

The formation of national character.

Throughout the years, the origins and causes of differences in national character have been the subject of great discussion. In this discussion, one may distinguish two types of theory, namely essentialist theories and constructivist theories. Essentialists believe that national character is determined by physical causes, such as climate, heredity or food. All members of a nation share essential characteristics which do not change through times. The opposite of essentialism is constructivism. Constructivist theories are based on the idea that national character is not determined by physical, but by social or 'moral' causes, such as education, government and upbringing.¹

Oliver Goldsmith and David Hume were eighteenth-century British philosophers, who respectively wrote 'A Comparative View of Races and Nations' (1760) and 'National Character' (1741). Both these writers have different ideas as to how national character is formed. In his essay, Goldsmith appears to be more of an essentialist than Hume, though both argue their point with some subtlety.

In his essay 'National Character' Hume's line of thought is primarily focused on constructivist theories. He states:

That the character of a nation will much depend on *moral* causes, must be evident to the most superficial observer; since a nation is nothing but a collection of individuals, and the manners of individuals are frequently determined by these causes.²

In other words; according to Hume the character of an individual is determined by moral causes. A nation is made up of individuals and the character of a nation therefore depends on moral causes rather than physical causes. He explicitly rejects the idea that 'men owe anything of their temper or genius to the air, food or climate.'³ To support his theory, Hume sums up a number of examples in which nations all around the globe show signs of national characters which are not formed under the influence of air or climate.

One of these examples is that people living in different nations 'who maintain a close society or communication together (...) acquire a similitude of manners', such as the Jews in Europe and the Armenians in the East. Usually they have more in common with their 'people', than with the nation they live in.⁴ Neighbouring nations who have close communication together by policy, commerce or travelling, can also acquire a likeness of

¹ Menno Spiering, 'National Character and National Identity.', pp. 3-4.

² David Hume, 'National Character', p. 144.

³ David Hume, 'National Character', p. 146.

⁴ David Hume, 'National Character', p. 150.

manners, which corresponds with the intensity of communication between the nations.⁵ Naturally, the establishment of national characteristics amongst people does not only occur in separate countries. Even within the same country, one could find two completely separated nations with their own national character.

Sometimes an ‘accident’, as Hume calls it, such as a difference in language or religion can prevent two nations in the same country from influencing each other. As a result, both nations develop their own, sometimes even opposite set of manners. In his essay, Hume mentions the distinction between the modern Greeks and the Turks as an example of this phenomenon.⁶ Hume puts a lot of emphasis on the impact that the government of a country has on the formation of national character.

Because people have the natural habit of copying or imitating behaviour of others, figures of authority play a big part in the formation of national character. Therefore, the type of government of a country has a big influence on national characteristics. As Hume states:

Where the government of a nation is altogether republican, it is apt to beget a peculiar set of manners. Where it is altogether monarchical, it is more apt to have the same effect; the imitation of superiors spreading the national manners faster among the people. If the governing part of a state consist altogether of merchants, as in Holland, their uniform way will fix their character. If it consists chiefly of nobles and landed gentry, like Germany, France and Spain, the same effect follows.⁷

Hume points out this phenomenon, in order to explain the reason why the English, more than any other nation, show such a mixture of manners and characters. The fact is, the English do not have one type of government. Actually, their government is a mixture of aristocracy, monarchy and democracy. Hume says: ‘The great liberty and independency which every man enjoys, allows him to display the manners peculiar to him. This is the reason why the English have the least of a national character.’ In other words, people ‘choose’ whom they imitate and because the people of England do not have one particular superior to follow, their characters differ within the nation.⁸

Hume also gives an explanation for the fact that the manners of a people can change. This is usually ‘due to alterations in government, by mixtures of new people or by that inconstancy to which all human affairs are subject.’⁹

⁵ David Hume, ‘National Character’, p. 151.

⁶ David Hume, ‘National Character’, p. 150.

⁷ David Hume, ‘National Character’, p. 152.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ David Hume, ‘National Character’, p. 151.

In another part of his essay, Hume again stresses the impact of the government: 'A very extensive government (...) established for many centuries (...) spreads a national character over the whole empire.' China, or rather the Chinese thus have the greatest uniformity of character imaginable, whereas in small governments the people usually have a different character and are often as different in nature as the most distant nations.¹⁰ Hume also states that 'the same national character commonly follows the authority of government to a precise boundary (...)'¹¹

As mentioned before, Oliver Goldsmith also wrote about the formation of national character, in 'A Comparative View of Races and Nations'. However, instead of the moral causes Hume discusses, he puts much more stress on physical factors.

According to Goldsmith, European peoples are superior to inhabitants of other parts of the globe, in particular Asia, because of physical causes. In this case, he does not refer to climate or soil, but to the population of the country. In Asia, parts of the country are closely inhabited, whereas other parts are seen without any inhabitants at all. Too much or too little cultivation changes the whole face of nature. 'As every country becomes barren, it is proportionably depopulated; and as the people diminish, so do the love, and even the utility of the sciences diminish also.'¹² Goldsmith states that the reason why Asians are 'more savage' than Europeans, is that in Europe the population is in fact equally spread out. The land is divided into small districts, and governed with equity.

Like Hume, Goldsmith believes that the English are different from the rest of the world. He also acknowledges the impact of the government in this establishment, but his approach differs from Hume's. Goldsmith argues:

As the government is charged with the most important concerns of Europe, and as every man has some share in the government, he by this means acquires a conscious importance, and this superinduces that gloom of solid felicity (...) ¹³

Thus, Goldsmith ascribes part of the differences of the English to the government, just like Hume. However, in his opinion, this is not the only factor which influences their characteristics. The other part of their differences he actually ascribes to their soil. He states that the fruitful soil prompts to luxury, but because it produces excellent meats, but no wine

¹⁰ David Hume, 'National Character', p. 149.

¹¹ David Hume, 'National Character', p. 150.

¹² Oliver Goldsmith, 'A Comparative View of Races and Nations', p. 83.

¹³ Oliver Goldsmith, 'A Comparative View of Races and Nations', p. 85.

this is not necessarily a negative luxury. The English indulge in an excess of eating rather than drinking, which has a positive effect on their tempers.

Goldsmith points out another characteristic of the English; that they have always had a passion for liberty. He states that this is due to physical causes. The fact that they live on an island has protected them from external threats and so they have had no external factors to distract their attention. Thus, their 'principle of liberty, of impatience under restraint, probably proceeds from their happy situation; (...)' ¹⁴

David Hume and Oliver Goldsmith both have their own view on the formation of national character. Though neither of them explicitly pinpoints one theory, Oliver Goldsmith's line of thinking appears to be more of an essentialist view than Hume's.

In his essay Hume argues that the people in different countries owe their national characteristics to moral causes such as governments, and very little to physical causes such as food, soil and climate. He argues against physical causes by illustrating that two specific societies in the same geographical conditions may have highly diverse characteristics and also that two societies in different geographical conditions may have similar characteristics. He puts a vast emphasis on the impact of government on the formation of national character and explains that the English show such a mixture of manners and character, because of their mixed government.

Goldsmith on the other hand, seems to be torn between two views. He ascribes some aspects of national characteristics to physical causes, such as the superiority of the Europeans, which he ascribes to the equal division of population over the country. In the case of the English however, he states that their manners, dispositions and turn of thinking are induced partly by government, which is a moral cause, and partly by the climate or the soil, which are physical factors.

Because Goldsmith considers both these causes as factors which influence national character, it would not be right to pigeonhole him as a true essentialist. However, it is fair to say that out of the two philosophers, Oliver Goldsmith's theory and views are most inclined towards essentialism.

¹⁴ Oliver Goldsmith, 'A Comparative View of Races and Nations', p. 86.

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