

Themed Section on Varieties of Britishness
English and French national identity:
comparisons and contrasts*

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ABSTRACT. The English and the French are both former imperial peoples, and to that extent they share certain features of national identity common to peoples who have had empires. That includes a ‘missionary’ sense of themselves, a feeling that they have, or have had, a purpose in the world wider than the concerns of non-imperial nations. I argue that nevertheless the English and the French have diverged substantially in their self-conceptions. This I put down to a differing experience of empire, the sense especially among the French that the British were more successful in their imperial ventures. I also argue that contrasting domestic histories – evolutionary in the English case, revolutionary in that of the French – have also significantly coloured national identities in the two countries. These factors taken together, I argue, have produced a more intense sense of nationhood and a stronger national consciousness among the French than among the English.

Nothing is more helpful to an anthropologist than to study contrasts he finds between peoples who on the whole share many traits (Ruth Benedict [1946] 1977: 7).

It is precisely communities with adjoining territories, and related to each other in other ways as well, who are engaged in constant feuds and in ridiculing each other (Sigmund Freud [1930]1963: 51).

History and identity

The French and the English, it is generally agreed, have very different attitudes to their history and how it affects them. For the English, despite all the cultivation of ‘heritage’ and the celebration of ‘Olde England’, the past

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is past; it has done its work. That does not mean that the English turn their back on the past, in the American manner ('history is bunk'). Rather it is an assumption of a continuity so seamless that the past dissolves insensibly into the present, making the distinction between past and present both difficult and pointless. Continuity knits the past to the present; it creates an organic whole which confronts the future with the resources of a thoroughly mastered and assimilated history.

Such a perception of continuity has significant implications for the concept of national identity. 'Because we in England', said Herbert Butterfield in an influential expression of this view, 'have maintained the threads between past and present we do not, like some younger states, have to go hunting for our own personalities. We do not have to set about the deliberate manufacture of a national consciousness, or to strain ourselves, like the Irish, in order to create a 'nationalism' out of the broken fragments of tradition, out of the ruins of a tragic past' (Butterfield 1945: 114).

Butterfield, as numerous references in his book make clear, did not simply have the Irish and other 'younger states' in mind. The 'tragic past' that was their burden was also the affliction of a near neighbour, one that was not only very old but had for some centuries rivalled England for world supremacy. The French suffered from precisely those violent ruptures and abrupt discontinuities that it had been England's good fortune to avoid. Thus after 'the great gash' caused by the seventeenth century Civil War, the English 'recovered continuity for our institutional life, so that healing could take place and normal growth could begin again'. The French by contrast, 'after the cataclysm of 1789, did not heal the wounds or tie up the threads again'. The result was a permanent war between 'Tradition' and 'Reason' in French politics and society, a constant struggle between an embattled conservatism and 'the romantic hypostasization of Revolution as such' (Butterfield 1945: 75, 104).

This complacent view of English history, and of its contrast with that of the French, is of course eminently contestable, and has indeed frequently been contested in the work of radical historians such as Christopher Hill and Edward Thompson. But whether or not seen as the self-serving view of the comfortable classes in English society, there remains an element of truth – at least as perceived by many of the English – in the contrast. Moreover so far as France is concerned, students of that country have largely concurred with this view of French history and its role in French political life. The turbulence of recent French history means that the past remains urgently alive, permanently present, a constant source of both warnings and inspiration. As Anne Sa'dah explains:

The British [*sic*] achieved closure on most of their disputes. The French did not, and so for them the past, dense with colliding ideas, individuals, and groups, remains present. It shapes how people understand themselves, articulate their aspirations, and assess the possibilities of political life. It provides the key to the codes in which current

conflicts are framed and fought (Sa'dah 2003: 1–2; cf. Gildea 1994: 340–4; Nora 2001: xxi).¹

The important question, as Butterfield suggests, is the effect of such differences in history, and of the relation to history, on national consciousness and national identity. Nations are formed of national memories, of the stories of great men and great deeds. This, as Ernest Renan says, is 'the social capital on which the national idea is based'. But it is not just triumphs and glory but also, and perhaps more so, defeats and trials that make the nation.

One loves in proportion to the sacrifices to which one has consented, and in proportion to the ills that one has suffered . . . [I]ndeed, suffering in common unifies more than joy does. Mourning is more important for national memory than triumph, for it imposes obligations, it demands a collective effort (Renan [1882] 1990: 19).²

Renan, writing shortly after the Franco–Prussian war of 1870–71, and the loss of Alsace-Lorraine to Germany, had every reason to feel the point keenly. It was necessary to wrest some sort of victory – if only a moral victory – from a crushing defeat. The French, he would argue, could take strength from the experience of suffering and defeat. France would emerge fortified as a nation, more certain of its identity, clearer as to its values. So had Rome emerged reinvigorated and more firmly united after its ordeal at the hands of the Carthaginian general Hannibal; so too would France after the trials of 1870–71.

It is the argument of this paper that it is the experience of defeat, taken with a particularly disturbed internal history, that has coloured French perceptions of national identity and shaped the character of its nationalism. This becomes clearer in a comparison with England and the English. The French and the English share many features. From the time of the Norman Conquest of 1066 to the break with Rome under Henry VIII in 1534, the French and the English had a common history. For much of the medieval period the French supplied England with a succession of monarchs, Norman and Plantagenet; French was the language of courtly society and courtly culture in England; French masons and French quarries supplied the skills and materials for the building of the great English cathedrals such as Canterbury, York and Winchester. Even the bitter conflicts between French and English, such as the Hundred Years' War of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, had the appearance of family quarrels, in which rival kings fought for the joint supremacy of France and England.

The Protestant Reformation and the loss of English power in France drew clearer lines between French and English developments. But their histories remained inextricably interlocked. Now, however, it was no longer struggles over a common Anglo-French patrimony that united them but, as great powers, competition and conflict for world domination. With the removal of the Dutch challenge at the end of the seventeenth century, the stage was set for an epic confrontation between the established power of France and the rising power of England.

The consequences of this conflict for the making of English (and British) identity have often been noted, most persuasively by Linda Colley (1994). One clear way, building on earlier traditions, was the drawing of a line between English – and British – Protestantism and French Catholicism. Another was the celebration of the English as ‘the island race’, with the development of the free, manly qualities generally held to go with maritime nations as contrasted with the despotic, militaristic, traditions of the land-based continental nations (see e.g. Wilson 2003). The two could be fused – as later in Arthur Bryant’s *Protestant Island* (1967) and several of Winston Churchill’s writings – in the idea of England as a Protestant bastion of liberty standing against the reactionary and benighted forces of international Catholicism on the Continent. Here the English could draw on a popular tradition, going back to the sixteenth century, of the contrast between free, maritime, commercial and Protestant nations, such as the English and the Dutch, and the despotic, continental, Catholic powers, hostile to trade, such as the Spanish and the French (Armitage 2000: 125–45). There were, in other words, a plethora of contrasts, ancient and more recent, that could supply ready stereotypes in the emerging competition between France and England. In focusing on the experience of empire, and the contrasting political histories, at least as perceived, of the two countries, we should be clear that we are dealing with only two of the many possible factors that need to be considered in how Anglo–French interaction shaped national self-perceptions.

Scholars of late have been keenly aware of the imperial factor, and of imperial rivalry, in the making of English national identity (e.g. Wilson 1998; Baucom 1999; Kumar 2003). Less often remarked is the way this conflict also shaped French self-understanding. Already in the eighteenth century, as David Bell has shown, rivalry with the English – always the preferred French term, even after the making of Britain in 1707 – had begun to make its mark on French self-conceptions. This could lead to a sense not simply of basic national difference but even, at times, of racial difference, ‘as the French struggled to differentiate themselves from the people with whom they often felt the greatest affinity and similarity, yet who had also emerged as the greatest apparent threat to their own honor, prosperity, and understanding of the world: the English’ (2003: 104; see also Acomb 1950). *Ressentiment*, as Liah Greenfeld above all has emphasised, is a great factor in the growth of European nationalism; and nowhere was it more keenly felt than in eighteenth century France in the face of the rising power of England (Greenfeld 1992: 177–84).

French national consciousness was no doubt fed by conflicts with a variety of other neighbours, first Spain and later Germany. It has in fact been common to stress the rivalry with Germany as a central fact in the making of French nationalism. As the joint legatees of the Carolingian empire, France and Germany can be seen to have been engaged in a more or less continuous struggle over their inheritance for more than a thousand years. Did not the

great French historian Ernest Lavisse reduce the Franco–Prussian war and the loss of Alsace-Lorraine to a single episode in the epic struggle between Germany and France for the central strip of Lotharingia – a struggle that had been going on since the division of the Carolingian empire in 843 (Gildea 1994: 122; see also Ousby 2003: 2)? Even if one does not take so long-term a view, there is material enough in the short-term to lend much plausibility to this position. When one considers the crippling defeat of France in 1871, the sense of wounded pride and the frequent calls for revenge against Germany up to the First World War, and the even greater humiliation of 1940, it is hard not to agree that Franco–German rivalry is one of the keys to the formation of French national identity.³

But the rivalry with England is equally important – arguably more important in modern times (Weber 1986: 105). Not only does it have the peculiar intensity that comes with intimacy, the product of a centuries-old joint history. More importantly, following the decline and dissolution of the Spanish and Portuguese empires, it was France and England – not France and Germany – who stood forth most clearly as the candidates for world empire in the modern period. The making of French national identity, just like the making of English national identity, has to be seen at least in part as a product of imperial ambitions and imperial rule. This experience the French and the English shared, with something of the same consequences. What separated them, what produced the contrasting character of their sense of nationhood, were the striking differences in outcome.

Like Butterfield in the passage quoted earlier, I have in this section variously spoken of ‘national identity’, ‘national consciousness’, ‘nationhood’ and ‘nationalism’. Elsewhere I use other terms – ‘national sentiment’, ‘nationality’ – in the lexicon of what Steven Englund (1992: 310) felicitously calls ‘nation-discourse’. Clearly it would be helpful to have precise definitions of these terms, and to employ them accordingly. Equally clearly no such precision is to be found, for the good reason that the phenomena in question do not lend themselves to it, as nearly the whole literature on nations and nationalism testifies. When does ‘national sentiment’ become ‘national consciousness’, when does ‘national consciousness’ solidify into ‘national identity’? When and in what ways does the sense of ‘nationhood’ or ‘nationality’ become ‘nationalism’, a more explicit and conscious declaration – perhaps – of membership, usually accompanied by a celebration of the nation?

There *are* differences in meaning of course, as even the above briefly suggests. But those differences cannot be specified in advance, as it were, in the form of neat definitions acceptable to all students of the subject. The best one can do is to indicate by the context why the particular term might be the most appropriate, always aware that it can be contested and that alternative terms are nearly always available – even if ‘family resemblances’ between them can usually be discerned (see on this Calhoun 1997: 4–8; also generally Englund 1992).

Perhaps the term that comes closest to the concerns of this paper is 'national identity'. I am interested, that is, in the different ways in which the English and French came to conceive themselves as a nation, and the part played in this by their differing experiences as rival nations. That this would affect the character of English and French nationalism – as an ideology or a movement – seems obvious; but my purpose here is not to explore this further ramification in any detail.

Imperial nations

For much of the time between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries, the English and the French shared the struggle for the mastery of Europe and the world. In the early period, the powerful and wealthy state created under the 'Sun King' Louis XIV appeared likely to emerge as the eventual winner. Militarily powerful, economically prosperous, culturally dominant, the French seemed to carry all before them. Bourbons sat on the throne not just in France but in Spain and several of the Italian states. French power was strong in North America, the Caribbean and India. French was the language of the educated classes all over Europe; French culture the culture to admire and imitate.⁴

By the middle of the nineteenth century a dramatic change had come about. As a result of the Seven Years War (1756–63), one of the most decisive wars of modern times, the French were largely driven out of North America, the Caribbean and India. Britain set itself on the road to world power (Bowen 1998; Duffy 2002; Ferguson 2004: 32). The French got their revenge by aiding the American colonists against British rule, and later Napoleon spectacularly renewed French imperial ambitions. Once more, however, French hopes were thwarted by defeats in the battles of the Nile (1798), Trafalgar (1805) and Waterloo (1815), allowing further territorial gains by Britain. Other rivals – the Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch – had already succumbed to Napoleon, who thereby aided Britain's rise to be 'the first modern superpower' (Duffy 2002: 242).

In the early 1840s the French saw an opportunity to gain influence in the crumbling Ottoman Empire by supporting the rebellious Egyptian pasha Mehemet Ali. British efforts to prop up the Ottomans again put paid to French designs. But, unlike the cases of India and North America, the French were not eliminated from North Africa. From their base in Algiers, seized in 1830, the French expanded along the Mediterranean littoral. Algeria was formally incorporated in 1870; Tunisia (1881) and Morocco (1912) followed. French North Africa was the spearhead for incursions into sub-Saharan Africa, leading to the formation of French West Africa (1895) and French Equatorial Africa (1910).

Even more impressive were the gains in far-away south-east Asia. French intervention in Vietnam in 1858 on the side of Catholic missionaries led to

increasing French involvement and imperial ambitions in the region. Between 1863 and 1893 Cambodia, Laos and the Vietnamese territories – Annam, Tonkin and Cochin China – came under French rule, forming French Indo-China.

These were substantial gains, and France was undoubtedly the second imperial power in the nineteenth century (Fieldhouse 1982: 303–4; Aldrich 1996). But there, for the French, was the rub. Second is not good enough. Once more it was their old enemy, the English/British, who took the lead, expanding into every corner of the world, dominating the sea-lanes, and thwarting the French wherever and whenever it suited them. The British had no special interest in Indo-China – there was no British equivalent of Lyons silk manufacturers in pursuit of raw silk – and were content to let the French take over the region while the British took over Borneo, Burma, Malaya and the rest of India, ‘the jewel in the crown’. For good measure they also gobbled up Hong Kong (1842) and parts of New Guinea.

But it was in Africa that the French received their severest and most humiliating check. The French dreamed of a vast African empire, linked by a Trans-Saharan Railway running from Algiers to the Sudan, with branches to the key port city of Dakar on the West African coast. The French writer Pierre Vuillot exhorted his fellow-countrymen to conquer the Sahara and pursue the goal of ‘a French Africa from Chad to the Atlantic, from Algeria to the Soudan’ (Fleming 2003: 22). The French, routed by the Prussians in 1871 and with no hope of avenging the defeat in Europe itself, sought to compensate themselves by gaining glory in the great spaces of Africa and elsewhere. ‘It was in the sands of Tunisia and in the jungles of Indo-China that the officer-corps recovered its pride after the humiliation of 1871’ (Sedgwick 1968: 84; see also Fieldhouse 1982: 305; Doyle 1986: 315; Hazareesingh 1994: 132; Gildea 1994: 121).

The Trans-Saharan Railway was never built, and British diplomacy and military power ensured that the French remained shut up in the northwestern corner of Africa (the one exception being the island of Madagascar off the east coast). A particularly cruel blow was the effective loss of the Suez Canal, built by French enterprise and French engineering skills, to Britain. Disraeli’s purchase of more than half the shares in the Suez Canal Company in 1875 laid the basis of growing British interest in Egypt which ended in outright control after 1882, displacing the French who had historic ties there going back to Napoleon. A further humiliation attended renewed French attempts in the region in the so-called ‘Fashoda incident’ of 1898. British troops moving up from Egypt and the Sudan forced the withdrawal of the French garrison at Fashoda, on the head-waters of the Nile. The retreat from Fashoda caused an uproar in French domestic politics. Here was a reversal that, if not quite as spectacular as the one inflicted by Nelson on Napoleon at the battle of the Nile, had repercussions almost as momentous. It ended French hopes in Egypt and the Sudan, and put paid to French ambitions of an equatorial African empire stretching from the west coast to the east (Robinson and

Gallagher 1962: 602, 629; Andrew and Kanya-Forstner 1971: 113; Betts 1978: 31–3; Baumgart 1982: 63–8, 181–2).

The contrast with Britain could scarcely be greater, or more apparent to contemporaries (Doyle 1986: 307; Brunschwig 1966: 20–30). Britain consolidated its rule in India and in south Asia. It ousted France in the Caribbean, leaving it with Martinique and a few other islands. It became the dominant power in Africa, directly ruling nearly half the continent. Together with the dominions of Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa the British Empire at the height of its power – just after the First World War – occupied nearly a quarter of the world’s land surface and included a quarter of the world’s population. This made it ‘the most extensive empire in world history’ – physically three times the size of the French empire and six times greater in terms of population (Ferguson 2004: 240–1).

More even than that was the worldwide dominance of Britain’s ‘informal empire’, in manufacturing, trade and finance. In the mid-nineteenth century Britain accounted for more than half the world’s trade in manufactured goods, and even more in services. British ships carried goods equal to those of all of the rest of the world put together. London was the world’s financial centre, ‘banker to the world’. British influence through investment and banking was powerful even in those areas, such as China and South America, where Britain had no formal imperial presence (Gallagher and Robinson 1953; Bayly 1989: 72–3, 143; Ferguson 2004: 241–7).

How could all of this not be galling to Gallic pride, in the light of France’s own great past as the leader of Europe and light to the world? Repeatedly frustrated by Britain in the competition for world power, the French were led again and again to reflect on the reasons for their failure. Frequently this involved looking for scapegoats at home, as at the time of the Fashoda incident, when an unholy coalition of Protestants and Jews, supporters of the ‘traitor’ Captain Dreyfus, were blamed by French nationalists for French humiliation at the hands of the British (Gildea 1994: 252, 308). Imperial failure led to bouts of anguished national soul-searching. What was it about France that had brought it to this pass? Why was modern France incapable of repeating the triumphs of the past?⁵

The contrast with the English/British in the rivalry for empire in the nineteenth century was repeated in the dissolution of empire in the twentieth century. The British got out of their empire not gracefully, nor even opportunely, from the point of view of the subject peoples at least. They departed India in unseemly haste, leaving behind the bloodshed and tragedy of partition into two states, India and Pakistan. In some of the African states, such as South Africa and Southern Rhodesia, the British legacy was that of entrenched white minorities who were given a free hand to oppress and exploit the native black population; in others, such as Uganda and Nigeria, they left a legacy of tribal rivalry that was to divide the countries in bitter civil wars after independence. Nor should we forget the violence and brutality of the independence struggles in some of the colonies, such as Malaya and Kenya.

So the British retreat from empire can in no way be considered an unqualified success story. Nevertheless, when compared with decolonisation in other major European empires – the Dutch and Portuguese, for instance – British withdrawal was remarkably peaceful (Holland 1985: 191–265; Kahler 1984; Spruyt 2005). By virtually unanimous agreement of all the political parties, British governments from 1945 to the 1970s wound up the British Empire – the largest the world has ever known – with a speed and an orderliness that still seems astonishing. If, as Sir John Seeley famously said, the British had ‘conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind’ (Seeley 1971: 12), they now very consciously and calculatedly, even cynically, disembarassed themselves of their imperial robes.

And the French? The French gave up their sub-Saharan African colonies reasonably gracefully – despite the rhetoric about the Sahara, the French were never as intensely involved there as elsewhere (Betts 1991: 116; Holland 1985: 154). But over their principal imperial possessions, in North Africa and Indo-China, they fought bitter and long-drawn-out rearguard actions for which at times they seemed to be prepared to sacrifice France itself. There was nothing in the British case to equal the eight year war in Indo-China that ended with humiliating defeat by the Vietminh at Dien Bien Phu in 1954; nor the equally vicious and brutal war between French troops and insurgents that, following almost immediately on the loss of Indo-China, convulsed Algeria between 1955 and 1962 (Holland 1985: 163–75, Betts 1991: 79–93).

Historians have noted the irony that ‘modern French colonial history begins and ends in Algeria’, with military encounters; they have also noted that ‘the irony is sharpened by the realisation that the geographical antipodes of French colonial empire – Algeria and Indochina – were similar extremes, the locations of the two most serious wars of decolonisation’ (Betts 1991: 113). What needs to be added to this is the internal impact of these struggles on French domestic society. The trauma of the Indochinese and especially Algerian imbroglios bitterly divided French society, leading to the collapse of the Fourth Republic and the real prospect of civil war (Sa’adah 2003: 79–95). De Gaulle offered himself as saviour, now as during the dark days of the Second World War. But once more, as after the Franco–Prussian War, as after the constant rebuffs and reversals in the struggle for empire and global influence, the French were driven back upon themselves, forced to reflect on the causes of their misfortunes and to consider what it was in the national psyche that – compared to the more successful English – led to such disasters.

Imperial legacies

There is one more thing to consider in this comparison of France and England as imperial nations. This has to do with imperial legacies, and in particular the pattern of race relations in the respective countries as a result of their policies towards the subject peoples of their empires. This too brings out the contrasting attitude to nationhood and national identity in the two countries.

The French, as is widely recognised (e.g Fieldhouse 1982: 308; Doyle 1986: 307; Bell 2003: 209), were broadly assimilationist in their attitudes to their non-European subjects. The policies adopted during the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, of exporting French ideas, French culture and French administration to the peoples of Europe, were later continued in the French colonies. Arabs in North Africa, Africans in black Africa and the Caribbean, Vietnamese and other orientals in Indo-China, were to become Frenchmen and Frenchwomen.⁶ The aim, as Jules Ferry, the great imperialist spokesman of the Third Republic put it, was to spread France's 'language, her culture, her arms, and her genius' (Doyle 1986: 315; see also Murphy 1968: 139–75; Aldrich 1996: 97–100; Conklin, 1997: 1–23). The French had as missionary a purpose as the English, indeed perhaps more so. Was the *mission civilisatrice* not an expression – if not a new idea – that the French gave to the world?

About what exactly this civilising mission consisted of there was some dispute, reflecting the splits in French society. Conservatives stressed Catholicism and the need to convert the heathen to (the right kind of) Christianity. Liberals and radicals – those that were not hostile to empire in the first place – played up Reason, Science and Progress – the hallmarks of the secular French Enlightenment (Hazareesingh 1994: 132). But there was no great disagreement over the goal of producing essentially French citizens, as alike the citizens of metropolitan France as it was possible to be. The civic republicanism of the French Revolution, made into something like an official ideology during the Third Republic, served as the basic template for moulding the model French citizen at home and in the colonies.⁷

This conception was to have significant consequences for debates about citizenship and nationhood in the post-imperial period, with the arrival of millions of non-European former subjects into the home country as immigrants. French governments of virtually all political persuasions insisted that immigrants should conform to the basic model of secular republican citizenship; religious symbols and practices, especially non-Christian ones, were to be kept private, away from the public realm, including that of public education. Extreme right-wing groups, such as Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front, fanned the flames of French nationalism, darkly predicting the loss of French national identity under the waves of immigrants and their alien ways. Immigrant groups, including many among the five million or so Muslims, with some support from liberals and radicals, vigorously resisted this centralising and secularising drive. In the face of a rigid and intolerant conception of French republican identity they drew upon French traditions of equality and individual freedom which proclaimed respect for the equal rights of all – including the right to freely practise one's religion.

Once more France is engaged in an intense and passionate debate about its national identity (Hargreaves 1995: 149–76; Noiriel 1996; Kastoryano 2002: 99–116; Sa'adah 2003: 199–260; Bleich 2005). Once more it has had to summon up events, ideas and personalities from its past, as buttresses and

ballast for conflicting positions. What is the French nation, and what does it mean to belong to it? Is the republican inheritance of the French Revolution a clear and sufficient guide to French identity, or has it, as some claim, stifled awareness of alternatives from within its own past through its 'hegemonic' position (e.g. Englund 1992: 316)? Is French identity truly civic, as has usually been held (e.g. Brubaker 1992)? Or, as Jews were perhaps the first to suspect following their 'emancipation' in the course of the French Revolution, did being 'civic' in France amount to taking on an 'ethnic' identity as secular, rational and republican beings (Kates 1989)? French policies in the empire, and the consequences of these when former subjects refused to live up to French expectations, were bound to stimulate such questions.

Such debates about national identity have undoubtedly also been stimulated in Britain, and especially in England, by the onset of mass immigration from former colonies in the period after 1945. But these debates have been based on different understandings, and have drawn on different resources, as compared with the French (see Favell 2001; Bleich 2003). For one thing, unlike the French, the English have little tradition of reflection on nationalism and national identity. Their debates have therefore had to start from scratch, so to speak (Kumar 2003: 249–69).⁸ For another, the place of non-white or non-European immigrants in the English nation, and their relation to English national identity, have to be seen against the background of their very different treatment as subjects in the former colonies of the British Empire.

Compared with the French, whose goal was assimilation and whose methods therefore involved direct rule and integration of the colonies in a uniform system of administration centred on Paris, British imperial rule was generally indirect and marked by considerable local variation. This position was classically stated by Lord Lugard, Governor-General of Nigeria in the 1900s, who set the technique of indirect rule within the perspective of eventual independence for the colonies. 'Liberty and self-government', he claimed, 'can best be secured to the native population by leaving them free to manage their own affairs through their own rulers' (Bayly 1989: 125; see also Cell 1999: 240). Enlightened paternalism was here satisfyingly harnessed to cheap government: the British throughout their imperial history had far fewer soldiers and administrators per head of the subject population than the French (Doyle 1986: 307; Cell 1999: 232; Ferguson 2004: 163, 247).

The policy of indirect rule through native rulers was never mechanically adopted throughout the British Empire – in India, especially, it was significantly breached in the distinction between 'British India', which was subject to direct rule, and the India of the princely states (Cell 1999: 236–7). But it is a good indication of the general tendency of British imperial rule. One consequence was a willingness to accept a greater variety of customs and cultures than was true in the French case. Such an attitude of pluralism made it easier for British statesmen to espouse a policy of 'multiculturalism' when, in the post-war period, the question arose of how best to integrate immigrants into British society (Favell 2001: 94–110; Joppke 1999: 223–6). Taken with the

absence, among English people themselves, of any clear sense of what English national identity might mean, this policy was by far the best answer to the challenge posed by mass immigration.

For various reasons, it has not really turned out that way. Threats of the 'break-up of Britain', coupled with the pull of the European Union and fundamental uncertainty about where England stands in relation to the United States, have precipitated an urgent debate about English national identity that makes the earlier period of pluralism seem innocent and somewhat remote (Kumar 2003: 239–73). English politicians have come to stress a tougher policy towards immigrants, and to define a stronger sense of Englishness (or Britishness) to which immigrants must conform. A policy of creeping assimilation seems to be in the making, shown to striking effect by the recent decision to make newly naturalised British citizens take a 'citizenship oath': a declaration of their commitment to the nation that is clearly designed to indicate a stricter conformity to cultural norms (*The New and the Old* 2003; see also Paul 2001; Ward 2004: 113–40).

But still there is nothing in Britain as radical as the banning of headscarves among Muslim girls in French public schools, and the attendant attack on other symbols that offend against the secular republicanism that is the official definition of French national identity (Terray 2004). Here as before, a strong sense of national identity in France, compared with a weak one in England, have produced characteristically different outcomes. The French, many of them at least, think they know who they are; the English are still searching. The French think they have a model of citizenship and belonging to which all must conform; the English are alarmed at the pluralism they have so far encouraged, but find it difficult to define the model of English or British identity to which they might expect people – themselves included – to conform.

Threats to nationhood: France and England

I have stressed so far the differences in imperial experience and attitude between the French and the English. This is because this is an aspect of the formation of national identity in the two countries that has not received much attention. But we should of course include some discussion of a phenomenon that has been widely acknowledged, though not necessarily in relation to questions of national identity. This is the succession of crises and catastrophes that have punctuated modern French history but not that of the English at regular intervals (see the first section of this paper). There is, in other words, an internal, domestic component that must be taken into account when comparing the attitudes of the two nations to their sense of nationhood and national identity. This distinction is admittedly somewhat artificial. French imperialism, as much as English/British imperialism, has to be related to its domestic history, and vice versa (cf. Burton 2003). But it is helpful to consider

domestic events separately, as an additional factor, in explaining differing styles of nationalism.

Here too the story parallels the imperial experience and the contrasts between relative English success and French failure, at least as perceived by their respective peoples. The English can congratulate themselves on an orderly evolution, at least since the seventeenth century. Their revolution, and its attendant disorders, are far enough back in time to be decently buried. The 'whig interpretation' of their history, which became the national myth, stresses progress through continuity and gradual change, rather than abrupt shifts and revolutionary convulsions. Despite the disruptions of the industrial revolution, despite the wholesale replacement of a rural by an urban way of life, despite the rise to global dominance and its subsequent demise, there was a sufficient approximation to reality in the whig interpretation of English developments to make the English look complacently on themselves and their history, especially as compared with their French neighbours. Such complacency, such an impression of orderliness in their affairs, did not encourage English introspection (as Durkheim once rather acidly observed)⁹ – least of all in relation to national identity.

France, once more, sees it differently. The French Revolution of 1789 created fissures that, even if they have now healed, bitterly divided French society throughout the nineteenth and for much of the twentieth centuries. The legacies of that revolution themselves caused a succession of other revolutions – in 1830, 1848 and 1871. Each of these revolutions in turn threw up fresh antagonists, with new grievances which they stubbornly nursed over the course of many generations. Legitimists, Orleanists, Bonapartists, republicans, liberals, Opportunists, Catholics, socialists, anarchists: all fought each other with a fierceness and intransigence that were matched in other continental societies but were conspicuously lacking in Britain. 'France is gifted', Marc Ferro remarks, 'not so much for battle as for civil war' (quoted Braudel 1993: 120).

The Third Republic is as good a place as any to indicate the nature and magnitude of the conflicts, though a similar story could be told of virtually any period in French history from 1789 to the 1960s. Born of the disaster of the Franco-Prussian war, and the loss of Alsace-Lorraine, the Third Republic started its career over the 20,000 dead bodies of the Communards – victims of the 1871 crushing of the Paris Commune by the new government headed by Thiers. No subsequent working-class movement was ever to forget this ruthless act of the government against its own people. In the 1880s the Republic survived an attempted coup d'état by the populist demagogue General Boulanger, with his rallying call of a revanchist war against Germany. The feeling in the army and in other conservative institutions in French society showed itself again in the Dreyfus affair that convulsed French society in the 1890s. Once again, the affair ended in a mood of bitterness and mutual recrimination. No reconciliation between the competing parties was offered; none seemed possible. The separation of Church and State in 1905,

fulfilling long-standing radical republican demands, was simply the victory of the strong over those who, for the moment, had been weakened and discredited by their part in the Dreyfus affair.

The Third Republic survived these crises and the enormous strains of the First World War. Perhaps, if we recall Renan's remark about the unifying effects of suffering, it was the very horror of that war, and the example of the thousands of men who sacrificed their lives for the nation, that helped to reconcile the various parties and gave the Third Republic a new lease of life. But traditional divisions revived in the 1930s, with violent clashes between communist and fascist parties, and open expressions of virulent anti-Semitism in the press, the Church and elsewhere. The victory of Léon Blum's Popular Front in 1936, widely seen as marking a turn towards socialism in France, further fuelled these divisions between left and right. The Popular Front government, incapable like all previous governments of healing the rifts, fell in its turn. But it was the old enemy, Germany, that delivered the coup de grâce. The defeat and occupation of France in 1940 marked its lowest point since the earlier defeat by Prussia in 1870. It was a bitter irony that the country whose actions had brought the Third Republic into being was there, at the end, to dig its grave.

Such episodes in the life of a nation have their inevitable consequences. As with Germany after 1945, they forced upon the political class in France an insistent questioning and soul-searching, a constant process of reflection on the national character and purpose. This process can be said to have begun with the 1789 Revolution, in the urgent debates surrounding it at the time and in the later reflections by scholars, statesmen and intellectuals. These would include works by such thinkers as Francois Guizot, Jules Michelet and Alexis de Tocqueville.¹⁰ Later works express the same spirit of interrogation and inquiry. There is Ernest Renan's famous lecture at the Sorbonne, 'What is the Nation?' (1882), stamped with his anguish at the loss of Alsace-Lorraine. The writings of Fernand Braudel and Pierre Chaunu on the 'sensibility' and the 'identity' of France, and of Pierre Nora on French 'collective memory', are in much the same vein of painful reflection, not to say nostalgia (Englund 1992). And one could add here the growing literature on Vichy France, and what that dark episode has to say about France and its character (e.g. Jefferson 2001). Marx once wrote that 'France is the only country of the "idea"; that is to say, the idea it has of itself' (quoted Rubel 1960: 139). How perfectly is that exemplified in the famous opening section of Charles de Gaulle's war memoirs, whose first line runs: 'Toute ma vie, je me suis fait une certaine idée de la France' ('All my life, I have harboured a certain idea of France') (de Gaulle 1954: 1). The continuing stream of works on the 'idea' or 'destiny' of France is powerful testimony to the continuing vitality of that tradition (e.g. Birnbaum 2001).

I have argued elsewhere (Kumar 2000 and 2003) that imperial nations often have problems coming to terms not just with the nationalism of their subject nations but also with their own. That has been the case with the Russians,

Austrians and Ottoman Turks. It has also strikingly been the case with the English. The creators first of an 'inner empire' – the United Kingdom of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland – and later of a second 'outer empire' – their vast empire overseas – the English developed a sense of 'missionary nationalism' that gave them an identity and a role in the world, as the carriers of particular 'missions': Protestantism, parliamentary liberties, free trade, the rule of law. Such an identity carried with it suppression of, or better yet indifference to nationalism, as that ideology came to be conventionally expressed in its nineteenth century forms. The result is a conspicuous absence in the English case of any sustained tradition of reflection on English nationalism and English national identity.

France too is an imperial nation. Like the English, they too built up an 'inner empire', starting with the conquest of the independent territories of the old Frankish lands by the Capetian kings. Like the English, indeed as their principal rivals, they too built up a second 'outer empire', a large overseas empire, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And like the English, they too saw themselves as the carriers of a special mission, the *mission civilisatrice*, the mission to carry the torch of the Enlightenment and of the arts of civilised living throughout the world.

But, unlike the English, the French developed a strong sense of nationalism and national identity. Indeed, *pace* Greenfeld (1992), they can even be said to have invented modern nationalism (see, e.g. Bell 2003). The difference has to do with the difference in histories that we have briefly surveyed. The English and the French differed as imperial nations – the French failing not in any absolute sense, perhaps, but in relation to the rivals against whom they most measured themselves, and with whom they were in the fiercest competition (the 'narcissism of small differences', as Freud termed it). Similarly, compared with the internal development of the English, modern French history was punctuated by conflicts and crises that repeatedly put whole classes and communities at war with each other. The result of both these experiences was to create a long and fertile tradition of national self-reflection in France – something absent in the English case. Which experience best equips the two nations in facing the challenges of the present – immigration, Europeanisation, globalisation – is something that remains to be seen.

Notes

1 It may not be irrelevant to note that the study of 'collective memory', and of its role in the life of the nation, is a largely French invention, beginning with Maurice Halbwachs ([1950]1980), a pupil of Durkheim's, and continuing in the monumental project of Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (1984–92, 1996–98). 'History', as Nora says, 'especially the history of France's development as a nation, has been our most powerful collective tradition, our *milieu de mémoire par excellence*' (1996–8, I: 3). For some stimulating reflections on that tradition, see Englund (1992); and for the very different English historiographical tradition, at least in the last century or so, see Mandler (2002).

2 Ian Ousby's (2003) study of the First World War battle of Verdun, and what it means for French national memory, illustrates this with outstanding clarity. See also generally Schivelbusch (2004).

3 'Anti-German sentiment is so profoundly rooted in French history since 1870 that it is almost tempting to regard it as a constitutive feature of French national character' (Hazareesingh 1994: 133; see also Ousby 2003: 152–87; Schivelbusch 2004: 103–87).

4 For the dominant position of France, politically, economically and culturally, for much of the eighteenth century, see especially Jones (2003); see also Newman (1987: 1–18). Niall Ferguson remarks that, despite British successes in the War of the Spanish Succession (1702–13), 'the danger that France would win a struggle for global mastery against Britain was a real one, and remained real for the better part of a century' (2004: 30).

5 As Jules Ferry, the principal advocate for French imperialism during the Third Republic, observed, France cannot be content with ordinary success as a nation: 'One cannot propose to France a political ideal analogous to the ideal that animates nations like the free land of Belgium or republican Switzerland. France has other needs. She cannot simply be a free country. She must also be a great country, exercising over the destinies of Europe all the influence that is hers' (quoted Sa'adah 2003: 263). As Sa'adah notes, 'the affirmation of French greatness was central to all definitions of French identity' (2003: 33). See also, for the expressions of hurt nationalist pride in this period, and the determination to reverse French fortunes, the essays in Tombs (1991). Earlier, the spectacularly bungled attempt by Napoleon III to re-start a French empire in South America by installing Maximilian as emperor of Mexico had added one more sorry episode to nineteenth century French imperialism. See on this Cunningham (2001).

6 One of the often-remarked consequences of this was that Arab, African and Vietnamese children in French colonial schools were taught from school history books that often started with the statement, '*nos ancêtres, les gaulois . . .*'. Assimilation was, of course, an ideal, a goal, and was in any case never uncontested. Both in law and in day-to-day practice the distinction between indigenes, who were mostly subjects, and Europeans, who were mostly French citizens, governed much of the life of the colonies in the nineteenth century. But from the late nineteenth century the concept of assimilation became increasingly influential in French thought and policy, and had an increasingly strong effect on the colonies (Aldrich 1996: 110–11). On colonial administration, French policies of citizenship, etc., over time, see Fieldhouse (1982: 308–24); Aldrich (1996: 212–30). On the complexities and contested nature of assimilation, see E. Saadah (2002); Wilder (2003); Bleich (2005: 173–8).

7 See on this Brubaker (1992: 85–113); Hargreaves (1995: 149–76); Noiriel (1996: xix–xxi, and *passim*); Birnbaum (2001: 243–50); Favell (2001: 40–93); Sa'adah (2003: 91–3, 199–243).

8 This is of course a matter of relative emphasis, rather than the assertion of a complete absence of a tradition in England of reflection on national identity, or at least on 'Englishness'. Gerald Newman (1987), for instance, has made the case for the development of what he calls English 'cultural nationalism' in the second half of the eighteenth century; Katie Trumpener (1997) also sees the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as giving rise to genres of literary nationalism which both asserted the separate character of the Celtic nations in Britain and at the same time – through a shared experience of empire – aspired to fuse them in a common Britishness. There is also the persistent concern with 'Anglo-Saxonism', again strongly marked in the literary sphere, as an important strand of English national identity (Horsman 1981: 9–77; MacDougall 1982; Simmons 1990). One might also trace a more distinctly political tradition of reflection on the English (or British) national character through the thought of Burke, Bentham, Carlyle, Macaulay, Bagehot, Seeley, Barker and others (see e.g. Greenleaf 1988; for an interesting variant on this, emphasising the more radical tradition, see Mendilow 1986). I do not wish to deny these developments, nor the possibility that they can be put into the framework of a distinctively national (English or British) tradition, though I do not think that they always add up to the expression of nationalism claimed for them. My point is simply that, as compared with the French and several other Continental nations, these various currents in English life have not produced a continuous, self-reflective tradition of thinking about the nation, national identity and national destiny (one important reason being the very confusion of 'English' and 'British' to be found in

most of the accounts above, creating difficulties in particular for the English and their sense of their own distinctive national identity – hence the common denial that there is such a thing as ‘English nationalism’. The reasons for this are partly the subject of this paper; for additional discussion see Kumar (2003: *passim*, esp. 18–21, 175–87; see also Kumar 2006).

9 ‘Among a people who consider their institutions everything they ought to be, nothing can incite thought to apply itself to social matters’ (Durkheim [1915] 1960: 383).

10 For an illuminating examination of this tradition of historiography and national commentary, seen retrospectively from the bicentennial of the Revolution in 1989, see Kaplan (1995).

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