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# Divided by a Common Language: Controversy over the Use of the Word "Anglo-Saxon"

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**Divided by a Common Language:  
Controversy over the Use of the Word "Anglo-Saxon"<sup>1</sup>**

At first glance, it might seem as if there would be little in common between *Romance Writers of America* and *The International Society for the Study of Early Medieval England* (until recently known as *The International Society of Anglo-Saxonists*), unless, perhaps, someone were to attempt to write a bodice-ripper set in Hrothgar's court. However, in recent years, the two associations have gone through strikingly similar crises, reflecting current anxieties over race, racism and, to some extent, gender.<sup>2</sup>

At the time of writing this paper, in early 2020, both societies are in a state of great turmoil. The RITA awards for 2020 have been cancelled because "many in the romance community have lost faith in RWA's ability to administer the 2020 RITA contest fairly, causing numerous judges and entrants to cancel their participation"<sup>3</sup> even though "[r]ecent RWA Boards have worked hard to make changes to the current contest, striving to make it

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my thanks to the colleagues who read my first drafts of this paper for their insightful comments and for their generosity.

<sup>2</sup> Gender and LGBT+ issues have received significantly less attention than racism during the two crises discussed, and their discussion is unfortunately well beyond the scope of this paper, but they would deserve their own examination, notably issues of discrimination and damaging stereotypes.

<sup>3</sup> The name of the award, RITA, stands for Rita Clay Estrada, RWA's first president.

more diverse and inclusive".<sup>4</sup> *ISAS* has recently changed its name to *ISSEME*, named a new executive director and started to work on new policies and initiatives to make the society more inclusive, but many are still calling for the society's dissolution. The next biennial conference, which was meant to be hosted by the universities of Nottingham and Leicester in 2021, has been cancelled and it is still unclear whether it will take place at all.

In each case, the cancellation of the association's upcoming major event is the culmination of several years of controversy combining similar ingredients: strings of resignations, social media storms and gatherings which end up dividing the community further instead of bringing it together. For the RWA, the 2018 RITA awards, which completely ignored one of the most celebrated romance novels of the year (written by a writer of colour, Alyssa Cole, and telling the story of an interracial romance during the American Civil War), was the origin of a major crisis. For *ISAS*, the two latest biennial conferences were equally fraught with tension. Shortly before the 2017 *ISAS* conference in Honolulu, Adam Miyashiro published a blogpost entitled "Decolonizing Anglo-Saxon Studies: A Response to *ISAS* in Honolulu",<sup>5</sup> in which he criticized the decision to reject his own proposal of a paper linking "a non-European reading of *Beowulf* to the contemporary issues of white supremacy that plague Anglo-Saxon studies, and medieval studies more broadly" and of practicing:

what is known in indigenous studies as "erasure of the native." In the conference materials, we are given the image of the "presence" of

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<sup>4</sup> "Status of the 2020 Rita Contest", *Romance Writers of America*, accessed January 16, 2020, [https://www.rwa.org/Online/News/2020/Status\\_of\\_the\\_RITA\\_Contest.aspx](https://www.rwa.org/Online/News/2020/Status_of_the_RITA_Contest.aspx).

<sup>5</sup> Adam Miyashiro, "Decolonizing Anglo-Saxon Studies: A Response to *ISAS* in Honolulu", July 28, 2017, accessed January 17, 2020, *In The Medieval Middle*, <http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2017/07/decolonizing-anglo-saxon-studies.html>.

native identities – from the Hokule'a picture to the liberal use of 'olelo Hawai'i as welcoming phrases. Yet, native voices are noticeably absent from the conference program, except for Uluwehi Hopkins, who will present on Hawaiian sea navigation.

The post got a strong reaction and contributed to the decision to choose Adam Miyashiro as one of the keynote speakers for the 2019 *ISAS* conference in Albuquerque, where he spoke on the topic of "Myth-making the 'Anglo-Saxon': Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy, and Medieval Heritage Politics". The 2017 conference also saw several developments which were meant to address the issue of racism in the field, such as the adoption of an amendment to its constitution explicitly stating its commitment to inclusiveness,<sup>6</sup> and the nomination of Mary Rambaran-Olm as second vice president. Rambaran-Olm's stated aim was to use her perspective as a woman of colour to help the society make the changes necessary to counter racism and misogyny in the field. However, shortly after the 2019 conference, Rambaran-Olm announced that she was resigning because she felt the board was resisting such changes.<sup>7</sup> That resignation led

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<sup>6</sup> "As enshrined in this Constitution, the purpose of the International Society of Anglo-Saxonists is to provide all scholars interested in the languages, literatures, arts, history, and material culture of Anglo-Saxon England with support in their research and to facilitate an exchange of ideas and materials within and among the disciplines. This work must take place in environments that do not tolerate prejudice, racism, inequity, or harassment, or related unethical behavior, and *ISAS* affirms its ongoing commitment to helping fashion an academic culture that fosters professional courtesy, respect, equity, diversity, tolerance and inclusion for all of its members, and for all people working in our related disciplines."

<sup>7</sup> See the summary given in the *Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship* statement of support: "During her time on the *ISAS* board, Dr. Rambaran-Olm pointed out a number of specific issues that needed to be addressed by that organization's advisory council, including the urgent need for a change in the society's name to address the harms that white supremacist communities enact by clinging to the term "Anglo-Saxon" and the historical and present racist ideologies that are intractably aligned with the term; the board's protection of lifetime membership for a known sexual predator in the field; and

to a heated debate within the society, many other resignations and to an emergency vote to change the name of the society and amend the constitution.<sup>8</sup>

During the online debate, most members spoke strongly and passionately in favour of changing a name which, they argued, excluded scholars of colour and suggested sympathy or at the very least tolerance for ideologies promoting the superiority of the "Anglo-Saxon race".<sup>9</sup> They also

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the absence of a formal harassment and discrimination policy for ISAS members' conduct both in the academy generally and at society events and conferences. Dr Rambaran-Olm has reiterated those problems since her resignation, pointing out that the advisory board for ISAS has not yet addressed these concerns despite assurances of its commitment to change in order to include and protect its most vulnerable constituents." "SMFS Statement In Support Of Dr. Mary Rambaran-Olm", *Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship*, September 17, 2019, accessed April 30, 2020, <https://smfsweb.org/%EF%BB%BFsmfs-statement-in-support-of-dr-mary-rambaran-olm/>. See also Colleen Flaherty, "It's About More Than a Name", *Inside Higher Ed*, September 20, 2019, accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/09/20/anglo-saxon-studies-group-says-it-will-change-its-name-amid-bigger-complaints-about>.

<sup>8</sup> The amendment (which was adopted with a large majority) specified that nominations for the board should strive for demographic, disciplinary and geographical balance rather than just disciplinary and geographical.

<sup>9</sup> In addition to several papers and blogposts that will be discussed further below, one can mention the following, which give a good idea of the arguments presented: Daniel C. Remein, "ISAS Should Probably Change its Name." Paper read at the 52nd International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, MI, May 2017, accessed April 1, 2020, [https://www.academia.edu/34101681/\\_Isas\\_should\\_probably\\_change\\_its\\_name\\_ICMS\\_Kalamazoo\\_2017](https://www.academia.edu/34101681/_Isas_should_probably_change_its_name_ICMS_Kalamazoo_2017); Josephine Livingstone, "Racism, Medievalism, and the White Supremacists of Charlottesville", *The New Republic*, August 15, 2017, accessed April 1, 2020, <https://newrepublic.com/article/144320/racism-medievalism-white-supremacists-charlottesville>; Peter Baker, "Anglo-Saxon Studies After Charlottesville: Reflections of a University of Virginia Professor", *Medievalists of Color*, May 25, 2018, accessed April 1, 2020, <https://medievalistsofcolor.com/race-in-the-profession/anglo-saxon-studies-after-charlottesville-reflections-of-a-university-of-virginia-professor/>; Mary Rambaran-Olm, "Anglo-Saxon Studies [Early English Studies], Academia and White Supremacy", *Medium*, June 27, 2018, accessed April 1, 2020, <https://medium.com/@mrambaranolm/anglo-saxon-studies-academia-and-white-supremacy-17c87b360bf3>; "Statement of Support for Dr. Mary Rambaran-Olm", *Medievalists of Color*, September 10, 2019, accessed April 1, 2020, <https://medievalistsofcolor.com/race-in-the-profession/statement-of-support-for-dr-mary-rambaran-olm/?fbclid=IwAR1OEVovzH8Phk9O0yusH5jFBHKDJllt4->

pointed to the *Oxford English Dictionary* entry for "Anglo-Saxonist", which lists as a secondary meaning "A person who believes in the importance or superiority of Anglo-Saxon language, people, or culture (past or present)". However, when the results were revealed, it turned out that only 61.5% of the voters had opted for changing the name of the association.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, when members were asked to submit ideas for a new name, 3 of the 33 entries submitted included the word "Anglo-Saxon":<sup>11</sup> International Society for Anglo-Saxon Studies, International Society for the Study of Anglo-Saxon England and International Society of Academics of Medieval Anglo-Saxon Culture.

There are two equally reductive ways one could analyse those results. One could conclude from them that a significant part of the society is so invested in their white privilege that they are unwilling to re-examine their practices and that they refuse to engage in dialogue and to listen to the colleagues who have tried to educate them on the harm caused by the use of word "Anglo-Saxon". Conversely, one could conclude that a significant part of the society were unable to present their arguments during the debate, because the conditions in which it unfolded were such that dissenting voices were effectively silenced.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> 267 in favour, 130 against and 37 abstentions (434 votes cast).

<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting, however, that no entry containing the word "Anglo-Saxonist" was put forward, which suggests that dropping that particular word and its connotations of racial superiority (as evidenced in the OED entry quoted above) did meet with consensus.

<sup>12</sup> In particular, one early contribution in defence of the name *ISAS* and of the use of the word "Anglo-Saxon" more widely, by a scholar of German origin, was met with mixed reactions. While several members expressed their support and shared her appreciation for the positive role played by *ISAS* for many years, as a forum where people from previously hostile nations could meet, collaborate and exchange views, others reacted with considerable vitriol: not only was she accused of being a liar, but her allusion to the German scholars who had chosen to dedicate their professional life to the study of English



While both views fail to capture the complexity of the situation, each deserves thoughtful consideration. This paper offers both a summary of the factors which led us to the current crisis and an attempt, from my own (admittedly limited) perspective as a linguist and as a French scholar who has been a member of the society for about a decade, at explaining the cultural factors which complicate the issue in an international context and make it more difficult to find a common way forward.

### 1 A GENUINE ISSUE, TOO EASILY IGNORED

In a paper published in 2017, Mary Dockray-Miller laid out all the reasons why our field has "a serious image problem".<sup>13</sup> She explains the connection between the comparatively high status of Old English as an academic discipline in the United States at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the notions of racial hierarchy (with "the Anglo-Saxon race" invariably at the top) prevalent in American society at the time. In particular, she shows how one oppressed group, women, was able to gain advantage by leveraging those conceptions, oppressing others in the process, in particular African Americans.

The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> constituted a particularly fertile ground for expressions of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority. That ideology was used to justify both the American expansion to the West and British imperialism, and those territorial

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in spite of the sufferings caused by World War II was met with scorn by some members who went as far as to suggest that such a line of argument amounted to presenting Nazi Germany as the victim of the war.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Dockray-Miller, "Old English Has a Serious Image Problem", *JSTOR Daily* May 3, 2017, accessed January 31, 2020, <https://daily.jstor.org/old-english-serious-image-problem/>.

conquests were used, in turn, as evidence of Anglo-Saxon superiority. It was also used to justify the cruel treatment of the Irish during and after the Great Famine, and to defend the practice of slavery. Thus, T. W. Hoit, in his essay entitled *The Right of American Slavery*, contrasts "the common sense of the Anglo-Saxon race", naturally inclined towards civilization and morality, with the "African race (...) stamped by nature with the unmistakable character of unmitigated barbarism, and absolute antagonism to civilization" to justify the moral rightness of slavery.<sup>14</sup>

Incidentally, that period also saw the development of modern academia. Most academic disciplines (history, archaeology, biology, etc.) defined their perimeters and their methods during that period.<sup>15</sup> Many essential tools (dictionaries, textbooks, editions, etc.) were also developed at that time. The study of Old English language and literature, and of the history of early medieval Britain were no exceptions. For better or worse, those disciplines were shaped at a time when the superiority of "the Anglo-Saxons" was seen as self-evident by many if not most English-speaking writers. This extract from William Witherle Lawrence's *Beowulf and Epic Tradition* is fairly typical of the scholarship of the time:

[I]f the heroism of Harold at Hastings came to naught, the indomitable Anglo-Saxon temper so strikingly illustrated in *Beowulf* ultimately

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<sup>14</sup> True Worthy Hoit, *The Right of American Slavery* (St. Louis, MO: Bushnell, 1860), 12.

<sup>15</sup> On the history of humanities and how the disciplines were shaped by the political and ideological context of that period, see for instance: James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2014); Rens Bod, *A New History of the Humanities. The Search for Principles and Patterns from Antiquity to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013), in particular chapter 5, "Modern Era: The Humanities Renewed", 250–350; Rens Bod, Jaap Maat and Thijs Weststeijn, ed., *The Making of the Humanities: Volume III: The Modern Humanities* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014); Jan Eckel, *Geist der Zeit: Deutsche Geisteswissenschaften seit 1870* (VandenHoeck & Ruprecht 2008).

prevailed in England over all invaders, and proved the foundation of the greatness of the English nation.<sup>16</sup>

Lawrence's views are different from those of Hoit, of course. He does not talk about race explicitly and he discusses the "greatness" of the English nation without making a direct comparison with other nations. However, the text does suggest implicitly that "all invaders", wherever they came from, may not have been quite as great. More importantly, the author puts forward the notion of a continuous "temper" associated with a certain people throughout history,<sup>17</sup> and thus an essentialized conception of national identity.<sup>18</sup> In this view, the English people are not merely the inhabitants of

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<sup>16</sup> William Witherle Lawrence, *Beowulf and Epic Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), 182.

<sup>17</sup> This (post-)romantic notion of nations having a particular, enduring soul is commonplace in the scholarship of the time, whichever language is considered. Thus, Andreas Heusler talks of the "properties of the soul of the English people" ("seeleneigenschaften des englischen volkes" (sic), "Der Dialog in der altgermanischen erzählenden Dichtung", *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 46 (1902), 189–284, 220) and Emile Pons of the "Anglo-Saxon soul" ("âme anglo-saxonne", *Le thème et le sentiment de la nature dans la poésie anglo-saxonne*, Publications de la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Strasbourg 25 (Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 1925), 59.

<sup>18</sup> Whether such a view of national identity is racist or merely chauvinistic is debatable. On the one hand, the kind of romantic nationalism evidenced in references to an "Anglo-Saxon temper" does not necessarily suggest that this temper is inherited by blood. Thus, Johann Fichte, whose *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (1808) was hugely influential on this current of thought, explicitly stated that the founding elements of that national identity did not include blood but rather a shared language, a shared history, a shared sensibility and an intense communal life, ensuring homogeneousness within the nation (see Geoffroy Rémi, "Aux sources du nationalisme allemande ? Sur *nation* et *patrie* dans l'*Esprit du temps* d'Arndt et les *Discours à la nation allemande* de Fichte", in *Les mots de la nation*, ed. Sylvianne Rémi-Giraud & Pierre Rétat (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1996), 261–283, 213). On the other hand, biological racism is just one form that racism can take. Recent definitions of the concept are typically broader, so that Lawrence's text would definitely qualify. Thus, the medievalist Geraldine Heng defines racism as a "tendency (...) to demarcate human beings through differences among humans that are selectively identified as absolute and fundamental, so as to distribute positions and powers differentially to human groups" (*The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*

a territory called England or the citizens of a certain political entity, they are a people united by a specific temperament, who have gone through time virtually unchanged, so that, for them, studying *Beowulf* is not studying a distant culture, but looking into a mirror.

One might wonder when such a conception of Anglo-Saxon superiority started, but in a sense, it was always there, or at least it appeared at the same time as the concept "Anglo-Saxon" did. I am not referring here to the early medieval phrases *rex Angulsaxonum* or *Anglorum Saxonum rex* ("king of the Anglo-Saxons") used by Alfred or by his successors. Such phrases were used to convey the idea that Alfred's power now extended beyond the West Saxons themselves and constituted a new, more significant polity. However, they cannot be seen as direct precedents of the Modern use of the term "Anglo-Saxons", which could be glossed as signifying all the people speaking Old English and living on the island of Britain until the time of the Norman Conquest.<sup>19</sup> While the phrase definitely conveyed a

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(Cambridge University Press, 2018), 27). Similarly, the anthropologist Evelyne Heyer and the historian Carole Reynaud-Paligot explain that racism is constituted whenever three criteria are present: categorization (several groups are identified), hierarchization (some groups are superior to others) and essentialization (the characteristics attributed to each group are considered immutable, whether they are considered genetic or cultural in origin), "*On vient vraiment tous d'Afrique?*" *Des préjugés au racisme : les réponses à vos questions* (Paris : Flammarion, 2019), 43–47.

<sup>19</sup> David Wilton claims that, on the other hand, on the continent the Latin word for "Anglo-Saxons" (*Anglisaxones*) was used as an "inclusive ethnonym" with a meaning comparable to the one we are familiar with today, "What Do We Mean by Anglo-Saxon? Pre-Conquest to the Present" *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (forthcoming). Walter Pohl, commenting on the earliest instances of continental use, offers a slightly different view of the same evidence: for him, it seems "that Carolingian writers often did not bother to distinguish between Angles, Saxon and British anymore" so that "our scholarly term for the Anglo-Saxons was coined by Continental clerics who had ceased to perceive a difference between Angles and Saxons, and probably did not even care" ("Ethnic names and identities in the British Isles: A comparative perspective," in *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. John Hines (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1997), 7–40). Admittedly, the two views are not necessarily

hegemonic ambition, it did not, as yet, include all the people we would call "Anglo-Saxons". Alfred's "Anglo-Saxons" were in fact the West Saxons and the Mercians. When Æthelstan eventually achieved sovereignty over all the English-speaking people of Britain, the term he chose to describe that entity was *gens anglorum*: "the English people".<sup>20</sup>

What I am referring to, then, is not the medieval uses of the word "Anglo-Saxon", but rather the first modern uses in English to describe the people living in England before the Norman Conquest. According to David Wilton, Early Modern uses of "Anglo-Saxon" are virtually all "historical" (referring to the pre-Conquest period), whereas the "ethno-racial use" (whereby modern individuals can identify or be identified as "Anglo-Saxon") came into being in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>21</sup> While that is factually correct, it should not lead us to think that Early Modern uses of the word "Anglo-Saxon" were ideologically neutral.

As noted by Wilton, the revival of the word "Anglo-Saxon" was inspired in large part by William Camden's highly successful *Britannia* (initially published in 1586 in Latin, followed by many subsequent editions and eventually translated into English in 1610), which uses it as a section title, to describe one of the people of Britain, alongside the Picts, the Scots,

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entirely incompatible. As noted by Pohl (p. 25), authoritative writers can shape perceptions of ethnicity to some extent. As a consequence, a word which may have originated as the result of laziness or ignorance, may have produced, in the readers of those Carolingian writers, the impression that the "Anglo-Saxons" did constitute a single people.

<sup>20</sup> See Sarah Foot, *Æthelstan: the First King of England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 25–26, and Arnaud Lestremou "Rex Anglorum ou Rex Britannie : l'utilisation du concept de peuple dans la politique des rois anglo-saxons au X<sup>e</sup> siècle", *Revue de l'institut Français d'Histoire en Allemagne* 6 (2014), accessed February 3, 2020, <http://journals.openedition.org/ifha/8036>; DOI : 10.4000/ifha.8036.

<sup>21</sup> "What Do We Mean by Anglo-Saxon? Pre-Conquest to the Present" *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (forthcoming).

the Danes and the Normans.<sup>22</sup> It is almost certain that the choice of that form was influenced by continental sources in Latin.<sup>23</sup> At the time Camden is writing, the dominant form used to describe the English-speaking people living in Britain before the Conquest is "Saxons".

A brief survey of the *Early English Books Online* (1470-1700) corpus available through *English-Corpora.org* shows only 49 instances of "Anglo-Saxon(s)", starting in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, against 22,322 instances of "Saxon(s)", with the number of instances picking up in the 1570s as texts preserved in the database become more numerous. Among those, there are 700 instances of the phrase "English Saxon(s)" (in one spelling of another), all of them dated from the period 1551-1659, with the exception of one early occurrence translating Paul the Deacon's use of the word *anglisaxones* (1482). A handful of synonymous phrases such as "Saxons of England" (3 instances), "Saxons of this realm" (2) or "Saxons of this nation" (1) can also be found.

Even when such precision is omitted, the overwhelming majority of instances refer to Saxons in England and not to continental Saxons. Most

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<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, Camden explicitly lists Paul the Deacon (one of the Carolingian writers discussed above in footnote 11) as one of his sources ("Anglo-Saxones", § 7), but he uses the form *Anglo-Saxones* rather than *anglisaxones* as Paul the Deacon did.

<sup>23</sup> Among the Early Modern users of the word, Camden is not the only author who uses continental sources in Latin, including Paul the Deacon. Thus, aside from Camden himself, the only other occurrence of the word "Anglo-Saxon" in the 1630s in the corpus *Early English Books Online* is clearly a literal translation of Paul the Deacon's statement about the "Anglo-Saxons": "they had loose and for the most part linnen garments, such as the anglo-saxons doe wear" (Franciscus Junius, *The painting of the ancients in three bookes: declaring by historicall observations and examples, the beginning, progresse, and consummation of that most noble art. And how those ancient artificers attained to their still so much admired excellencie*, 1638; compare with Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 4, 22, "*Vestimenta vero eis erant laxa et maxime linea, qualia Anglisaxones habere solent*", which David Wilton translates as "their garments were loose and mostly linen, such as the Anglo-Saxons were in the habit of wearing").

occurrences by far are found in texts concerned with the History of England or Britain.<sup>24</sup> From the mid-1560s onwards, the word "Saxons" is also used in texts using pre-Conquest precedents to argue a certain religious view,<sup>25</sup> and in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century especially, to argue a point regarding the structure of government.<sup>26</sup>

That flurry of interest for the (Anglo-)Saxons is part of a broader cultural phenomenon, which can be loosely identified with the emergence of English nationalism. The Elizabethans looked to the Pre-Conquest period as a source of validation for a specifically English culture, which would not be dependent on French or Latin models and traditions. Three emblematic works can be used to illustrate that trend. William Camden's *Britannia* is not just known, as mentioned above, for making the word "Anglo-Saxon" popular. It is also one of many texts promoting the myth of "the Norman Yoke" whereby the Norman Conquest was interpreted as a cataclysmic event which saw cruel oppressors deprive the English of their freedom and prosperity.<sup>27</sup> In the chapter dedicated to the law courts of England, Camden

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<sup>24</sup> Typical sources, accounting for many instances, are: translations of Ranulf Higden's *Polychronicon*, Robert Fabyan's *Chronicle*, John Rastell's *The Pastyme of People, the Chronydes of dyvers Realmys and most specially of the Realme of England*, John Stow's *A summarie of Englyshe chronicles* and Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*.

<sup>25</sup> For instance, *A testimonie of antiquitie shewing the auncient fayth in the Church of England touching the sacrament of the body and bloude of the Lord* (1566), *A defence of priestes mariages* (1567), *Tvvo treatises written against the papistes* (1577) or *A briefe confutation, of a popish discourse* (1581).

<sup>26</sup> For instance, Samuel Johnson's *An essay concerning Parliaments* (1693), James Tyrell's *Bibliotheca politica* (1694), Algernon Sidney's *Discourses concerning government* (1698).

<sup>27</sup> See in particular Siobhan Brownlie, *Memory and Myths of the Norman Conquest* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2013), especially chapter 7, "A Time-honoured Myth", 111–130. Brownlie notes that "Saxonism, a belief in the value and indeed superiority of the Anglo-Saxons, is thus a counterpoint to the Norman yoke" (p. 118).

also refers to "the Anglo-Saxons our ancestors" (*Maiores nostri Anglo-Saxones* in the Latin original) as the true founders of the English parliament. William Lambarde's *Archæionomia* (1568), a translation of Old English laws, was written with a view both to giving access to the "pure" laws of England, before they were tainted with Roman influence, and to prove the existence of an unbroken legal tradition in England. John Foxe's edition and translation of the Old English Gospels (1571) is likewise explicitly presented in its preface as evidence that "the Church at thys present, is no new reformation of thinges lately begonne, which were not before, but rather a reduction of the Church to the Pristine state of olde conformities, which once it had".<sup>28</sup>

In other words, the appearance of the concept of the "(Anglo-)Saxons" cannot be separated from nationalism. The whole point of this concept is to project the existence of "England" as a coherent entity before the time of the Conquest and to suggest that the Normans could only affect England very superficially and temporarily, because its identity was already fully formed at the time of the Conquest. The often-repeated tale of the defeat of the British at the hands of the (Anglo-)Saxon invaders as a story of origin for the English nation is also a pointed reminder of England's superiority over its immediate neighbours at a time when it is strengthening its control over Wales and conquering the remainder of Ireland.

What changed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, then, is not that a "historical" term suddenly became a marker of identity. Rather, a term of national identity,

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<sup>28</sup> For more information on this topic, see Rebecca Brackmann, *The Elizabethan Invention of Anglo-Saxon England: Laurence Nowell, William Lambarde, and the Study of Old English* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012) and John D. Niles, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England 1066-1901: Remembering, Forgetting, Deciphering, and Renewing the Past* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), especially chapter 2, "The Discovery of Anglo-Saxon England in Tudor Times", 49–76.



which had been designed to set the English apart from many close neighbours (the Welsh, the Irish and the French, as well as all Catholics) saw its meaning shift and expand so that it could welcome some foreigners within its sphere (e.g. white Americans of English descent and some other white Protestants of Germanic descent) and reject others (anyone subjected to slavery or the colonial rule). That expansion took two dominant forms: the idea of a common "cultural" model based on the rule of law, love of freedom and Protestantism (i.e. all the ingredients present in Early Modern views on Pre-Conquest England, but now applied both to the English and the Americans) and the idea of a common race, associated with specific biological attributes. The two notions are not entirely separate, of course, in that both rely on a common reference to the Anglo-Saxons as "our ancestors".<sup>29</sup>

A comparison of freely available linguistic data for the United Kingdom and the United States in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century reveals important similarities in the use of the word "Anglo-Saxon" in that period.<sup>30</sup> In both countries, the noun most commonly used after "Anglo-Saxon" in that

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<sup>29</sup> In the same period, the term "Anglo-Saxon", becomes more common, while the term "Saxon" can still be used on its own with a similar meaning both in the United States and in Britain, but sees its use in that sense decrease towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some examples of uses of "Saxons" in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: for the United States, in an article from *North American Review* (July 1835), "The Saxons who conquered England", or as late as 1898 in the novel *A Boy I knew and Four Dogs*, by Laurence Hutton, "it was not the London of the Romans, the Saxons, or the Normans"; for Britain: throughout Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819), and, as late as 1886 in a debate in the House of Common, "It might be supposed, from what had been said, that this was one of the laws made by the Saxons".

<sup>30</sup> The corpora examined are the *Corpus of Historical American* (a balanced corpus) and *Hansard* (the complete transcripts of debates in the British Parliament) which can both be interrogated via *English-corpora.org*, by Brigham Young University, and *Google Ngram Viewer* (American English and British English). A full list of the corpora used in this paper is available at the end of this paper.

period is "race", and that collocation is more common than others by a very wide margin. In the *Corpus of Historical American (COHA)*, the collocation "Anglo-Saxon race" comes first with 107 occurrences, against only 14 occurrences for the next most common noun phrase ("Anglo-Saxon world"); in *Hansard* it comes first with 70 instances against only 10 for the second one ("Anglo-Saxon times"). In *Google Books Ngram Viewer*, "Anglo-Saxon race" again comes first both for British and American English, with the second most common phrase, "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle", lagging significantly behind, especially in American English.<sup>31</sup>

The most common adjectives preceding "Anglo-Saxon" in both dialects are "old" and "great", but the sequence [ADJECTIVE + Anglo-Saxon] is less common than [Anglo-Saxon + NOUN], which explains why the ranking is not identical in the two sets of corpora considered: "great" comes first in *Hansard* (8 occurrences) and *COHA* (5), followed by "old" (4 in both corpora), but in *Google Books*, "old" comes first before "great" by a wide margin both in American and British English.<sup>32</sup> The two adjectives complement each other well: the whole point of (re)discovering the pre-Conquest past of England is to claim a pedigree (almost) as long and as well-established as that of the Greeks or the Romans. This extract from *A Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Orthography*, and published in 1852 sums up that programme quite explicitly:

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<sup>31</sup> "Anglo-Saxon race": 0.40 per million phrases with the same number of words in them in American English and 0.29 in British English; "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle": 0.07 in American English against 0.22 in British English. The figures are averages for the period 1850-1900.

<sup>32</sup> "Old": 0.10 per million in British English and 0.07 in American English; "great" 0.05 in British English and in American English.

The time is at hand, when the professor of the English language shall sit side by side with the doctors of Latin and Greek, but he shall do so on the condition of placing the old Anglo-Saxon above the classics, and making Alfred and Caedmon and Bede more honorable than Virgil and Homer.<sup>33</sup>

It would be surprising if such attitudes had left no traces at all in present attitudes to Anglo-Saxon England. Inside academia, the category of "race" is no longer considered scientifically valid. It has been debunked as a social construction based on a purely arbitrary selection of markers to classify populations and justify an existing hierarchy. As regards the Early Middle Ages more specifically, scholars belonging to the School of Vienna,<sup>34</sup> in particular, have produced a lot of valuable work showing that the "Germanic" tribes of the Early Middle Ages did not constitute rigid ethnic groups, impermeable to each other and to "non-Germanic" groups, but rather more fluid entities. And yet, scholars have shown striking examples of the ways in which some 19<sup>th</sup>-century attitudes and preferences continue to influence our perceptions of the period in spite of us.<sup>35</sup>

Outside academia, the situation is even more worrying. As noted by Wilton, Dockray-Miller, and others,<sup>36</sup> the Anglo-Saxon period and the (Early) Middle Ages more broadly occupy an important place in the ideology

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<sup>33</sup> A Literary Association, *A Hand-Book of Anglo-Saxon Orthography* (New York: John A. Gray, 1852), vi.

<sup>34</sup> Particularly works by Reinhard Wenskus, Herwig Wolfram or Walter Pohl. See also works by Patrick Geary, who has explored similar issues.

<sup>35</sup> For Old English, one may mention the following examples: Josephine Bloomfield, 'Diminished by Kindness: Frederick Klaeber's Rewriting of *Wealhtheow*', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 93:2 (1994), 183–203, as well as several papers by Allen J. Frantzen, including "The Diverse Nature of Old English Poetry", in *Companion to Old English Poetry*, edited by Henk Aertsen and Rolf H. Bremmer, Jr. (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1994), 1–17.

<sup>36</sup> See above, footnote 9.

of the alt-right, of neo-Nazis and various other racist groups. Even more concerning, in some countries, the word "Anglo-Saxon" has largely become synonymous with "white" in mainstream usage,<sup>37</sup> to the point where it has become possible for a congressman to say something like "I'm White. I'm an Anglo Saxon. People say things all the time, but I don't get offended. With a name like Mike Kelly you can't be from anyplace else but Ireland."<sup>38</sup>

In that context, it is easy to understand why scholars of colour might find themselves ill-at-ease in a field identified as "Anglo-Saxon Studies" and that they might see the reluctance of *ISAS* to change its name as frustrating at best and deeply offensive and damaging at worst. At first glance, it can be tempting to see that reluctance as a symptom of white privilege,<sup>39</sup> or even white fragility.<sup>40</sup>

It is a well-known fact that people who are not themselves subjected to discrimination tend to underestimate its reality,<sup>41</sup> while people who are

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<sup>37</sup> See the next section below for a more detailed discussion showing differences across countries regarding that point.

<sup>38</sup> Lily Puckett, "Republican congressman defends Trump's racism by saying: 'I'm a person of colour... I'm white'", *The Independent*, July 17, 2019, accessed April 14, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/trump-mike-kelly-racism-person-of-color-white-gop-republican-a9009706.html>.

<sup>39</sup> See Peggy McIntosh's seminal work, "White privilege and male privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women's studies" *Working paper No. 189* (Wellesley, Massachusetts: Wellesley Center for Research on Women, 1988).

<sup>40</sup> Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

<sup>41</sup> See for instance Megan Earle & Gordon Hodson, "Questioning white losses and anti-white discrimination in the United States" *Nature Human Behaviour* 4 (2020), 160–68, which shows among other things that white people underestimate the extent of racist discrimination, and Keon West & Asia A. Eaton, "Prejudiced and unaware of it: Evidence for the Dunning-Kruger model in the domains of racism and sexism", *Personality and Individual Differences* 146 (2019), 111–19, which showed that all participants in the study overestimated how egalitarian they were in terms of race and gender and that the

successful are more likely to believe that success is the result of merit rather than mere chance or privilege.<sup>42</sup> As a result, one can expect that white, well-established scholars will find it difficult to believe that racism exists within the field and that it might have a negative impact on the careers of younger aspiring scholars. As with other types of discrimination, unaffected people are very likely to think that there are more important problems to worry about, that the importance of the issue is exaggerated, etc.

More than that, some people are bound to be very defensive. It is always unpleasant to be confronted with a negative image of oneself, so that accusations of racism are rarely well received, even (especially?) when they are accurate. Some people can also have a strong emotional and personal connection to their field, so that a call to change its name and to denounce some of its history can be a source of distress and that distress, in turn, can cloud rational judgment. There are also understandable questions regarding what will happen to individual scholars if the word "Anglo-Saxon" becomes altogether unacceptable in academia. Will past papers using that word have a negative impact on hiring prospects? Will an interest in past scholarship become suspect? As with any significant change, uncertainty can generate a great deal of anxiety.

Such reasons explain why, whenever a call is made for an institution to address its racist legacy, that call is likely to meet with initial resistance or

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least egalitarian participants were also those who showed the highest level of overestimation.

<sup>42</sup> See for instance Katharina Maria Hecht, "A sociological analysis of top incomes and wealth: a study of how individuals at the top of the income and wealth distributions perceive economic inequality", PhD thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2017, which shows that the respondents belonging to the richest households are also those most likely to consider that hard work and natural ability are the most decisive factors for career success.

reluctance and it is important for all members of the institution to examine what part those factors play in their individual reluctance.

However, if it is possible to draw parallels between the crisis at *ISSEME* and other related crises and protests, be it at the *RWA* or elsewhere, it is wrong-headed to think that any such crisis is the repetition of a Manichean fight of progress against racism and/or conservatism. While there is undeniably an issue with the word "Anglo-Saxon", that issue becomes significantly more complex and multifaceted once it is examined in an international context.

## 2 AN ISSUE THAT PLAYS OUT DIFFERENTLY ACROSS COUNTRIES

American proponents of the name change have been keen to stress that the issue goes beyond the United States alone and that the arguments they make have universal value. Thus, while David Wilton's study shows important discrepancies between uses of the word "Anglo-Saxon" across the world, he still writes in his conclusion that "anywhere from one quarter to two thirds of the uses of Anglo-Saxon are as some form of present-day identity label" so that persisting to use it "will be understood, rightly or wrongly, as upholding the ideals of white nationalism".<sup>43</sup>

Likewise, on a blogpost published in 2019, Eric Weiskott writes:

I am aware of differences of usage according to geography and discipline, but these minor differences do not somehow vindicate the innocence of the technical meaning. I am weary of implications that racism is a US "thing" (...).<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> "What Do We Mean by Anglo-Saxon? Pre-Conquest to the Present" *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (forthcoming).

<sup>44</sup> Eric Weiskott, "International Society of?", published on September 16, 2019, accessed February 20, 2020, <https://ericweiskott.com/2019/09/16/international-society-of/>.

It seems to me that both scholars underplay "these minor differences" and that, if any meaningful conversation is to take place, such differences need to be acknowledged. First of all, the statement that "anywhere from one quarter to two thirds of the uses of Anglo-Saxon are as some form of present-day identity label" is technically correct but somewhat disingenuous. The phrase "some form of present-day identity label" conflates two very different uses of the word "Anglo-Saxon", identified in Wilton's study as "ethno-racial" and "politico-cultural". "Ethno-racial" corresponds to instances such as "[they] were likely the only Irish Catholic family at the school where most were Protestant and Anglo-Saxon", whereas "politico-cultural" corresponds to instances such as "[it] warned that the global domination of Anglo-Saxon culture had plunged the future of the French language into a 'deep crisis'". In other words, the "ethno-racial" sense is used to differentiate between inhabitants of an English-speaking country according to their ancestry, whereas the "politico-cultural" sense is used to differentiate between the cultural practices of English-speaking countries and those of other nations.

Arguably, there is some overlap between the two notions. The "Anglo-Saxon world" (in a politico-cultural sense) does not actually refer to the entirety of the English-speaking world, but more particularly to the United Kingdom and former British colonies of settlement: the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In other words, it refers to nations which trace their history back to England or Britain rather than to nations which adopted the English language as a result of colonial domination, but which trace their history elsewhere, such as India or Nigeria. However, the two notions are clearly distinct and both cannot be equated with "white

nationalism": according to the ethno-racial definition, African-Americans are not "Anglo-Saxons", but according to the politico-cultural one they very much are.

In David Wilton's study, the ethno-racial use has a significant presence in all the corpora examined, but, as he acknowledges himself a few pages before the statement quoted above, there are significant differences. Roughly speaking, three groups can be identified: the United States, Canada and Australia (to a lesser extent New Zealand) where the ethno-racial use is dominant, Great Britain, where the "pre-Conquest" use is dominant, and everywhere else where the politico-cultural use is dominant.

A complementary survey confirms the existence of important differences in use across countries. Thus, data from *Google Books Ngram Viewer* for the period 1990-2008 show that the nouns most frequently associated with "Anglo-Saxon" vary greatly from one country (and one language) to another.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> 2008 corresponds to the end of the corpus available on *Google Ngram Viewer*. 1990 has been chosen arbitrarily to focus on recent usage.



Rank	British English	American English
1	Anglo-Saxon England, 0.86	Anglo-Saxon England, 0.12
2	Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 0.46	Anglo-Saxon race, 0.06
3	Anglo-Saxon period, 0.23	Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 0.06
4	Anglo-Saxon countries, 0.13	Anglo-Saxon world, 0.03
5	Anglo-Saxon world, 0.10	Anglo-Saxon countries, 0.03
6	Anglo-Saxon times, 0.08	Anglo-Saxon Protestants, 0.03
7	Anglo-Saxon race, 0.06	Anglo-Saxon culture, 0.03
8	Anglo-Saxon Church, 0.05	Anglo-Saxon period, 0.02
9	Anglo-Saxon settlement, 0.05	Anglo-Saxon word, 0.02
10	Anglo-Saxon kings, 0.05	Anglo-Saxon times, 0.02

Table 1: Nouns preceded by "Anglo-Saxon" in British and American English, 1990-2008: number of occurrences per 1 million words (source: *Google Ngram Viewer*)

For British English the most frequent phrase by far is "Anglo-Saxon England", followed by "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle" and "Anglo-Saxon period", and then "Anglo-Saxon countries", "Anglo-Saxon world", "Anglo-Saxon times", then only "Anglo-Saxon race", followed closely by "Anglo-Saxon Church", "Anglo-Saxon settlement" and "Anglo-Saxon kings". For American English, the list looks somewhat different: Anglo-Saxon England also comes first, directly followed by "Anglo-Saxon race" and "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle", then "Anglo-Saxon world", "Anglo-Saxon countries", "Anglo-Saxon Protestants", "Anglo-Saxon culture", "Anglo-Saxon period", "Anglo-Saxon word" and "Anglo-Saxon times". Interestingly, the figures show that the phrase "Anglo-Saxon race" has about the same frequency in both countries. The figures for "Anglo-Saxon Protestants" are slightly lower in

the United Kingdom, but not that much (0.02). What really explains the massive difference is apparently not so much that Britons write less about race or identity, but that they talk a great deal more about Medieval History. Overall, the word "Anglo-Saxon" is much more frequently used in the United Kingdom (8.3 per million) than in the United States (2.4).

A complementary survey of collocations for "Anglo-Saxon" in the *News on the Web Corpus*,<sup>46</sup> shows the collocation "Anglo-Saxon race" to be especially common in the United States and in Canada,<sup>47</sup> where it ranks 6th and 2nd respectively as one of the most frequent collocations involving "Anglo-Saxon" followed by a noun.<sup>48</sup> In Australia, the collocation does not appear, but many of the ten most common nouns in that position refer to identity in some way (in descending order: "Australians", "upbringing", "background", "men", "males", "male"). In the same corpus, the most common adjective found before "Anglo-Saxon" in all countries is "white", but the extent to which the collocation is dominant differs from one section to another. In the United States, the ratio between that collocation and the next most common is above 10 (56 against 5), in Canada above 7 (29 against 4, and the second most common adjective happens to be "pagan"), in Australia close to 4 (31 against 8, and most common adjectives refer to identity: "suburban", "heterosexual", "middle-aged", "average", "traditional"), but in Great Britain only close to 1.5 (23 against 16), and many of the existing occurrences in British sources refer to an American context.

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<sup>46</sup> 2020-present, 20 countries using English surveyed; data obtained on May 6, 2020.

<sup>47</sup> It should be noted that the corpus only contains data for the English language, so potential uses of "Anglo-Saxon" in Canadian French are not included.

<sup>48</sup> By comparison, the same collocation ranks only 49th in the British section of the corpus, with only 5 occurrences against dozens of occurrences for "Anglo-Saxon times" or "Anglo-Saxon king" for instance.

	French	German	Italian	Spanish
1	<i>pays</i> , 1.15	<i>Land</i> / <i>Länder(n)</i> , 0.65	<i>paesi</i> , 0.67	<i>mondo</i> , 0.34
2	<i>monde</i> , 0.56	<i>Raum</i> , 0.38	<i>mondo</i> , 0.65	<i>paises</i> , 0.31
3	<i>modèle</i> , 0.25	<i>Welt</i> , 0.17	<i>cultura</i> , 0.21	<i>cultura</i> , 0.13
4	<i>littérature</i> , 0.17	<i>Literatur</i> , 0.15	<i>modello/i</i> , 0.20	<i>derecho</i> , 0.12
5	<i>auteurs</i> , 0.15	<i>Tradition</i> , 0.11	<i>tradizione</i> , 0.15	<i>tradición</i> , 0.12
6	<i>origine</i> , 0.13	<i>Modell</i> , 0.06	<i>letteratura</i> , 0.14	<i>modelo</i> , 0.08

Table 2: Nouns located next to "Anglo-Saxon" in French, German, Italian and Spanish, 1990-2008: number of occurrences per 1 million words (source: *Google Ngram Viewer*)

For French,<sup>49</sup> the most common nouns for the period 1990-2008 according to data from Google Books Ngram Viewer are "pays" ("countries"), "monde" ("world") and "modèle", confirming that the politico-cultural meaning is dominant in that language.<sup>50</sup> Next come "littérature",

<sup>49</sup> The French, German, Spanish and Italian sections of the Google Books corpus are selected according to their language, not according to the country where the books were published. Thus, the "French" section may include books from any country where French is used, though the proportions per country are not known. For each language, the search was performed according to the typical word order of a noun phrase (noun followed by the adjective in the Romance languages and preceded by it in German).

<sup>50</sup> On a more anecdotal note, a search for "célébrités anglo-saxonnes" in French yields among its first results an article published in the magazine *L'Express* about weddings celebrated in France by the likes of Brad Pitt & Angelina Jolie but also Kim Kardashian & Kanye West, and Tony Parker & Eva Longoria ([https://www.lexpress.fr/styles/diaphoto/styles/mariage/les-mariages-en-france-des-stars-internationales\\_1571305.html](https://www.lexpress.fr/styles/diaphoto/styles/mariage/les-mariages-en-france-des-stars-internationales_1571305.html)), as well as another published in *Jeune Afrique* about North-American stars making faux pas when expressing their love for Africa, which lists Justin Bieber, Angelina Jolie, Oprah Winfrey, Madonna and Beyoncé, among others (<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/166997/societe/people-le-top-5-des-couacs-africains-des-stars-am-ricaines/>).

"auteurs" and "origine". For German, the most common nouns seem to be "Länder(n)" ("countries"), "Raum" ("space"), "Welt" ("world"), "Literatur", and "Modell".<sup>51</sup> For Italian, the two most frequent nouns by far are "paesi" ("countries") and "mondo" ("world"), followed much behind by "cultura", "modello/modelli", "tradizione" and "letteratura". For Spanish, the most frequent phrases are "mundo anglosajón", "países anglosajones" ("Anglo-Saxon countries"), "cultura anglosajona", "derecho anglosajón" ("Anglo-Saxon law"), "tradición anglosajona" and "modelo anglosajón".

Of course, it would be interesting to survey more languages, such as Russian or Japanese, to see what they make of that word. However, together with the data gathered by David Wilton, this quick survey already offers interesting perspectives. It seems significant to me that countries where the people of pre-Conquest England are not regarded as ancestors in any way mostly use "Anglo-Saxon" in a cultural sense, whether the language they use is English or not. This, in itself, can be an issue for specialists of Early Medieval England trying to present their research field to a general audience: direct translations of "Anglo-Saxon England" are likely to sound tautological or nonsensical to members of a general audience in many countries.

Does that mean, to get back to Weiskott's statement, that racism is not "a thing" in most countries? Definitely not. To take just one example, French racism is very well documented and has a long history. In recent times, a far-right candidate twice came second in the presidential election and racist

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<sup>51</sup> German being more inflected than the other languages considered, it was slightly harder to combine all relevant results using *Google Ngram Viewer*. To obtain this list, I first searched the ten most frequent nouns after each individual inflection of the adjective "angelsächsisch" and then compared the frequencies of phrases combining any inflected form of the adjective with one of those nouns.

threats and acts of violence remain common in this country.<sup>52</sup> However, for obvious reasons, French racism does not revolve around an "Anglo-Saxon" identity.

When French, Italian, Russian or Japanese scholars study Old English, they do so as people taking an interest in a foreign country. Even in countries where a Germanic language is spoken, the study of Old English and of Early Medieval England usually takes place in departments of English (and American) Studies and not in departments of Germanic philology. In other words, students come to the study of Early Medieval England from an interest in foreign languages and not from an interest in possible shared ancestors.

In Britain, the situation is of course very different. Studying the history of one's own country is always fraught with issues of nationalism. The temptation of writing a "*roman national*" (literally "a national novel") celebrating the inevitable success and superiority of one's own nation is always present and it is the responsibility of historians to check such attempts and show the actual complexity and unpredictability of history. The choice of the United Kingdom (minus Scotland which does not use GCSEs) to present the study of the Early Middle Ages for the GCSE History syllabus as part of a broader history of migrations, highlighting the near constant movement of populations to and from Britain throughout History, is clearly meant to avoid that pitfall ("Britain: Migration, empires and people c790-present day"). Likewise, the British Library exhibition entitled "Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms: Art, Word, War" (which ended in February 2019) avoided

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<sup>52</sup> See the annual report of the Commission Nationale Consultative des Droits de l'Homme published on April 23, 2019 and available here <https://www.cncdh.fr/fr/actualite/rapport-racisme-2018> (last consulted March 15, 2020).

suggesting an anachronistic national unity by focusing on separate kingdoms and by choosing to emphasize links with the wider world through documents such as the North African manuscript of the *Letters of Cyprian*, which may have been brought to Britain by abbot Hadrian.

It is probably possible to do even better (especially as regards the representation of the Celtic Britons), but, for the most part, one can argue that "Anglo-Saxon England" does not have an image problem in the United Kingdom. On the contrary, the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had seen a surge of interest in the "Anglo-Saxon period",<sup>53</sup> so that the name can be said to enjoy a strong brand recognition and a relatively positive image. While "early medieval" is a term largely confined to academic prose, "Anglo-Saxon" is a term which is familiar to a much wider audience.<sup>54</sup> Accordingly,

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<sup>53</sup> Whereas, according to *Google Ngram Viewer*, in the United States, the frequency of the use of the word "Anglo-Saxon" has been in relatively steady decline since 1900, in the United Kingdom, there has been a significant rise from the mid-1980s onwards (with the beginning of a small decline in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century), so that, if yearly variations are smoothed away by averaging the number of occurrences by decades (i.e. the value for 1995 is given by the average for the years 1990-2000, so 11 years in total), the peak of frequency reached at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (8.80 per million in 1998) is almost as high as that reached overall in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (9.32 in 1858). Without smoothing, the overall trend is slightly obscured because there are significant variations from one year to the next.

<sup>54</sup> A comparison of the uses of the two terms in the *British National Corpus* is revealing. Generally speaking, "Anglo-Saxon" is more commonly used than "early medieval" (6.04 occurrences per million words against 0.61; capitalization is not a factor since it is not taken into account by searches through [English-Corpora.org](http://English-Corpora.org)). Furthermore, while "Anglo-Saxon" is especially frequent in academic prose (19.11 per million or 293 occurrences) and in other printed books other than fiction (7.82 or 129 occurrences), it does also occur in magazines, newspapers and fiction, and even, though very rarely, in spoken English (respective frequencies: 3.44, 2.39, 1.45, 0.5; this corresponds, in absolute terms, to 25, 25, 23 and 5 occurrences respectively). By contrast, "early medieval" is found almost exclusively in academic prose (23 occurrences) and other printed books other than fictions (virtually all occurrences, 30 out of 32 in essays about art). There are no occurrences at all in the *BNC* in magazines, newspapers and fiction, and there is a single occurrence in spoken English (in a discussion concerned with allegorical poetry broadcast on the radio).

several historical attractions targeting a non-scholarly audience use it in their names, such as the *West Stow Anglo-Saxon Village* and *Jarrow Hall: Anglo-Saxon Farm, Village and Bede Museum* (known as *Bede's World*, until its reopening in 2016). It is also used in the titles of several recent children's books, including humorous titles such as *You Wouldn't Want to be an Anglo-Saxon Peasant!*, by Jacqueline Morley and David Antram (2016), *How to be an Anglo-Saxon in 13 easy stages*, by Scoular Anderson (2011) or *Newspapers from History: The Anglo-Saxon Times*, by Andrew Langley (2018).<sup>55</sup>

In British English, "Anglo-Saxon" is not just a convenient shorthand used by academics to describe the people of Germanic culture who invaded Britain after the Romans,<sup>56</sup> it is a relatively popular term which, much like "the Tudors" or "the Victorians" has a strong evocative power for a non-academic audience.<sup>57</sup> The situation is also helped by the fact that, in recent times, racism and nationalism in Britain have tended to crystallize around

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<sup>55</sup> The ever-funny Horrible Histories series by Terry Deary and Martin Brown, on the other hand, chose to name their title *Smashing Saxons* (2016), and refer to Saxons throughout. This may be in part because Terry Deary himself is Scottish and, as the author explains at the beginning of this volume, "'Saxon' was a name the Welsh, the Scots and the Irish called all the strangers who moved into England when the Romans left".

<sup>56</sup> Historians, art historians and archaeologists find the term especially useful, as it makes it easier to distinguish artefacts belonging to different material cultures in Early Medieval Britain. Many of the signatories of the statement released by the *Forum for Multidisciplinary Anglo-Saxon Studies* belong to those disciplines. As they argue, "the term 'Anglo-Saxon' allows for precise and concise, unmarked reference. It does not prevent the choice of more precise terms such as 'West Saxon' or 'Anglo-Scandinavian' where appropriate, nor does it hinder critical reflection on situations in which it might encourage preconceptions and over-generalization. (...) 'Anglo-Saxon' represents a readily identifiable although fluid cultural complex with open borders, and not a unitary linguistic, territorial or political field.". The full statement may be found on the website *fmass.eu* (last consulted, May 12, 2020).

<sup>57</sup> See a recent article by Howard Williams, a professor of archaeology at the University of Chester: "The fight for 'Anglo-Saxon'", *Aeon*, May 29, 2020, accessed May 29, 2020, <https://aeon.co/essays/why-we-should-keep-the-term-anglo-saxon-in-archaeology>.

different historical periods and different tropes, so that the pre-Conquest period has been rather less tainted by association in that country.

That is why talking of a "Brexit/Trump" era as Wilton does in his paper is not entirely helpful. It is certainly true that Brexit Britain has seen a surge in xenophobic and/or racist aggressions and discrimination across the country.<sup>58</sup> However, to describe that surge as "the emergence of white supremacist groups into mainstream discourse"<sup>59</sup> as David Wilton does is to apply an American lens on a British issue. Accordingly, the fact that, according to Wilton's own data, British English did not see an increase in "ethno-racial" uses of the word "Anglo-Saxon" after the Brexit referendum is less surprising than Wilton makes it out to be.<sup>60</sup>

By far, the historical period which has been referenced most prominently and consistently by the partisans of Brexit is WW2, particularly "the Blitz" and its attending "spirit". Thus, Nigel Farage has twitted that he "urged every youngster to go out and watch #Dunkirk" (July 26, 2017), Mark Francois has mentioned "Teutonic arrogance" in an interview to the BBC before saying that his "father, Reginald Francois, was a D Day veteran. He never submitted to bullying by any German and neither will his son"<sup>61</sup>, and

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<sup>58</sup> See for instance "Racism rising since Brexit vote, nationwide study reveals" *The Guardian*, 20 May 2019, accessed June 5, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/20/racism-on-the-rise-since-brexit-vote-nationwide-study-reveals>.

<sup>59</sup> "It would take the 2016 discovery of Frantzen's ties to the men's rights movement, the emergence of white supremacist groups into mainstream discourse following Brexit, the election of Donald Trump, and the 2017 racist march on Charlottesville for many medievalists to recognize the field's association with these racist groups, an association that had been there all along."

<sup>60</sup> Wilton, "What Do We Mean by Anglo-Saxon?": "One might have expected an increase in the ethno-racial uses of Anglo-Saxon [in British English] since the advent of the Brexit era, but the data shows this not to be the case."

<sup>61</sup> *BBC News*, "Brexit Tory MP Mark Francois accuses Airbus boss of 'German



Boris Johnson is of course famous for his fondness for Churchill, not to mention the *Telegraph* interview in which he likened Germany's EU policy to an attempt to take over Europe, like Napoleon and Hitler had tried before.<sup>62</sup>

A focus on supposed common Germanic ancestors does not fit very well into that picture. It is specifically English nationalism (not British and not "Anglo-Saxon") which has fueled Brexit, leaving the "four nations" at odd with each other in its wake. It is striking that Kingsnorth's surprisingly successful novel, *The Wake* (2014),<sup>63</sup> set in England at the time of the Norman Conquest, is full of references to England and the English, but uses the word "Anglo-Saxon" rather sparingly if at all,<sup>64</sup> even though the novel is very nationalistic and fully supports the "Norman Yoke" theory outlined above. Likewise, it is revealing that Jonathan Coe's bittersweet Brexit comedy is entitled *Middle England* (2018) and not *The Anglo-Saxons*. It could actually be argued that, in the United Kingdom, the most toxic part of the label "Anglo-Saxon England" is not "Anglo-Saxon" but "England".

For English-speaking countries outside Britain, however, the situation is again very different. There, medieval England is neither safely foreign nor local history. It raises thornier questions of filiation and is, in a sense, intrinsically suspect. Why should the medieval past of a foreign country be

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bullying" 25 January 2019, accessed May 19, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-politics-47004688/brexiter-tory-mp-mark-francois-accuses-airbus-boss-of-german-bullying>.

<sup>62</sup> *The Telegraph*, "Boris Johnson: The EU wants a superstate, just as Hitler did", 15 May 2016, accessed May 19, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/14/boris-johnson-the-eu-wants-a-superstate-just-as-hitler-did/>.

<sup>63</sup> Surprising given the fact it is written in a strange form of pseudo-Old English, which makes it slightly difficult to read.

<sup>64</sup> The word only occurs in some of titles listed in the bibliography.

given a special status in academia unless some kind of ancestry was traced there? In that context, it is not surprising if many scholars outside Europe, especially in North America, have called for the field to broaden its geographical scope and for Early Medieval Studies to be less Eurocentric. Such a change of approach would indeed probably help untying the unhelpful connections between Early Medieval Studies and misguided conceptions of some "unsullied ancestry" traceable to a mythical point of origin, by putting Early Medieval England back in perspective, as just one small territory among many in a much bigger world. This context probably explains why, among the many new names suggested for *ISAS*, was the option "International Society of Early Medievalists."

However, while there is certainly a case for an international society that would bring together all scholars interested in Early Medieval Studies in, say, Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, it is unlikely that any European scholar would find it a suitable replacement for *ISAS*. Presumably, many scholars in England focus on Pre-Conquest England precisely because this is the territory they inhabit and they want to work on the primary evidence available there, whereas many scholars elsewhere in Europe or elsewhere focus on that very same time and place, precisely because they do not wish to study the history of the territory *they* inhabit, but want to look further abroad. Not to mention the fact that many historical societies dedicated to the Middle Ages already exist (*Mediävistenverband*, *Réseau des Médiévistes Belges de Langue Française*, *Società Internazionale per lo Studio del Medioevo Latino*, etc.) and a society that would no longer have England as its focus would lose its specificity, as if the *New Chaucer Society*

suddenly turned into the *New Chaucer, Dante, Wolfram von Eschenbach and Chrétien de Troyes Society*.

### 3 A DIFFICULT WAY FORWARD

As I hope the paragraphs above have shown, the differences in uses of the term "Anglo-Saxon" are anything but minor, which makes any international policy on this issue incredibly difficult, especially when one takes into account the fact that this is not a strictly academic issue, so that changes effected within academia may have no impact outside it, or, even worse, have undesired ones. It is not inconceivable, for instance, that discouraging the use of the word "Anglo-Saxon" might create difficulties for people trying to bring early medieval history to a wider audience, by depriving them of a powerful brand, while encouraging various white supremacists in claiming ownership of the word and lambasting "the elite" for trying to keep the truth from "the real people".

To make matters even more complex, there are significant differences across nations regarding how toxic words themselves are handled (or should be handled), so that even if we all agreed that the word "Anglo-Saxon" is toxic and that the only way forward was to get rid of it, we might not all agree on how to achieve that aim. It is worth keeping in mind that legislation on hate speech differs significantly from country to country and that the presence or absence of legislation proscribing hate speech is no indicator of how seriously the problem is taken in a given country. Thus, the United States is one of very few countries in which *ISSEME* has members where hate speech is not punishable by law but protected as free speech. And yet, this is also the only country where hate speech is considered so corrosive that

the mere mention of a racist slur, for example in the context of quoting someone else, can be enough to lead to the suspension or dismissal of an academic.<sup>65</sup>

Similarly, it is striking that the actions undertaken by anti-racism groups and the discourse they use can take very different forms from one country to another. For instance, our colleague Abby Ang, a graduate student of color specializing in insects in 12th to 15th century literature, is also the founder of No Space for Hate (NSFH), "an organization that seeks to counter white supremacist recruitment and organizing in the local community". As part of that work, she attends the Farmers' Market in Bloomington, Indiana every week to protest the presence of vendors belonging to a white supremacist organization and thereby to express her refusal to normalize white supremacy in her community.<sup>66</sup> This type of activism is very uncommon in my native country, where, in similar circumstances the most common types of action are either litigation or large demonstrations which typically do not have a single target but try to gather as many movements as possible to defend a common, general message of support for refugees, refusal of discrimination and police violence.

In terms of vocabulary too, there are important differences across countries (and within them), that go beyond mere linguistic idiosyncrasies. Thus, the American medievalists acting against racism tend to lay a strong

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<sup>65</sup> In 2019, one case concerned Phillip Adamo, at Augsburg University, Minnesota, and another Laurie Sheck, at the New School, in New York City. In both cases, the academics had used the "n-word" in a discussion of James Baldwin and his work.

<sup>66</sup> For more information on her action, see Abby Ang, "A Graduate Student in the (Farmers') Marketplace of Ideas", *In the medieval middle*, February 28, 2020, accessed March 31, 2020, <http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2020/02/a-graduate-student-in-farmers.html>.

emphasis on individual awareness and self-reflection. Individuals are challenged to examine their own privileges and prejudices so they can become better allies and advocates.<sup>67</sup> By contrast, French activism, for instance, tends to avoid stressing individual, personal experience, and to emphasize instead the ideals of universality and of "la République".<sup>68</sup>

This is important to keep in mind, not as a sign that international concerted action is impossible, but as a reminder that, when a discussion about racism and discrimination occurs in an international context, divergences of opinions regarding what steps need to be taken will necessarily play along different lines than when a similar discussion occurs in a strictly national context.

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<sup>67</sup> A good example of that type of activism can be found in the proposal for the workshop "How to be a White Ally in Medieval Studies 101" which was submitted by Carla María Thomas to the International Congress for Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo in 2018: "It will serve as an introduction for white faculty and graduate students on how to recognize white racial identity and privilege, accept and confront white guilt, and move beyond personal emotional reactions to engage with and support medievalists of color. (...) We will provide the tools and resources necessary for gaining self-awareness through the emotional labor white academics must do on/for/by themselves (and not at the expense of medievalists' of color emotional labor) before they can attempt to be allies, advocates, and, hopefully, accomplices (terms that we will define in the workshop) for not only medievalists of color but also all persons of color." For a full discussion of the workshop and its rejection, see Carla María Thomas's blog, *Muddling Through the Medieval*, July 24, 2018, accessed March 31, 2020, <https://carlamthomas.com/2018/07/24/assistant-professor-emes-president-and-icms-boycott/>.

<sup>68</sup> Thus LICRA states as its first mission "Profondément attachée aux valeurs de la République, nous défendons un principe simple : l'universalité des droits de l'Homme." ("Deeply attached to the values of the Republic, we defend a simple principle: the universality of human rights"). <https://www.licra.org/qui-sommes-nous> (accessed March 31, 2020). Likewise, an opinion page hosted on SOS-Racisme by a former vice-president of the association, Nasser Ramdane Ferradj starts with the following statement: "Nous croyons aux valeurs universelles qui nous ont été transmises par nos familles et par l'école : l'égalité, la liberté, la fraternité." ("We believe in the universal values that were passed on to us by our families and by school: equality, liberty, fraternity."), <https://sos-racisme.org/nous-musulmans-laiques/> (accessed March 31, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, offering a perfect solution to the current crisis is well beyond the scope of this paper. Such a solution can only come from the society as a whole. What I hoped to achieve with this contribution was to help move beyond two attitudes which I think are counterproductive. One such attitude is to think that the issue surrounding the word "Anglo-Saxon" is a strictly local, American problem, which has no relevance to the rest of the society. While the word "Anglo-Saxon" is only used in a predominantly "ethno-racial" way in a few countries, those countries account for an important proportion of specialists of Old English, Anglo-Latin and Early Medieval England worldwide, so that a problem which is important there is necessarily important globally. Certainly, the wider issues that lie behind that word are relevant to all of us: most obviously, whether we live in Russia, Norway, Japan or Canada, we all use scholarship and resources which were shaped to some extent by nationalist, racist and sexist views and while a great deal of work has been done already to criticize and address that heritage, more work remains to be done.

The other attitude that needs to be left behind, I think, is one which sees the issue as having only two sides, one of which is racism. This attitude prevents debate because it assumes that any dissenting voice is necessarily morally unsound and therefore not worth listening to. Racism and anti-racism may exist everywhere, but they take different shapes in different contexts, so that any single cultural practice may look quite different to observers in different countries.

While the word "Anglo-Saxon" is familiar to all of us and has been used by all of us at some point, it is put to very different uses in different

parts of the world. In Britain, it is a useful bridge between academia and the general public, a powerful brand which helps draw attention (and funding) to a distant historical period, while opening useful conversations in schools about the many migrations which helped create the United Kingdom as it is today. In the United States, Canada and, to a lesser extent, Australia and perhaps New Zealand, the word is an identity marker which can fuel racist hierarchies. In the rest of the world, the meaning of the word in common usage seems to have lost any connection to early medieval Britain, referring to an odd mix of neo-liberal economic views and whatever cultural traits are thought (sometimes mistakenly) to be typical of the United States and/or the United Kingdom.

While we can hopefully all agree that, like many ethnonyms, the word "Anglo-Saxon" has a troubled background that needs to be acknowledged and confronted, it is probable that different kinds of conversation and different kinds of strategies will have to be tried locally to deal with that complex heritage. It is to be hoped that, in the future, we will all be able to reach out to each other and listen to each other so that we can benefit from each other's insights and work on making this field ever richer and stronger, more vibrant and fulfilling to all those who take an interest in it.

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