This is both an ambitious and a disappointing book. The ambitiousness of its sweep through more than 150 years of Anglo-French intellectual history is easily apparent (and boldly proclaimed on the dust jacket). But it is disappointing because the argument is neither as iconoclastic nor as revisionist as the author apparently believes. This dense, complicated book is based on an impressively broad array of primary materials, but not a wide reading of secondary studies beyond the works of a few, admittedly influential, traditional intellectual historians. Romani’s approach is neither experimental nor innovative. Indeed, the explicit (and very nearly condescending) dismissal of studies of the broader cultural manifestations and uses of constructed ideas about national characteristics underlines the degree to which the narrowly conceived and intellectually elitist focus adopted by Romani barely disturbs our understanding of the hold ideas about nationality have had on modern consciousness. This book rounds out and clarifies high intellectual traditions, but is not a sweeping new interpretation.

The rationale for the book is well laid out in the introduction where Romani questions the essentialist use of terms like national character and national identity in both popular and academic discourse. Indeed, he discards the term “national identity” entirely, arguing it is a more modern-sounding, but in reality just as allusive, synonym for national character. Romani has no time for what he evidently sees as the faddish concern in recent scholarship with the expression of national identity/characteristics. He dismisses such recent work—without citing a single example—by stating his disinterest in tracing “successive portraits” of national character in Britain or France, or elsewhere. Instead, the book’s main concern is the “variation in the discussion of national dispositions conveying the issue of peoples’ suitability for liberty” (p. 3). Here his obvious, and acknowledged, debt to the ideas of J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner is made clear.

Romani explains that the book’s main argument stems from two contentions. The first is that “the viewpoint of citizens’ aptness for liberty should be distinguished from the specific idioms in which it was expressed” (p. 3), and hence deliberations on the making of civic virtues have a history larger than any one particular strand of thought. The second contention is that “the pervasiveness of the issue of citizens’ dispositions” dominated the period between the Enlightenment and the early twentieth century. The issue of the relationship between government and its citizens was at the core of social and political thought, and over the course of the nineteenth century institutions changed to accommodate this relationship. Later in the century the focus shifted to the “adequacy of the human material to the demands of mass society” (p. 4). The book compares Britain and France because of their two divergent idioms: British Whiggism (both pre- and post-Burke) and the French Enlightenment (and later British) concern with “public spirit.” Romani sees the latter as based in social discipline, responsibility in electoral choices, a sense of interdependence and belonging along with the willingness to operate and develop the institutions of self-government. Despite its long antecedents, Romani regards the civic thinking running through the nineteenth century as an “original intellectual phenomenon, motivated by the political and social problems of the day” (p. 4). In short, the book examines the emergence of a civic standpoint (what he calls “civism”) from within two different national char-
acter discourses. The political and social problems that amount to the key context for each idiom, however, remain largely in the background.

The book’s argument is divided chronologically into two periods, 1750-1850 and 1850-1914, which are then further divided into a number of discrete discussions of French and British thought. Romani argues that the period 1750 to 1914 saw the working-out of the problem of the “relationship between a free government (and/or market economy) and the quality of citizens” (p. 3). However, the division at 1850, marked by the rise of evolutionary social science, makes rather more sense than the end point of the study in 1914. This is particularly so given the references to thinkers such as Ernest Barker whose writings and influence were in the interwar and post-World War II period, and to the numerous social-scientific attempts to come to define national character in the twentieth century (p. 333). How or why 1914 was chosen as a concluding date for the study is never discussed: World War I clearly did not end the kind of thought analyzed, nor is it clear that it significantly altered or shifted the intellectual terrain of discussions about national character.[1] If a break is being posited, it needs to be demonstrated rather than assumed; if the end date is one of convenience, then this should at least be acknowledged if not justified.

Moreover, despite the title and the claims of the introduction, the book is not particularly comparative. French thought is given more space in this book than British: two-thirds of the first section of the book is devoted to the philosophes and their heirs. And although both the French and the British thinkers discussed in the first section make references to the others’ presumed national characteristics, more often than not Romani chooses to explore connections within national intellectual traditions (staying true to the two idioms rather than comparing and contrasting between them). Similarly, of the three chapters in the second chronological section, two are explicitly nationally focused: one dealing with the rise of social scientific thought in Britain, the other devoted almost exclusively to Durkheim and his influence in France. The penultimate chapter returns the author to British thought and the idea of public spirit, with a coda on Italian thinkers in the post-Risorgimento period. The conclusion glances cursorily across incidents of national character discussion in the later twentieth century.

Unsurprisingly, well-known Enlightenment thinkers dominate the attention given to the French portion of the first section of the book. Until 1789, French thinkers concentrated on criticism of their own national characteristics—although it should be noted that the nation they criticised was a narrow one, largely embodied in the leisured intelligensia of which they were a part. For thinkers like Montesquieu, Rousseau, Raynal, Voltaire, and others, national character was something molded by climate and/or by governing institutions. The concentration on institutions fed clearly into the political project of the philosophes: if the institutions could be reformed, then a virtuous citizenry might be developed, absolutism done away with, and national greatness returned to a free France. Clearly, the French Revolution was thus the apex and crux of change, not only for thinkers in France, but also for Britain where there was no similar radical break, but rather a gradual change in views due to the rise of political economy. In the aftermath of the Revolution, the causal connection between institutions and national character in France was reversed (and references to environmental determinism increasingly dropped). Romani shows this development by exploring first the thought of novelist and essayist Madame de Stael, then political economists like Dupin and moderate liberal journalists like Chateaubriand, with his analysis reaching its apogee in the thought of Tocqueville. His basic argument is that as current events made it necessary to extend the demographic boundaries of the nation, national character was perceived increasingly as the origin of national institutions rather than as an effect. Montesquieu and Tocqueville are the bookend figures in this first part of the book because both concerned themselves with their nation’s failure to establish free political institutions, albeit in quite different contexts: Montesquieu challenged the civic norms of Absolutist France by comparison with the British, while Tocqueville underscored the limitations of Restoration France by comparison with the Americans. The thinkers that are discussed along with these two comprise a “who’s who” of the major philosophes, along with an eclectic mix of lesser-known writers. Strangely, given the vitality of ideas about the nation during the events of the Revolution, Stael is the only significant thinker of that generation discussed. Rather it is the Restoration liberals (with a few cursory nods to conservatives like Bonald and de Maistre) whose thought is pored over, probably because of their influence on Tocqueville.

Liberal thought, both “vulgar” Whiggism and more refined variants, also constitute the core of the discussion of Britain from 1750 and 1850. The great difference was that in Britain there were fewer limits to free expression than in France, and more self-satisfaction with the pre-
vailing constitutional arrangements. As he notes, “Whiggism is a statement about the English in comparison with the French, but the criteria for judgement were universal in nature” (p. 163). Of course, ideas of national character in eighteenth-century Britain, rooted in Whiggism and notions of English liberty, could also appeal to conservatives and radicals as well as liberals. Nevertheless, over the course of the period discussed, British thinkers increasingly dismissed ideas that universal criteria such as civic virtue might be reproduced everywhere. They too shifted to a perspective that viewed nations based on cultural distinctiveness. While the pillars of the mostly Scottish Enlightenment—Smith, Millar, Ferguson—receive due attention, little space is provided for the philosophic radicals or for more conservative thinkers of the period. The exceptions to the latter omission are Burke and Hume, both of whom are given significant space. But Romani’s concentration on the influence of the Whig tradition is clearly evident, and here Romani’s argument builds on rather than overturns the work of Stefan Collini, J. W. Burrow, D. Winch, and other prominent intellectual historians working on the Victorian age. Romani caps his account of British discussions of national character with a single concrete example of how the concept came to be used in a largely negative way in the early part of the nineteenth century: an examination of British thought on Irish character from the Act of Union in 1801 to the Great Famine in the 1840s. Here the ideas of liberals like the historian Thomas Macaulay and of conservatives like Carlyle are viewed cheek by jowl. This chapter, in my opinion one of the best in the book, fits somewhat awkwardly with the others precisely because of one of its virtues. Romani delves into the realm of ideas employed by less-than-elite intellectuals: by some common-and-garden political propagandists. Of course, after admitting this, he immediately apologizes for referring to this less “refined literature” even though “it may serve to place the more upmarket texts in their proper perspective” (p. 215). However, such a comparison might have been a more fruitful approach to the whole book: the ideas expressed by other thinkers were similarly not formulated in a political or cultural vacuum nor immune from adoption and adaptation by the less intellectually gifted. Indeed, given Romani’s recognition of the emptiness of essentialist ideas about national character, it is a wonder he did not seek to further analyze why apparently more “upmarket” thinkers did not question the essentialism and determinism of national character. I would suggest more exploration of the cultural and political context, which might help provide answers to this conundrum.

In the second section of the book, Romani assesses the changing shape and use of national character descriptions from 1850 to 1914. For Britain he stresses the rise of the Darwinian and Spencerian intellectual framework of the social sciences and of the changing economic and social concerns in the age of imperialism. He starts with British thinkers and their need to find a social dimension to citizenship in a mature, mass, industrial society. Spencer and Mill loom large here, but he also finds space to analyze social psychologist William McDougall (and to a lesser degree the “herd instincts” theories of Wilfred Trotter) as well as the economic thought of T. H. Green’s idealism, the development of altruistic character traits and a re-affirmation of reciprocal relations within society seemed necessary. Romani travels confidently through these well-established contours of later-Victorian liberal thought. In his focus on national character and civic virtues in the thought of Hobson and L. T. Hobhouse, and their arguments for the demotic and communal basis of social reform, he illuminates but does not significantly revise existing analyses of the Fabians and New Liberals. He implicitly compares the new liberalism in Britain with the situation in France in his chapter on Durkheim. There the focus was much more on how to generate social cohesion and political stability.

Across the second chronological section, as in the first, the figures discussed are almost all from the liberal canon. Nearly all the British thinkers fit within a general Whiggish perspective, as he himself admits (p. 335). The lack of concern with more conservative thought is perplexing. Perhaps Romani does not see any conservative thinkers in nineteenth-century Britain or France sophisticated enough to discuss? But the rise of the conservative racialist thought associated with Gobineau in France and Robert Knox in Britain seems a strange omission. Even more liberal racialists like Charles Dilke are passed over with little comment.

Moreover, there is a lack of interest in explicitly religious modes of thought about the idea of national characteristics, even though such thought was quite highly developed in the Victorian era.[2] Similarly, radical and explicitly socialist thought (and not just that of the Fabians in Britain) also had to deal with the relationship between citizenship and national community; and not infrequently, leftists in Britain used national character as a tool for their own ideological work.[3] Lastly, in a book so keen to make fine analytical distinctions, I was surprised to see no attempt, beyond the case of Ireland, to come to grips with the thorny problem of British national
character as opposed to the various component national groups of the British Isles (English, Scottish, Welsh). Romani ignores the issue and merely refers to his use of terminology in a footnote (p. 14).

I began this review with an explicit criticism of the narrowness of this book’s approach—let me conclude by elaborating on that criticism. Roberto Romani is surely right to question the essentialism of national character descriptions, as he does in this book, but this is hardly a novel observation. He is also right to be critical of the use of national identity as an explanation for current or historical social and political developments, which again is hardly new. Romani’s implicit dismissal of recent scholarship on national identity in the British context is more puzzling. The implication of Romani’s introductory and concluding remarks is that the large amount of scholarship over the last fifteen years attempting to unpack the hitherto neglected presence of national rhetoric, contemplation, and self-identification in the British past has remained embedded in an essentialist framework or is irrelevant to serious intellectual history. I think this view, if it is actually what Romani means to imply, is simply wrong. There is some unevenness in more recent work conducted on national identity, and some works do lapse into naïve description and essentialism, yet Romani uses the intellectual historian’s conceit of referring to “the Anglo-French mind” (p. 343), itself a lapse into a form of essentialism. Most of the recent scholarship, however, starts from the assumption that the national is an imaginative fabrication.[4] Indeed, many of these works take as their starting point Benedict Anderson’s formulation of the national as an “imagined community” and/or Eric Hobsbawm and Terry Ranger’s notion of “invented traditions” (both approaches now twenty years old, although neither is cited by Romani).[5] For instance, the recent scholarship focusing on eighteenth-century nationalism in Britain has invariably sought to understand how national character/identity was ideologically used: whether it attempts to explore how the English identified national characteristics as a means to contest the power of their own cosmopolitan elites;[6] or how contemporary foreigners understood and helped to reinforce domestic English stereotypes;[7] or how national character was used to shape and mobilize a largely conservative, multi-national political community.[8] This work has not been just about defining national self-identification: exploring how contemporaries understood their own Britishness or Englishness is the starting point for understanding wider political or social questions.

Moreover, Romani’s deliberate disregard of gendered and racial characterizations in his study (p. 6), especially for the nineteenth century, allows him to ignore recent work by Catherine Hall, who has demonstrated the intersection of ideas concerning gender, race, ethnicity, and citizenship in a number of important works on the mid-Victorian period.[9] Her perspective permits the reader to see how the intellectuals of the age worked within, rather than above, society, and how they were influenced by, and helped to influence, the flow of culture. One does not have to accept post-colonialism tout court to see that the development of the world’s two largest colonial empires by Britain and France during the period 1750-1914 might have had at least a contextual impact on the intellectuals of the respective societies. Furthermore, gender characterizations are not just about the absence of women in political discourse; they are equally important in discussions of the same sex. I stopped counting the use of “effeminate” by thinkers in Romani’s text after I had reached a dozen instances. There is a rich vein of gendered language requiring analysis in these thinkers’ output on national characteristics.

Ultimately, however, my disappointment with Romani’s analysis is that it mirrors rather than disturbs Hall’s analytical trajectory without ever providing answers to the questions that she addresses: for example, how did some of the most respected intellectuals of their age come to share the prejudices and essentialist beliefs of their time? Of course, Hall’s conclusions and approach have not gone unchallenged, but the most serious challengers, like Peter Mandler, have presented a much different view of national character discussions in nineteenth-century Britain than have Hall or Romani.[10] Moreover, Mandler, like Hall, takes culture seriously as the context of his intellectual history. I would argue that, unlike Romani’s concentration on the “high-brow” intellectuals, we need to see more cultural histories that pay attention to “high-brow” intellectualism, and intellectual histories that pay more attention to the broader cultural context.

Notes


[3]. Margot Finn, After Chartism: Class and Nation in English Radical Politics, 1848-1874 (Cambridge: Cam-

[4]. Even if one disputes his chronology, there is no disputing Elie Kedourie's recognition of this point made in his 1960 intellectual history, *Nationalism* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1960).


[9]. Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland, and Jane Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the British Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). See also Hall's numerous articles and chapters published over the course of the 1990s, which have now been brought together and expanded in her most recent book, *Civilising Subjects: Colony and Metropole in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).


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