

AS “MEN OF SENSE”. GODWIN, BAROJA, BATESON AND HUME’S “OF NATIONAL CHARACTERS”

Abstract: *Men of sense, Hume says, condemn the extreme undistinguishing judgments concerning national characters; yet, he adds, they also allow that each nation has a national character or a peculiar set of resembling manners. Hume’s “Of national characters” was published at the end of 1748 in unclear circumstances, but it is still the object of several discussions for different reasons. William Godwin, Julio Caro Baroja and Gregory Bateson seem to refer to it, even though only the first two acknowledge it. Godwin uses it as a weapon to attack the climatic theory in the service of tyranny; Baroja as a sceptical solvent to destroy all mythical national character and real national prejudice; Bateson as a model to delineate an abstract frame for the research on national differences. Since, as Hume warns us, we run with avidity to give our evidence to what flatters our national prejudices and, as Mary Wollstonecraft denounces, we are eager to give a national character to every people, “Of National Characters” still provides us with acute and instructive remarks: to speak of national characters does not necessarily mean that we are speaking in favour of nationalism and against the individuals.*

Keywords: *David Hume, National characters, William Godwin, Julio Caro Baroja, Gregory Bateson*

“Hume is indeed full of acute remarks, or he would not be Hume. [...] it would be well if popular writers of the present day had emancipated themselves from the delusions which perplexed his unsurpassed keenness of vision. Perhaps the most instructive example of his method is the interesting Essay on ‘National Characters.’” (Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the eighteenth century*, 1876)

“You made a remark about ‘national character’ that shocked me by its primitiveness [...] what is the use of studying philosophy [...] if it does not make you more conscientious than any... journalist in the use of the DANGEROUS phrases such people use for their own ends” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, 16 November 1944)

The character of having no character¹

“When you come back to England from any foreign country, you have immediately the sensation of breathing a different air”, George Orwell observes in 1941; but then “the vastness of England swallows you up,

1 I’m very grateful to María Blanco Gonzáles, Laura Nicolí, Alberto Mingardi, Gianluca Mori and Emanuele Ronchetti for their suggestions.

and you lose for a while your feeling that the whole nation has a single identifiable character".² And Orwell asks: "Are we not 46 million individuals, all different?".³ National characteristics are "not easy to pin down" and often turn out to be "trivialities";⁴ yet England will still be England, "having the power to change out of recognition and yet remain the same".⁵

Like Daniel Defoe ("Thus from a Mixture of all Kinds began, / That Het'rogenous Thing, *An Englishman*"),⁶ in 1748 David Hume claimed that the English are remarkable for their "wonderful mixture of manners and characters": the great liberty of every man "allows him to display the manners peculiar to him", hence the English "have the least of a national character; unless this very singularity may pass for such" (E-NC, 207; cf. HOE V, 132).⁷ Joseph Priestley recalls Hume's judgment,⁸ and Immanuel Kant advances his critical opinion, which is close to that of the criticized author. Hume is "mistaken", because "affectation of a character is precisely the general character of the people", which Kant depicts in his own way: "*arrogant rudeness*".⁹

The character of having no character: While Gotthold Ephraim Lessing applied a similar formula to the Germans,¹⁰ Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, who wanted to have "Hume for a coffee", put it among his aphorisms and agreed with it.¹¹ What about Hume's legacy and national characters?

The essay and its readers

"I would rather tell you of a fine dissertation, where you give a much greater influence to moral than to physical causes", Montesquieu wrote to Hume:

as far as I am able of judging, this subject is deeply treated, how difficult it is to be treated, and written with a master's hand and filled up with very new ideas and reflections.¹²

2 G. Orwell, *Inside the Whale and Other Essays*, Penguin: London 1962, 64 (cf. ivi, 72).

3 Ivi, 64.

4 Ivi, 75.

5 Ivi, 90 (cf. ivi, 64).

6 D. Defoe, *The True-Born Englishman*, London: J. Roberts, 1716, 11.

7 "Men have no certain Characters; or if they have, 'tis that of having no constant, unalterable, distinguishing one" (*The Works Of Monsieur De La Bruyere*, 2 vols., London: E. Curll et al., 1713, II, 252; cf. ivi, 83).

8 J. Priestley, *Lectures on History and General Policy*, Dublin: P. Byrne, 1788, 446–447.

9 I. Kant, *Anthropology, History, and Education*, edited by G. Zöllner and R.B. Loudon, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 407.

10 G.E. Lessing, *Selected Prose Works*, edited by E. Bell, London: G. Bell and Sons, 1890, 490.

11 G.C. Lichtenberg, *Aphorismen. Zweites Heft: 1772–1778*, edited by A. Leitzmann, Berlin: B. Behr, 1904, 135; on Hume and the English, cf. ivi, 133, 289.

12 *Oeuvres complètes de Montesquieu*, 3 vols., edited by M.A. Masson, Paris: Les éditions Nagel, 1950–1955, III, 1230 (transl. mine).

Montesquieu was slightly ironic: he knew that Hume was acquainted with the *Spirit of the Laws*, published one month before Hume’s essay; but these are but conjectures without evidence. Montesquieu’s is probably the first private review of Hume’s essay. Rejecting “altogether” the physical causes, Nicolas-Claude Thieriot remarks, Hume “goes beyond what he ought and even beyond his own opinion”, while Montesquieu “conceded too much to climate”;¹³ his rejection, Jean-Bernard Mérian echoes, is “directly contrary” to Montesquieu.¹⁴

The topic of national characters was often debated in eighteenth-century Europe, especially in Scotland: Adam Ferguson’s *Essay* (1767), John Millar’s *Observations* (1771) and *Origin* (1779), Henry Home’s *Sketches* (1774), William Robertson’s *History* (1777), and James Dunbar’s *Essays* (1780). Here I will consider three exemplary uses of Hume’s essay: the first use is avowed and common in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the second is equally avowed and common especially in the twentieth century; the third is merely conjectural and certainly uncommon in the twentieth century. In 1793 William Godwin followed Hume and attacked the explanation by physical causes, in 1970 Julio Caro Baroja appealed to him to destroy the myth of national character, and in 1942 Gregory Bateson could have been inspired by Hume in his positive treatment. Before analysing these uses, I will go back to the essay.

Characters and prejudices: Hume’s double view

In 1734 Hume makes his first remark on national characters: “’tis with Nations as with particular Man, where one Trifle frequently serves more to discover the Character” (*Letters* 1: 21) – Lawrence Sterne will see the marks of national characters in some “nonsensical *minutiae*”.¹⁵ In 1748, with Richard Steele, Hume observes that “nothing serves more [than travelling] to remove [national] Prejudices” (*Letters* 1: 126).¹⁶ These prejudices, he maintained in 1739, are the effect of rash general rules: we establish it as a principle that the Irishmen cannot have wit, and we entertain such a prejudice against them “in spite of sense and reason” (T 1.3.13.7; SBN 146–147). As part of the “vulgar” we are “commonly guided” by that influence of general rules which is “destructive” of reasoning and rejected by “wise men” (T 1.3.13.12; SBN 150). Hume accounts for national characters from sympathy rather than climate:

13 [N.-C. Thieriot] “Sur le Caractère des Nations”, *Mercure de France*, Vol. 2 (1756): 21–49: 24 n. 2.

14 [J.-B. Mérian] “Sur le Caractère des Nations”, *Journal Encyclopédique*, Vol. 3 (1757): 26–51: 30.

15 [L. Sterne] *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy*, 2 vols., London: T. Beckett and P.A. De Hondt, 1768, I, 159.

16 Cf. [R. Steele] *The Guardian*, 2 vols., London: J. Tonson, 1714, Vol. 1, No. 34 (30 April 1713): 135–138: 134–135.

the “great uniformity [...] in the humours and turn of thinking of those of the same nation” must be ascribed to the “propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments” (T 2.1.11.2; SBN 316–317).

Hume’s reflections in the *Treatise of Human Nature*, and his distinction between the “vulgar” and “men of sense” at the beginning of “Of National Characters”, remember us that there is no acceptance for absolute judgments. Men of sense reject all the vulgar undistinguishing judgments that “comprehend every individual under the same censure”; yet they allow that a certain nation has a certain character and that some qualities are more “probably” and “frequently” to be met with among the members of a nation than its neighbours, “though” the same men of sense will not forget the exceptions (E-NC, 197–198).¹⁷

Even Hume shows a prudent good sense. His language is full of “perhaps” and “may be”. He affects caution with some ambiguities (he is “inclined” to doubt, though “altogether”; he allows that the contrary opinion “may justly [...] seem probable”, though “at first sight”, E-NC, 200, 201), especially when he advances some controversial or embarrassing hypothesis as a suspicion (E-NC, 202 n.4, 208 n.10). With regard to the “promiscuous” characters of nations in temperate climates, he even uses a sceptical formula: “this however is certain, that [...] almost all the general observations [...] are found to be uncertain” (E-NC, 208). Against these observations, which appeal to physical causes and acknowledged authorities, Hume cautiously advances his own exceptions and moral causes (E-NC, 207; 209–210, 211, 213–215).

“Of national characters” was published at the end of November 1748, after six months abroad to the courts of Vienna and Turin and eight years of war, and achieved its final structure in 1753.¹⁸ Hume believes in the existence of “national character”: it is a “uniform”, “common” and “peculiar” character consisting in a “peculiar set of manners”, in a “resemblance” or “similarity” of manners that are possessed by a people or nation and make it “distinguishable”. Yet, not all the qualities are always habitual and extended to the whole nation (NC, 197–99, 202–207).

Hume’s starting point is a question: if physical causes have a mighty influence on animals and plants, if animal characters are “derived” from their

17 Cf. A. Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, edited by F. Oz-Salzberger, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 183).

18 In the 1753 edition Hume divides the first paragraph in two, turns the discursive footnote on courage into a paragraph, and makes several additions: two discursive footnotes on the character of animals and “negroes”; another discursive footnote on the small sects; a paragraph on revenge and the final sentence on the sacerdotal office in the footnote on priests; a sentence on the taciturnity of the Gauls according to Diodorus Siculus in the last footnote; finally, the references to Cicero and Quintilian in the text, Titus Livius, Quintus Curtius and Plutarch in the footnotes. We may conjecture that the 1748 version was written in a hurry (even though not necessarily in Turin after the reading of Montesquieu).

native climate, “why not the same with men?” (E-NC, 201–202; cf. E-NC, 207). By distinguishing national characters from prejudices, Hume establishes the legitimate use of the notion (E-NC, 197–198). With regard to their causes, he sides with those who explain national characters by moral rather than physical causes, and sets sympathy against climate (E-NC, 198–204). Then he considers the first objection from animals (in 1753 he expresses the “little suspicion” that animal characters do not depend on climate but on the different breeds and their rearing, E-NC, 202 n.4), and replies by appealing to sympathy, fixed moral causes and accidents (the prevailing disposition in the infancy of society, and the persons in authority at the first establishment of a government).¹⁹ Seeking for proofs in history and geography he advances nine observations in favour of moral causes, especially government (E-NC, 204–207). Then he considers the second objection from animals and plants, where the influence of the degrees of heat and cold seems to be proved by the inferiority of those who live beyond the polar circles or between the tropics (in 1753 he is “apt to suspect” that the inferior character of the “*Negroes*” does not depend on climate but on some natural original difference between the breeds of men, E-NC, 208 n.10),²⁰ and advances a probable explanation from moral causes or indirect physical causes (E-NC, 207).

Here begins the second part of the essay, where Hume shows the fallacy of the general observations on national characters in temperate climates. He accounts for eight observations in favour of climate supported by authorities (Bacon, Berkeley, Bentivoglio and Temple) and shows that they are not universally valid (E-NC, 208–212). With regard to the distribution of the passion for alcohol in the North and love in the South, by way of mere hypothesis, he first accepts the seemingly probable explanation from heat and cold; then he offers his possible explanation from moral causes or indirect physical causes; then he calls into doubt the distribution; finally, he acknowledges the physical explanation of the distribution, but limits its consequences: climate can only have an influence on gross bodily organs, not on those fine organs on which the operations of the mind depend (E-NC, 213–215).

The character of a nation consists in a peculiar set of resembling manners that distinguish a particular “rank” of people: the “generality” or the “greater number” (E-NC, 197–199). Hume had already explained why a nation is

19 According to *A Dialogue* (1751) “chance has a great influence on national manners” (D 50; SBN, 340).

20 Our knowledge of Hume’s “racism” (a term unknown in his time) is inferior to the number of words on it. See for example E. Mazza, *Cavalli bianchi e pappagalli neri*, “I castelli di yale”, Vol. I, No. 2 (2013): 187–220; “Black Parrots”, The Hume Society’s 41st Annual Conference, Portland, Oregon, 2014, conference handbook; A.C. Willis, “The Impact of David Hume’s Thoughts about Race for His Stance on Slavery and His Concept of Religion,” *Hume Studies*, 42, 1–2 (2016): 213–239; A. Garrett and S. Sebastiani, “David Hume on Race,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Race*, edited by N. Zack, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 31–43.

more learned than others by appealing to its government, and maintained that the “multitude” will “certainly” be seized by the common passion, even though “many individuals may escape the contagion, and be ruled by passions peculiar to themselves” (E-RP, 115).²¹ Likewise, here he maintains that in England every individual can display “the manners peculiar to him” (E-NC, 207).

Even though national characters depend on moral causes and accidents, government and sympathy, Hume makes some concessions to indirect physical causes (E-NC, 207, 213): southern people have a greater inclination to love because they go half-naked (direct moral cause) because of the “heat” (E-NC, 213).²² We can even see the relics of that physical explanation Hume has just destroyed: in temperate climates blood is not so inflamed to “render” men jealous, but warm enough to “make” them to set a due value on the charm of women (E-NC, 214–215). In general, Hume reminds the reader two things: as the common character is spread by “sympathy or contagion of manners”, the closer the communication is, the greater is the similarity of manners (E-NC, 202–204); the “manners of a people change very considerably from one age to another” (E-NC, 205) or, as he adds in 1753, “national characters may alter very much” (E-NC, 213 n.17).

Hume leaves a complex legacy. As he had previously maintained (cf. T 2.3.1.10; SBN 403), national characters do exist but should not be confounded with prejudices. They consist in that peculiar set of resembling manners that distinguish a nation. They admit of exceptions and change in the course of time. They spread themselves by sympathy and communication. Their causes are not physical, but moral, even though climate may have an indirect influence (if it had a direct influence, it will insensibly affect only our bodily organs). Where characters do not depend on fixed moral causes, they depend either on accidents or an original natural difference. Finally, we must treat the matter with a sceptical attitude: we must limit ourselves to tendencies and probabilities and be cautious in our observations on characters in temperate climates, the extension and constancy of certain qualities, the natural distribution of certain passions.

From time to time, readers will receive or reject some elements of this legacy. Two dark footnotes have been the main target: Alexander Gerard and others attacked Hume on “priests”,²³ James Beattie and others on “negroes”.²⁴ Gerard denounced Hume’s contradiction: he “justly blames the

21 Cf. B.-L. De Muralt, *Lettres sur les Anglois et les François et sur les Voyages*, [London?] s.e., 1725, 175–176.

22 Cf. R. Susato, *Hume’s Sceptical Enlightenment*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015, 52.

23 *Early Responses to Hume’s Moral, Literary and Political Writings*, edited by J. Fieser, 2 vols., Bristol: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005, II, 193–195; for Wallace’s, Shaw’s, and Ogilvie’s reaction, cf. *ivi*, 72, 351–352, 375–382.

24 *Ivi*, 276–277; for Swediaur’s and Kames’ reaction cf. *ivi*, 383–386; H. Home, *Lord Kames, Sketches of the History of Man*, 2 vols., London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1774, I, 32–33.

undistinguished judgments of the vulgar”, he “justly observes, that all that can be asserted with truth is, that some particular qualities will be more frequently met with among some classes of people than others”; but he did not preserve “this necessary caution and delicacy in determining the character of the clergy”.²⁵

“Philosophy – Hume declares – would render us entirely *Pyrrhonian*, were not nature too strong for it” (T.Abs.27; SBN 657). The phrase depicts his “very sceptical” philosophy as a compounded process that should not be reduced to one single element. The first paragraph of “Of National Characters” can be compared to this phrase: our nature would lead us into national prejudices, if it was not corrected by reflection; but the rejection of national prejudices does not entail that of national characters. The beginning of the essay is “a two-handed pot”:²⁶ “Men of sense condemn the undistinguishing judgments: Though at the same time, they allow, that each nation has a peculiar set of manners” (E-NC, 197). Readers commonly choose the denial of national prejudices. Some of them appeal to this denial with regard to the race question. In 1956 Geoffrey McKay Morant remarks that in ordinary conversation we speak “as if the collection were a single individual”:

the practice conveys the impression that the distinction between two groups compared is greater than it can be supposed to be if the case is examined in detail. This was Hume’s point when he remarked that the vulgar are apt to carry all national characters to extremes.²⁷

In the 1974 edition of *Man’s most dangerous Myth* (1942), Ashley Montagu quotes Hume’s passage and concludes: “national and racial stereotypes mostly serve ill purposes”.²⁸

Other readers appeal to the same passage with regard to the nationalist question. In 1955 Boyd Shafer quotes it and warns: a group cannot be described “as if it were a single man”: “the faulty reasoning is simple to demonstrate, though its effects are tragic”.²⁹ In 1972 he uses the passage to maintain that there is “no proof” that the citizens of one nation are more warlike than those of another: “individuals in each nation have been peaceful and warlike”.³⁰ According to the *Encyclopedia of Nationalism*, “as early as” the eighteenth century, Hume pointed out the road: “because of the many difficulties involved in studying the ramifications of stereotypes, some

25 *Early Responses*, II, 216.

26 Montaigne, *Les Essais*, 3 vols., edited by P. Villey, Paris: PUF, 1992, II, 581 (transl. mine).

27 G.M. Morant, *The Significance of Racial Differences*, in *The Race Question in Modern Science*, New York: UNESCO, 1956, 285–325: 288, 292–293.

28 A. Montagu, *Man’s Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*, 5th edn., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, 284.

29 B.C. Shafer, *Nationalism. Myth and Reality*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955, 332.

30 B.C. Shafer, *Faces of Nationalism. New Realities and Old Myths*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972, 339.

scholars believe that it is advisable to maintain them in myth”.³¹ Let us now consider the three exemplary uses of Hume’s essay.

“The judicious collections of Hume”: Godwin and the moral causes of freedom

The characters of passions and minds are different in different climates, and laws must have references to them: this doctrine, Reverend David Williams says in 1789, was the “principal distinction” of Montesquieu’s fame: the inferences from “physical effects” to political institutions are “so plausible” that they have been “generally adopted” and to dispute them is “a species of heresy”.³² Hume “added to his numerous offences against popular opinion a general denial of the doctrine”,³³ and Williams advises his students: those who “mean to oppose the sentiments of Montesquieu, should not overlook those of Mr. Hume”.³⁴ Montesquieu maintained that “the cowardice of the peoples of hot climates has almost always made them slaves”;³⁵ in the *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) Godwin replies to those who have “affirmed to be ‘impossible to establish a free government in certain warm and effeminate climates’” (PJ, 43):³⁶ “my original conception proceeded on a feeling of the imperfections and errors of Montesquieu”.³⁷

Since the influence of climate could be an objection to his principles, Godwin calls it into question (PJ, 43). Chapter VII is divided in two parts: “Of moral and physical causes” and “Of national characters”. Following Williams’ advice, Godwin contrasts Montesquieu’s alleged facts with Hume’s exceptions. He begins the second part with a traditional comparison: “as is the character of the individual, so may we expect to find it with nations” (PJ, 42). According to Hume “a nation is nothing but a collection of individuals” (E-NC, 198), and Godwin echoes: “society is nothing more than an aggregation of individuals (PJ, 57, 71)”. Later he will both extend and restrained his view: “the universe is no more than a collection of individuals”, but “no man stands alone”.³⁸

31 L.L. Snyder, *Encyclopedia of Nationalism*, New York: Paragon House, 1990, 376.

32 D. Williams, *Lectures on Political Principles*, London: J. Bell, 1789, 263–264.

33 Ivi, 264.

34 Ivi, 264.

35 Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, edited by A.M. Cohler *et al.*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 278. The assertion is attacked by Kames (*Sketches*, I, 31).

36 W. Godwin, *An Enquiry concerning Political Justice*, edited by M. Philp, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013 (hereafter PJ). On Hume and Godwin, see Susato, *Hume’s Sceptical Enlightenment*, 52–53.

37 C.K. Paul, *William Godwin: his Friends and Contemporaries*, 2 vols., London: H.S. King, 1876, I, 67, cf. ivi, 71.

38 W. Godwin, *An Enquiry concerning Political Justice*, 2 vols., London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1796², I, 203, 442.

Following Hume, Godwin maintains that the operations of law and political institution are “important”, those of climate are “trifling” (PJ, 42; cf. E-NC, 198, 200, 204). Like Hume and Adam Smith, he also claims that “particular professions [...] must always operate to the production of a particular character” (PJ, 42; cf. E-NC, 198–201),³⁹ and that, “in some instances”, some particular moral causes may render some men “superior” to their professional character (PJ, 42). Yet, he concludes with Hume, “exclusively of such exceptions, priests of all religions [...] have a striking similarity of manners” (PJ, 42; cf. E-NC, 198–199).⁴⁰ What is relevant for Godwin is that “free men in whatever country will be firm, vigorous and spirited in proportion to their freedom” (PJ, 43). To show how unreasonable is the assertion that we can’t establish a free government in a warm country, Godwin accounts for the process that establishes it in any country: to recommend the advantages of freedom to people, we must “inform” their understanding, rather than inquiring whether they are native of a “favourable” climate (PJ, 43). It is a question of truth, and the causes that suspend its progress arise “not from climate, but from [...] despotic sovereigns”: climate will not prevent the majority from embracing “the obvious means of their happiness” (PJ, 44).

To be acknowledged as true, Godwin’s theory needs to be confirmed by the history of mankind, where “the inhabitants of neighbouring provinces in different states, [are] widely discriminated by the influence of government, and little assimilated by the resemblance of climate” (PJ, 44; E-NC, 204). The majority of Godwin’s instances are “taken from Hume’s *Essay on National Characters*, where this subject is treated with much ability” (PJ, 46 n.1); they are “abridged from the judicious collections of Hume upon the subject”.⁴¹ Godwin repeats almost verbatim (with some personal embellishments) the last edition of Hume’s essay⁴². Hume argues that “the Languedocians and Gascons are the gayest people in France; but whenever you pass the Pyrenees,

39 Cf. A. Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, edited by D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1984, 202–203.

40 Godwin’s remarks on priests are drawn from Hume (E-NC, 199–201 n.3) and, like Hume, he admits of exceptions (E-NC, 200–201 n.3; PJ, 42).

41 Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1796, I, 100. In 1796 chapter VII (“Of the Objection to these Principles from the Influence of Climate”) is turned into chapter VI “Of the Influence of Climate” (ivi, I, 90): Godwin maintains part II (“Of national Characters”), omits part I (“Of moral and physical causes”), throws the rainy day and indigestion examples into another chapter (ivi, I, 79), adds some new passages (ivi, I, 96–97, 100–101) and cuts some old ones (ivi, I, 46–47), like that on priests (ivi, I, 42–43).

42 Godwin’s sale catalog lists Hume’s *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, 2 vols., London: T. Cadell *et al.*, 1788; his diary has two entries “Hume on Nat. Characters”: 7 and 15 March 1792 (godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk). Godwin echoes Hume: “it is easy to obtain any thing of the negroes, even their wives and children” (PJ, 46). In 1772 Hume still claims that they sell “not only their parents, but their wives and mistresses” (D. Hume, *Essays and Treatises on several Subjects*, 2 vols., London, T. Cadell, 1772, I, 222); later he turns “parents” into “children” (E-NC, 214).

you are among Spaniards” (E-NC, 204), and Godwin, like Priestley,⁴³ echoes: “the Gascons are the gayest people in all France; but the moment we pass the Pyrenees, we find the serious and saturnine character of the Spaniard” (PJ, 44; cf. E-NC, 208).⁴⁴ Godwin also recalls Hume’s exceptions and remarks. Hume argues that “it would have been juster to have said, that most conquests are made by poverty and want upon plenty and riches” (E-NC, 201), and Godwin echoes: “it would have been truer to say that conquest is usually made by poverty upon plenty” (PJ, 45).⁴⁵ Sometimes Godwin makes a concession to Montesquieu (“to the extent that, in each nation, one of these causes acts more forcefully, the others yield to it”):⁴⁶ “physical causes have already appeared to be powerful, till moral ones can be brought into operation” (PJ, 46); but he remains convinced that the “result” of Hume’s reasonings is “of the utmost importance to him who speculates upon principles of government” (PJ, 46).

Godwin agrees with Hume that climate, if it operates, “may operate upon the grosser particles of our frame, not [...] those finer organs upon which the operations of intellect depend” (PJ, 46; cf. E-NC, 215). In the first part he distinguishes between those causes that operate directly on the mind as “subject of reasoning”, and “inducements to action”, and those that operate indirectly by rendering the animal frame gay or sluggish, and must be regarded as “inefficient” and “trivial” – the “meanest branch of human constitution” to which many thinkers ascribe “so much” (PJ, 37). Unlike bodily indisposition, which operates on the mind as a physical cause, corporal punishment operates as a moral cause: “it influences our conduct, only as it is reflected upon by the understanding, and converted into a motive of action” (PJ, 37–38).

To those who assert that a rainy day makes us cowards and indigestion unable to think (PJ, 38–39), Godwin replies: physical indisposition becomes “formidable” only if seconded by the consent of the mind; the communication with the material universe is “at mercy” of our choice; the inability of the understanding exists “only in the degree in which it is deliberately preferred” (PJ, 39). In the name of the association of ideas, Godwin makes his last attack:

If men were principally governed by external circumstances such as that of atmosphere, their characters and actions would be much alike. [...]. Every thing that [...] permanently distinguishes the character of

43 J. Priestley, *Lectures on History and General Policy*, Dublin: P. Byrne, 1788, 447; cf. ivi, 444–447.

44 Godwin recalls Hume’s observations against climate: on Athenians and Thebans (E-NC, 204; PJ, 44), Gascons and Spaniards (E-NC, 204; PJ, 44), Jews and Armenians (E-NC, 205 and n. 7; PJ, 45), Turks and Greeks (E-NC, 205; PJ, 45), Greeks, Italians and French (E-NC, 206; PJ, 45), and Gauls (E-NC, 213 n. 17; PJ, 45).

45 See PJ, 45–46; E-NC, 205, 207, 208, 213, 214, 215.

46 Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 310.

one man from that of another, is to be traced to the association of ideas. But association is of the nature of reasoning. [...]. It is thus that one man appears courageous and another cowardly [...] under the same or nearly the same external circumstances (PJ, 39).

Pain occurs “too seldom” to be mistaken for the efficient principle of character; the system which “determines” our proceedings springs from a different source and “returns” when the pain has subsided (PJ, 39–40).

Where our conduct is directed “merely” by external impressions, we resemble animals (PJ, 40). Like Hume, Godwin considers the mind in its “infancy”, where it is “nearly” the creature of contingencies, as the supporters of physical causes claim; yet, he adds, the farther it advances the more it individualizes and acquires personal habits. This progress shows the influence of reflection:

Physical causes, though of some consequence in the history of man, sink into nothing, when compared with the great and inexpressible operations of reflection. They are the prejudices we conceive or the judgments we form [...] that constitute the true basis of distinction between man and man. The difference between savage and savage indeed, in the first generation of the human species and in perfect solitude, can only be ascribed to the different impressions made upon their sense. But this difference would be almost imperceptible (PJ, 41).

In the early age men lived in solitude and physical causes had an influence. This is Godwin’s answer to the analogical argument from “the considerable effects that physical causes appear to produce upon brutes” (PJ, 41). Like Hume, he observes that “the races of animals perhaps never degenerate, if carefully cultivated”, but “we have no security against the wisest philosopher’s begetting a dunce” (PJ 41) (Hume says “a coxcomb may beget a philosopher”, NC-215). Godwin repeats Hume’s objection from animals:

If [...] climate were principally concerned in forming the characters of nations, we might expect to find heat and cold producing an extraordinary effect upon men, as they do upon plants and inferior animals (PJ, 45, cf. E-NC, 200–202, 207).

Godwin limits the consequences of this objection: the existence of physical causes “cannot be controverted” in animals, where they are “left almost alone”, but in men “their efficacy is swallowed up in the superior importance of reflection and science”: in a “race of negroes”, which lie in solitude from their infancy, the operation of breed “might perhaps” be rendered as “conspicuous” as in the different classes of horses; yet, in a situation of communication, “all parallel” would cease (EPJ, 41; cf. E-NC, 200–202, 208 n. 10).

The more the individual is civilized, the greater is the action of reflection (as Montesquieu put it, “nature and climate almost alone dominate savages”),⁴⁷ and the changes of character do not depend on climate:

He that would change the character of the individual, would miserably misapply his efforts, if he principally sought to effect this purpose by the operation of heat and cold, dryness and moisture upon the animal frame. The true instruments of moral influence, are desire and aversion, punishment and reward, the exhibition of general truth (PJ 41–42).

The influence of physical causes is a “blind and capricious” principle that taints all our conclusions on the “advantages of liberty”: some writers have concluded that the corruptions of despotism and the usurpations of aristocracy were “congenial to certain ages and divisions of the world, and under proper limitations entitled to our approbation” (PJ, 46). According to them climate opposes “a palpable barrier to the political improvement” and renders “impossible” the introduction of liberal principles; yet, “truth when properly displayed [is] omnipotent”,⁴⁸ and the “correspondence between national character and national government will be found [...] to arise out of the latter” (PJ, 104). No state or period of mankind can render men incapable of exercising their reason or make it necessary to hold them in a condition of pupillage: “the real enemies of liberty in any country are [...] those higher orders who profit by a contrary system” (PJ, 47).

In order to change, we must infuse the just views into a number of educated persons and give the people their guides. The error is not tolerating the worst forms of government for a time, but supposing the change impracticable and not pursuing it. Godwin’s target is climate in the service of tyranny; and Hume serves to dismantle the political use of the climatic hypothesis, which is found “incapable of holding out against a moment’s serious reflection” (PJ, 46). Hume taught him that his reasonings on liberty are confirmed by “general experience as to the comparative *inefficacy of climate*, and the superior influence of circumstances, political and social”.⁴⁹

“All are eager to give a national character”: a digression on Wollstonecraft’s caution

In 1788 Mary Wollstonecraft reviewed the *Essay on the Causes of the Variety* of the minister Samuel Stanhope Smith, who had advanced his *Strictures on Lord Kaims’s Discourse*.⁵⁰ Kames had directly attacked

47 Ivi, 310.

48 Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1796², I, 96.

49 Ivi, 100.

50 M. Wollstonecraft, “Review of *An Essay on the Causes*”, *The Analytical Review*, Vol. 2, art. 7 (1788): 431–439; S.S. Smith, *Strictures on Lord Kaims’s Discourse on the «Original Diversity of Mankind»*, in *An Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure*

Montesquieu: his “plausible” natural causes “are contradicted by stubborn facts”.⁵¹ Neither tempers nor talents depend “much” on climate.⁵² Smith is convinced that the doctrine of “one” race “illustrates the power of physical causes”.⁵³ Wollstonecraft shares this conviction: if Smith’s arguments are “conclusive”, then “vague conjectures”, which shake our confidence in the validity of the Mosaical account”, will melt before them.⁵⁴ Different external circumstances, such as “the situation of the country, forms of government, religious opinions, &c.”, Wollstonecraft observes recalling Hume (E-NC, 198, 207), have been “traced by the ablest politicians as the main causes of distinct national characters”.⁵⁵ To account for this variety Smith refers to “climate” and the “state of society”, and Wollstonecraft embraces this combination, but finds “more interesting” the appeal to the effects of society and education.⁵⁶

1796 is the year of the second meeting between William and Mary, and of the publication of the second edition of Godwin’s *Political Justice* and Wollstonecraft’s *Letters*. Like Rousseau, she is convinced that in the capital “less of a national character is to be found than in the remote parts of the country” (L, 15),⁵⁷ where the separated habitations “allow the difference of climate to have its natural effect” (L, 25). However, she is the partisan of the indirect influence of climate (cf. L, 29–30, 22), when she does not directly appeal to moral causes: if the Swedish children do not have the graces of their age, this is “much more owing to the ignorance of mothers than to the rudeness of the climate” (L, 22; cf. 14, 23, 32, 41, 97). Sometimes even moral causes are not able to offer an exhaustive account (L, 23, 101). Yet, most travel writers remark only the differences “inspired by the climate” rather than the “numerous and unstable” varieties that the forms of government and religion “produce”; “all are eager to give a national character; which is rarely just, because they do not discriminate the natural from the acquired difference” (L, 33). Only the eighteenth-century “spirit of enquiry”, she argues, will “destroy the factitious national characters which have been supposed permanent, thought only rendered so by the permanency of ignorance” (L, 33).

in the Human Species, Philadelphia: R. Aitken, 1787, 1–31; Kames, *Sketches*, I, 1–43. Cf. S. Juengel, “Countenancing History: Mary Wollstonecraft, Samuel Stanhope Smith, and Enlightenment Racial Science”, *EKH*, Vol. 68, No. 4 (2001): 897–927.

51 Kames, *Sketches*, I, 31 (cf. E-NC, 204).

52 H. Home, Lord Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man*, 4 vols., 2nd edn., London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1778, I, I, 62.

53 Wollstonecraft, “Review of *An Essay*”, 437; Smith, *Essay*, 165.

54 Wollstonecraft, “Review of *An Essay*”, 431–432, 439; Smith, *Essay*, 143, 201–203.

55 *Ivi*, 431.

56 *Ivi*, 433–434; cf. *ivi*, 436; Smith, *Essay*, 122.

57 M. Wollstonecraft, *Letters written during a short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009 (hereafter L); J.-J. Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, edited by A. Bloom, New York: Basic Books, 1979, 468–469.

Unlike Hume and Godwin (E-NC, 207; PJ, 45), and Like Beattie,⁵⁸ Wollstonecraft denounces those who forget to consider that faculties remain “obtuse”, where not “sharpened” by self-interest and necessity, and passions are “weak”, where the necessities of life are “too hardly or too easily obtained” (L, 33):⁵⁹ “A people have been characterized as stupid by nature; what a paradox!”. Slaves have “no object to stimulate industry”, and some other peoples have “no aptitude” for arts and sciences because “the progress of improvement had not reached that stage which produces them” (L, 33).

Unlike Hume, she distinguishes between manners and national character (L, 107), and maintains that the former may shape the latter: the character of the French “is, perhaps, more formed” by their theatrical amusements than is generally imagined.⁶⁰ Since the energy of thinking proceeds “either from our education or manner of living”, the French frivolity “may be accounted for, without taking refuge in the old hiding place of ignorance: occult causes”.⁶¹ Yet, like Hume, she maintains that “the character of every man is, in some degree, formed by his profession”,⁶² and sometimes “the professional had indeed effaced the national character” (L, 107); that government exerts a strong influence, and public happiness “ought not to have been expected, before an alteration in the national character seconded the new system of government”.⁶³

Did Mary Wollstonecraft – who in other matters was “rather inclined to coincide in opinion with Hume”⁶⁴ and to quote his *History and Essays* –⁶⁵ ever read Hume’s “Of National Characters”? We do not know it, but we know that she read Godwin’s *Enquiry* and that Godwin read Hume’s essay.

“A threatening and dangerous myth”: Baroja and the vulgar

“All speaking of ‘national character’ is a mythical activity” (M, 34), declares Caro Baroja in *The Myth of National Character* (1970).⁶⁶ There are some precedents, besides Max Weber’s general sentence that “the appeal to

58 *Early Responses*, 277.

59 M. Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men. A Vindication of the Rights of Women. An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, 120.

60 Ivi, 298, 361.

61 Ivi, 365.

62 Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 82.

63 Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 343.

64 M. Wollstonecraft, “Review of *A sonnet*”, *The Analytical Review*, Vol. 7, art. 22 (1790): 304.

65 Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication*, 9, 124–125.

66 J.C. Baroja, *El mito del carácter nacional*, Madrid: Caro Raggio, 2004 (1970¹) (hereafter M; all translations are mine); cf. E-S. Unamuno, *Weaving Identities in the Spanish Context*, in *Identity*, 2 vols. edited by M.M. Baptista, Coimbra: Grácio Editor, 2015, I, 31–49.

national character is generally a mere confession of ignorance”.⁶⁷ In 1944 Ludwig von Mises had attacked “the Fallacy of the Concept”: “there is no such thing as a stable national character”.⁶⁸ This arbitrary idea derives from a judgment which “omits all unpleasant facts contradicting the preconceived dogma”.⁶⁹ There is no “permanency”, no “stable character of which all its ideas and actions are the outcome”: the “generalization of features discovered in various individuals” is the result of an “ill-considered induction from an insufficient number of ill-assorted samples”.⁷⁰ To explain Nazism as the “outcome of the German national character”, and its “inherent tendency”, is a “vicious circle”.⁷¹

In 1940 Henry Hamilton Fyfe had published *The Illusion of National Character*, which was to be revised and shortened two years after Mises’ essay. When we have moved among many different nationalities, Fyfe argues, we come to know that “there are no ‘national character types’”, and we must remove “the most dangerous of the myths which in our time prevent the nations from settling down to make the best of life”.⁷² This harmful illusion springs from the “ignorant belief in the differences between people inhabiting different territories”.⁷³ The target of Fyfe’s assault is the union of nation and honour:

If we admit national character, thus recognizing the existence of a certain mystical entity, the nation, we must also admit national honour [...]. But if we reject national character as an illusion, if we say that nations are masses of people who happen to have been born under the same Government, if we deny that any mystical bond unites them [...], then we must refuse to believe there can be any such thing as national honour.⁷⁴

Since the interests of the individuals are not opposed to those of the nation, and mankind are beginning to realize their common interest, “the chief obstacle in the way of that realization is the illusion of national character”.⁷⁵

In the name of historical method applied to anthropology, Baroja starts his campaign against national character and every abstract and synchronic

67 M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, London: Routledge, 1992, 47.

68 L. von Mises, *Omnipotent Government*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1945 (1944¹), 234.

69 Ivi, 232.

70 Ivi, 231.

71 Ivi, 231–232, 234. We can correctly speak of the “a nation’s mentality” (“of the majority” and “subject to change”) “at a certain historical epoch” (ivi, 233).

72 H.H. Fyfe, *The Illusion of National Character*, London: Watts & Co., 1940, 21 (cf. ivi, 2). Fyfe Humeably underlines exceptions and changes (ivi, 34, 69, 103).

73 Fyfe, *The Illusion of National Character*, 1940, 2, 147; cf. ivi, 24, 52, 59, 79, 90, 130, 135.

74 Ivi, 125.

75 Ivi, 157.

anthropological study. His essay has an eloquent English epigraph, which is the first sentence of Hume's essay: "The vulgar are very apt to carry all national characters to extremes" (cf. E-NC, 197).⁷⁶ Holding one Humean handle Baroja attacks those north-American anthropologists who, in order to "nationalize" their science, produced a "considerable quantity" of works (M, 33), which are but failed attempts between science and "pleasant literature", being scarcely scientific, literary and pleasant (M, 33-34). They are the springs of "heavy sophisms, eternal common places... and painful constraints". National character is a false harmful myth:

He who speaks or chats adapts himself to a more or less elaborate tradition that is not based on scientifically observed or observable facts; and this tradition tends to give somewhat popular explanations and in fact changes itself much more than is believed or asserted. Myth is advantageous or disadvantageous according to those who elaborate or use it, and it may degenerate into real mania (M, 34).

One of Baroja's targets are the *Ideas of the Spaniards of the XVII Century* (1928) by Miguel Herrero García, which were enlarged four years before Baroja's essay and reflect the ideology of an erudite right-winger who thinks that the origin of what the one hundred percent Spanish (i.e., the Castilians) are and, "must think of themselves", lies in the middle of Sixteenth Century (M, 49-50). Baroja's other target is fascist literature. In the twentieth century the international conflict (Spanish against French) became also national (Catalans against Basques), and the "nationalistic thesis of nationalities" opposed itself to the "nationalistic thesis of State". The fascist literature, which appealed to the true "spanishness" or "italianness", was a reaction to the new national conflict. Between 1921 and 1945 the European fascist countries tried to fix the national characters and convert patriotism into monopoly and profit, and the American democrats rediscovered national characters:

What a sad discovery! What a poor discovery! What a miserable dialectical game! For we can frequently observe that indeed the authors of the most irritating judgments do not have great importance and, on the contrary, no value is given to the objective or positive judgments (M, 82).

The harmful myth must be unmasked, and Baroja goes back to the epigraph:

The myth of national character is a threatening and dangerous myth, like many myths of the pagan antiquity; yet, perhaps it has neither their majesty nor their depth. It makes councilmen speak much and badly, and Hume was right when he said that the "vulgar" carry its concepts

76 Cf. J.C. Baroja, *El Señor Inquisidor y otras vidas por oficio*, Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1968, 74; J.C. Baroja, *De los Arquetipos y Leyendas*, Madrid: Ediciones ISTMO, 1991, 105, 130 n.217.

to extremes, and by “vulgar” today we mean many people who do not believe to be part of the vulgar (M, 82–83).⁷⁷

Baroja identifies all his targets: the ascriptions of a “global character” to an entire people (“all the Spanish”), the “dogmatic” theories on their origin and way of being (M, 36, 72), and the tendency, often attending international conflicts, to characterize peoples in a “permanent way” (M 45, 47, 72, 75–77, 86 n.4, 87–88 n.6, 94 n.19). He attacks all those who, from a nationalistic or localistic, aggressive or defensive perspective, ascribe “permanent traits” to different peoples: the only permanent thing that can be found is the “will” to ascribe national characters as founded on supposed scientific facts (M, 79; cf. 54). Baroja unmasks all these clichés, contradictions, decompositions of national into regional characters, the stereotypical images that each nation produces of itself, where all defects are little and virtues are cardinal (M, 48), and the negative generalizations she produces of foreigners (M, 75).

In this “gallery of horror”, where Mead finds a place with her essay “National Character” (1953) and Bateson is never mentioned (M, 85 n.2), Hume is urged as the antidote. He is the sceptical myth destroyer, who presides over the beginning and the end of Baroja’s discussion. Hume’s “wonderful” essay, which Baroja dates 1742 (even a learned Spanish has his careless moments), appears to him “full of exceptions, reserves, fine observations which are contrary to any dogmatism in this matter”:

[Hume] points out the difference of general context between the eighteenth-century English society and that of the preceding century, discusses the influence of climate, insinuates that the *professional* character is perhaps more dominant than the *national* character, and finally delivers many other witty thoughts (M, 58).⁷⁸

“Nevertheless”, Baroja acknowledges, Hume “ascribes to the Spanish, as a whole, a grave and sad character, and judge them decadent with respect to what made them famous in the preceding times, the soldier’s profession” (M, 58, 102 n. 44; cf. E-NC, 198, 204, 206, 208). Yet this ascription does not diminish Hume’s merit:

Everything the father of modern scepticism says is curious and useful today as well as in his time. His observations concerning the southern peoples compared to the northern, the little meaning of courage in the collective life, the constant variability of attitudes and knowledges are as many starting points for those who want to give the proper value

77 Baroja is evoked in the discussion of Kant’s answer (“a national character is not a mere chimera”) to the sceptical challenge (national character is “merely a myth”) (R.B. Louden, *Kant’s Human Being*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 156, 199 n.16).

78 Baroja refers to D. Hume, *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* (2 vols., London: A. Millar, 1764) and following the frontispiece he maintains that it “appeared in 1742” (M, 101–102 n.44).

to myths without being drawn by the force of the above-mentioned common places that, as Hume points out in the sentence quoted at the beginning of these pages, make a strong impression on the vulgar: a vulgar among whom there are writers, ministers or generals... (M, 58).

Baroja attributes too much to his favourite Hume and shows some inaccuracies. Hume is more interested in the causes of characters than their content (E-NC, 198); he only reports the observations on the nature of the northern and southern peoples, and often disagrees with them (E-NC, 213–214); he does not insinuate that the professional character is more dominant than the national one (Wollstonecraft says that the professional may efface the national character), but maintains that moral causes fix the professional characters and alter the natural personal character, and the professional character does not prevail in every instance over the personal character but always predominates with the greater number (E-NC, 198–199);⁷⁹ he does not say that courage has little meaning, but that it is exerted only at intervals by a minority (E-NC, 212); finally, Hume does not merely discuss the influence of climate, but rejects it in favour of moral causes (E-NC, 198, 200, 203–204).

Baroja distinguishes Hume's view from Montesquieu's and Voltaire's "generalizing pretensions" (M, 59). Sometimes, he remarks, the impressions communicated by men of genius are the "most gloomy" (M, 102, n. 45), and their generalizations are devoid of any foundation:

the ignorance of every age, as well as its knowledge or more than it, helped to found its characterizations [...]. The possibility to err in general is parallel to that of deceive oneself, even frequently, in particular judgments: in the first case errors are considered as "scientific", in the other they are rejected as mere "judgments of value" (M, 59).

Baroja's radical reading of Hume's essay is founded on its beginning: "The vulgar are apt to carry all national characters to extremes [...] Men of sense condemn these undistinguishing judgments" (E-NC, 197). Yet, according to Hume, prudent men of sense also allow that each nation has her own character (with its exceptions). Baroja reduces national characters to national prejudices. Hume certainly insists on the "constant variability" of characters (they are variable as they depend on variable moral causes): he does not limit himself to saying that the "manners" of a people change very considerably, but adds that "national characters may alter very much" (E-NC, 205, 213 n.17). And he can say so because – as Ernest Barker acknowledged in 1948 –⁸⁰ he allows the existence of national characters. They can be dangerous, when carried to extremes, but are not mere harmful myths.

79 Cf. Gerard in *Early Responses*, II, 211.

80 Even Hume "assumes, as a matter of obvious common sense, that there *are* national characters" and his "only scepticism" is about the influence of climate upon them (E.

The “father of modern scepticism”, as Baroja calls him, does not treat national characters as other modern philosophical notions. He does not say that philosophy cannot justify their existence and, when consistently pursued, leads us into scepticism with regard to them; that we can only account for this belief upon the suppositions of the vulgar (all of us, at one time or another) and find its origin in the principles of our mind. The existence of national characters is something that we must take for granted as well as their causes and reductions to extremes.

“A sort of resonance”: Bateson, Mead, and national morale

Thirty years before Baroja, Bateson grabbed the other Humean handle. We do not know whether Bateson ever read “Of national characters”. It is possible, not probable; but there are some analogies. The Select Society of Edinburgh (Hume was a founding member) was formed in 1754 to discover the most effectual methods of promoting the good of the country;⁸¹ one of the much-debated question was “Whether the difference of national characters be chiefly owing to the nature of different climates, or to moral and political causes?”⁸² In 1942, as a member of the Committee for National Morale, organized by Arthur Upham Pope in 1940, Bateson published “Morale and National Character”. Here he outlined a theoretical structure and certain “useful” formulas which are based on the assumption that “people will respond most energetically when the context is structured to appeal to their habitual patterns of reaction” (MNC, 89).⁸³

At the end of 1941 Bateson and Mead had published “Principles of Morale Building”, which is the common root of Bateson’s “Morale and National Character” and Mead’s *And Keep Your Powder Dry. An Anthropologist Looks at America*, both published in 1942. In order to raise the morale, “an attitude to a group goal expressed in appropriate action”, they maintain, we must consider the different national characters, because the different cultural systems rely upon different sets of motives (unlike the German, the American morale increases with increasing adversity).⁸⁴

Bateson’s and Mead’s problem is how the energetic commitment to the group purpose can be carried over from one situation and goal to another.⁸⁵

Barker, “Preface” to *National Character and the Factors in its Formation*, 4th ed., London: Methuen, 1948 (1st ed. 1927), x).

81 “An account of the Select Society of Edinburgh”, *The Scots Magazine*, Vol. 17 (1755): 126b-127a.

82 Edinburgh NLS, Adv. Mss. 23.1.1, ff. 32–33, 35, 48, 51, 103, 190.

83 G. Bateson, *Morale and National Character*, in *Civilian Morale*, edited by G. Watson, Boston – New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1942, 71–91 (hereafter MNC).

84 G. Bateson, M. Mead, “Principles of Morale Building”, *Journal of Educational Sociology*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (1941): 206–220: 207–08, 211.

85 Ivi, 208.

Related to this problem of “morale transfer” is that of “morale resonance”; here their language evokes Humean “sympathy or contagion of manners”, a disposition that “makes us enter deeply into each other’s sentiments, and causes like passions and inclinations to run, as it were, by contagion, through the whole club or knot of companions” (E-NC, 202). “It is common – Bateson and Mead critically observe – to speak of emotional attitudes as ‘contagious’ or ‘infectious,’ but these terms are probably misleading”.⁸⁶ The bases for most of our adult attitudes derive from our family relationships “in childhood”; yet, when we speak of “contagious” morale attitudes we usually refer to the rapid spread of a behaviour pattern, like panic or determination, from one individual or group to another. The necessary basic attitudes were “already in some sense latent” in the individuals concerned, “ready to respond” when some other individual gave them overt expression.⁸⁷ To refer to these attitudes, Bateson and Mead maintain, we need “some concept of *latent morale*”,⁸⁸ since the rapid spread or evocation of latent attitudes is “a sort of resonance rather than a sort of contagion”.⁸⁹

Education establishes a set of “coherent and socially adaptive” attitudes and values through a process that occurs “with greatest rapidity in early childhood” and contributes to the shaping of the character as a “conglomerate of attitudes”.⁹⁰ Each culture implants a set of attitudes and values in its individuals, but not all cultures implant the “*same*” set, and these attitudes are part of a coherent character structure that is adapted to the nation living.⁹¹ Thus, to raise the morale we must consider the coherent attitudes which exist in a nation and are ready to be evoked. Knowing the national character we can predict how people will behave in wartime and adjust their interpersonal differences so that they can carry on war effectively.⁹²

In order to achieve this result we must rely on the “habitual patterns” that people exhibit in their “continual dialectic relationships” of love and hate. The patterns show a “symmetrical” motif, where the individual is stimulated to respond with greater strength to the strength of the enemy; a “complementary” motif, where he is stimulated to respond with greater strength to the weakness of the enemy; and a “compensatory” motif, where he is stimulated to prove his uncertain strength by a symmetrical and complementary manner. As the symmetrical motif characterizes the Americans and the English, it is the most proper to build up their morale.⁹³ Contrary to the Germans, they are

86 Ivi, 208.

87 Ivi, 208.

88 Ivi, 209.

89 Ivi, 213.

90 Ivi, 213–214.

91 Ivi, 213–214 e n. 8.

92 Ivi, 216.

93 Ivi, 216–217.

positively stimulated by failure taken as a challenge, their morale will rise, and they react to it increasing the effort.⁹⁴

As Bateson remembers in the *Ecology of Mind*, in 1942 “many of us were interested in ‘national character’”.⁹⁵ The practical consequences of the theory were evident; the abstract theory was entrusted to “Morale and National Character”.

“The theoretical structure”: Bateson and national characters

“In casual conversation – Bateson observes – it is popularly assumed that national groups have characteristic differences”. The illustration is partly surprising: “the British are thought to be low in sense of humor and in foresight, but arrogant and possessed of bulldog tenacity”. The consequence is seemingly cautious: “If such differences exist, they are of tremendous importance” (MCN, 71). Bateson is reacting to an editorial article published in *Nature* and based on a speech of Morris Ginsberg (MCN, 71 n.).⁹⁶ Sceptical scientific thinking, the editorialist remarks, should be reconciled with the demand for positive contributions:

It is as easy to show confusions, contradictions and over-simplifications in the popular conceptions as it is difficult to find scientific proof of the real differences which, in a confused way, they may be registering. What then should be the role of a scientific treatment of the question?⁹⁷

We should be able to show what, “at their most plausible”, popular conceptions would be and “in what directions scientific proof or disproof could most profitably be sought”.⁹⁸ Unlike Fyfe, Ginsberg thinks it “a mistake to dismiss the idea of national character as a mere illusion”. In order to identify differences in national character he looks at the institutions and their background, without overlooking “the pitfalls in the way of deducing national character from national institutions”.⁹⁹

Ginsberg’s views on the English and Germans, the editorialist remarks, reflect “subjective impressions” rather than “scientific conclusions”, but interpret a body of permanent material “available for further inspection”.¹⁰⁰ Explaining national character is “even more hazardous” than to identify

94 Ivi, 217 e n.12.

95 G. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1972, 155.

96 Ginsberg quotes Hume’s essay, cf. *Reason and Unreason in Society*, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1947, 165 and n. 1.

97 “National Character”, *Nature*, Vol. 148, No. 3741 (July 1941), 31–33: 31a.

98 Ivi, 31a.

99 Ivi, 31b-32a.

100 Ivi, 32b.

them, and we can only claim to “a degree of probability”.¹⁰¹ According to Ginsberg “historical and social conditions play a much greater part than genetic factors”, and national character “is, for all its relative stability, capable of enormous changes”.¹⁰² The editorialist remembers that the needs of warfare require to study “not only the relatively enduring character of a nation, but also its more transient moods”: the social scientist must contribute to a “full understanding” of the characters, moods and interests of the nations “among which the War is being fought, and by which an international order must be reconstituted”.¹⁰³

Bateson acknowledges that his “abstract frame” for the research on national differences “will be useful only in so far as it suggests hypotheses which can be empirically tested” (MNC, 73). The American and English characters demand a different kind of propaganda “based on an understanding of their different ‘national’ psychologies” (MNC, 71). Bateson does not only show the differences in habit between various groups conditioned by cultural environment rather than by racial descent, but also their “implications [...] for the common character of the individuals who exhibit them” (MCN, 72). In order to state the “conceptual limits” within which the phrase is “likely to be valid”, he first examines some criticisms urged against “national character”; then, he outlines “what orders of difference we may expect to find” among western nations and guesses “concretely” at some of these differences; finally, he considers how the problems of morale are “affected” by them (MNC, 73–74).

Like Hume, Bateson allows the existence of a national or “common” character (E-NC, 203; MNC, 77, 79–80); yet, while Hume considers it as “uniform” (E-NC, 199, 204, 206), Bateson rejects any “uniformity” and limits himself to “regularity” (MNC, 75, 78, 89). The first part of Bateson’s argument recalls Hume’s opening distinction between national prejudices and characters. The examination of the “barriers” to national character “very stringently” limits its scope but also establishes its legitimate use (MCN, 79). Bateson accounts for two objections: the first appeals to the existing circumstances and historical background, which should be sufficient to account for the differences without invoking any unobservable difference of character (MNC, 74–75); the second appeals to differentiation, and articulates itself into five under-objections: three concern the differentiation within the nation or community (sexes, classes, and occupational groups; heterogeneity in melting-pot communities; accidental individual deviants); two concern the differentiation depending on changes (those within the nation and those of its boundaries).

The first objection, Bateson maintains, ignores “*learning*” and “learned character”: our characteristics “depend upon the previous experience and

101 Ivi, 32b.

102 Ivi, 33a.

103 Ivi, 33b.

behaviour” (MNC, 75). With regard to the second objection, some people argue that communities contain a “too great” internal differentiation or random element for any notion of common character; Bateson replies that his approach is useful, provided we describe this character in terms of “the motifs of relationship” between the differentiated sections, groups and individuals within the community (MNC, 77, 79), and provided we allow sufficient time for the community “to reach some degree of equilibrium or to accept either change or heterogeneity as a characteristic” (MNC, 79).¹⁰⁴ The postulate is that, like an individual, a nation is an “*organized*” entity, and all its aspects are “mutually modifiable and mutually interacting” (MNC, 76).

The insistence on the “mutual relation” within the community and between different communities, the “mutual relevance” between the special characteristics of different groups (MCN, 76), the “reaction” and “systematic relationship” among patterns (MNC, 78–79), recalls Hume’s insistence on “communication”:

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, and have a common or national character, as well as a personal one (E-NC, 202–203).

Hume considers communication both within a nation (E-NC, 204, 205, 209) and among different nations. The “situation of a nation with regard to its neighbours” (E-NC, 198) is one moral cause: “where several neighbouring nations have a very close communication together, either by policy, commerce, or travelling, they acquire a similitude of manners, proportioned to the communication” (E-NC, 206; cf. 215).

He who wants to describe the “common character of individuals” in a community must describe it in terms of “bipolar adjectives” and take “the dimensions of the differentiation as our clues to the national character”. Instead of defining the character of the Germans by its position on a continuum between extreme dominance and submissiveness (they are submissive), he will use some continua as “orientation towards dominance-submission” (they are dominant-submissive). By saying that they are “paranoidal” he will mean “some bipolar characteristic of German-German or German-foreign relationships” (MNC, 80, cf. 77).

Bateson displays his updated version of Humean sympathy: having discussed complementary (Germans) and competitive symmetrical (British and Americans) patterns, and combinations of complementary motifs (dominance-submission, exhibitionism-spectatorship, succorring-dependence), he happily concludes:

¹⁰⁴ According to Bateson “glorying in heterogeneity for its own sake” can be considered as a “common motif of behavior” (MNC, 77); according to Hume having “the least” of national character “may pass for such” (E-NC, 207).

Using the motifs of interpersonal and intergroup relationship as our clues to national character, we have been able to indicate certain orders of regular difference which we may expect to find among the peoples who share our Western civilization (MNC, 89).

The knowledge of characters is useful as far as it tells us what “we may expect to find” (cf. MNC, 74–75, 78, 88–89). As Hume put it:

some particular qualities are more frequently to be met with among one people than among their neighbours [...]. We have reason to *expect* greater wit and gaiety in a Frenchman than in a Spaniard; though Cervantes was born in Spain (E-NC, 197–198; emphasis added).

Conclusion

Nothing serves more to oppose any essentialist conception of nations and national characters than studying their theory and history. Especially because, even when we lose the feeling that our nation has a single identifiable character, we still ascribe it to others: we are “eager to give a national character”, as Wollstonecraft denounced. Hume had already warned us: “Men run with great Avidity to give their Evidence in favour of what flatters their Passions, and their national Prejudices” (Letters 2: 311). Godwin, Baroja, and Bateson: each of them makes a legitimate though partial use of Hume’s essay. Godwin and Baroja explicitly appeal to it. Bateson never mentions it, but his treatment is probably closer to Hume’s intention: to reject the prejudices without rejecting the characters, and to offer a plausible account of the latter in order to promote the good of the country.

As part of the vulgar we are inclined to form undistinguishing judgments and share national prejudices; as persons of good sense and reflection we correct these judgments and reject the prejudices, and allow the existence of (changeable) national characters and probable or frequent qualities and manners; finally, as prudent people we draw the practical consequences into our expectations, but we are equally ready to make exceptions; as Humeans we explain these characters by “moral” causes and “sympathy”, without forgetting that chance has an influence and only “the great liberty and independency, which every man enjoys, allows him to display the manners peculiar to him” (E-NC, 207).