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The Idea of the National in Victorian Political Thought

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ABSTRACT: This article contests the argument that British political thought in the 19th century was exceptional in European perspective in lacking a strong concept of nationhood and nationality. On the one hand it argues, with reference to Mazzini, Michelet and Renan, that continental European theories of nationality were by no means as dependent on a strong concept of race as a focus on Germany might imply. On the other hand, it identifies the Liberal Anglican tradition (Thomas and Matthew Arnold, F.D. Maurice, Arnold Toynbee) as a current of thought which generated an important but certainly non-racial concept of nationhood, as part of a general rehabilitation of community in the face of what these thinkers took to be utilitarian neglect.

KEY WORDS: *Matthew Arnold, F.D. Maurice, nation, nationalism, race, Toynbee, Victorian*

Peter Mandler has recently offered a powerful rebuttal of the increasingly fashionable notion that already in the middle of the 19th century British culture and thought were permeated with organic concepts of race and nation.¹ He has instead stressed the continuing vitality of an older, ‘civilizational’, tradition of thought which regarded nationhood as atavistic. He challenges the argument, advanced by cultural historians such as Catherine Hall, that imperial crisis in India, Ireland, Jamaica and elsewhere had a remorselessly nationalizing and racializing impact on British political thought. For Mandler, ‘the ladder of civilisation, rather than the branching tree of peoples and nations, remained the dominant metaphor’.² The former metaphor, tied to the idea of a ‘universalising “civilisation”’, implied a more or less uniform human nature, whereas the latter took human nature to be nationally differentiated.³ He argues that organic nationalism made few inroads in Britain before the First World War, and even concludes that it was only in the inter-war period, with the emergence of a conservative nationalism, that the idea of the nation came to play a central role in British political thought.

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In my view Mandler is right to cast doubt on the importance of racial nationalism in Victorian thought: indeed, his essay constitutes a powerful counterblast to the postcolonial argument that 19th-century conceptions of nationhood were defined by racial assumptions. It thus complements the work of scholars such as Georgios Varouxakis, who has definitively rebutted the suggestion that J.S. Mill's conception of nationality was grounded in racism or racial determinism.⁴ The criticisms this article goes on to offer of Mandler's essay should be read in this light. I think that Mandler unduly marginalizes the significance of other conceptions of the national. In previous work I have tried to indicate some of the work that the idea of the national did in Victorian political thought, and I now want to revisit my argument in the light of Mandler's interpretation.⁵ I want to explain why I still believe that the idea of the national was rhetorically powerful in Victorian political argument, and I shall draw on comparative perspectives to conclude that Britain's intellectual exceptionalism was not as great, in this respect, as Mandler supposes.

Because the aim is to qualify assumptions about Britain's intellectual exceptionalism, we need to begin by placing Victorian Britain in a European perspective. Mandler assumes that a strong concept of nationality – one that does a lot of work in political argument, for example – must rest on a 'biological racism' or at least an 'organic nationalism'. National differences must be regarded as innate rather than as the simple consequences of different patterns of historical development, in which different peoples ascend the ladder of civilization at differential rates. Furthermore, he implicitly assumes that this concept of nationality was the European norm in the 19th century. The English, he says, lagged behind continental Europeans in thinking seriously about nationality. But these assumptions are questionable.⁶ Mandler makes quite a lot of use of the Italian patriot Giuseppe Mazzini in support of his theory of British intellectual exceptionalism: Mazzini, he reminds us, argued that the British were too utilitarian a people to grasp the importance of the concept of nationality.⁷ But was Mazzini really a theorist of organic nationalism? Maurizio Viroli's work on the patriotic tradition of political thought suggests not: for Viroli, Mazzini was really a patriot as opposed to a nationalist, and he was critical of German nationalists for the narrowness and exclusivity of their patriotism.⁸ He saw nationhood as a bridge towards a universal fraternity: 'In labouring according to true principles for our Country we are labouring for Humanity; our Country is the fulcrum of the lever which we have to wield for the common good.'⁹ Or as Viroli puts it, 'For Mazzini *patria* is a common house in which we live with people whom we understand and love more than others because they are more similar and closer to us.'¹⁰ Nationhood was also a remedy for the vices of selfishness and individualism, for:

. . . where there is no Country there is no common agreement to which you can appeal; the egoism of self-interest rules alone, and he who has the upper hand keeps it, since there is no common safeguard for the interests of all.¹¹

It was crucial to Mazzini that the nation was not a unique source of value, but one – the largest actual – species of association. He drew a pivotal distinction between an association and a mere aggregation. Without equality of status (meaning the abolition of caste and formal privilege) and without the acceptance of a common principle, there could be no nation, but merely ‘a multitude, a fortuitous agglomeration of men whom circumstances have brought together and different circumstances will separate’.¹²

The same point may be made with the help of an example drawn from France: the historian Jules Michelet. Mandler cites him as the author of the kind of *Volksgeschichte*, or nationalist history, that the English lacked.¹³ But a more defensible reading of Michelet would see him as operating within the same sort of civilizational framework that Mandler sees as so distinctively English in the 19th century. National history was important for Michelet not because the nation is completely different from all others, but because it has lessons for others, because the national history has an integral part in universal history. Michelet’s *Introduction to Universal History* (1831) begins with the declaration that the book might equally have been entitled ‘Introduction to the History of France’. Michelet had arrived at the conclusion that ‘his glorious fatherland is henceforth the pilot of the vessel of humanity’.¹⁴ The ladder of civilization has been replaced by a nautical metaphor, but the implications are the same: where France leads, the rest of humanity follows. Michelet saw history as the struggle of the human spirit to subdue nature. This battle would last, he thought, as long as the human will could steel itself against the influences of race and climate.¹⁵ History is the history of freedom, and freedom entails the liberation of humanity from these atavistic influences of race and climate. At the outset these influences were all-powerful, but at each subsequent stage of history we can see ‘the fatal power of nature diminishing, and the influence of race and climate becoming less tyrannical’.¹⁶

This kind of argument about the relationship between nationality and determinism is familiar to students of nationalism and nationality through Ernest Renan’s famous lecture, ‘What is a nation?’, delivered in 1882. Renan’s chief aim was to contest deterministic conceptions of nationhood, without in any sense undermining the importance of the phenomenon of nationality, which he took to be a subjective phenomenon, defined above all by the will to belong: ‘The fact of race, capital at the outset, thereafter is constantly losing its importance. Human history differs essentially from zoology.’¹⁷ The same was true of language, geography and religion. The nation should be seen as ‘a soul, a spiritual principle’, dependent on ‘a rich inheritance of memories’ and on consent in the present.¹⁸ ‘Man’, Renan concluded, ‘is slave neither of his race nor of his language, neither of his religion nor of the course of rivers nor the direction of mountain chains’.¹⁹

Michelet and Renan were arguably the two most important theorists of nationhood in 19th-century France. Contrary to Mandler’s assumption, neither of them invoked innate national differences, since they saw the history of civilization as a

process of emancipation from the determinism of 'nature' or biology. But they did not conclude that nationhood too was an atavism. On the contrary, they saw nationhood as a spiritual rather than a material fact, and as the culmination rather than the origin of history. A focus on their work, and on Mazzini's, should surely caution us against assuming that organic nationalism of the kind that developed in Germany was the normal form taken by the idea of nationality in 19th-century Europe.

In an earlier work I suggested that the closest British counterparts of thinkers such as Mazzini, Michelet and Renan were the Liberal Anglicans – a line of descent that began, perhaps, with Coleridge, and continued through Thomas Arnold certainly, F.D. Maurice less certainly, and then on to thinkers such as Matthew Arnold, Arnold Toynbee and J.R. Seeley.²⁰ Thomas Arnold is considered briefly by Mandler, who contests the view of the late Duncan Forbes that the Liberal Anglicans were a major agency for the Germanization of British thought. For Mandler, 'the Liberal Anglicans' thought on race and nationality looks far more English than German', since 'they lacked Herder's distinctive view that different nations had essentially different moral natures'.²¹ But there is a case for dwelling rather longer on this tradition, and also for moving away from the contestable assimilation of 'real' nationalism and an effective concept of nationality with German thought. Perhaps the comparison with France is more appropriate than the comparison with Germany. Arnold's model as a historian was Guizot, himself a notable exponent of the civilizational tradition, but we might also compare Arnold with Michelet, not least because Arnold and Michelet shared an enthusiasm for Vico. Michelet translated Vico's *New Science* into French, while Arnold thought the work 'so profound and striking that the little celebrity which it has attained out of Italy is one of the most remarkable facts of literary history'.²² Both saw nationality as a pointer to the universal.

Arnold's conception of nationality emerges most clearly in his writings on the relations between church and state and the implications of church establishment. He held that nationhood and religion must be coterminous. He was critical of what he took to be the ancient doctrine that race is the basis of social union, and to that extent he followed Michelet and anticipated Renan in seeing nationality as a liberation from determinism; but he held that the social union had to have some substantive basis. This was to be found in religion: 'Christianity gives us that bond perfectly, which race in the ancient world gave illiberally and narrowly.'²³ The religious foundation of nationhood was not a narrow foundation, for in Arnold's eyes it implied a broad and non-dogmatic conception of Christianity: no discrimination was therefore implied against Trinitarian Christians of the non-Anglican denominations. But he also used it as the basis of his rejection of civic rights for Jews (and, indeed, for Unitarians). The state would be Christian, but the church would be national.

It was F.D. Maurice, much more than Arnold, who was the central figure in the Victorian articulation of the central importance of nationhood. Like Mazzini,

whom he admired, Maurice was critical of the Benthamites for their lack of a concept of nationality: 'In their project of society the Benthamites discarded, or treated as mere accidents, all *national* distinctness.'²⁴ He insisted on what he termed 'the unspeakable importance of a distinct National life'.²⁵ Nationhood should be understood positively because it was not a secular but a sacred thing: a sacramental sign of a universal fraternity. Maurice insisted on 'the sanctity, the grandeur, the divinity of national life',²⁶ and that, indeed, 'a nation just so far as it is a nation is anti-secular in one way, just as the Church is anti-secular in another'. Both church and nation were, he thought, 'god's appointed instruments for resisting the evil, rebellious, disorderly principles, which make up the scriptural notion of "this world"'.²⁷ Likewise his Christian Socialist follower, and Arnold's old pupil, Thomas Hughes, declared that 'The nation is holy as well as the Church. . . . Christ is the King of the nation as well as the Head of the Church.'²⁸ Maurice's understanding of the relationship between the particular societies of family and nation and the universal society of humanity (and the church) was grounded in a reading of scripture, and especially in his interpretation of the relationship between the Old Testament and the New. The old dispensation was not abrogated by the new – to think that was an 'accursed doctrine'²⁹ – and, because it was not so abrogated, the principles of national society articulated in God's dealings with the Jewish people were of broader significance; they provided the key to the history of all nations. The Old Testament developed the principles of national society while the New Testament developed the principles of universal society, and it was important to grasp that national society and universal society were mutually necessary.³⁰

Maurice was clear that his concept of nationality as love of country was incompatible with chauvinism or xenophobia. He sought to avoid the 'opposite dangers' of contempt for other nations and undue neglect of the merits of our own. He urged 'an increased reverence for our position as members of a nation', but argued that this principle of nationality implied equal respect for all nationalities:

If I count it an unspeakable blessing for myself to be the citizen of a nation, I must count it an unspeakable blessing for every man. If I, being an Englishman, desire to be thoroughly an Englishman, I must respect every Frenchman who strives to be thoroughly a Frenchman, every German who strives to be thoroughly a German. I must learn more of the worth and grandeur of his position, the more I estimate the worth and grandeur of my own.³¹

It is only as an Englishman that the Englishman is useful to the Frenchman or the German; and vice versa. If they shed their distinctive characteristics they become useless to each other: 'neither brings in his quota to the common treasure of humanity'. In other words, humanity is a universal community grounded not in homogeneity but in heterogeneity: it derives its strength from national differences and not from national sameness. Similarly, nationhood is a modern form of community founded not in an atavistic nostalgia for an undifferentiated society but rather on a modern sense of individuality. A nation, he asserted, is 'a Collection

of Individuals': not in the sense of a mere aggregate of individuals, but in the sense that there can be no nation if those who compose it are not individuals (that is, do not possess subjectivity), and, conversely, that there can be no individuals without nationhood. Significantly, he cited Fichte here: he was both 'the assertor of Individuality' and 'the defender of his nation'.³²

For Maurice, to assert the importance, indeed the sacredness, of national life was a way of asserting the necessity of community founded not on blood but on shared belief or a common life: indeed, a spiritual community. For him, as for Mazzini, nationality was a principle opposed to individualism. In this tradition the antonym of 'national' was not 'foreign', but, perhaps, 'private', 'sectional', 'sectarian' or 'narrow'. So Thomas Hughes, critical of the revival of Convocations in the Church of England, depicted them as instruments of clerical government of the church. They would be liable 'to take narrow professional, rather than broad national views'.³³ We can find resonances of this usage in Matthew Arnold's work, especially *Culture and Anarchy*, which was rhetorically directed against the provincial and the sectarian. This trope is especially evident in the preface to the 1869 edition. There Arnold develops his argument that Nonconformity stamps a *provincial* as opposed to a *national* character on its adherents. The reason was that 'the Nonconformist is not in contact with the main current of national life, like the member of an Establishment'. The best way of protecting ourselves from the Hebraizing tendency of all religion was to have 'the main current of national life flowing round us, and reminding us in all ways of the variety and fulness of human existence'.³⁴ Arnold develops an argument in which the concept of the national plays a pivotal role, and in which its antonym is certainly not the foreign or the cosmopolitan, but the narrow, the peripheral and the provincial. Nationality was rhetorically connected with liberality, centrality and breadth of outlook, as well as with a specific argument in favour of religious establishment, which necessarily promotes 'totality', whereas dissenting or 'hole-and-corner' forms of religion based on 'free religious communities' and the voluntary principle promote 'provincialism', 'want of centrality' and 'a narrow and partial view of humanity and its wants'. So: 'the Nonconformists have got provincialism and lost totality by the want of a religious establishment'.³⁵

In the Liberal Anglican tradition religion, culture and education were not carefully demarcated, and Arnold's concept of nationality was also pivotally important to his writings on education, and especially to *A French Eton*. There he argues for the need to make secondary education for 'the offspring of the middle classes' into a 'national concern'. The means he envisages is by:

... giving them great, honourable, public institutions for their nurture – institutions conveying to the spirit, at the time of life when the spirit is most penetrable, the salutary influences of greatness, honour, and nationality – influences which expand the soul, liberalise the mind, dignify the character.³⁶

Existing provision – in the form of the Woodard Trust and its schools, for

instance – was criticized on the ground that ‘their constitution is too close, their composition too little national’.³⁷ Elsewhere he argues that where a nation lacks an intellectual centre of the kind provided by an academy, the intellectual life of the nation will display ‘a *note of provinciality*’ caused by ‘remoteness from a centre of correct information’.³⁸

The idea of nationality figured in the Liberal Anglican tradition as part of a broader rehabilitation of community against the utilitarian tradition. It would serve as the spiritual principle at the basis of a *modern* community. Mazzini, who spent much of his life in London, was an important source here. He was widely admired in Victorian intellectual and political circles, which is difficult to explain if his concept of nationality were as remote from Victorian ideas as Mandler implies. The Liberal Anglicans were particularly enthusiastic followers of his. At Cambridge, Maurice and Seeley were among the members of a reading group which met and discussed *The Duties of Man*. At Oxford he attracted a host of followers at Balliol: these included Jowett, Green and Arnold Toynbee, who declared that ‘not Adam Smith, not Carlyle great as he was, but Mazzini is the true teacher of our age’.³⁹ Bolton King, Mazzini’s editor and biographer, was a Balliol man and a student of Toynbee’s. His lecture notes help provide the published text of Toynbee’s posthumous *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution in England*, and he participated in the foundation of Toynbee Hall, a memorial to his old tutor, where Mazzini’s translator and King’s collaborator, the self-taught Thomas Okey, taught Italian.

Toynbee was named after Thomas Arnold and his father was a friend and ally of Mazzini’s in London: his personal background itself therefore provides some support for the argument advanced here.⁴⁰ But intellectually too he was a key figure in this tradition, because he drew on the Arnoldian tradition as well as on Mazzini to formulate a distinctive critique of individualism in the name of association. Recording the attack made on *laissez-faire* individualism by the Romantic poets and others (he quoted Coleridge: ‘the entire tendency of the modern or Malthusian Political Economy is to denationalise’⁴¹), he argued that that critique was doomed to fail because they sought to preserve moral relations that rested on the *dependence* of the labourer. The cash-nexus, which they denounced, was necessary to the emancipation of the labourer from this dependence. That newly found independence was ‘a necessary condition of the new and higher form of social union, which is based on the voluntary association of free men’.⁴² Here Toynbee echoed Maurice’s argument that nationhood was a form of community that built on individuality rather than extinguishing it.

Toynbee’s critique of *laissez-faire* liberalism and his significance for the rise of collectivism in the late Victorian period are well-known. His churchmanship is less often commented upon, but was crucial to his outlook, and in particular to his quest for a modern form of association. In a free society, he recognized, individuals could not be held together by the external state alone; instead, it was for religion to ‘weld free but isolated beings into a loving interdependent whole’.⁴³

For him, as for Matthew Arnold, it was a broad and national, rather than a narrow and sectarian, religion that could do this:

Which is the more likely to do this: a religion wise and rational, comprehensive and universal, recognising a progressive revelation of God, such as the State may provide, or a religion provided by individual interests which is liable to become what is popular at the moment, which accentuates and multiplies divisions, which perpetuates obsolete forms, and has no assurance of universality of teaching.⁴⁴

He shared the characteristic Liberal Anglican view that a state church could preserve the minister of religion (he eschewed the term 'priest') from 'the spiritual despotism of the people'.⁴⁵

In this article I have been concerned to evoke one set of usages of the idea of 'the national' in Victorian political thought. In the tradition examined here, nationality was cherished as a remedy for the vices of individualism (in Maurice and Toynbee) or for provincialism (in Matthew Arnold). Mandler recognizes the Liberal Anglican tradition as a key source of anti-individualistic thinking about nationality, but he thinks it was a rather short-lived movement which could not survive the crisis of natural theology in mid-century. My suggestion is that it was in fact a much more mainstream current of thought which irrigated some fertile traditions of political thought: idealism, for instance, but also the tradition of Anglican social thought represented by Westcott, and the nationalist historiography of Seeley. I have suggested that this tradition of thought was a counterpart of the civic tradition of patriotism articulated by continental European thinkers such as Mazzini, Michelet and Renan. Clearly there remains a British exceptionalism here: notably the fact that the idea of nationality I have been concerned with was usually articulated in religious terms, and from within rather than without the ecclesiastical establishment. Mazzini, Michelet and Renan, though all in many ways deeply spiritual thinkers, were separated from the Catholic Church and indeed from any institutional religion. But if Victorian Britain was intellectually distinctive in a number of ways, that distinctiveness did not entail the absence of a working concept of nationhood.

Notes

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11. Mazzini (n. 9), pp. 53–4.
12. Ibid. p. 57.
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18. Ibid. p. 903.
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29. Maurice (n. 24), vol. 1, p. 232.
30. Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 234, 237, 246.
31. Frederick Denison Maurice (1893) *Social Morality*, 2nd edn, pp. 106–7. London and New York: Macmillan.
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33. Vidler (n. 28), p. 255.
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41. Toynbee (n. 39), p. 24.
42. Ibid. p. 25.
43. Ibid. p. 237.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid. pp. 237–8.