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NATIONAL CHARACTER

EVERYDAY assertions of differences in character between one nation and another have for long been maintained in the face of scepticism, and the scepticism has often seemed the more scientific attitude. 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? Scepticism is scarcely enough. Differences of national character (in some sense of the term) have certainly not been disproved. That they have also not been proved may well reflect on the crudity of the sociological and scientific techniques at our service. In these circumstances it would seem that a proper function of scientific discussion is that of sympathetically clarifying the popular conceptions and showing what, at their most plausible, they would be, and in what directions scientific proof or disproof could most profitably be sought.

Some such purpose informs an address on national character given by Prof. Morris Ginsberg at a recent meeting of the British Psycho-

logical Society. Prof. Ginsberg's caution and legitimate scepticism could scarcely be greater than they are. Yet his attitude towards the popular conceptions is sympathetic and constructive. At the present time such an approach is particularly welcome, attempting as it does a reconciliation between the standards of scientific thinking and the demand for positive contributions to an important topical question of wide interest.

Allowing fully for the effects of prejudice in observers and for the difficulties of defining both 'nation' and 'character', Prof. Ginsberg still thinks it a mistake to dismiss the idea of national character as a mere illusion. Instead, he asks in what direction there lies most hope of detecting and identifying differences in national character. With our present techniques for observing group behaviour he sees small likelihood of demonstrating by direct observation that particular traits of personality are more prevalent among one nation than another. The belief, for example, that the Germans are more docile than the English, or the French more articulate, cannot yet be scientifically

confirmed or disproved by the observation of individual behaviour. As a sociologist, Prof. Ginsberg puts more faith in analysing "the psychological basis of the collective achievements of peoples", their institutions and their corporate policies.

The pitfalls in the way of deducing national character from national institutions are not overlooked. In particular, allowance has to be made for the historical background of the institution (and often its geographical background) and for the class structure from which it emerged. This caution would be needed, for example, in estimating the significance for the English national character of our public schools, our non-conformist churches, our traditions of diplomacy. Prof. Ginsberg is of opinion that these and other similar difficulties can be sufficiently allowed for to permit of some valid deductions as to the national character implicit in collective achievements.

In illustration of this viewpoint he suggests that both the empiricism and the individualism which many observers regard as characteristically English can best be seen in our institutions. Individualism is evident "in the spirit of the English law which is a law of the liberty of the individual subject, in the strength of local government and resistance to centralisation, in the stress laid by Puritanism on the autonomy of the individual and in a very widespread and deeply rooted impatience of compulsion and restraint". An extreme form of individualism is also deeply rooted, according to widespread opinion, in the German character.

But there is an important difference between the two peoples in that among the English the individualism is counterpoised by a capacity for spontaneous organization, seen in the number of our voluntary societies, and in the history of the trade unions, the co-operative movement and the friendly societies. With this goes also the capacity for what Madariaga has called "collaboration in opposition", important no less in politics than sport. Among the Germans, on the other hand, individualism shows itself in politics as "a strong tendency to particularism and discord and an incapacity for wider unions except when they come under the influence of dominant leaders". Prof. Ginsberg inclines to the view that it is the Germans' lack of capacity for spontaneous organization which makes them seek unity through authoritarian discipline. "It is clear that, for whatever reasons, the need for authority is deeply rooted in German life and that the relationship of inferior and superior pervades all spheres of activity."

The English empirical tendency can be shown in our legislation and our politics, in both of

which "there is a disinclination to formulate general principles, and piece-meal enactments are preferred". English international policy is especially tentative and piecemeal, its consistency over long periods being due to the constant influence of our geographical and economic situation and not to a formulated plan. The lack of deliberated, abstract planning in the growth of the British Empire contrasts with the French, and still more with the German, policy towards colonial possessions. A similar tendency is to be seen in English domestic politics and Church history: "in dealing with the practical problems of life the English mind prefers to proceed tentatively, by trial and error."

In contrast to the English tendency stands the German concern for system and generalization. The systematic regulation of practical public affairs, and painstaking and exact investigation in scientific work, form one aspect of the Germans' effort to maintain a balance against excessive individualism and vague emotionalism. In their intellectual life, however, there is a liking for abstract generalizations which "do not seem to be reached by analysis of sense experience but rather by a sweep of imagination or fantasy". Here their interest in system "is often not rooted in the need for order, not the product of a drive to classify and understand, but rather of an imaginative longing for grandiose architectural schemes".

It goes without saying that these views cannot claim the status of scientific conclusions. They reflect subjective impressions. But as distinct from impressions of transient everyday behaviour, observed under conditions which are seldom defined and never exactly repeatable, these views are interpretations of a body of permanent material—institutions, writings, historical policies—which remains available for further inspection and re-interpretation. No one, and certainly not Prof. Ginsberg, would deny that by the standards of experimental science we are here on most uncertain ground. Yet a consensus of the opinion of observers who differ in nationality but who are examining much the same data can claim a degree of probability which should ensure serious attention and provisional belief.

To explain differences in national character is even more hazardous than to identify them. The view that national character is based on the biologically inherited constitution of a people, the so-called racial theory, has in democratic countries received ample criticism. Prof. Ginsberg ignores, no doubt wisely, the complication which Jung's doctrine of the 'collective unconscious' has introduced into an already confused problem. But he effectively re-states the objections to the main theory. He insists, however, that we should not go to the other extreme of denying to biological

inheritance all significance as a factor in group character. "Unless we are prepared to deny the inheritance of mental characteristics we must regard it as highly probable that just as there are individual differences there are also group differences and that these play their part in shaping the collective life of groups. . . . The inherited constitution must in some sense put a limit to what can be achieved by social organisation." But Prof. Ginsberg has no hesitation in concluding that historical and social conditions play a much greater part than genetic factors in moulding national character. As he says, "it must be remembered that the range of human potentialities is extraordinarily wide and that upon the same hereditary elements very different social structures may be built. There seems no warrant for assuming any such differences between national groups as would amount to an inherited incapacity of any one for the arts and institutions achieved by another."

The immediate practical significance of this conclusion lies in the consequent recognition that national character is, for all its relative stability, capable of enormous changes. Those who might wish to make an end of the German nation on the grounds of its incorrigibility will find no support in Prof. Ginsberg's careful and comprehensive survey of the problem. He takes the view that even if there is "an inherited element in the character of nations of long standing they nevertheless retain considerable powers of adaptation and the limits of these powers cannot be determined with any accuracy from their previous history".

The means by which profound changes in national outlook and character may come about—such, for example, as the abandonment by the Germans of over-emphasis on authoritarian organization—deserve the fullest attention of social scientists. This question did not fall within Prof. Ginsberg's purview, but it is one on which both sociologists and social psychologists should have important matter to contribute. The former have evidence on the workings of the broader social institutions. The latter may be expected to throw light on the importance in this respect of the characteristic structure of the family in different nations. It is in the family that many of our most enduring social attitudes are learnt and certain fundamental social expectations formed. There can be little doubt that the intimate structure of the family, influenced as it always is by the position accorded to women in the world outside the family, is highly relevant to the emergence of a particular social outlook in adult life. Tempted to despair of a changed outlook in some nations, we have to remember that effective changes in such profound emotional dispositions must occur very largely in

childhood—certainly with immense difficulty at any other period—and in the history of a nation like Germany there have not been many generations of children who have grown up during periods when the ideals of democratic co-operation had currency among the adult population.

The impossibility of scientific certainty in predicting the trends of development in national character is no good reason for abandoning all attempt at prediction. Where one observer goes completely astray, another, with greater insight and better opportunities of observation, will be far more dependable. At the present time it may well be that the practical judgment of men of affairs is as good a guide as any more scholarly or scientific assessment. In speaking of the Greeks, for example, Prof. Ginsberg thinks that their recent political and military behaviour "would have been predicted by no student of their character". Yet it is worth while to recall that Mr. Churchill (in "The World Crisis: the Aftermath") reports the belief of Mr. Lloyd George shortly after the War of 1914–18 that "The Greeks are the people of the future in the Eastern Mediterranean. . . . Their fighting power is grotesquely underrated by our generals. A greater Greece will be an invaluable advantage to the British Empire. The Greeks by tradition, inclination, and interest are friendly to us; . . . The Greeks have a strong sense of gratitude, and if we are the staunch friends of Greece at the period of her national expansion she will become one of the guarantees by which the intercommunications of the British Empire can be preserved. One day the mouse may gnaw the cords that bind the lion" (p. 391).

Some of the urgent, practical needs of warfare, notably the guidance of propaganda, demand the close study and collation of all that is known and alleged about the characters of the various nations. To a great extent such a study must be *ad hoc*, directed to answering limited questions of perhaps transient importance. For not only the relatively enduring character of a nation, but also its more transient moods and the particular aspects of character which are uppermost at the moment, are vitally important to the propagandist. To the statesman who must handle the broad issues of future policy the enduring features of national character and the trends of its development are equally significant. There can be few more important tasks for the social sciences than to contribute to a full understanding of the character, mood and prevailing interests of the nations among which the War is being fought, and by which an international order must be reconstituted, wherein all nations of the world may be able to advance along the road of civilization in peace and security.