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Roberto Romani. *National Character and Public Spirit in Britain and France 1750-1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. ix + 348 pp. Notes and index. \$65 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0521810000.

Review by Jeremy D. Popkin, University of Kentucky.

The title of Roberto Romani's study of how the question of national character was addressed in Britain and France from the time of Montesquieu to the early twentieth century is ambiguous on several points. His book is not in fact about "national character" or "public spirit" in either Britain or France, however those terms might be defined, and indeed his conclusion expresses doubts about the existence of such entities, although he admits the difficulty of getting away from the concepts in ordinary discourse. He has set himself instead the task of analyzing the role concepts of national character and public spirit played in British and French social and political thought. The title also raises hopes for a genuine comparative inquiry, but in fact Romani provides two separate accounts, interspersed with occasional sections devoted to Italian thinkers, and does little to link them together. He states that "the book's main thread is variation in the discussion of national dispositions conveying the issue of people's suitability for liberty" (p. 3), although his main conclusion is that there was little variation in these discussions. Romani finds that British authors consistently viewed their countrymen (he explicitly excludes women from his discussion) as peculiarly qualified to live under free institutions, whereas the French were consistently self-critical, frequently comparing their fellow citizens unfavorably to the population across the Channel.

Comparing Romani's two parallel accounts, one can see that there was a general tendency in both countries in the nineteenth century to broaden discussions of national character from analyses of elites to treatments taking in the popular classes. In Britain, the rapid growth of an industrial society led commentators to hail their countrymen as uniquely suited to productive work as well as to self-government; French writers (at least those Romani considers) seem to have paid less attention to economic virtues.

Romani puts himself squarely in the tradition of elitist intellectual history, claiming that he will concentrate only on serious authors and frequently dismissing what he labels as "down-market" publications. Other than a short discussion of Bonald and de Maistre, his French sources are drawn from what could be called the liberal tradition. He makes no references to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century republican or socialist thinkers, does not discuss the relationship between French nationalist discourse and the issue of national character, and there are no index entries for the racist theorist Gobineau or the *Action française's* founder Maurras. Romani's discussion is also strangely decontextualized: there is little attempt to link the thinkers discussed even to such major events as the French Revolution, which is mentioned only in connection with a section on Madame de Staël, or to the principal upheavals of the nineteenth century. Readers are presumed to understand why 1914 figures as an ending date: Romani gives no hint of what consequences the Great War had for his topic.

It is no surprise that Montesquieu and Tocqueville figure heavily in Romani's discussion. Both explicitly set up a contrast between French national character and their country's failure to establish free political institutions, which they contrasted with the success of the British (in Montesquieu's case) and the

Americans (in Tocqueville's). As Romani indicates, they differed in their explanations for this contrast. Montesquieu's climate theory suggested an essentially determinist conclusion, although his arguments were often inconsistent, whereas Tocqueville put more stress on institutions and historical traditions. Along with these two major figures, Romani discusses an eclectic selection of other French writers. The major philosophes are at least mentioned, but the revolutionary generation is skipped entirely, with the sole exception of Madame de Staël. The Restoration liberals get considerable space, because of their influence on Tocqueville, but the latter's contemporaries are largely ignored. Taine gets a certain amount of coverage, but not Renan. The hero of Romani's pages on France, however, turns out to be Emile Durkheim, credited with having put the study of identity questions on a scientific basis and with having dismissed the idea that France's political institutions had created a people unsuited for liberty. (Romani in fact says nothing about Durkheim's own political ideas.)

Romani's high estimation of Durkheim is clearly linked to his general distaste for the whole notion of "national character." His chapter on British assessments of Irish characteristics amply demonstrates the nefarious uses to which the concept could be put, and his brief concluding discussion on the failure of American social science attempts to define it, from the 1940s to the 1960s, suggests his fundamental attitude. He has little difficulty in pointing out the confusion and inconsistencies pervading most of the discussions of the topic he deals with. The major difficulty with his book, however, is his failure to explain how so many highly intelligent people could have taken the concept so seriously, and why it continues to pervade popular and journalistic discourse. Romani's own examples show how essential notions of the difference between national selves and Others have been to political and social thought throughout the past two-and-a-half centuries: if national character really does not exist, it has apparently had to be continually reinvented, and not only in France. A broader approach to the subject, and one that put greater stress on the interactions between the British and French traditions, rather than confining them to separate compartments, might have produced a more rewarding book.

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