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## National Character

National character is an expression which describes forms of collective self-perception, sensibility, and conduct which are shared by the individuals who inhabit a modern nation-state. It presupposes the existence of psychological and cultural homogeneity among the citizens of each country, as well as the idea that each nation can be considered a collective individual, with characteristics analogous to the empirical individuals who are its inhabitants. The noun *character* seeks to describe a universal aspect of social life—simultaneously an internal dimension to the existence of individuals and an external one, observable through collective behavior. The adjective *national* situates this universal aspect of social life in the specific context of those social units we call nations.

Since it was first formulated in Europe during the second half of the eighteenth century, the idea that the inhabitants of each nation possess psychological and cultural characteristics in common, which confer upon them identity and distinguish them from others, has always been a part of the ideology and practice of nationalism. Hence its double status, being simultaneously a descriptive and a prescriptive expression. On the one hand it describes communities of custom, forms of being and feeling, on the other it serves to make legitimate claims for sovereignty and forms of political action. One refers to the essence of each people or nation, the other supposes that collective action can serve to favor or even to mold the national character of a political community in the making.

During the 1940s and 1950s, the expression national character gained scientific legitimacy within the so-called North American anthropological school of Culture and Personality, to the point of designating an object of study and a university specialization: national character studies. From then on, it has been at the center of various academic controversies, where many have questioned its theoretical status, attributing its scientific shortcomings to its close relationship with the essentialism characteristic of nationalist ideologies. Yet recently, social theory studies interested in understanding the social force of feelings of national belonging and the new forms of nationalism have turned once again to the expression. What distinguishes this trend from national character studies is the fact that there is no attempt to attribute

any theoretical status to the expression; instead, current studies are more concerned with the expression national character as an object, a practical category used in the discourse and action of the social agents and groups which one seeks to understand (for an argument in favor of the study of the categories of national identification as 'practical categories' see Brubaker 1996).

### 1. *National Character and Nation-states*

Questions dealing with national self and unself have been historically associated with the origin of nation-states and with international relations. While the processes leading to the emergence of new nation-states served to substitute older national elites for new ones, redefining the borders between countries along the way, the belief in the singularity of *one* national character, also demanded the recognition of a plurality of national characters from which it became necessary to differentiate.

One of the most detailed examples of the relationship between we-ideals and we-images in the formation of nation-states can be read in Norbert Elias' studies of the Germans (see Elias 1994, 1996). Discussions concerning 'national character' in Germany emerged within the context of an encounter between new intellectual figures and a public capable of understanding and identifying with them. The poetry and philosophy of the second half of the eighteenth century (authors such as Herder, Schiller, or Goethe and movements such as *Sturm und Drang*) celebrated the ethic and aesthetic community grounded in the concept of *Kultur*, whose principal, distinguishing element was the use of the German language in opposition to the French spoken in the German courts by the social elites of the time. One century later, when the heirs to this intellectual tradition, backed by sections of the military and the old imperial nobility, established themselves within the German nation-state, words such as *Kultur* (alongside words such as *Volksgeist* and *Zeitgeist*) had already become 'nationalized,' thus designating the we-ideals and the we-images of social groups in a larger scale and describing forms of collective self-perception and the 'German National Character.'

The diffusion of the nation-state as a means for organizing social life (see, for example, Balibar 1991 [1988] and Anderson 1983) brought about similar processes in other areas of the world. At the start of the twentieth century, and particularly after World War I, the end of the old Empires served to reinvigorate nationalist ideologies in central and eastern Europe. Ideas about the national character of the Hungarians, Poles, Czechs, Romanians, Croats, and Serbs began to inform the unification policies of new states. By then, however, debates about 'national character' were no longer confined to European

intellectual circles. In America too, the most renowned authors were those who succeeded in describing the traits of the 'spiritual community' to their compatriots, who then recognized themselves in these. Their texts and ideas served as a guide for state politics, spreading beyond the literate elite and onto other social groups in the process of nation-making (particularly through the expansions of literacy and the school system). In Spanish-speaking America one of the best examples may be the Mexican writer Manuel Gamio, author of well-known statements on what it means to be Mexican, centered on the relations between the descendants of pre-Hispanic peoples and the Spanish (Gamio 1916). In Portuguese-speaking America the best example is Gilberto Freyre, remembered as the author of one of the most influential representations of Brazilian national character, based on the idea of miscegenation between Whites, Blacks, and Amerindians (see Freyre 1933). Among the many similarities between the two authors is the fact that during the 1920s both resided in the USA and studied under the German anthropologist Franz Boas at Columbia University. Boas is largely recognized as one of the intellectual fathers of the Culture and Personality school which later served as an inspiration behind national character studies (on the Culture and Personality School see the articles collected in Stocking 1986).

## 2. *National Character Studies: A War-time Anthropology*

The Culture and Personality School was marked by two main ideas. The first, based on the concept of primary socialization, sought to explain the relationship between types of culture and types of personality based on the experiences of childhood (see Mead 1928). The second, centered around the idea of patterns of culture, intended to describe and psychologically profile cultural configurations and the types of personality associated with them: each culture, although made up of fragments from different origins, developed a specific 'style,' capable of bringing about its unification as a synthetic totality and, at the same time, distinguishing it from other cultural units (see Benedict 1934). Even though the relationship between the concept of patterns of culture and the theories concerning German national character were very explicit (in her books, for example, Benedict mentions Dilthey and Spengler), the use of the concept was primarily restricted to primitive or simple (i.e., non-national) social forms, the traditional object of anthropological inquiry.

The use of these ideas in attempts to understand cultural configurations and personalities within national communities was, in fact, closely tied to the experience of the extreme and intense form of international relations which is war. For it was immediately after North-American intervention in

World War II that a group of anthropologists (foremost among them were Gregory Bateson, Ruth Benedict, Geoffrey Gorer, Clyde Kluckhohn, Ralph Linton, Margaret Mead, Rhoda Métraux, and George P. Murdock) became involved with the Office of War Information, intending to place the theories and methods of social anthropology at the service of the war effort. Its first goal became to produce a statement about national character which would help maintain the high morale of Americans during the conflict. Soon afterwards, its activities turned towards attempts at understanding allied and, specially, enemy nations.

The end of the war led to what would later be considered the most convincing evidence of the efficacy of national character studies. After Japan's surrender, the American government decided to maintain the Japanese emperor in power, as had been recommended by the Office of War Information in a memorandum signed by Gorer. This helped to ensure stability in postwar Japan and to guarantee that, despite Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a new state of equilibrium between the two countries could be established. This concurrence between US foreign policy and the anthropological analysis of the place of the Emperor in Japanese culture has been cited ever since as a fine example to the kind of 'applied anthropology' which national character studies allows.

But it was in the early 1930s that anthropological solutions to 'practical' problems began to be elaborated in the USA. Up until World War II, applied anthropology had been a matter for internal affairs, aimed at solving problems derived from American cultural and social diversity. In shifting the field of applied anthropology to external affairs, national character studies crossed a significant threshold in the history of anthropology. According to the division of labor established between the disciplines at the time, anthropology had been confined largely to the study of social forms different from those of the observer, and thus different from national societies and cultures. Now, for the first time, anthropologists began to deal explicitly with nation-states as an object of study. The discussions which then followed went beyond the concerns of anthropologists alone, and began to interest all those who sought to comprehend national forms of social and cultural life (for an analysis of the relations between theory and politics in national character studies, see Neiburg and Goldman 1998).

First the USA and the Americans, then Japan and the Japanese, Germany and the Germans, Great Britain and the British; a little later (already in the context of the Cold War) Russia and the Russians, Poland and the Poles (see, for example, Gorer and Rickman 1950)—all came to be treated as cultural worlds susceptible to analysis on the basis of the same categories used in the study of so-called 'simple societies,' those to which, until then, the majority of anthropologists had restricted their attention. Fron-

tiers between countries were treated as cultural, and cultural frontiers were treated as national, thereby delimiting new objects for analysis. The context of war and of conflicts between nations demanded, however, a methodological 'development': 'studies of culture at a distance' (see Mead and Métraux 1953, Mead 1953). Anthropologists, prevented from carrying out the traditional task of prolonged participant observation in the field, would now interview immigrants, analyze novels or films made in other countries, or examine media productions, so as to reach those cultural universes which were always qualified as *national*.

So began a tradition of research based on empirical sources which can still be recognized today, and not only in anthropology but also in other disciplinary traditions interested in the study of national cultures or societies (notably the so-called cultural studies). Yet it is interesting to draw attention to the paradoxical nature of the idea of 'studies of culture at a distance' for, in studying nation-states, researchers were socially and culturally 'closer' than traditional anthropologists in relation to their objects. Thus the fact that traditional methods and practices of anthropology (such as participant observation) were rarely made use of seems to have more to do with the specific properties of the object of study (or with the nature of the relations between researcher and object) than with the supposed impossibility of direct access to it.

### 3. *National Character Reframed*

In the theoretical debates concerning the expression 'national character' we can recognize some of the main questions surrounding contemporary discussions on the status of the nation-state as an object of the social sciences. One finds arguments in favor of the need to renew theoretical models in order to conceptualize empirical objects which need to be thought of as a historical novelty—such as those connected with processes of decolonization, localization, and transnationalization of social and cultural life—or denouncing the supposed limitations behind theoretical models whose origin would be a mere reflection of the world of nation-states which these models were developed to explain in the first place.

The main objections to national character studies can be summed up in three points. First, cultural patterns (obtained through the direct observation of empirical behavior) may become the principles through which one then seeks to explain these very patterns—a vicious circle which appears to be characteristic of culturalism in general (for a critique, see Kuper 1999). Second, observed behavior in a fraction of the society analyzed would then be abstracted and attributed to all nationals, without a critical enquiry into the social position occupied by that fraction within national society. As such, the idea of national

character would serve to disguise a more profound sociological reality; it would become an 'ideology' in the Marxist sense. Finally, in its rush to discuss racist theories, the Culture and Personality school (and, by extension, national character studies) may have shifted from a biological essentialism to a cultural or psychological one, which may then lead it to neglect other dimensions of social life, fundamental to an understanding of national realities and the elaboration of feelings of national belonging—such as institutional aspects related to the presence of the state, or the relations of differentiation, force, and domination between social groups (see Leite 1969 [1954]).

In an article first published in 1942, Gregory Bateson outlined what remains the most convincing argument in favor of studies of national character. First, he argued that the fact that national characters are constructs does not mean that they do not exist and therefore do not serve to emphasize cultural and social differences. Second, he affirmed that to speak of national character does not imply cultural uniformity, but can, on the contrary, stress the existence of a system of differentiations organized in relation to a pattern (a set of stereotypes) recognized as being dominant. In this sense, national borders (political, cultural, and 'character-based') would serve as a good example of how something which is socially generated can lead to certain effects, acting on the forms of self-perception of the very communities which they differentiate and constitute, ultimately affecting ways of feeling, living styles, and moral configurations (for a similar argument see M. Mauss' 1969 [1921]) classical text; good examples of anthropological studies heading in this direction include Handler (1988) on the objectification of national cultures and Herzfeld (1993) on the social productivity of national stereotypes).

Feelings of national belonging and national forms of organizing social life are, like the Roman god Janus, two-faced. One face is that of the solidarity between nationals, between those who stand united through a relatively homogenous social and cultural base. The other reveals itself at the national borders and the attempts at imposing them and re-enforcing them, through exclusion and nationalist violence. The sociological and anthropological understanding of both faces—as well as of the social force of feelings of national belonging, which are, in effect, the basis for their existence—constitute one of the central themes in contemporary social science. A careful examination of the diverse contents of the discussions brought about by the idea of national character shows us how an advance on this understanding must pass through three theoretical frameworks: we must situate feelings of national belonging alongside other modes of social belonging and identification (ethnic, racial, regional, transnational) as a means of discovering what they may owe to (and reveal about) the universal properties and forms of social life; we cannot ignore the historical and sociogenetical processes behind the formation of

categories of identity and the homogenization of forms of being and feeling; and, finally, it is essential to situate the comprehension of national characters as a dimension of the processes which objectify realities (cultures, societies, identities, stereotypes, etc.), both national and international.

*See also:* Benedict, Ruth (1887–1948); Cultural History; Cultural Variations in Interpersonal Relationships; Culture and Emotion; Education: Anthropological Aspects; Elias, Norbert (1897–1990); Gender and Feminist Studies; Gender and Feminist Studies in Economics; Gender and Feminist Studies in History; Gender and Feminist Studies in Political Science; Gender and Feminist Studies in Psychology; Gender and Feminist Studies in Sociology; Gender Ideology: Cross-cultural Aspects; Mead, Margaret (1901–78); Nationalism: Contemporary Issues; Nationalism: General; Nationalism, Sociology of; Psychological Anthropology; Religion: Nationalism and Identity; Sexual Orientation: Biological Influences; Values, Anthropology of

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## National Health Care and Insurance Systems

All national governments have some policies regarding healthcare for their citizens. National Health Care/Insurance Systems (NHC/I) are distinguished by two characteristics. First, the government sponsors or coordinates a system of healthcare service delivery or insurance. Second, this system aspires to guarantee the benefits of modern standards of medical care to all, or virtually all, citizens, and comes reasonably close to achieving that goal.

Government public health measures such as sanitation are not NHC/I because they do not focus on individual medical services. National systems to provide subsets of care, or care to subsets of the population, such as primary care clinics for the poor, are not NHC/I because they do not provide the full range of modern medical care to virtually all citizens. In any given instance, also, there may be disagreements about whether the aspiration is achieved: for instance, whether 'waiting lists' mean that adequate care is not guaranteed. Certainly no system meets all possible demands. Each nation also will have its own definition of the necessary extent of medical benefits. Nevertheless, the definition here fits common and scholarly understandings.