of Cornish people in the twentieth century have regularly voted Conservative or Labour?

This wider, more inclusive view of Cornish identities also opens them up to comparison with other identities, and to how Cornish identities might have differed from and co-existed with other non-Cornish identities in Cornwall. But that's another fascinating issue best left for another time.

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