

Internationality

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With the unification of Germany and the fragmentation of the Soviet Union and its satellites, nationhood has suddenly become a topical issue.* And, by good fortune, scholars are well prepared to debate it: in the past decade several historians and social scientists have revived and perhaps transformed the whole question of nations and nationalism. The *corpus*, as they say, which defines the new approach includes four salient books: Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain* (1977), Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (1983), and now Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, (1990).¹ For all their differences, these works agree in their emphatic rejection of the idea that, as Walter Bagehot put it (*Physics and Politics*, 1872, cited in Hobsbawm, p. 3 n. 8), nations are “as old as history.”

If we took etymology as our guide, we would probably have to agree with Bagehot, since *nation* and *nature* mean more or less the same: how things are according to their birth. But the new school holds that nations are as synthetic as could be, that they are cultural inventions peculiar to the modern world, perhaps unknown before 1789. Of course they will not deny that there were numerous proud peoples and tribes, long before the French Revolution; but they would classify these, with Hobsbawm, as “proto-nationalisms,” or, in Gellner’s terms, as examples of patriotism rather than nationalism. “Patriotism,” he says, “is a perennial part of human life.” Nationalism, on the other hand, “is a distinctive species of patriotism, and one which becomes pervasive and dominant only under certain social conditions, which in fact prevail in the modern world, and nowhere else” (p. 138). Modern nationhood is connected with a politics or at least a rhetoric of popular sovereignty: “the arrival of nationalism in a distinctively modern sense,” as Tom Nairn says, “was tied to the political baptism of the lower classes” (p. 41). Certainly the pageantry and pomp – the national sports teams, national anthems, national poems, national literatures, national costumes, national operas, libraries, and galleries, national monarchies (conceived as ancient national families, rather than as scions of remote and probably foreign aristocracies) – are artifacts of the last two centuries. To this extent, the new chronology of nationalism is indisputably right. But what, one wonders, is it really a chronology of?

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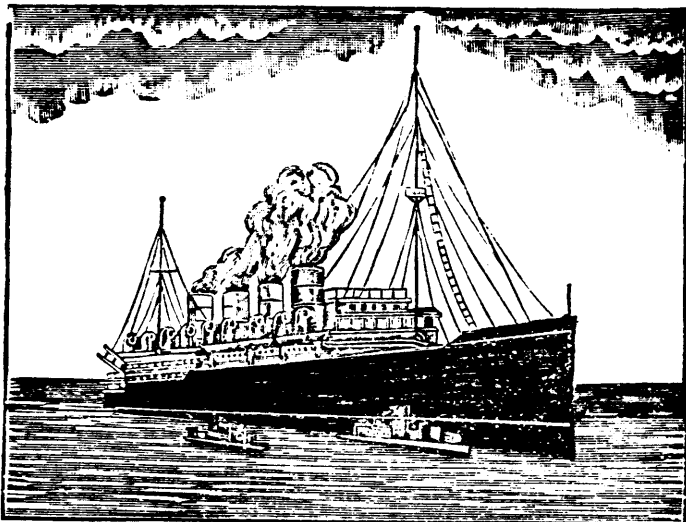
Definitions

Soon after you start reflecting on nationhood in general terms, you are likely to get an uneasy feeling that your subject is refusing to stay still. At the same time, you may well feel that it would be inappropriate to try and tie it down to an explicit definition. In a passage which seems to have caught the fancy of all his readers, Hobsbawm contrasts nations with natural objects like birds: “nation watching,” he says, “would be easy if it could be like bird watching” (p. 5). His argument seems to be that any definition of nationhood is liable to cover some things which you would never have classified as nations, and to leave out others which you would have included. It is not clear that birdwatchers are in a completely different position, however: bats (or superman for that matter) might be similar borderline cases for apprentice birdwatchers. However, as their knowledge of ornithological classification progresses, they will presumably tighten up their vocabulary, and agree to exclude such creatures from the universe of birds. Nation watchers might well hope to do the same to do the same, working their way towards locating nations amongst the species and genera of the historical world.

Perhaps this is what Hobsbawm has in mind when he says that he “assumes no *a priori* definition of what constitutes a nation.” But it is hard to see what he can mean. His aim is to arrive at a general characterisation of nationhood by studying several different nationalisms, that is, various movements which lay claim to nationhood as a value and a goal. But if he doesn’t have an *a priori* definition of nationhood at his disposal, he is not going to be able to identify this sample in the first place. Anyway, if his objection to an explicit definition of nationhood is that it may conflict with his intuitions about what is or is not a nation, then the correct description of his position is that he is operating, rightly or wrongly, with an intuitive *a priori* definition, not (as he thinks) that he is avoiding one.

The logic-chopper who makes criticisms like these should be warned, however, that definitions are not always a straightforward matter. In the first place, some things do not lend themselves to the type of definition that proceeds by sorting things out into sets and subsets. Moreover, in addition to being classificatory devices, they can be ways of focusing and clarifying epistemological and ontological issues. And evidently nations are not altogether comparable, ontologically and epistemologically, to positively classifiable natural objects. They have something of the character of myths or fantasies, and they are rather like intentional objects; in fact one might even suggest that they only exist to the extent that they are believed in.

Benedict Anderson’s phrase about nations as “imagined communities” has had a deservedly brilliant career in the debate about



nations. "In an anthropological spirit," he says, "I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both limited and sovereign" (p. 15). Anderson says that the processes of imagination which concern him, though they are not to be assimilated to "fabrication" or "falsity," are a matter of "creation." But it must be said that their creativity is rather prosaic and pedestrian. A paradigm example of them, for Anderson (as for Hegel), is the ritual of reading a daily newspaper, a kind of communion in which "each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion" (p. 39). But it is surely only the very coolest of nationalists who will pride themselves on belonging to a nation of newspaper readers. Much more powerful are ideas of communion with old gods, and of relationships, including sexual ones, with military heroes, or, most especially, with kings and queens, princes and princesses. If one wants to explore the nationalist imagination, one needs to look out for wild longings and weird fantasies as well as sensible calculations. (One might start from such works of strange scholarship as Brian Masters's *Dreams about Her Majesty the Queen and other Members of the Royal Family*, 1973.)

Maybe imagined political communities belong not so much to the imagination as to what Sartre and Lacan both call the *imaginary*, the domain of objects (such as the ego, perhaps) which are believed in to the extent that they are negations of reality, and felt not to be really present at all.³ The imaginariness of nations may call for a kind of historical depth psychology, not swift classification and definition.

Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960) starts out from a distinction between two ways in which individuals can relate to each other on the basis of a shared practice: as members of a series, and as members of a group. Members of the same series have no sense of being unified by what they do in common: indeed they see each other as obstacles to their own activities and threats to their personal interests. Members of a group, however, are united by their sense of belonging together, and each of them feels responsible for sustaining the life that they share. According to Sartre this kind of unity is achieved only when people feel that they are being confronted by outsiders intent on threatening them as a group. A group is not only self-conscious, therefore; it must also be aware of at least one other group, and of itself as existing in tension and hostility with it.

Nationhood, or at least nationalism, evidently lends itself to analysis on the same lines as a Sartrian group. This fact has two important implications. The first is that not all characteristics of

a nation are national characteristics. For example there is a country where the average consumption of sugar is higher than anywhere else in the world. But whilst sweetness of tooth is apparently a characteristic of people living in Britain, this does not mean that it is a British national characteristic. The feature is too external to the imaginary processes of group-formation for that. It is also, perhaps, too positive. If there are British national characteristics, they would include items like not being big, loud and boastful, not being cynical and smelly, not being cold and humourless, and not having coins with a hole in. Such imagined features need not correspond to any actually distinctive ways of not being American, French, German or Danish, of course; indeed they need have no truth to them at all. Their *esse* is *imaginari*; for them to exist as national characteristics, it is sufficient that they be imagined as distinctive by the collectivity in question.

This leads to the second preliminary principle, which is that a set of national characteristics may incorporate incoherences or self-contradictions: they may be ways of not thinking about the questions of group membership to which they propose themselves as solutions. Just as the constitution of an ego can be a bundle of contradictions (perhaps it cannot be anything else, in fact), so too may that of a nation; and whilst an account of a nation (or a person) which effaces such contradictions may be gratifyingly clear, it may also, unfortunately, be utterly false. The same may well be true of the abstract general idea of nations as well. The reasons why it's hard to settle the definition of nationhood, therefore, may not be that it is a complicated matter, but that it's a contradictory and imaginary one. Before developing this theme, however, I shall sketch a specific example of nationhood, to give my theoretical suggestions some material to work on.

England and the Englishness of English philosophy

Like other English people, I am used to the fact that foreigners – including ones whose native language is English, like Australians or North Americans – sometimes describe me as a *Briton* or as *Anglo-Saxon*. In the variety of English which I speak, however, these descriptions sound extremely strange: *Anglo-Saxon* means more or less the same as Old English, that is to say the English language as it was before about 1200, and the Britons were a tribe of Celts (as distinct from both Angles and Saxons) whose civilisation is often thought to have amounted to nothing except painting themselves blue, and who were lucky enough to be subjugated by the Romans. If I am Anglo-Saxon or a Briton, then you Danes are Vikings or Old Norse.

The word *Britain* is even more complex. It is usually used to cover what are, in many people's eyes, four different nations: the Irish, the Scots, the Welsh, and the English. (Even this is too simple, since there are other claims to nationhood within these collectivities, such as those of Cornwall or the Isle of Man.) It is also extremely uncertain in its application to the island of Ireland: the geographical term *British Isles* includes Ireland, but the political term *Great Britain* refers to the Union of Scotland with England and Wales, and very definitely excludes it. My passport tells me that I am a "British Citizen," but this is misleading in that I am not a citizen in the usual sense of the word, but a "subject," owing allegiance to the monarch who rules over a realm whose name, as it happens, is not *Britain* at all, but *The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*. Myself, if I have to refer to the nationality of so-called British citizens, and I cannot use the relatively simple terms *Scotland*, *Ireland*, *England* and *Wales*, then I prefer to use Tom Nairn's excellent coinage, *Ukania*. I too am a Ukanian.

Britain is also a politically loaded term. In the first place, it

refers to an entity whose unity is guaranteed by the monarchy: to this extent it belongs to the vocabulary of royalism. Secondly, the concept of Britain is so constructed as to imply that England is the senior partner, dominating Scotland, Ireland and Wales, which of course reflects but also covers up the fact that the political unification of Ukania has been achieved by English military force.

The effects of the inequality are paradoxical. Classical nationalism, one might say, is interested in the construction of national pageantry, national heroes, and a national racial stock. But whereas Scotland, Wales and Ireland have all, since the eighteenth century and before, displayed a lot of this kind of nationalism in this sense, England, as distinct from Britain, has produced almost none. As far as language is concerned, it has perhaps always been too obvious that Modern English (a language normally dated from 1500) has no pure archetype, and that no one dialect or variety can make a remotely plausible claim to unique authenticity or even respectability. And – rather like Spanish or Portuguese, and unlike Danish, French, Irish, Scotch, Welsh, German or Italian – English was spoken as a first language by many people who would never come anywhere near the country from which it got its name. British English did not begin to define itself at all jealously until the nineteenth century, when a process began of identifying and expelling “Americanisms” – though, ironically enough, many expressions which were heard as Americanisms are actually closer to early modern British English than its contemporary forms. (One real Americanism worth mentioning in this context is the use of the word “nation” to refer to a territory – particularly that of the United States, from sea to shining sea – rather than to a set of people with some internal principle of unity.) The fact that the English language is not exclusively English is presumably the reason why many Irish nationalists, such as Daniel O’Connell, have supported the replacement of Irish by English: how could they not, when so much of the Irish nation was bound for freedom in America and Australia?

A similar elusive pattern appears in the idea of an English national race. The only racial boast that carries any aristocratic kudos in England is that of having come over with the Normans in 1066 – that is, roughly speaking, of being French. This peculiarity was noticed in a celebrated satire on English national pride, Daniel Defoe’s *True-Born Englishman*, first published in 1701.

And here begins the Ancient pedigree
That so exalts our poor nobility:
'Tis that from some *French* Trooper they derive,
Who with the Norman Bastard did arrive....
For *Englishmen* to boast of Generation
Cancels their Knowledge, and lampoons the Nation.
A *True-Born Englishman*'s a Contradiction,
In Speech an Irony, in Fact a Fiction.

Defoe’s Englishman belonged to “a Mongrel half-bred race.” Originally he had been “in eager Rapes, and furious Lust begot/ Betwixt a Painted *Britton* and a *Scot*.” Then he had been adulterated with “new Mixtures.../ Infus’d betwixt a *Saxon* and a *Dane*,” and in the meantime, to spice the “Nauseous Brood,” his “rank daughters, to their Parents just,/ Receiv’d all Nations with Promiscuous Lust.” For, as Defoe asserts, in a rather striking anticipation of the new historians of nationality, “*England*, Modern to the last degree,/ Borrows or makes her own nobility.”⁴

David Hume (a Scot who thought of himself as “North British” or English, despite his dislike for England and especially London) said much the same thing in his essay “Of National Characters”: “the English, of any people in the universe, have the least of a national character,” he claimed, but added astutely:

“unless this very singularity pass for such.”⁵

English nationhood is such a strange creature that its very existence has sometimes been doubted. There have been patriotic histories of England, particularly for children (for example Charles Dickens’s *Child’s History of England*, Maria, Lady Callcott’s *Little Arthur’s History of England*, and Arthur Mee’s *Our Island Story*). Underlying all these is the tradition which Herbert Butterfield called, in the title of a book published in 1931, “the Whig Interpretation of History.” The idea is that, since the Norman conquest of 1066, England has always shown a tolerant and adult willingness to take things as they come, negotiating a winding but natural path from one unique but satisfactory muddle to another, without indulging in fanatical radicalism or getting infatuated, as foreigners always do, with images of how things ought to be and ending up, as they have done, with regicide and revolution. Many contemporary historians – notably Christopher Hill – have laboured hard to show that seventeenth-century England was actually a pioneer and an extremist in matters of radicalism, not to mention regicide and revolution, but the celebration of what Butterfield called “the English system of moderation and compromise” has survived in the political imaginary. It was an element of what Butterfield called “the inescapable inheritance of Englishmen;” it was “part of the landscape of English life, like our country lanes or our November mists or our historic inns.” And, as Butterfield noted with satisfaction in *The Englishman and his History* (1944), the Whig Interpretation got a new lease on life in the rhetoric of the Second World War, which liked to contrast “the English method” with “what used to be called the French method: the revolutionary and the doctrinaire.” After the French had succumbed, the Russians, the Germans and the Italians had all at last succumbed. “The traditional elasticity of English statesmanship” was “a blessing” for which the world would have to thank “the solid body of Englishmen, who throughout the centuries have resisted the wildest aberrations, determined never for speculative ends to lose the good they already possessed; anxious not to destroy those virtues in their national life which need long periods of time for their development.”⁶

Hume’s idea that the English national character consists in not having one needs adjusting to take account of the fact that, during the twentieth century, a negative attitude to Englishness has been one of the peculiarities of English upper-class intellectual life.



The idea has been that there is an English national character, but that it is one which deserves to be treated with ridicule and contempt. The Bloomsbury group – which is conceived by many as representing the essence of ruling-class English culture – made a cult of French wine, French cooking, and French poetry, and saw “the continent” as the polar opposite of Englishness, which they defined in terms of drab philistinism, narrow mindedness, and the values which Lytton Strachey attributed to his “Eminent Victorians.” The great satire on children’s books of patriotic English history, *1066 and All That* (1930), was written by two upper-class teachers of upper-class English boys, W.C. Sellar and R.J. Yeatman, and they knew how to delight their upper-class audience, without giving any offence: only the Top Nation could afford to make jokes about being the Top Nation.



The adhesive ambiguities of English nationhood are further illustrated by parts of the history of English high culture. If you investigate, as I once tried to do, the state of English philosophy in the 1950s, you will be astonished by the insistence of concepts of national philosophy and philosophical nationality within it.⁷ A study of the obvious sources of information – features, reviews and advertisements in the literary pages of the Sunday papers or the *Times Literary Supplement*, and publishers’ lists for instance – reveals that as far as the influential Londonian reviewers were concerned, the idea of English philosophy was no less ridiculous and degrading than the idea of English cooking. In this late-Bloomsbury milieu, philosophy meant Sartre, Marcel, Simone Weil, Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir. Only one English book got an enthusiastic reception: Colin Wilson’s *The Outsider*, published in 1956. This was the English philosophical bestseller of the postwar years, and its young self-taught working-class author was, at least for a few months in 1956, ranked with the French celebrities as a kind of philosophical hero. *The Outsider* was not really an independent work, however. It did little more than summarise a lot of continental books, whilst denouncing the drabness of what it called “the English nation” in the name of the “new existentialism.” Existentialism, according to Wilson, dealt with issues “of which England is completely ignorant: from an



intellectual point of view, we have always been the most backward country in the world.”

The Bloomsburys loved *The Outsider*. They thought it proved that, contrary to Evelyn Waugh’s forebodings about “l’école de Butler” (that is to say, the free state secondary schooling introduced by the Butler Education Act of 1944, which Waugh evidently could not bear to refer to in English) thinking could still take place in England, at least provided it was explicitly anti-English. Philip Toynbee, himself a relic of old Bloomsbury, praised Colin Wilson for having “beaten the French at their own game.”

Meanwhile, fifty miles away, and almost unknown to the Bloomsburys and the other cultural leaders of London and Cambridge, a certain kind of philosophy had been systematically taking over the institutions of English philosophy teaching. Since 1949, Gilbert Ryle had been editing *Mind*, England’s leading journal of professional philosophy, and organising a team of Oxford-based philosophers who were to define themselves as anti- or post-logical positivist, to revere Wittgenstein and Austin, and to make vague attempts at unifying themselves around a technique which they called “ordinary language philosophy.” In historical retrospect, it is hard to see much real agreement amongst them, except for one thing: they all placed a sovereign value on something called “clarity” which, to them, meant translatability into the simplest of plain English.

Foreign philosophers might be very clever and well-read, but despite this (or perhaps because of it), they were unlikely to grasp the importance of clarity: that was the view from Oxford. The Oxford philosophers believed that their own commitment to clarity was part of a national tradition, known as “British Empiricism.” Iris Murdoch explained that Oxford philosophy was just “today’s version of our traditional empiricism,” and A.J. Ayer edited an anthology of *The British Empirical Philosophers* (1952) to celebrate the national heritage, and by implication to disparage foreign philosophers for the arrogance with which they persisted in proliferating unempirical high theory with reckless disregard for clarity. “One of Descartes’ least happy legacies to France has been the belief that empirical questions can be decided *a priori*,” he wrote in his autobiography; “and one of these *a priori* judgements is that among foreign philosophers only the Germans need be taken seriously.” *Mind* occasionally carried reviews of books by foreign authors, all saying more or less the same thing. They complained about the use of “long abstract words” and “pompous abstractions,” or about the unseemly habit of using philosophy, as one reviewer put it, to deal with “personal and emotional problems.” Another reviewer announced that “a rough estimate suffices to demonstrate that only very few philosophers have been made sick by the contemplation of the contingency of existence,” and concluded that the only existential question raised by the work of Sartre was “the existence of M. Jean-Paul Sartre” with the illusion that he was a philosopher. Almost the only foreign book to receive a favourable review in *Mind* in the fifties was a study of Virginia Woolf – the queen of Bloomsbury, in most people’s eyes – by Maxime Chastaing, which P.F. Strawson praised because it “places Virginia Woolf where she no doubt belongs: in the British Empiricist tradition.” This remark brings the two sides of English high culture together: if Virginia Woolf is part of a British national tradition, then so is the inverted cultural chauvinism of the Bloomsbury group. Some English intellectuals would pride themselves on their Englishness, whilst others would be ashamed of it, but even in the fields of pure philosophy or literary modernism, the matter of being English, or of not being continental, was an issue which none of them could leave alone.



Before I close this parenthesis about the peculiarities of Englishness, it is worth noticing that it has supplied, incidentally, some of the background to the new historiography of nationhood. Nairn and Anderson are both associated with the group (led by Anderson's brother) which took over the journal *New Left Review* in 1961 and expelled one of its original leaders – the historian E.P. Thompson, who believed that his own ethical socialist internationalism was a continuation of the proud democratic traditions of English working-class politics. From the point of view of Perry Anderson, Tom Nairn and their colleagues, Thompson looked like a dreary Little Englander, of the kind that Bloomsbury had taught them to despise; and their marxist analyses were designed to show that, compared with that of the Continent, their own “national culture,” as they called it, was backward and provincial and provided no basis for authentically progressive politics. Gellner, meanwhile, began his career with a brilliant quasi-anthropological attack on the parochialism of English philosophy (*Words and Things*, 1959), which created a celebrated scandal when Ryle refused to have it reviewed in *Mind*. Hobsbawm, however, has always been conspicuous for his unswerving communist internationalism, and for not allowing himself to be drawn into English ruminations about the contemptibility of the English.

The phenomenon of Englishness clearly supports the basic contention of the new historiography of nationhood, that nations are modern artifacts. It shows, too, how much truth there is in Hobsbawm's contrast between bird-watching and nation-watching. The division of feathered bipeds into different species does not work in the same way as the division of their featherless counterparts into different nations. Every bird is born into a given and (for birdwatching purposes) fixed species, and will stay in the same species for ever, regardless of how it or anyone else may classify it: a swan, for example, will always be a swan, even if it is universally mistaken for an ugly duckling. But human beings, born in the British Isles let us say, may find themselves belonging to several overlapping or conflicting or warring national groups in succession, or even at the same time, and their categorisation will depend not only on the objective and unalterable circumstances in which they were born, but also on their feelings, and those of others, about their national affiliation.

So it is perhaps not surprising that the new approaches to nationhood should come from Ukania. However, if I believed in the concept of British empiricism (which I do not), then I would have to say that the new Ukanian corpus runs the risk of being all too British: too clear, that is to say, or at least too confident in the ready possibility of clarity, when it comes to describing the modern phenomena of nationhood. With that in mind, let us now go back to the theoretical problem of nationhood in general.

Individuals and groups

Even if nationalism, as distinct from proto-nationalism and patriotism, is as modern an invention as the new *corpus* proposes, the logic of nationality can be traced much further back. Medieval and renaissance chronologies, for instance, had a kind of national schema imprinted on them, derived from interpretations of Daniel's prophecy (*Daniel II 4*) about the four earthly monarchies which would precede the Kingdom of God. The last of these was usually taken to be that of Rome – an idea which naturally found favour with the rulers of the Holy Roman Empire. A quite modern-looking form of nationalism appears to have been in-



vented in opposition to this scheme, by sixteenth-century French humanists such as Pasquier, Bodin and Popelinière. They rejected the habit of idealizing Rome, and substituted an understanding of history which would allow them to celebrate the thousand-year-old traditions of their own “nation” instead. They ridiculed the idea that Germans were the continuers of Roman culture, and sought to vindicate the millennial Gallic tradition of liberty instead: a liberty which had been driven underground by Roman and Germanic invaders, but which had never, thank God, been extinguished. Pasquier wrote his *Recherches*, as he said “pour ma France.”⁸

The idea of rival national cultures was then to be developed in the general histories of philosophy which (I believe) provided the unacknowledged matrix of most subsequent cultural theory.⁹ These histories had various starting points, (Egyptian, Chaldean, Greek, Jewish or Oriental for instance), but they did not embark on a serious story of national rivalry until they reached modernity (a period which was inaugurated, according to them, by Descartes). After that, philosophy was separated into three main nations, French, German and British-or-English – “the three nations which count in the civilised world” as Hegel saw it, though Italian historians of philosophy were often moved to add a fourth.

Hegel explained very compellingly how in “England” (a place whose boundaries, in Hegelian philosophical geography, sometimes include Scotland and Ireland), “the concept took a finite and empirical form;” in France, it was “universal, infinite and pure;” whilst in Germany it came home to itself as “the concrete which itself thinks itself.” This conception of an international division of conceptual labour was perpetuated in many later authors, such as John Stuart Mill, Victor Cousin, and Marx and Engels, not to forget A.J. Ayer and the protagonists of the philosophical conflicts of England in the 1950s.

This doctrine of philosophical nationality was not patriotic or chauvinist, however. Quite the contrary: its logic was one of internationalism, and it was articulated in Schleiermacher's conception of philosophy as a dialectical treatment of myth. Philosophy, he claimed, had begun with Socrates' Greek reaction to Greek myths, but subsequently it had been necessary for each national dialectic to nourish itself with the myths of other nations, because it would be unable to draw sustenance from its own: a kind of philosophical exogamy was necessary for the survival of national cultures.

For Hegel, politics was the process by which society becomes conscious of itself, and individual matters of life, love and death

were supposed to be entirely absorbed and transcended in its stately historical progress. The doctrine of national cultures played an essential role in this conception, since it provided a kind of cross-over between personal and collective experience: it gave Hegel a ready solution, one might say, to the moral, political, epistemological and ontological difficulties of relating particular subjective experiences to the objective processes of world history as a whole, or at least a way of avoiding them or covering them up. This is how he put it in the Introduction to the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*:

The spirit is essentially individual, but in the field of world history, we are not concerned with particulars.... The spirit in history is an individual which is both universal in nature and at the same time determinate: in short, it is nation in general, and the spirit we are concerned with is the *spirit of the nation*. But the spirits of nations differ in their own conceptions of themselves, in the relative superficiality and profundity with which they have comprehended and penetrated the nature of spirit. The right which governs the ethical existence of nations is the spirit's consciousness of itself, the nations are the concepts which the spirit has formed of itself....

On the one hand, the spirit of the nation is in essence particular, yet on the other, it is identical with the absolute universal spirit – for the latter is One.... The particular spirit of a particular nation may perish, but it is a link in the chain of the world spirit's development, and this universal spirit cannot perish. The spirit of the nation is therefore the universal spirit in a particular form.¹⁰

The Hegelian category of nationhood, then, is a device for dismantling ordinary conceptual barriers between consciousness and experience, and between individual lives and universal humanity. If it succeeds, it makes the whole of human experience permeable to a universal theory of world history, leaving no shadows, no corners, no mysteries that it cannot comprehend with its all-powerful concept. It is impressively holistic and totalizing therefore; but it ought perhaps to be treated with caution as well. And the question I now want to raise, is whether the new theory of nationhood is sufficiently wary of Hegelianism; and my suggestion will be that in some cases – even, perhaps especially, when it takes itself to be most adventurously up-to-date – it has been so incautious that it has swallowed Hegelianism whole.

Identity, character and imagination

In his paper "Peasants and Danes" Uffe Østergård makes a distinction between "voluntaristic-subjective" accounts of nationhood (which he finds in Taine and which he is in favour of) and "objective-culturalist" ones, (which stretch from Herder to Hitler and beyond, and which he is against). In doing this he aligns himself with the new historiography and its conception of nations as imaginary rather than natural objects. But in choosing the phrase "voluntaristic-subjective" he makes it sound as though the imaginary world is reducible to the conscious will of individuals.

But the relation between the subjective and the objective is – as Hegel saw – not just a problem for theoreticians trying to devise an adequate concept of nationhood; the actual institutions of nationality are themselves responses to this issue. They are ways of making a statement, so to speak, about the relationship between the consciousness of individuals and the exercise of political power. The message of nationhood is that political power arises from the

collective feelings of the people. This explains one of the leading peculiarities of the word "national," which is that – unlike its stablemates such as "state" and "country" – it has entered into regular partnership with words normally reserved for the discussion of individual personality. Thus there is, as we have seen in Hegel, the idea of national *spirit*; there is also national *culture* and national *life*, and national *character* and national *identity*. Nationhood, one might say, is an attempt to treat questions of social power as if they were matters of personal feeling; it is a psychologisation of politics, and based on a very superficial psychology too.

The question which Hume sought to resolve in his essay "Of National Characters" is why people living in the same country should "acquire a resemblance in their manners, and have a common or national character, as well as a personal one, peculiar to each individual." But he failed to comment on the trick one can play on oneself by using the word *character* in this context. It can refer (like "characteristic") to the qualities of any category of thing, personal or impersonal; or it can refer to an individual's interior sense of personal selfhood; or it can refer to a public reputation or a written testimonial about someone's professional or moral qualities. The word "national" is attracted to it, presum-

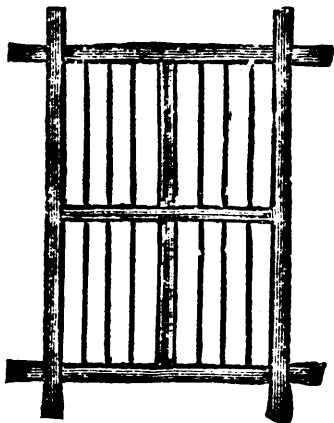


ably, because the composite idea of "national character" deadens any anxiety that might be caused by the conflation of individual and society which the institutions of nationhood seek to perform.

The same thing happens even more strikingly with the word *identity*, which has become, if I am not wrong, one of the great political, ideological, and conceptual follies of our time. The trouble seems to have begun in some innocent and brilliant paragraphs of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. They occur in a chapter about identity in general: what is it, Locke asked, that entitles you to think you can encounter one and the same object at different places and times: that, for example, the sapling you saw many years ago is *the same* as the mighty tree that spreads above you now? In particular, Locke wondered what could constitute the sameness of a *person*. His answer was – to make a long story short – that persons are simply what they remember having been, or, roughly speaking, that you are what you think you are. The title which Locke gave to this problem was *personal identity*; and, for better and for worse, the phrase has prospered.¹²

It is a brave and exciting moment in the history of philosophy; but not a particularly plausible one. Locke's suggestion means, after all, that if you cannot remember doing something then you – the real, present, actual you – cannot be responsible for it: if crimes have been committed which you do not remember, then they are not your fault, even if the only reason you've forgotten that you did them yourself is that you were hopelessly drunk at the time. Locke's suggestion has, however, been so influential that, even to people who are not aware of Locke's philosophy, the phrase "personal identity" has become a commonplace or even a cliché, and his eccentric theory has come to be what people mean by *personal identity* or even by the word *identity* on its own: your identity is the sort of person you are and take yourself to be.

The trouble with this use of the word *identity* is that, like *spirit* or *character* but with far more devastating effect, it tends to remove all pain, awkwardness and opacity from people's relations to their own subjectivity: it reduces problems of personality to matters of self-image. The depths are brought to the surface, the insides to the outside, and the first and second persons are merged with each other and with the third. The possibility that people might be deceived or mistaken about themselves is excluded *a priori*. Since self and self-image are supposed to be the same, anything like the psychoanalytic distinction between the ego (largely conscious) and the personality or psyche as a whole (largely unconscious) becomes unstatable. In addition, like the terms *spirit* and *character*, *identity* covers over the differences in



nature and structure between individuals and the collectivities in which they participate: an identity can be attributed to a collective, which may then be conceived of as having exactly the same structure as an individual, and it can become natural to suppose that a personal identity can be identical not only with itself (which is doubtful enough, surely), but with a collective identity too.

It is this concept of identity which Uffe Østergård has put to work (or which has put him to work) in his essay "What is National and Ethnic Identity?"

Most of us (he says) have come to believe that identity is only what we say it is, no more no less, however difficult that may be to accept. In other and more complicated words, sociologists and historians have learned to understand identity primarily as a discourse and not as the result of an "essence." National myths are real to the degree people believe in them and act accordingly.¹³

Østergård not only endorses this view, but also claims that it commands the assent of the majority of "modern scholars." When I first read this, I scribbled on my copy: "it doesn't seem very modern to me; it's certainly pre-Freudian." I gave the typescript back to him, and he returned it with his responses to my comments: "no, post-Freudian" he had written, in schoolmasterly red

ink. I am not sure which is worse, pre-Freudianism or post-Freudianism, but in any case it seems to me to be an error to assume, with Østergård, that intentional objects, that is to say things that are believed into existence, have no ontological depth: no levels, no shadows, no corners, no shocks or secrets or unfathomed contradictions. However up-to-date it may be, his definition ignores the palpable fact that people can misunderstand themselves profoundly, even – or perhaps especially – when it comes to questions of ego, self-image, and, if you like, "identity." His account of national identities colludes with the concept of nationality in making it seem simple – even easier than it seemed to Hegel – to identify personal identities with collective ones. It may be an advantage to move, with Østergård, to explanations of nationhood in terms of "discourse," but not, surely, if it is assumed that the nature of one's own discourse is simply "what we say it is, no more no less."

The practice of applying the idea of subjective self-transparency to nations has the effect of naturalising the Hegelian trick of projecting recklessly from subjectivity to objectivity and back, and of obliterating the differences between the particular and the universal. Gladstone was astute enough to see through this logic. "Bismarck," he once said, "made Germany great, but Germans small." It is the possibility of this sort of contrariness that is concealed by the implicit logic of the institutions of nationhood.

Nationality attempts in social practice what Hegel attempted in social theory. The fantasies which constitute the nationalist imaginary are themselves Hegelian in character; or, to put it differently, Hegelianism mimics the elisions and contradictions of the idea of nationhood. It is like getting infected with the illnesses they are trying to diagnose. And the historians who adopt too frankly the language of identity, however modern or post-modern they may be, are simply repeating the same sad old story. They too are Hegelians.

Internationality, violence and the state

The word "international" was one of the more successful verbal confections made up by Jeremy Bentham. It was devised to indicate that just as the members of a given nation are legal persons relating to each other through a national legal system, so the various nations can be regarded as legal persons relating to each other through a framework of international law, or what had formerly been called the Law of Nations. Some time later, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a further neologism was proposed, with much the same meaning. This was the word *internationality*: but the coinage was not a success and seems to have lain unused since the middle of the last century. By way of a conclusion, I propose to rehabilitate the word, in order to indicate the basis upon which I think the theory of nationhood ought now to develop. I shall use it to express a concept which, although it is implicit in much recent work on nationhood, perhaps deserves to be spelt out and discussed more clearly.

The big problem for historians of nationhood is that its institutions themselves embody a delusive and even contradictory conceptualisation of the relations between individual and collective structures, and between consciousness and experience; that, at any rate, has been my argument so far. Historians therefore need to find a way of describing this faulty conceptualisation without simply reproducing it, as Hegel did. My proposal is that, in the same way that (as Kristeva has proposed, and most literary theorists have accepted) individual texts can function only within a field of general intertextuality, so individual nations arise only within a field of general internationality; or, in other words, that the logic of internationality precedes the formation of nations. By

internationality I do not mean what is usually meant by internationalism: a willingness to overlook national interest in favour of the welfare of humanity as a whole. Internationality is a style of thought and global social organisation which tries to generate a plurality of nations, in order that, for any piece of land, and for any human being, there should be a definite answer to the question "which nation is responsible?" Internationality, you might say, is the tendency for the global imposition of the nation-form.

If I am right, then a theory of the delusions of nationhood needs to be grounded in a history of internationality. Such a history would have to include explanations of the following matters.

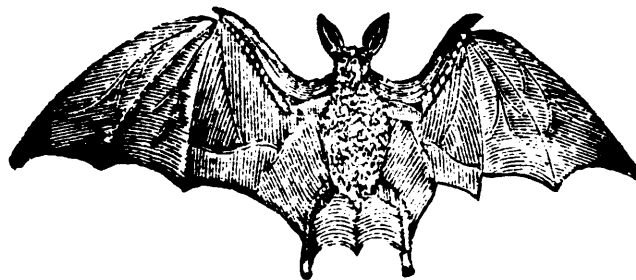
- (a) *Geography*: the exploration and naming of territorial features and the making of maps is not, or not only, a dispassionately scientific affair. It is also a means of giving places significance as part of an international partition of the world, and depriving them of their direct relation to those who live with them. Hence it is a political precondition of nationhood. (Brian Friel's play *Translations* gives a marvellous portrayal of the mapping and renaming of Ireland by British soldiers in the eighteen thirties.)
- (b) *Legal and fiscal jurisdictions*: there was a time when legal jurisdictions were tied to persons and categories of persons (such as clergy, for example, or Normans), rather than to territories. The early University of Paris, for instance, was organised into four nations corresponding to the different systems of law to which its cosmopolitan students were subject. A history of internationality would trace the development of the modern idea of legal jurisdictions and the associated concern with patrolling (literally and metaphorically) the territorial boundaries of the nation-state or state-nation, and explain them as measures for bringing ideas of legality into line with the imperatives of internationality. The rise and spread of systems of national taxation obeys a similar logic.
- (c) *National currencies*: in "pre-modern" times, different media of currency could circulate wherever they could gain recognition: a history of internationality would trace the rise of the assumption that economies are essentially national economies, each of them governed and permeated by a single national currency-issuing authority.
- (d) *Pageantry*: it is tempting to take systems of national symbols at their own valuation, as expressions of a latent national life, spirit, character or identity; but a more scrupulous and sceptical history would invert this order of explanation, presenting the invention of national traditions as an effect of the larger logic of internationality.
- (e) *Militarism*: it seems most probable that the chief motive force behind the rise of internationality is militaristic. Internationality, with its concepts of geography, jurisdiction, money and pageantry, is functional, above all, for the organisms of warfare and the systems of policing and control which it involves. Internationality, by making out that people derive their spirit, life, character and identity from their nation, creates a world in which the maintenance of armies and arsenals seems natural, and where the arts of violence are regarded as the summit of human solidarity. Internationality makes every nation a potential warrior to every other, and forces each national population to subordinate itself to military imperatives for fear of invasion by another.

A history of internationality, therefore, would show that the nation-form is a kind of false consciousness, an ideology in which the extension of the nation-form gets interpreted as an expression

of popular subjective will. It is a system which works in the interest of military and political élites, or of the ruling classes: by requiring that political power be monopolised by central national authorities, it lets them divide and rule. And the magic of it is, that it constantly covers its tracks. Processes which are actually the effect of internationality are experienced as an expression of the natures of different nations and their individual members. Militarism is experienced as an expression of natural and prepolitical popular feeling.

Nation-state-nation

I know it may be objected that the approach based on internationality, with the space it gives to militarism, ignores precisely the issue which has given rise to the recent debates about nationhood, and the political developments which have made it topical today: that is, the difference between nations and states. Nations, it will be said, are groups of people considered in relation to the local traditions and values which give them their "cultural identity," but states are organisations which place themselves above society in order to monopolise the means of warfare and violence, and perhaps of welfare and culture too. My purpose is not to deny this distinction, however. My argument is that the logic of internationality is deceptive because it attempts to confound and conceal the difference: it conspires to make us give our consent to state power by disguising it as an expression of our own feelings. It is a deceit and a living falsehood: the pretence that the states which define national boundaries are expressions of a prior popular will.



Those who treat the idea of nationhood with affection – misguided affection, I would say – will talk movingly about the place of memory, tradition, and love between generations in human affairs. They will point to the vital effects of national self-consciousness in the high arts – especially poetry and opera – during the last century and a half. A politics of nationality will, they believe, treat local ways and feelings with affection and respect. Nations will be about the songs you learnt before you could read or write, the first flowers you picked, the skies and landscapes, rooms and buildings, streetcorners and alleyways, folk tales and soap operas, the cookery and the smells, the special styles of speech and gesture which form the framework of your experience for the rest of your life, and which bind you with hoops of steel to the people you grew up with. In reality as well as imagination, your nation will constitute places where you can feel confident that you know what things mean, as you will never will do anywhere else. Those of us who are suspicious of the whole idea of nationhood must then look like heartless cynics, refusing to recognize the existential power and the human beauty of such local loyalties.

Local affections are one thing, however, and national loyalties another. Local affections are complex and many-dimensional:

they can comprise ambiguity and ambivalence, illusion and disillusion. In addition, they can involve many different geographies: the language, the songs and the stories which you treasure may all belong to localities with different boundaries: a street, a town, a region, or a linguistic group spread through several different countries. It is not the haters of nationhood, like myself, but their lovers, who treat local affections with impatience and contempt. It is the nation-lovers who insist on squaring off people's geographical attachments and forcing them to conform with the boundaries ordained by legal, commercial and military power.

Hume's account of the moral origin of national characters sees them as based on the fact that "where a number of men are united into one political body, the occasions of their intercourse must be so frequent for defence, commerce and government, that, together with the same speech or language, they must acquire a resemblance in their manners." This implies, he says, that "the same national character commonly follows the authority of government to a precise boundary" (pp. 208-9). But Hume's explanation describes conditions which could never be fulfilled except in a nationalist's fantasy. The speech, language and manners of most of us evolve pretty independently of the comings and goings of the "number of men" who become familiar with each other through being "united into one political body;" and they have no tendency to spread to the geographical boundaries between national territories, and obediently to cease exactly there — unless, that is, the apparatuses of the state have forced them to do so. The idea of nationhood is therefore a false friend to the ordinary affectionate sense of place. It imposes a conception of "identities" on individuals and collectivities which are not even identical with themselves, let alone with each other. Nationhood is a device for making ordinary people feel responsible for the activities of "a number of men united into one political body." It cajoles us into participating in global systems of antagonism, and tells us that we are only expressing ourselves when we do so. The task of a history of internationality should be the exposure of this delusion. It needs to be, or rather to remain, a militant history.

Notes

1. Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and neo-nationalism*, London, New Left Books, 1977; Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1983, and Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990.
2. Quoted in Tom Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass: Britain and its Monarchy*, London, Century Hutchinson, 1988.
3. There is an excellent Lacanian analysis of nationhood in "Eastern Europe's Republics of Gilead," by Slavoj Žižek, in *New Left Review* 183, September/October 1990, pp 50-62.
4. Daniel Defoe, "The True-Born Englishman," (1701), in *The Shortest Way with Dissenters, and other pamphlets*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1927, pp. 21-71, esp pp. 38, 42, 43, 44. It is interesting that Defoe should use the word "modern" to describe this aspect of national pride, and it might seem to confirm the views of the new historians, except that, being written in 1700, it comes nearly a century before modernity, as they conceive it, began.
5. David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (1741-2), Oxford University Press, World's Classics, 1963, p. 212. This essay anticipates the new theory of nationality in its emphasis on "moral" as distinct from "physical" factors in the formation of national characters; but its parade of prejudices (for example, that "an Englishman will naturally be supposed to have more

knowledge than a Dane," p. 203) has understandably put some people off.

6. *The Englishman and his History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 126, 2, 136, 138-9.
7. There is no adequate study of English philosophy in the 1950s, but Harry Ritchie's *Success Stories: Literature and the Media in England 1950-1959* London, Faber and Faber, 1988 gives a good account of the reception of *The Outsider*. My own investigations have been published as "La Philosophie Anglaise des années cinquante" in Christian Descamps, ed., *Les enjeux philosophiques des années 50*, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1989, but in a truncated form which the author disowns; there is also a brief summary, "English Philosophy in the 1950s," *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 10 March 1989.
8. See George Huppert, "The Renaissance Background to Historicism," *History and Theory* V, 1966, pp. 48-60.
9. See "The Vanity of Historicism," Aarhus, Center for Kulturforskning, Arbejdspapir 78, December 1990; reprinted in *New Literary History*, Vol 22 No 4, Autumn 1991, pp. 961-983.
10. G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Introduction, second draft (1830), translated by H B Nisbet, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975, p.51, pp. 52-3.
11. Uffe Østergård, "Peasants and Danes: Danish National Identity and Political Culture," Aarhus, Center for Kulturforskning, Arbejdspapir 75, December 1990, p. 33.
12. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), Book II, Chapter XXVII, Section 9.
13. Uffe Østergård, "What is National and Ethnic Identity?" Aarhus, Center for Kulturforskning, Arbejdspapir 72, October 1990, p. 22.

