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Agnès Nairn

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Book Review – Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour

Kate Fox, Hodder & Stoughton, 2005, 432pp, soft cover, £8.99, ISBN 978-0340818862

Agnes Nairn
EM Lyon

This book is the perfect accompaniment for the *IJMR* Special Edition on Ethnography.

Social anthropologist Kate Fox sets out on a quest to discover what makes the English so unmistakably English. Her holy grail is a grammar of Englishness or, as she puts it, 'the hidden, unspoken rules of English behaviour, and what these rules tell us about our national identity'.

She adopts one of the classic ethnographic positions of 'participant observer' – that is, being involved in social situations while simultaneously analysing the behaviour of the actors. I must say that I had hoped for more details on her methodology and the challenges it poses. And it would have been illuminating for fellow researchers if she had shared some of her analysis techniques. Instead she glosses over the need to justify her approach by saying it would be really boring to read; that it is jolly hard to validate the combination of 'going native' and remaining objective anyway; but that it is the best approach social scientists have. So, reader, you'll just have to accept it.

However, even if we are not given access to the technical aspects of her work, the results are really fascinating and packed with those moments of 'Yes! Absolutely! That's exactly what the English are like!' (And, as a Scot, I can view this in a totally objective manner ...) Moreover, if we don't get much in the way of methodology, academic readers will be pleased that, right at the very end, we do get a model: a parsimonious model of the grammar of Englishness.

According to Fox's model, the core of Englishness is what she terms 'Social Dis-ease'. The English feel embarrassed and rather uncomfortable in just about any social situation you put them in. When greeting guests the English never know if they should hug them, kiss them, shake their hands or keep them at a respectable distance. What if someone mentions money? The English would rather even talk about sex than financial matters: it's just too ... well ... awkward.

Around this central dis-eased pivot of Englishness, Fox proposes a set of Outlooks, Values and Reflexes. The key English reflex is humour. Other nationalities, and particularly the Americans, really don't understand why the English make a joke of everything. But the English can't help it: it's a deeply ingrained, cultural knee-jerk reaction to social discomfort. The result is that nothing in England can be taken too seriously, with 'Oh, come off it!' a national mantra (used almost as often as the phrase 'What about a nice cup of tea?'). Fox affirms the essential English values as fair play, courtesy and modesty. She illuminates the depths of the courtesy value in an experiment at the very start of the book, which involves her deliberately bumping into people in order to ascertain how many will actually apologise to her (answer: a lot!). Perhaps the most striking of her rules of Englishness is a class-conscious outlook. While one or two facets of Englishness vary on gender lines (e.g. buying rounds in a pub is essential for men but optional for women), it seems that an English person's social class is revealed in every aspect of behaviour. Do you say 'settee' or 'sofa'? Do you put hard-boiled egg in your salad? Is your garden gnome genuine or ironic? What items do you buy in M&S? The answers to all these questions will determine an English person's class.

Overall, apart from being a thoroughly enjoyable read, this book exemplifies the depth of insight into human behaviour that can be gained through ethnographic approaches to research, and describes how this insight can be converted into a practical model.

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World Advertising Research Center Ltd.
Farm Road, Henley-on-Thames, Oxon, United Kingdom, RG9 1EJ
Tel: +44 (0)1491 411000, Fax: +44 (0)1491 418600

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