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0521822610 - Geographies of England: The North-South Divide, Material and Imagined

Edited by Alan R. H. Baker and Mark Billinge

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Material and imagined geographies of England

ALAN R. H. BAKER AND MARK BILLINGE

Two themes

Scholarly accounts of the historical geography of England since the Norman Conquest have tended to focus upon systematic changes in its population, economy, society and landscape. Although addressing ‘geographical’ issues, their organisational structures have led them to place more emphasis upon chronological (temporal) changes than upon regional (spatial) differences. By contrast, popular accounts of the changing geography of England in modern times have tended to emphasise a basic divide between North and South. To some extent, this difference in emphasis might be because the former have tended to focus upon material geographies and the latter upon imagined geographies of England. There is, therefore, a case for combining these two perspectives in an examination of both the material and the imagined geographies of England since the Norman Conquest. The central questions to be addressed in this book are: To what extent has a North–South divide – in diverse forms – been a structural feature of England’s geography during the last millennium and to what extent has it been especially associated with, and recognised during, particular periods in the past?

The concept of a North–South divide has surfaced in recent political debates about regional contrasts in wealth and welfare in England but aspects of the concept can be traced in literature for almost two centuries. Famously, Benjamin Disraeli (1845) in his novel *Sybil, or The Two Nations* portrayed the existence of ‘two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other’s habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws’. This social rather than spatial concept of two nations was reinforced geographically in Elizabeth Gaskell’s (1855) novel *North and South* and has since then become part of English popular and political culture. For example, a historical account of the idea of Englishness written by an Australian, Donald Horne, identified

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two regionally specific variations, what he terms ‘an ambivalence caused by the industrial revolution’:

In the *Northern Metaphor* Britain is pragmatic, empirical, calculating, Puritan, bourgeois, enterprising, adventurous, scientific, serious, and believes in struggle. Its sinful excess is a ruthless avarice, rationalised in the belief that the prime impulse in all human beings is a rational, calculating, economic self-interest. In the *Southern Metaphor* Britain is romantic, illogical, muddled, divinely lucky, Anglican, aristocratic, traditional, frivolous, and believes in order and tradition. Its sinful excess is a ruthless pride, rationalised in the belief that men are born to serve. (Horne 1970: 22)

Beryl Bainbridge (1987), in her book *Forever England*, set out to examine the roots of what she called ‘that evergreen assumption, the notion that England is two nations’. Distrusting of historical scholarship, and doubting the reliability of fragmentary historical evidence, Bainbridge preferred to call partially upon literature but principally upon the memories of six families – three from the North and three from the South – to testify to the character of the concept. Two more academic accounts of the North–South divide were published in 1989 by professional geographers: David Smith explored in his book *North and South* what he saw as a growing economic, social and political divide in Britain since the end of the Second World War; and Jim Lewis and Alan Townsend edited a collection of eight essays on regional change in Britain during the 1980s, under the general title *The North–South Divide*. More recently, Helen M. Jewell has provided a scholarly, historical examination of one aspect of this duality in her book *The North–South Divide: The Origins of Northern Consciousness in England* (1994). Fundamentally although not exclusively a geographical concept, the North–South divide both as a ‘reality’ and as a ‘representation of reality’ clearly had a history.

But it is a history neglected by geographers. For example, in Robert Dodgshon and Robin Butlin’s (1990) second edition of their synthesis of the historical geography of England and Wales, the North–South ‘problem’ featured only in the essay by Brian Robson on the interwar years and even then only occupies a few lines of its introduction and of a section on regional disparities in employment structures (Robson 1990: 546 and 557). That chapter included a reference to Robson’s own rarely cited essay on the North–South divide (Robson 1985). Richard Lawton and Colin Pooley (1992) rightly emphasised the persistence of regional cultures in their historical geography of Britain between 1740 and 1950 but they said nothing about any North–South divide. In the recently published, pioneering, historical geography of Britain in the twentieth century, the editors – David Gilbert, David Matless and Brian Short – refer briefly to Horne’s northern and southern metaphors arguing both that they can be overplayed (ignoring or sidelining other significant regional differences in Britain) and that a more culturally and historically informed story of those metaphors awaits detailed elaboration, because the North–South divide is not addressed further in their own collection of essays (Gilbert, Matless and Short 2003: 10–11).

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The concept of a North–South divide in England will be approached in this present book in two ways. First, there is the task of identifying the broad, regional differences in the *material* or ‘tangible’ geography of England. This involves describing and explaining the geography of England in terms of the broad, regional differences in, for example, its population, economy, society, culture or landscape. Such studies are reconstructions undertaken by *observers* with historical hindsight using evidence of a variety of kinds from different historical periods. The aim here is to delineate the broad geographical structures which have underpinned England’s history during the last one thousand years. Emphasis will be placed on the economic contrasts between North and South, because they have constituted such an important component of the concept, but appropriate attention will also be paid to demographic, social, political and cultural characteristics (such as language and religion). The second approach is that of historical geosophy, of reconstructing the geographical ideas, the geographical *imaginings*, of peoples in the past. The task here is to identify the nature of geographical ideas held by *actors* in the past, to determine the importance of a sense of place and in particular to assess the significance of the idea of the locality, of the region, of the province and of the nation at different times in England’s history. Just how has England’s geography been imagined through the centuries? Here the book draws upon a wide range of economic, social, political and cultural sources, which differ from period to period. Geographical conceptions in both popular and elitist culture are derived from literary sources, such as topographies, newspapers and novels; from graphical sources, such as maps and paintings; and from statistical sources, such as censuses and surveys.

Our book focuses on the North–South divide in England, because it is to England that the concept has been most specifically applied. But, where appropriate, reference will be made to that division within the broader context of Great Britain (or the United Kingdom). The six substantive essays, while treating different historical periods, are integrated by their common concern with two fundamentally geographical questions: first, to what extent is it possible for us today to detect a North–South divide in England during specific periods in the past; and secondly, how important was the idea of such a divide to contemporaries in those periods? Of course, there is a certain arbitrariness about the time periods selected for study – the periodisation of history, like the regionalisation of geography, is as much art as science and often more so. The periods chosen provide a framework, a historical grid, through which to examine the material character and the imagined content of the North–South divide. Unusually, a modified retrogressive approach has been adopted. The book ‘retrogresses’ chapter by chapter from a later period to an earlier period, beginning in the late-twentieth century and moving backwards period by period into the eleventh century. This approach has been adopted in part because the concept of a North–South divide in England is undoubtedly of popular and political significance today and it has enabled our contributors to ask in turn how significant the divide was both in material terms and in imagination

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in a series of increasingly remote historical periods. A retrogressive approach has been adopted additionally because it has permitted contributors to proceed from the better known to the less-well known, from the better understood to the less-well understood, aspects of the North–South divide. Discussion within each chapter, however, is not necessarily chronological: it is often thematic, because the book’s approach is fundamentally geographical and it is not attempting to present a narrative history of the North–South divide.

Few geographical concepts have become deeply embedded in popular and political culture. Perhaps in recent years that of ‘globalisation’ has become so, throughout the world, but that of the North–South divide, nationally within England, has been so for more than a century. While the *idea* of a North–South divide in England undoubtedly has deep historical roots, the existence – or non-existence – of such a divide in reality has become a significant geographical component of popular culture and of political discourse especially in post-war Britain. As debates about devolution, about the possibility of regional assemblies in England and about geographical inequalities in work and welfare become more pressing, claims to the legitimacy of more localised autonomy will surely seek to draw upon the histories and cultural identities of localities and regions within England. The concept of a North–South divide thus has both contemporary importance and historical significance. The essays presented here endeavour collectively to reveal that dual role but they do so in individually distinctive ways. Discussion of their common threads is best deferred until the essays have been read, but their singular contributions may usefully be highlighted at this stage.

Six essays

During the last quarter of the twentieth century and through to the present day, the North–South divide in British social and economic life became a prominent topic of political, academic and popular discourse. Not only has debate raged about the existence and significance of the divide, but this has also provoked discussion of its history, origins and evolution. Ron Martin (Chapter 2) does not present a detailed catalogue raisonné of the numerous indicators and measures that could be, and have been, used to prove or contest the existence of the divide. He does use some empirical evidence to argue the case for a divide (marshalling information on regional GDP growth, employment, class, incomes, health and social welfare), but he accepts that the basic facts and figures relating to the issue have already been assembled elsewhere. Instead, Martin’s primary aim is to address some key questions surrounding the divide. Why did a distinctive North–South divide – both material and imagined, both economic-political and sociocultural – (re)emerge so prominently from the mid-1970s onwards? Why has it proved to be such a contentious issue? Why does the divide matter? Martin argues that the (re)assertion of the divide since the mid-1970s is inextricably bound up with Britain’s progressive shift from an industrial socio-economy to a post-industrial, and increasingly

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globalised, form. While the process of post-industrialisation can arguably be traced back to the 1950s, it was not until the late-1960s that it began to be evident in terms of its geographical consequences. Up until then, during the so-called ‘long post-war boom’, regional disparities in socioeconomic welfare had been minimal (especially as compared to the marked inequalities of the interwar period). In the late-1960s, large-scale de-industrialisation set in, which then accelerated sharply during the 1980s at precisely the time that the growth of services, high-technology and the ‘knowledge economy’ took off.

Martin argues that, like earlier phases of British capitalism, the upheavals and transformations of the past quarter-century have been inherently uneven geographically, in both form and impact. The main brunt of de-industrialisation since the 1960s has been borne by the old industrial urban regions of the north of England, Wales and Scotland (but also the Birmingham and London conurbations), where it has undermined not just the economic bases of those areas – with serious consequential effects on employment and incomes – but also their associated industrial cultures, social networks and traditions. In contrast, the growth of the post-industrial economy, with its different social structures and cultural politics, has developed disproportionately in south-east England (including London). During the 1980s, the Thatcher governments’ policies of monetarism, deregulation and privatisation gave added impetus to these divergent trends between the ‘north’ and ‘south’ (and ‘west’ and ‘east’) of the country. Indeed, Martin argues, the ‘post-industrial, internationalised, enterprise-orientated and consumerist-individualist south’ was actively promoted as the social, economic and cultural exemplar which the ailing ‘industrial, labourist, and welfare-dependent north’ should seek to emulate. Thus, while on the one hand the Thatcher governments persistently denied that a North–South divide existed, on the other the South was repeatedly used ideologically as the model of a modern, post-industrial society for Britain as a whole.

This portrayal, Martin contends, whilst rooted to a large degree in stark socioeconomic realities – a prosperous south-east and a lagging rest of England, Wales and Scotland – was also founded on, and has served to reproduce, two key structural aspects of the divide. The first is the concentration of economic, financial and political power in London and the south-east, a concentration which not only itself is an integral component of the divide, but which also imparts a distinct southern bias to perceptions and conceptions of the ‘British’ socio-economy, its problems and solutions. This London-based nexus has been playing an instrumental role in shaping the geography of capital accumulation in post-industrial Britain. The second is the political and cultural significance of the southern electorate, which is perceived (even if in slightly different ways) by both the Conservative and New Labour political parties as representing the ‘core values’ of a modern post-industrial society, a ‘new Britain’, and whose vote, therefore, is essential to electoral success. For the Tories, this was less of a problem, since the south of England has long been their main socio-spatial heartland. For Blair’s New

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Labour government, however, it meant abandoning the old industrial values of its socio-spatial heartlands in northern Britain in order to appeal to those of the service-dominated south. In this sense, Martin suggests, since the late-1970s, and unlike earlier decades, the north-south geography of sociopolitical legitimization has correlated closely with the north-south geography of economic accumulation. At the same time, he argues, the notion of a North-South divide is both complicated by, and tends to obscure, the existence of more local intra-regional disparities, or what some refer to as 'north-north' and 'south-south' divides. Notwithstanding their importance, however, these other dimensions of economic, social and political disparity do not undermine the existence or significance of the basic North-South divide.

In the final part of his essay, Martin turns to an examination of some of the tensions generated by these uneven geographies of post-industrial Britain at the end of the twentieth century. He argues that the continued concentration of economic growth, wealth, power and population in the south and east of England relative to the north and west, has not only generated negative effects there (for example, congestion, rising house costs and environmental pressures), but poses problems for the running of the national economy. In the mid-1960s, overheating in southern England undermined the then Labour government's National Plan. Similarly, during the second half of the 1980s, overheating in the south-east brought Chancellor Lawson's boom to a halt. In the late-1990s the Bank of England's high-interest-rate policies attracted considerable criticism from the northern business community, angered by the Bank's view that higher unemployment in the north of England (caused by high interest rates) was a 'price worth paying' to keep the south from overheating. Meanwhile the Labour government denied the existence of a divide. The policy response has not been so much one of seeking to promote growth in the north, or deliberately redistributing wealth and prosperity northwards from the south, in order to close the divide, but rather a strategy of political devolution in the case of Scotland and Wales, and regional policy devolution to new Regional Development Agencies in the case of the English regions. At the same time, the government is pushing through plans to allow the building of an additional one million homes in the south of England by 2020 in order to accommodate and maintain economic growth there. Martin opines that, in the early years of the twenty-first century, there are few signs that the North-South divide, whether material or imagined, will disappear.

The central decades of the twentieth century are the focus of Danny Dorling's essay (Chapter 3), which argues that it was in this period that the North-South divide in England both became most acute in reality and paradoxically went largely unrecognised by people at the time. He argues that within the period from 1918 to 1940, a North-South divide, which can now be readily identified by observers with historical hindsight, was off-stage for most of the actors in that dramatic period of England's history. He suggests that revelation of the divide's existence had to await both detailed analysis of the 1931 census and a new social welfare agenda

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developed during the 1950s and 1960s that then continued to underpin political discourse and academic writing through the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Dorling is convinced that a line from the Severn to the Wash delineates a metaphorical cliff between North and South, a cliff which he claims was at its steepest in the 1920s and 1930s.

This conviction is based not on the views of writers and commentators from that period but on tabular and geographical analysis of its statistics and their interpretation with the benefit of historical hindsight. In order to identify the North–South divide *c.*1930 and to compare it with the situation some forty years later, Dorling examines the infant mortality data for 1928 and 1971, and unemployment and social class data for 1931 and 1971. Massaging the earlier data in that manner and comparing the *c.*1930 data with that from a later period enables Dorling to view the information in a way that was not available to contemporaries and to identify a North–South divide of which he claims they were not aware. Placing little credence in what he calls ‘travelogues’ as historical evidence, and emphasising the limited cartographical techniques available to researchers and commentators in the 1920s and 1930s, Dorling prefers a more rigorous and sophisticated analysis of the numerical data collected in those decades. Given that contemporary observations of the North–South divide were either made or interpreted by an intellectual elite, Dorling essays a more systematic discussion of how the divide might have been experienced and then expressed by the public at large in voting behaviour. His examination of voting patterns in ten general elections between 1918 and 1951 leads him to conclude that, from the point of view of political expression, there were no stark regional divides, and that during this period support for the Conservatives strengthened in the North while that for Labour weakened. He claims that voting behaviour depicted local rather than regional patterns. The pattern of voting behaviour did not, Dorling argues, show evidence of a North–South divide and, he implies, it must therefore have been of little consequence to, or in the consciousness of, voters.

In his concluding remarks, Dorling acknowledges that local and regional planning came to be much debated during the 1940s and 1950s but he claims that the North–South divide of the 1920s and 1930s was itself narrowing during those decades and only came to be fully recognised later. Unable to find convincing verbal testimony to a contemporary recognition of a North–South divide in that earlier period, Dorling is nonetheless sure from his handling of numerical data from the period that a highly significant divide did indeed then exist. As Dorling puts it, we find what we are looking for.

A central assumption in discussions of a North–South divide in the modern period has been the rise and fall of the North as an industrial region: the supposition of industrial prosperity in the North has even led some to suggest that there was no ‘regional problem’ before the symptoms of industrial decline became apparent in the early-twentieth century. Philip Howell (Chapter 4) examines the myths and realities of a North–South divide in what he claims has to be considered a crucial

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period – after the achievements of the first industrial revolution but before the acknowledged era of British industrial failure. He accepts that caution is necessary about such easy periodisations, not least because although industrialisation must be viewed as being central to any assessment of the North–South divide, regional divisions are a complex admixture of material and discursive realities. In reaching this conclusion, Howell's argument proceeds in three stages: first, he examines critically the broadly econometric conclusions of the new economic history; secondly, he considers the social and political status of regionalisation; and, thirdly, he maps the contours of what Patrick Joyce has called the 'geography of belonging' in the field of popular culture.

Howell begins by discussing the various attempts by revisionist historians to downgrade the impact of industrialisation in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, to trace the persistence of a London and south-east dominated service and commercial economy throughout this period, and also (thus) to identify the symptoms of economic decline as early as the 1840s. Howell notes that the conclusions of the new economic history for the idea of a North–South divide are at best ambiguous: if, for example, one accepts the notion of an economic climacteric in the 1840s, with a decisive downturn in the growth rates of industrial output thereafter, then the shift in gravity to a non-industrial/non-manufacturing South would appear very early; on the other hand, the shift from untransformed to transformed sectors could be read as industrial maturity rather than decline, and the notion of a later climacteric and pronounced industrial dominance in the North would still be apposite. But even the most avid proponents of revisionism concede the importance of both regional and sectoral economic differentiation, and Howell argues that geographies of wage differentials, unemployment statistics, and of fixed and circulating capital broadly confirm the existence of a significant regional divide. He argues that recognition of the differentiated regional and sectoral patterns allows us to reconcile the claims of continuity and discontinuity nationally. Howell contends that patterns of industrialisation, decisive at the local and regional scales before 1840, endured into the twentieth century, acting as constraints to the economic developments that would produce the national patterns so emphasised by the econometric revisionists. The industrial roots of a North–South divide in England from the 1840s can therefore be generally accepted. Nonetheless, it is the continuing economic strength of London and the South-East and their persistent advantage over the North which is most apparent for Howell. He argues that this version of a North–South divide, uncoupled from what he considers to be a misleading emphasis on industrial hegemony, is established as arguably the critical feature of Victorian economy and society. Towards the end of the nineteenth century the pivotal shift towards finance and the metropolitan economy appears to Howell to have widened decisively the divide between North and South.

The second section of Howell's chapter, however, contests any notion of a uniformly prosperous North in contrast to an undeveloped South, whatever the period under review. Broadening his perspective to questions about society and politics,

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Howell suggests that besides a picture of the autonomy of the provinces – illustrated by the evolution of vibrant and innovative bourgeois public spheres in the provincial towns, itself the legacy of the earlier urban revolution in northern England – should be set a recognition of the importance of core-periphery relationships that instate the priority of London and the South, particularly given the accelerating growth of London after 1841. Howell's wide-ranging discussion here includes urban networks, the growth of provincial municipal culture and the strength of localism within the nation. Coupling this with an examination of social policy and the reach of the state, Howell is critical of a view of regional differentiation which disregards the continuing and even growing significance of central authority. While social and political life was locally organised and concentrated, it was also nationally connected and coordinated. Howell accepts the interdependence of regional differentiation and national integration. In this section, then, the North–South divide is treated with more caution and scepticism. Howell sees the industrial North as being in this period more independent of London's influence than it had been at any time in the previous two centuries. Nonetheless, while becoming different from the South, the North remained to a degree dependent upon the metropolis. But the decades leading up to 1914, Howell argues, saw a growing challenge to localism and a reassertion of the importance of London, in the process transforming the relation of North and South from one that was essentially symbiotic to one that was fundamentally oppositional.

In his final section, Howell moves from material economic differences that divided the nation to consider the representation of North and South in the cultural imaginations of Victorians and Edwardians. While recognising the North–South divide as being in part a space-myth created by a literary elite, Howell also insists on the significance of the concept in the popular imagination as a way of enabling people to identify themselves, to comprehend their social reality and to express a geographical belonging. The 'North' and the 'South' were thus cultural constructions, populist metaphors (or, as preferred by Howell, synecdoches) for two different versions of Englishness. Moreover, Howell suggests that 'southern' populism ultimately became more powerful than its 'northern' counterpart, affirming the centrality and 'superiority' of London and the South-East over the marginal and 'inferior' North. That process of denigration, Howell suggests, was fully worked out only after 1918.

Each of the periods addressed in this collation has its own particular significance but in the next essay Mark Billinge (Chapter 5) claims that the period between 1750 and 1830 can legitimately be considered the most transformational in Britain's written history. It witnessed at home the triumph of machinofacture, the end of the old organic dependencies and the explosion of urbanism, while it also saw the consolidation of overseas trade and, as an idea at least, the apogee of empire. Responsibility for these developments (as well as for their recursive and co-lateral domestic effects) was not, Billinge emphasises, evenly distributed amongst the English regions, for this was also an era in which the basic relationships

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between an industrialising North and a still largely agricultural South were in the process of crucial renegotiation. As Britain industrialised and its perspectives internationalised, North and South both contributed to and benefited unevenly from the development process. Significant as these material transformations were (not least in their impact on the English landscape), Billinge stresses that increasingly radical changes were also afoot in the realm of ideas; for the period's significance lay as much in its determination to rethink the status of people and their relationship with nature, the purpose of civil society and the expectations of a modernising state as in any of its more practical accomplishments. Billinge argues that it was the rich elaboration combined with the uneven acceptance of Enlightenment, secularist and scientific critiques which lay at the heart of the process of regional differentiation. Simultaneously, Billinge argues, London's metropolitan dominance gave way to provincial regeneration and the economies of the regions were progressively freed from the rigid control of the London-based mercantile monopolies. Underpinned by the new turnpike and canal networks, these decentralising forces promoted the burgeoning growth of the northern and midland cities and a pattern of demographic redistribution which would create, in the minds of many contemporaries, a clear sense of northern vitality and southern stagnation: a reversal of historic fortune as startling as it was novel. As such progressive ideas and their impacts spread, they were subject to definition both by geography and by social position. Billinge considers that as a result, the advance of a 'northern' (essentially bourgeois) prospectus did much to entrench a 'southern' mentality grounded in tradition, propriety and natural superiority. Billinge seeks to establish the nature of these developments and to assess their differing impact – 'actual and perceived' – on the English regions.

Billinge begins by examining the 'reality' of North and South: the materiality of such conventions broadly described as a developing (industrial) North and a relatively lethargic (agricultural) South. Reviewing the demographic and economic changes of the period leads Billinge to argue that industrialisation produced greater regional diversity but within a framework of a broadly homogenising national culture. His general impression is of a buoyant North and a readjusting South, concluding that the late-eighteenth century began to witness a fundamental reversal of the long-standing fortunes of North and South. Such an economic transformation also saw a decisive shift in the social realm, for whereas the old society of the South had been based upon a moral economy that of the emerging society of the North was based on a new political economy.

While accepting a broad impression of a North–South divide and of a pattern of diverging fortunes on either side of it, Billinge then confronts that generalisation with some detailed issues which sit uncomfortably within it. For example, the role of London and the relation of the capital to the provinces do not fit easily into a simplified North–South picture. Nor, Billinge argues, do the Midlands: just as the county society of Warwickshire was eclipsed by the rise of industry in the Midlands' towns, so the claims of the Midlands to belong to the heartland of the