Uncovering the English National Character

A “chicken or the egg” question hangs over the study of nations, nationalism, and national identity. Did nations come before nationalism or the other way around? Once asked, this query immediately generates still more equally vexing problems. How can one identify the presence of a nation? Is it enough to find national consciousness among social elites or is it critical to find broad support among the masses? Is it necessary for historical actors to use the term “nation” or are words such as “kingdom” acceptable substitutes that ultimately meant the same thing? [1] These are not merely historical questions and quickly involve anthropological, sociological, philosophical, and linguistic concerns. With almost as many definitions of and ideas about nations as there are studies, most scholarly treatments speak past one another, further confusing issues that need no more obfuscation.

According to Peter Mandler, the solution to the problem of excessively “loose” terminology is to be found in a new and more complicated “language—one that recognizes different forms of national consciousness as well as other identities (including supranational ones) that bedevil national consciousness” (p. 4). Mandler takes an important step in this direction by moving beyond national consciousness, a notoriously difficult thing to pin down, in an effort to explore the idea of “national character,” those characteristics which are popularly believed to exemplify a people.

Mandler is certainly not the first to mention English national character (which is often considered, at least by the English, to be coterminous with British national character), but he is the first to systematically study its history—a task that often appears every bit as complex as searching for national consciousness or identity. It turns out that while national character is imagined to be timeless, it is an idea that is always in flux, which is constantly debated, and which is sometimes absent altogether. Indeed, even after national character was firmly established as a widespread popular discourse by the middle of the nineteenth century, there were often competing ideas about the nature and definition of that character.

According to Mandler, national character is a modern idea, little more than 200 years old. During much of the Middle Ages, collective identities were based largely on the king: the king personified the people. By the fifteenth century “Englishness” was beginning to appear as a concept that was usually tied to admiration of English laws and institutions. Without the widespread use of print language, however, there was little room for a vernacular of character.

By the seventeenth century new theories of historical origins provided the English with “more sharply national” qualities (p. 12), but intellectuals did not outline a firm notion of English character, with the nation as a centerpiece of analysis, until the Enlightenment. In the mid-eighteenth century thinkers such as Baron de Montesquieu posited the idea that geography and climate might define a people’s characteristics. Soon intellectuals such as Adam Smith, David Hume, and Edmund Burke started to apply similar ideas to the English. According to Mandler, Burke’s contribution to this burgeoning dialogue was especially important. The Dublin-born philosopher and politician wrote about an English inheritance, arguing that English history reflected a continuity of character across time—a character that helped explain the powerful democratic institutions that define political life in England. For Burke, institutions, English law and parliament in particular, along with the governing classes, exemplified Englishness. England was the pinnacle of civilization, its people the creators of something great who enjoyed an obligation to encourage others to follow them.
Once an initial conception of English national character was introduced, it gradually emerged as a popular mode of analysis yet it was never fixed and there was seldom, if ever, consensus about its parameters. At first, the idea remained close to the civilizational model suggested by Burke and the environmental explanation posited by Montesquieu. National character was about the primacy of institutions and the characteristics of individuals that made those institutions great.

As time passed, the idea of England as a “mongrel nation” that benefited from both Saxon and Celtic traits gradually eclipsed the civilizational model. Confidence in the union was at a peak and the idea of the mongrel nation made it possible to acknowledge English dominance in Britain while also recognizing the contributions of both the Scots and even the Irish. When combined, the strengths of each group helped explain why Britain was the dominant world power. Both reason and emotion were joined, creating a genuinely balanced people (pp. 66-67).

In contrast to the “mongrel nation idea,” based more on environment than race, racial explanations of English character gained popularity during the 1850s and 1860s. If the English were superior, as their burgeoning empire suggested to contemporaries, then it was necessary to fully explain why. Further, the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 and the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865 both “stirred up English anger against the ‘in-gratitude’ of fractious colonial subjects and English doubts about their capacity for civilization” (p. 72). What made these people behave so poorly while the English behaved so well? For many, race seemed an obvious answer, but this response took various forms. There were those such as J. C. Prichard who felt that humanity formed a single species and that differences were superficial. Meanwhile, polygenist thinkers held that each race represented a distinct species. In contrast to both, Lamarckian thinkers argued that the races started out closely related and subsequently, due to environmental factors, diverged.

Here again, the idea of English national character remained far from fixed. Even as racist thought sought to produce a more scientific explanation of difference, Charles Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* (1859) problematized racial explanations by dramatically expanding the historical timeline that most racialists used. For Darwin, species evolved over thousands of years, yet England was settled and had evolved quite recently. How could racial divergence explain changes that must have occurred in hundreds rather than thousands of years? As a result, many became obsessed with Teutonic explanations for English character. Between the rise of Napoleon III and his defeat by the Germans in 1870, English hostility toward France and affection for Germany reached its peak. In the context of the time, it made sense to celebrate England’s Anglo-Saxon origins and to point toward popular ideas about an ancient “Saxon constitution” which bordered on proto-democracy (p. 87). Teutonic strength produced England’s great institutions and empire.

Like its antecedents, Teutonism could not last. German unification and the subsequent development of German imperialism made it difficult to celebrate Germanic roots. Likewise, the traumatic impact of the Boer War made celebrating imperialist exploits equally troubling. By the early twentieth century, the new view of England was a “‘Merrie England’ of lords and peasants, cakes and ale, folk song and pageantry” (p. 139). England was no longer a place of bluster, but a place of peace. The English increasingly celebrated their ability to “muddle through” crises (p. 138), while returning to their peaceful ways immediately afterward. By the end of the First World War, the old racialist conception of England was popular only among a small minority, while the English were increasingly seen in terms of a character type: the “Little Man”—complete with a bowler hat, bow tie, and tightly furled umbrella. The Little Man was “small, kindly, bewildered, modest, obstinate and very lovable” (p. 163). While previously considered dower, in the wake of World War I, the English imagined themselves to have a sense of humor and to be especially kind to animals.

Yet national character remained far from fixed. During the Second World War, the Little Man view came under attack. It was not that critics necessarily disliked the Little Man, but rather that this “quintessentially English” characteristic caused people to be absorbed in home life and kept them “pottering in the garden” when they should have been tuned into world events. As A. J. Cummings wrote of his countrymen: “they were prepared to present half the world to Herr Hitler on a silver salver if only he would leave them to their own agreeable and prosperous devices, to their motor cars, their cinemas, their bungalows, their holidays at the seaside, their multiple shops, to all the congenial paraphernalia of a thriving and developing trade” (p. 185). Even during Britain’s darkest hour, however, not everybody could
begrudge the English national character. Yes, they were asleep at the wheel during the 1930s, but once the crisis was on, the English rose to the occasion. This ability to face adversity was soon integrated into the national character.

After the war, the English celebrated their character at the Festival of Britain and looked forward to a return to normalcy—but normalcy did not last. The splintering of popular culture during the 1960s, the economic troubles of the 1970s, and Margaret Thatcher’s failure to reignite belief in the national character all served to undermine the idea. For many, England was best exemplified by the past. Heritage centers and museums sprung up everywhere, prompting some to wonder whether England was about to become little more than a heritage museum. English national character seemed quaint, hardly indicative of a people who were more diverse than ever before.

While too recent for inclusion in Mandler’s book, Gordon Brown’s effort to develop a “statement of values” defining what it means to be British represents only the latest stage in this long-running dialogue. In an age of “England after Character,” (pp. 196-242) Mandler’s readers should be little surprised that the government faces a difficult road toward finding such a statement. In an age of speedy communication and transportation, emigration and diversity, the concept of English national character today inspires little more than cynicism. For example, Times of London readers replied to a motto-writing contest with phrases such as “Dipso, Fatso, Bingo, Asbo, Tesco,” “Once Mighty Empire, Slightly Used,” “We Apologize for the Inconvenience,” and, most popular of all, “No Motto Please, We’re British.” Evidently the latest debate about national character is whether it is desirable to attempt any definition of that character at all. As one motto-writer put it, “this idea of a statement of Britishness; I cannot think of anything less British than that.”[2] If Mandler’s book suggests anything about what to expect in the future, however, it is that the debate about character will continue, even if cynicism about character represents the new character.

The English National Character is an excellent book, full of gradations, anecdote, and intriguing arguments. Ideally it will inspire a new wave of scholarship about national character that will, in turn, reinvigorate debate about national identity more generally. Yet, as important as this book is likely to be, Mandler does not solve the chicken or the egg questions that opened this review for at least three reasons. First, Mandler makes clear that English national character is a modern idea. He will undoubtedly find disagreement among both early modernists and medievalists. Sociologist Liah Greenfeld, for example, cites John Milton’s belief that liberty was “the distinguishing characteristic of Englishness,”[3] a view not terribly different from that of Burke, Smith, and Hume some 150 years later. Was Milton ahead of his time or was he responding to a larger dialogue about what marked the English as different from their continental neighbors?

Second, The English National Character is likely to prompt objections from scholars concerned with ordinary people as opposed to social and political elites. Although Mandler does briefly discuss the popular reception of ideas on several occasions and while his study increasingly crosses class barriers upon reaching the twentieth century, this book is primarily concerned with the ideas of a narrow elite. While the debates outlined here are fascinating and important, it is highly unlikely that handloom weavers, a group whose fortunes were dramatically and adversely effected by industrialization during the early nineteenth century, sung the praises of parliament or discussed the particulars of John Stuart Mill’s effort to found a science of national character as they rested in their hovels at the end of a fourteen-hour day. At a time when most historians agree that nationalism and national identity was on the ascent, is it reasonable to assume that ordinary workers had no perception of an English national character? Where they completely excluded from the discussion?

Finally, Mandler’s effort to create a more complex language with which to explore questions of identity is an extremely valuable one, but it certainly does not simplify the underlying challenges. If anything, his book complicates matters tremendously by showing just how transient identities are. Sense of self and community shifts almost constantly. Demonstrating this is no bad thing. Indeed, it is refreshing in a field of study where identity is often viewed as a simple top-down construction. Yet we are still left with more questions than answers.

Despite these points, Mandler’s book is nuanced and complex, readable and engaging. Prompting us to consider “character,” in addition to “national consciousness” or “national identity,” may well open new avenues of study and new understandings. Man-
Mandler does a beautiful job, not only of demonstrating the contested nature of identity, but of showing how identity-related debate is closely wedded to historical context. Each new definition of and explanation for English national character was closely tied to specific historical moments whether the French Revolution, the expansion of empire, the various colonial wars, the inevitable domestic crises and political debates. English national character was a contested idea that was at once political and pseudo-scientific, transient, yet imagined timeless. Illustrating this point represents perhaps Mandler’s greatest achievement. Whereas most related scholarship fails to depict debate, suggesting that identities are somehow monolithic, Mandler shows just how messy identity is. His account should play a role not only in shaping the literatures about nations, nationalism, and national identity, but also the very discourse about English national character that is the subject of Mandler’s book.

Notes

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