# Roundtable

## Discussion:

*Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867*

By Catherine Hall. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002, Pp. v+556, $79.00 (cloth); $29.00 (paper).

Comment by

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Sometime in the last half of the 1990s, against the background of an emerging European union and regional devolution, and with a resurgent migrant community in its midst, England suddenly discovered its identity, or rather it came to the realization that what it had always taken for granted was contested. The national characteristics that the English had taken for granted, even in the midst of war and the crisis triggered by decolonization from the 1940s and 1960s, had in the 1990s been turned upside down. As Robert Colls notes in his introduction to *Identity of England,* foundations that seemed so secure only forty years ago have been "unravelling with astonishing speed" as the infrastructure of ideas about Englishness and the modes of production of culture and identity become restructured.[1] By the end of the twentieth century, the transformation of Englishness had become one of the central themes in the historiography of England as the political and cultural institutions associated with Englishness came to be challenge or rethought. But while there seems to be general agreement that the structures of English identity changed in radical ways in the last few decades of the twentieth century, there is a quiet, yet significant disagreement, on the nature of this transformation in at least two areas.

[1] Robert Colls, *Identity of England* (London, 2002), p. 5.

*Journal of British Studies* 42 (October 2003): 505–538
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#03225 UCP: JBS article # 420404

https://doi.org/10.1086/376464 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The first one concerns the meaning of the ongoing restructuring of Englishness. For Colls, to use one prominent example, the "postimperial" identity of England represented a state of decay and decline, one in which the deep structure of Englishness had been rendered "unserviceable" by the process of social change that followed the Second World War.[2] For Catherine Hall, however, what appeared to be the decay of Englishness in the postwar period and after represented the return of the colonial repressed, the discovery that Englishness had always been structured and haunted by a transnational world, one defined by slavery and colonialism; that the vocabulary and grammar of even middle England was "a racialised vocabulary, for supposed racial characteristics were always an implicit part of their categorisation" (p. 8).

The second point of debate revolves around the fact that if Englishness now appears to be continuously contested, it is ultimately because the process or method by which it should be read or represented has yet to be settled—or perhaps will not. The issues here concern not so much the long history of slavery and colonialism in the making of English identity but the extent of the reach of the colonial other into the deep structures of Englishness. For Colls the decay of the old structures of Englishness led to a crisis of representation and cognition. With the "rapid decay of the old ways of seeing the world," it became difficult to write a stable narrative of English identity; the result was a tendency to see the story of English identities as multiple and shifting but still contained with a domestic structure.[3] Within this economy of representation and cognition, Colls has argued, the story of Englishness was essentially what "the English have thought about themselves" with only occasional, ornamental glimpses at "how others have thought about the English."[4] In Hall's account, by contrast, to bring the metropole and colony together is to rework the geography of English identity itself, which is a restatement of the claim that it was in the colonial space that Englishness was remade or consolidated.

Hall sees the colonial experience as an integral part of English identity, part of its deep structure and generative grammar as it were. The central argument of her book is that Jamaica was not ancillary to empire, an outside space defined by its exterior relation to England; rather, even when it was conceived as a problem, especially in the first half of the nineteenth century, this West Indian colony was "a problem within," representing the anxieties of an imperial English identity but also asso-

[2] Ibid., p. 8.
[3] Colls, *Identity of England,* p. 7.
[4] Ibid., p. 2.



https://doi.org/10.1086/376464 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ciated with technologies of self at the most personal level, in domestic relations and sexuality (p. 25).

The issues involved in this debate are not simply questions of emphasis or perspective, nor are they distinctive oppositions between a self-generating Englishness and a vision of the infrastructure of English identity as part of the long history of empire. What is perhaps more important than an individual historian's preferences are the methodological and epistemological consequences. For if we see the narrative of English identity as essentially a series of facts and myths that have lost their authority over time, then it makes sense to deal with what Colls calls "things that we know already" and to make the obviousness of the story of English identity a subject of reflection in the belief that "when dealing with intangible forces such as national identity, it is their very obviousness that makes them matter."[5] The standard of judgment here is how well this obviousness is made to matter and how compelling it is in revealing how the English have thought about themselves. However, Hall's project is predicated on the opposite notion: that the key vectors in the making of English identity have never been obvious, that the things that matter most have often been repressed or subjected to official amnesia, or that obviousness itself has had the unintended consequence of making the imperial past serviceable toward undesirable ends. Her claim is that in the period of decolonization, the empire was "best forgotten, a source of embarrassment and guilt, or alternatively a site of nostalgia" (p. 5).

As a result, *Civilising Subjects* sets out to uncover the repressed or to make the obvious less obvious, to valorize the colonial roots of Englishness while also defamiliarizing the myth of English identity as autonomous and self-generating. In trying to show that Jamaica was a problem within Englishness rather than exterior to it, Hall tells a now familiar story on the role of the colony in the making of the metropolis, but in the process she also recovers narratives and paradigms that are new. Perhaps the most innovative aspect of this book, indeed the mark of its newness, is its focus on the role of nonconformists, Baptists in this case, in mediating the relation between metropolitan England and colonial Jamaica. The focus on nonconformism is important for three closely related reasons: first, the book builds an important historiographical bridge between domestic nonconformism and its colonial counterparts. Students of modern British history know that nonconformism was central in the making of English identities, especially in the nineteenth century. Students of colonial culture know that nonconformism was indispensable to the history of colonial Jamaica, especially in the resistance to slavery and the making of free

[5] Ibid, pp. 2–3.



https://doi.org/10.1086/376464 Published online by Cambridge University Press

black communities. Yet few scholars have made the crucial link between the histories and narratives of Baptists in the English midlands and those in the colonial Caribbean.

Second, when it comes to the discussion of colonial Englishness, especially the institutions that made it possible such as the Church and school, few scholars have paid attention to the significant role played by the nonestablished churches. In the traditional history of Christian missions in the colonial zone, the tendency has been to represent the Church primary as an agent of empire by focusing on the role of established denominations, those closely aligned with the state. Yet, as Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff have argued in their classical study of Methodism in Southern African, the tactics of the nonconformists were different: they sought to drive a wedge between "the realm of the spirit and the temporal affairs of government . . . to lay the ground work for a new moral economy based on the clear separation of church and state."[6] In their involvement in the politics of abolition, Jamaican Baptists, too, sought to drive a wedge between the plantocracy and God. Their goal was to reproduce the free black as a new moral subject. Hall's book is about how they failed on both accounts.

But the revisionary impulse of *Civilising Subjects* lies in its use of the nonconformists' engagement with colonialism to open up new areas of investigation. These include the place of wives and children in the model colonial family (model because the missions represented their social relationships as exemplars of civilized behavior), friendships, and other personal relationships, including the naming of children as acts of social reproduction. This book is exemplary in the attention it pays to what one may call the colonial private sphere and, by implication, its questioning of the centrality accorded to the public sphere in the aftermath of Jürgen Habermas's crucial intervention in the early 1960s. In Hall's account, the public sphere constituted by the missionaries was built on a bedrock of private impulses and interests.

But there is another radical rethinking of colonial historiography in this book—its systematic attention to what Hall aptly calls the "anatomy of difference" (p. 16). Now, we are so used to thinking about the structure of difference in the constitution of colonial relations as the opposition between the white colonial self and its black other that we have tended to collapse it into an unproductive binarism or to unleash an unsustainable play of differences. In other words, we have tended to see the colonizer and colonizer locked in what Frantz Fanon once called a "Manichean world,"

[6] Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago, 1991), 1:11.



https://doi.org/10.1086/376464 Published online by Cambridge University Press

or in its opposite, Homi Bhabha's postcolonial hybridity.[7] But for Hall, nonconformists existed in a world that defied both binarism and hybridity to the extent that they were located in a world of distinction that was simultaneously rigid and flexible. Hall's concern is with the moment of empire as the time "when anatomies of difference were being elaborated across the axes of class, race and gender" (p. 16). Each of the chapters in *Civilising Subjects* takes up various aspects of this anatomy of difference and redirects it into new areas of research but also raises difficult questions that still need to be addressed in colonial studies.

In the first part of the book, which is my focus in this essay, Hall's interest is on the mapping of Jamaica in the British imagination. On the surface, the argument Hall makes—that for the early English colonialists "Jamaica was the most fascinating, but also the most disturbing of the Caribbean islands" (p. 70)—is not a new one in Caribbean history or historiography. What is new here, I think, is the shift of emphasis from Jamaica as a significant realm of empire (the source of wealth and fascination) to its demonization as the source of terror, a position hitherto occupied, in Caribbean colonial historiography, by Haiti.[8] In mapping out the sources of this disturbance, Hall rehearses familiar themes but also gives them a new import: she notes the significance of sexuality and transgression in the mapping of Jamaica, of the interplay of notions of order and disorder in colonial governmentality, and of the role of gender relationships and the politics of prestige in the social geography of empire. Once upon a time the Jamaica of the colonial imagination was the story of powerful planters seeking to assert local autonomy in order to maintain the institution of slavery, or the story of recalcitrant blacks challenging the mandate of empire in order to reconstitute themselves as free landholders. In *Civilising Subjects,* the emphasis is not on these two groups but on Christian missionaries caught between the demands of white supremacy and black insurgency, struggling to produce a discourse to counter the entrenched planter interests, while not acceding to the demands of black subjects, and also seeking to assert their identities between the doctrine of colonial rule and missionary patronage.

This book is a major account of the work of missionaries not so much in their familiar role as the vanguard of the abolition movement but as subjects located precariously between the interests of the planter class and the demands of slavers and, later, free blacks. Missionaries such as William Knibb, Edward Underhill, and James Phillipo were important in voicing an

[7] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* trans. Constance Farrington (New York, 1963), p. 41; Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York, 1994), pp. 206–8.
[8] See Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley, 1995), esp. pt. 1.



https://doi.org/10.1086/376464 Published online by Cambridge University Press

alternative history and vision of Jamaica in opposition to planter discourse; inherent in their counterdiscourse was the moral opposition to slavery and the insistence on freedom as the inalienable right of black subjects; consequently, no one can doubt Hall's claim that Christianity "played a vital part in articulating new claims for freedom" (p. 105). What is not clear at all is why she insists that an elaboration of differences or interests in Jamaica was "the work of culture," that the categories involved in the process were "discursive" and their "meanings historically contingent" (p. 16).

For literary and cultural theorists like me, this turn to the discursive would appear to be like manna from heaven. Still, Hall's privileging of the cultural nature of the colonial encounter raises some difficult questions. If we see Jamaica as primarily a discursive formation, and debates about it as essentially conducted in either planter discourse or missionary counter-discourse, where was the place of black subjects in the ensuring economy of debate? What were the cultural terms by which the slaves understood their position in the order of things? Doesn't a focus on systems of representation exclude those "subalterns" defined as objects of analysis rather than historical agents? In her discussion of the war of representations that pitted planter against missionaries, Hall tries to find a way around these difficulties by foregrounding the uncanny link between planter and missionary discourses even in the face of competing interests. But what does she unmask in such analogical moments? She is able to show that missionaries held a patronizing view of Africans and blacks and that their racialized idiom was not far removed from the blatant racism of the planters. She shows how the missionaries, rather than planters, were crucial in shaping the postemancipation moral and political economy of the free villages and how they tried to force the freed slaves to fit into an idiom and framework that was not cognizant of their interests. She also shows that beneath the benign and patronizing mask won by the missionaries was a real exercise of power. But where were the free villagers themselves in this economy of debate? Could they as subalterns speak or were they simultaneously silenced in the discourse of the planters and the missionaries alike?[9] Were the new black subjects masters of their own technologies of self in the postemancipation order or inherently over-determined?

In respect to many of these questions, Hall's position seems divided: her instincts seem to gesture toward a world in which missionary authority

[9] For the theoretical issues involved in this debate, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271–313.



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eventually fell under the weight of its contradictions and a distinctive black peasantry emerged to fill the vacuum. Her conclusion is that sometime in the mid-1840s the missionary project was overtaken by the emergence of "a distinctive peasant culture" (p. 138) But how and why did this distinctive culture emerge? Or, rather, what were the terms of its emergence? How did it articulate its demands? All evidence supports Hall's claim that by the middle of the nineteenth century blacks had become important players in challenging and changing the terms of the colonial encounter, but where and how did they speak? It seems to me ironic that every time Hall tries to discover the voices of the new black subjects she ends up drawn back into the discourse of the missionaries or their surrogates.

I call attention to this problem not because it reflects any interpretative failure on her part but because it calls attention to the major problem that still remains to be addressed in the history of colonialism and the limits of the discursive methodology in addressing it: where and how to find accounts of the colonized's views of themselves as subjects in the period of high imperialism. Hall tries to find these black voices in numerous places, crevices, and lapses, but everywhere she turns difficulties seem to develop and the perennial question arises: can they represent themselves or must they always be represented? My contention is that the most obvious source of the problem is the chosen method itself, for if we focus primarily on the representations and cultural interpretations in the colonial library, then the stories we hear and the practices we witness are those of the planters and missionaries or their surrogates. And although Hall does not always put it as explicitly as one would like, the emergence of a discourse of the West Indies, or what she calls the Jamaica of the mind, already precludes a black subject. Indeed, there is a way in which the whole project of producing the black as a modern subject, either as a slave for the plantocracy or a free peasant under the tutelage of the mission, was driven by the imperative to exorcise the characteristics that might have made the black a free self-reflective subject. In other words, whether as a slave or a free peasant, the black was located in discourse defined by what Orlando Patterson famously called social death.[10]

In his study of the sociology of slavery, Patterson isolated two conceptions of social death, one intrusive, the other extrusive. In the intrusive concept of social death, the slave was uprooted from his social milieu, "desocialized and depersonalized," and then reintroduced into the community of the masters as a nonbeing.[11] Within the moral economy of the

[10] Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), p. 38.
[11] Ibid. pp. 38–39.



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plantocracy, then, we could extend Patterson's definition to argue that Africans, uprooted from their symbolic and real communities through enslavement, were confined to the social and moral margins of the plantation as nonbeings. Planter discourse insisted on the nonbeing of the African and sought to maintain depersonalization as the status quo. But what interests me here is Patterson's notion of social death as a form of "extrusive representation": "Here the dominant image of the slave was that of an outsider who had fallen, one who ceased to belong and had been expelled from normal participation in the community because of a failure to meet certain minimal legal and socio-economic norms of behavior."[12] Because missionaries sought to secure minimal legal and socioeconomic rights for blacks, it is tempting to forget that the black's entitlement to the underlying norms of civil society depended, in the missionary economy of debate, on a process of conversion in which Africanness was the mark of this second kind of social death—the stigmata of an outsider who had fallen.

Consider then the account of the missionaries' conception and representation of the Africanness of their black charges: in her discussion of the Jamaican's Baptists' ill-fated attempt to establish a mission station in West Africa, Hall succinctly notes that the moral imperative behind this project was the construction of Africa as "the heathen place, ready for conversion, and Jamaica as the Christian country which could offer salvation" (p. 147). Hall underscores the disarticulation of Jamaicanness and Africanness in this process: "Africans were not quite the same when they were no longer in Africa," she notes; emancipation would be the key to modernity, freeing the ex-African from "archaic time" (p. 186). Missionary discourse would then seem to be different from that of the plantocracy in its insistence on the redemptive potential of the African in the new world, on its positing of the modernity of the African as a categorical imperative.

It is, however, interesting to note that the vision of the redeemed African espoused by Baptists such as Phillipo, the "new style imperial man," could not conceive of the free black except within the image of the fallen subject whose entry into the kingdom of God, modernity, and culture depended on the fulfillment of the missionary mandate. When the free blacks did not seem to fulfill this mandate, the image of the fallen—and, hence, of an extrusive social death—returned with a vengeance. For despite their insistence on the possibilities of the new black, missionaries were constantly troubled by the danger of African atavism. Missionaries were particularly troubled by the occasional "myral outbreaks" among

[12] Ibid, p. 41.



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their subjects because, as Hall rightly notes, these forms of regression foregrounded the uneasy boundaries between African heathens, "Bow-down-Baptists," and proper Christians. The missionaries wanted to confine the first two categories of persons to social death in order to secure the identity of the proper Christian who also, ironically, reinforced their own authority. My contention is that we cannot escape the trap of colonial discourse, whether planter or missionary, until we find ways of accessing the voices of the African heathens who, in the period under discussion, were still roaming colonial Jamaica under the mask of Bow-down-Baptism. A history of the wars of representations in Jamaica, as elsewhere in the colonial world, will remain incomplete until we make the accounts of these subjects, the ones confined to the margins of the discourse as it were, constitutive of it.

Indeed, one of the major conclusions to be drawn from *Civilising Subjects* is that for planters, missionaries, and their postcolonial successors, the subjects associated with moral disorder and, hence, confined to the margins were the ones whose beliefs and practices could not fit the framework of representations and institutional practices that defined what colonial Jamaica was or was not. Hall considers the events at Morant Bay (1857) decisive because the revolt, in its aftermath, witnessed the emergence of a new kind of black subject excessive of both the constrictions of the old imperial order and the equally restrained doctrines of freedom and modernity prescribed by the missionaries. Who was this new subject? This is the question that seemed to obsess missionary discourse after Morant Bay as it struggled to account for the character of a black subject that was "conceited, insubordinate and insolent" (p. 257).

*Civilising Subjects* is a majestic book, and my arguments with it are evidence of its success in raising the question of the colonial encounter and its multiple sets of interests and their discursive dimension. What I find missing in this account, finally, is a hint of how these debates in the nineteenth century, and especially the failure of what one may call the missionary trusteeship of the new black subject, opened the way for a remapping of Jamaica itself. For in the end, the collapse of missionary trusteeship opened up the possibility that a certain class of blacks could indeed represent their interests along what were later to become nationalist lines. For most of the nineteenth century the war of representations was fought between the planter historians (Edward Long and Bryan Edwards) on the one hand and missionaries on the other (Underhill and Phillipo). Both groups produced discourses that deployed the black as an object of analysis rather than a subject, toward ends that were much about white interests and white identity. Hall's book invests a lot of time and effort in constructing the counterdiscourse of the missionaries: Edwards produced a



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book to argue for the autonomy of the planter class through the entrenchment of slavery, William Bridges produced a discourse "to reclaim the high ground from the forces of antislavery in Britain and to strengthen the planter resolve in Jamaica," and Anthony Trollope wrote a travelogue that "reaffirmed white superiority and the inferiority of the African" (pp. 104, 122). In contradistinction, Underhill would produce a counterdiscourse to rebut the libels against blacks. The structure of a discourse-counterdiscourse drives *Civilising Subjects* and accounts for its drama, rigor, and authority.[13]

Nevertheless, this is a structure with perils: the first one is that it lets those whose voices are neither part of the discourse or its counter slip through; the second one is that the counterdiscourse is already dependent on the discourse that precedes it. I think it would be unfair to say that Hall is not unaware of this peril or to argue that she posits the counterdiscourse as the way out of the prison house of planter discourse. The second possibility is rebutted at the end of her book when she concludes that both missionaries and planters needed to accentuate their differences because of the closeness of their arguments. This may well be the case, but I prefer to see the issue slightly differently: as a discursive formation, the difference between the planter and missionary projects was perhaps minor. This was not because their intentions and practices, beliefs, and ideologies were close; rather, having chosen to respond to a discourse whose terms had been set by the plantocracy, the missionaries had no choice but to follow the *arche* and *techne* that the former had established. But perhaps more significantly, minor differences in a discursive formation are not necessarily mirrored in other spheres of life, and it is possible to argue that, measured in terms of their consequences, rather than enunciation, the discourses of the planter and missionaries were radically different. Here I am thinking of the possibility that while planter discourse had lost its authority by the end of the nineteenth century, the central features of missionary discourse continued to thrive both among the congregations they had left behind and, most importantly, among the black and brown elite that was to dominate the decolonized polity. Thus, by making the narrative of colonial discursive practices central to the making of English identities, *Civilising Subjects* has also laid important groundwork for rethinking the history of modern Jamaica.

[13] For theories of discourse and counterdiscourse, see Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/Counterdiscourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth Century France* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990).



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