

## Discourses on National Identity

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Every polity has a more or less coherent conception of the kind of collectivity it is, what it means to belong to it, who belongs to it or is an outsider, and how it differs from others. It is united and conducts its affairs in a specific manner, and displays singularity and individuality. In Western thought systematic reflection on the nature and locus of national identity, that is, on the collective identity of a polity began with the emergence of the Greek *polis*, and has over the centuries given rise to different views, of which the following three are among the most influential.

Surrounded as they were by several polities, the Greek philosophers asked how each of them was held together and differed from others. For Plato the identity of the *polis* lay in the way it defined and organized itself for the pursuit of the good life. He distinguished several conceptions of good life and classified polities accordingly. His view was broadly accepted by Aristotle and other Greek, Roman and Christian thinkers, for almost all of whom a polity was united in terms of and distinguished from others by its collectively shared substantive conception of the good life.

A different view of national identity emerged in the seventeenth century. Since Hobbes rejected the possibility of a collectively shared conception of the good life and abstracted the state from society, he located the identity of a polity in its formal and autonomously constituted structure of authority. In his view a polity was united in terms of and constituted as a specific kind of community by virtue of its shared conception of legitimacy and the structure of authority derived from it. Locke, Rousseau and many other writers shared Hobbes' view in varying degrees.

The rise of nationalist ideas in the nineteenth century marked the emergence of a very different view of national identity. For the nationalist writers every polity was an organic whole, almost like a living organism, and distinguished by a unique spirit, genius or soul which infused, ordered and gave life to its legal, social, cultural, political and other institutions. Its national soul or spirit made it the kind of polity it was, and both united and distinguished it from others.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This paper was first presented at the Jowett Society of the University of Oxford. I am grateful to the participants, especially Alan Montefiore for their comments. I also thank Martin Burch for his valuable advice.

<sup>2</sup> The nationalist literature abounds in the metaphors of national genius, national soul, collective self and national spirit, and locates national individuality or identity in them. See Anthony Smith, *National Identity* (London, Penguin, 1991), ch. 4.

During the past few decades, the concept of national identity has once again become a subject of intense political and philosophical debate in many countries. Rather than analyse the concept abstractly with all its obvious disadvantages, I shall locate it in the ongoing debates in different countries and explore how the participants define it, what they are debating in its name and why they regard the debate as of utmost political importance. In the first section I offer a brief sketch of some of these debates, and in the second comment on their confusions and limitations.

## I

Britain began to undergo significant changes from the early 1960s onwards. As a result of the decolonization of most of the empire, its two centuries of imperial adventure came to an end, leading to a drastic shrinkage of its geographical expanse and political power. Thanks to the arrival of a large number of black and brown immigrants from the erstwhile colonies and to their concentration in the major cities, British society was becoming recognizably different and faced with problems created by the presence of 'alien' cultures. The British economy was in a state of decline. Its industrial productivity was low, its technology outdated, the quality of its industrial management poor, and its balance of payment unfavourable. British political institutions were widely perceived to be ineffective and commanded only a limited popular support. The pressure from influential quarters to join the European Community generated widespread fears about the loss of its distinct political identity. The emergence of Scottish and to a lesser extent Welsh nationalism also aroused fears about Britain's territorial and political integrity. In short almost all the traditional sources of pride in terms of which Britain had for several centuries constructed its collective identity, namely the empire, social cohesion, stable democratic institutions, the industrial leadership of the world, superiority to the rest of Europe, political unity and so on, were proving problematic. The cumulative impact of these and related changes was considerable. Not surprisingly they created a widespread sense of decline and disorientation, and provoked a debate on the causes and the best ways of arresting its decline.<sup>3</sup>

It was in this context that the New Right, which was finely tuned to the national mood, introduced the idea of national identity as an integral part of its programme of national regeneration.<sup>4</sup> In its view Britain was steadily declining because, among other things, its national identity was being increasingly eroded. It had no clear conception of what it stood for and lacked a sense of national purpose. It was losing touch with its great past and becoming devoid of the qualities of character that had made that past possible. As a

<sup>3</sup> For a good discussion, see Robert Skidelsky (ed.), *Thatcherism* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1989). In 1978 the *Sunday Telegraph* ran a series of fifteen articles on the state of Britain. These were later collected in Patrick Hutber (ed.), *What is Wrong with Britain?* (London, Sphere, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> See Roy Lewis, *Enoch Powell* (London, Cassell, 1975), pp. 86f; Margaret Thatcher's Bruges Speech, of 1988. (London, Conservative Political Centre, 1988); John Casey, 'One Nation: the politics of race', *The Salisbury Review* 1 (1982), 23-8; Ian Crowther, 'Mrs Thatcher's idea of good society', *The Salisbury Review* 2 (1983), 40-3; and Maurice Cowling (ed.), *Conservative Essays* (London, Cassell, 1978). For a critique of their views, see my 'National identity and the ontological regeneration of Britain', in Paul Gilbert and Paul Gregory (eds), *Nations, Cultures and Markets* (London, Avebury, 1994).

result, Britain was beginning to drift and falling prey to the fashionable but highly dubious ideas and practices imported from abroad. For the New Right the answer to Britain's predicament was obvious. It needed to return to its roots, reestablish contacts with its past and revive its characteristic virtues. British national identity, a product of its long history, was already formed, and the British people only needed to know it. As the New Right defined it, the British national identity largely consisted in a specific body of virtues and values and a specific form of historical self-understanding.

Once the New Right put the question of national identity on the public agenda, it provoked considerable controversy. Some, mainly on the Left, dismissed it as an empty slogan devoid of explanatory and normative power, and designed only to give the emerging British, especially English, nationalism a respectable disguise. Others accepted the legitimacy of the concept, and either gave a different mainly liberal account of British national identity, or argued that its identity was not static and immutable and needed to be redefined by each generation in the light of its needs and circumstances. Partly because these critics failed to offer clearly worked out alternatives, and partly because the New Right has remained in power since the late 1970s, its conception of national identity enjoyed considerable popularity and prestige. The Thatcher government used it to power and legitimize its massive programme of producing British men and women possessed of the 'vigorous' virtues and self-confidence of their forbears, concentrating on the educational and economic policies as the central tools of cultural engineering.

Canada is another country where the question of national identity has dominated the public agenda since the early 1970s.<sup>3</sup> For long Quebec was in no doubt that it was French and Catholic, and that the Catholic church was the custodian of that identity. Thanks to the cumulative effect of urbanization, social atomization, secularization and the immigration of people of different races and religions, its social and political life underwent profound changes after the Second World War. This led to much anxious debate about what it once was and had since become, and how it was to define and preserve its traditional way of life. The task of defining its national identity that had hitherto been discharged by the clergy was now taken over by the intellectuals, and the Quebec government replaced the church as its guardian. In the new definition of its national identity, Catholicism lost its earlier centrality to French language and culture which were now regarded as the essential components of Quebec's identity. The nature and content of the French culture were nowhere clearly defined, but that did not prevent the emergence of the widely shared view that Quebec was 'essentially' French, that its cultural identity was under grave threat, and that the newly formed alliance between

<sup>3</sup> For a good summary and discussion of the Canadian debate, see Charles Taylor, *Reconciling the Solitudes: Essays on Canadian Federalism and Nationalism* (Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993); A. C. Cairns, *Charter versus Federalism: the Dilemmas of Constitutional Reform* (Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992) and R. L. Watts and D. M. Brown (eds), *Options for a New Canada* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1991). See also James Tully, 'Multirow federalism and the charter', in Phil Bryden, Stephen Douis and John Russell (eds), *The Charter - Ten Years after* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1992); the two useful articles by Michael D. Levin and Paul-Andre Lintau in *Indian Journal of Canadian Studies*, 1 (1992); and William Kaplan (ed.), *Belonging: the Meaning and Future of Canadian Citizenship* (Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991).

its intellectuals and government had a vital role to play defining, preserving and propagating it.

On the basis of its redefinition of its identity, Quebec's leaders argued that it was not just a province of Canada or what was long called French Canada but a distinct nation, and that correspondingly the rest of Canada did not consist of separate and distinct provinces but constituted a homogeneous English nation. Canada was a binational country, and the composition and functioning of its political institutions must reflect their equality. Quebec leaders also argued that it had a right to protect its identity, and hence to control immigration, to make English alone its official language, to require all immigrant children to go to French schools, and in general to do all that was necessary for that purpose. For its part the Canadian state was asked to recognize Quebec as a 'distinct society' (a strikingly nonethnic concept with a French form and an English content), regard its protection as one of its major national goals, and grant the latter rights not demanded or needed by other provinces. Since Quebec's needs were different from theirs, there was nothing unfair about its enjoyment of special rights.

Quebec's demands, later taken over by the older original nations of Canada, raised several questions about the nature and identity of the Canadian state. The first question related to the historical self-understanding of Canada. Was it an essentially Anglo-Saxon country containing several linguistic and cultural minorities, the French being only one of them? Or was it a binational country founded by two distinct nations, and thus endowed from the very beginning with a dual identity? Or was it a trinational country made up of these two and the original nations? Or was it a multiethnic country composed of several distinct communities including the three major ones and several others that had later made it their home? In short, was the Canadian identity essentially singular and homogeneous, two-in-one, three-in-one, or many-in-one? The answer to the question had profound constitutional and cultural implications.

The second question concerned the organizing principles of the Canadian state. Should it concede the demands of the original nations and especially of Quebec, and create not just an asymmetrical and even unequal federation but also a hybrid state based on the principles of both liberal individualism and the recognition of collective rights? Or should it refuse to compromise its much-cherished commitment to liberal individualism and reject all attempts to limit it in the name of cultural self-preservation? Many Anglophones thought that if Canada opted for the former, it could no longer call itself a liberal society, and that that represented such a grave erosion of its identity that they could not live with it. Some others were prepared to compromise their liberal identity in the interest of Canadian unity, but continued to feel deeply uneasy about it. A few saw no reason why a liberal society could not accommodate collective rights, and offered ingenious restatements of liberalism.<sup>6</sup>

The third question related to the nature of Canadian citizenship. Should Canada insist on equal and uniform citizenship and require that all its citizens belong to it in an identical manner? Or should it allow mediated and

<sup>6</sup> Since liberalism is currently more severely tested and contested in Canada than in almost any other Western country, and since most Canadian writers on it are also politically engaged, the recent Canadian contribution to the development of liberalism displays unusual richness and depth. Indeed a distinctly Canadian form of liberalism has now come of age.

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differentiated modes of citizenship such that some could belong to specific national groups, say, Quebec and through that to Canada, and thus become not Canadians *sans phrase* but Quebecquois-Canadians? This looks like but is really quite different from the hyphenated identities of the ethnic minorities in the United States. The Polish-Americans and the Irish-Americans are all Americans enjoying equal citizenship and relating to the American state in an identical manner. Their ethnicity does not adjectivize or qualify their citizenship and has only a cultural significance. By contrast the differential form of citizenship demanded by the French Canadians and the native peoples gives their ethnicity or nationhood a political significance, and ethnicizes and pluralizes the very structure of the Canadian state.

Finally, the Canadians asked how they differed from their powerful southern neighbour and where their distinctiveness lay. Most of them were convinced that they had different cultural traditions, values, modes of conducting their affairs, attitude to the government, and so on, in a word a distinct national identity, and that they were finding it difficult to preserve it under the pressure of increasing American cultural domination. Some thought that the presence of Quebec provided them with a bulwark against the American threat. They were therefore keen to accommodate its demands *provided that* these did not weaken its unity or render its identity so diffused and vague as not to make it worth preserving. Much therefore depended on the kinds of demands Quebec made and the nature and degree of accommodation required from the rest of Canada.

In Germany also the question of national identity has been a subject of much anguished debate. The debate was initially provoked by the Nazi experience, especially the murder of six million Jews. The trauma was too acute for the Germans to raise disturbing questions soon after the Second World War, and many of those who could have raised them were too compromised or diffident to do so. Most Germans wanted a clean break with their recent past and set about giving themselves a new identity in the form of newly established democratic institutions. The study of history was replaced by social studies in many German schools, and systematic attempts were made to instil and nurture the new identity. As the latter took roots and as a new generation of Germans with sufficient self-confidence and detachment grew up, several important questions about national identity were raised.<sup>7</sup>

The first question related to what the Nazi experience revealed about the German national character and identity. German writers asked if the murder of six million Jews was 'singular' and historically unique, or whether it was like such other acts of genocide as the Turkish massacre of the Armenians and Stalin's liquidation of the Kulaks. If the former, it said something deeply disturbing about the dark and mysterious forces lurking in the German character. If the latter, it was capable of explanation in terms of the usual

<sup>7</sup> The most useful place to follow the German debate is the famous *Historikerstreit* debate, now helpfully collected in James Knowlton and Truett Cates (trans), *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler?* (New Jersey, Humanities, 1993). See also Barbara Heimannsberg and Christopher J. Schmidt (eds), *The Collective Silence: German Identity and the Legacy of Shame* (London, Maxwell Macmillan, 1993). For obvious reasons trust between generations and the transmission of experience and views from one generation to another, without both of which a society cannot preserve its continuity, were effectively shattered in Germany. This created a disturbing void at the very heart of the young German's sense of personal and national identity.

political and personal factors, although that did not diminish the enormity of the deed. In either case the question remained as to how the Germans could do such a thing. They were no more evil than human beings elsewhere, and the same nation that produced Hitler had also produced Kant and Herder. Was the holocaust then an aberration? Or was the German national character deeply self-divided and schizophrenic? Or were its outrageous propensities merely the obverse of its noble qualities? Whatever the explanation, the Nazi atrocities had at least some roots in the German national character, raising disturbing questions about how the Germans were to come to terms with it and guard themselves against their recurrence.

The second question concerned the continuity of the German identity and the so-called 'historicization' of the Nazi period. Is German history to be seen as continuous or does it fall into three distinct phases, namely pre-1933, 1933 to 1945, and post 1945? If it is continuous, how is the second period to be integrated in its historical self-understanding? If it is discontinuous, how can the discontinuity be explained and the Germans arrive at a coherent conception of their history? Habermas stressed the continuity of German history. He located German identity in its way of life and argued that, since the latter had remained the same over time and persisted till today, there was no rupture in German identity. As he put it, 'our identity is permanently interwoven with it, from bodily gestures through the language to the rich interplay of intellectual customs'. This means that the present day Germans are connected with Auschwitz 'not through contingent circumstances but internally'. His critics rejoined that he was wrong both to see the Nazi period as a necessary expression of the German way of life, and to suggest that the present German way of life remained substantially similar to the one that obtained between 1933 and 1945.

The third question related to Germany's new post-war identity. The Germans had now given themselves a new national identity in the form of its democratic institutions, abandoned their traditional preoccupation with the *Sonderweg* (a special path of development that was neither Eastern or Western), and stressed their European roots as a way of guarding themselves against themselves. This raised the crucial question as to whether such a constitutional and Europeanized patriotism or what Habermas called a 'post-national' or 'post-conventional' identity was enough to define their national identity. Habermas thought that it was not only sufficient but the only form of identity possible in the plural and globalized modern state. Others disagreed.<sup>8</sup> In their view a nation could not be held together by a largely formal constitutional patriotism alone and needed deeper emotional and cultural bonds. They also thought that so long as the Germans lived within the framework of the nation state, a post-national identity was both utopian and dangerous. Even they however appreciated that since interpretations of the German past were bound to differ, an attempt to ground the new national identity in a unified understanding of history could easily destroy the post-war consensus.<sup>9</sup> This left the Germans with two painful choices. Either they should eschew all attempts to give the new identity a historical basis, or they should give it one and endanger the identity by provoking a hitherto silent rightwing reading of German history. The first alternative entailed a deliberate historical amnesia

<sup>8</sup> Knowlton and Cates, *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler?*, p. 165.

<sup>9</sup> Knowlton and Cates, *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler?*, pp. 181 f. and 202 ff.

and was emotionally and intellectually difficult. The second was fraught with unacceptable political risks.

The post-war division of Germany also raised important questions about its identity. Were there now two German states, both equal and legitimate? Or was there only one Germany illegitimately divided into two states? If the latter, did its oneness consist in its prewar territory, ethnicity or, as was commonly argued, its nationhood? The overwhelming majority of West Germans and a large section of even the East Germans were in no doubt that West Germany was the 'real' Germany and true heir to the German past. Accordingly the West Germans decided not to give themselves a constitution, for that implied an endorsement of the division, but a Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*), which was to remain effective only until such time as the country was united.<sup>10</sup> Not surprisingly, when the two halves were united, the Unification Treaty simply extended the Basic Law to and incorporated East Germany into West Germany. Acutely aware of the role of collective memory in the maintenance of national identity, the Treaty sought to wipe out the memory of East Germany by avoiding as far as possible any mention of it.<sup>11</sup> Like post-war Germany, post-unification Germany wanted a clean break with its recent past as the only way to give itself a secure and undivided identity. Since the unification was widely popularized in the name of the unity of the German nation, it gave the new German state a nationalist dimension which most of the post-war leaders were deeply anxious to avoid. The recent rise of the neo-Nazi and other racist movements based on the slogan of 'Germany for the Germans' seems to bear out their fears.

Among the developing countries India was one of the first to embark on a debate on national identity. From the early decades of the nineteenth century onwards, Indian leaders began to ask why their country had repeatedly fallen prey to foreign invasions and rule. A large body of influential opinion concluded that the causes of India's predicament lay in its deeply flawed national character and social structure. The only way to regenerate India was to make a clean break with its past by giving it a wholly new and modern identity. The modernists appreciated that some aspects of its past, especially the classical past, were commendable. But they were afraid that any attempt to resuscitate these fragments would only open the door to revivalism and undermine the new identity. They also appreciated the need for a coherent conception of their history, but were aware that it was bound to run up against the periods of foreign rule, especially the Muslim, and disrupt its new identity. Like the Germans the modernist Indian leaders thought it unwise to seek to give the new national identity a historical and cultural basis, and resisted the temptation to evoke historical memories and draw historical parallels. When the country became independent in 1947, its first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru insisted that it must be based on a new liberal, democratic and secular 'national philosophy'. As he won successive elections, and claimed democratic

<sup>10</sup> For a useful discussion, see Eimar M. Hucku (ed.), *The Democratic Tradition: Four German Constitutions* (Leamington Spa, Berg, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> The fear of the past was so deep that many west Germans hotly debated what to call their divided country. An influential group preferred 'Federation of German Länder'. Theodor Heuß, the first Federal President, thought that this implied an 'evasive action before one's own identity' (*ein Ausweichen vor sich selbst*) and persuasively advocated the name of 'Federal Republic of Germany'. See Hucku, *The Democratic Tradition*, p. 69.

legitimacy for the new national identity, he declared it the 'absolute' and 'unquestionable' foundation of the Indian state from which it could deviate only at its peril.<sup>12</sup>

In recent years India has thrown up a new debate on national identity, which bears considerable resemblance to that in Germany and Canada. Some Indian leaders, mainly Hindu, have argued that the new post-independence national identity remained abstract and fragile unless it was given historical roots. Some of them would like to ground it in a suitably reinterpreted conception of their past, whereas others would like to indigenize it and change it in parts. As the modernists had feared, these attempts revived garbled collective memories of the centuries of Muslim rule and stoked anti-Muslim prejudices, leading to the destruction of the Babri mosque in 1992 and the violence that followed it. Indians, especially the Hindus would like to reclaim their past and arrive at a coherent understanding of their historical identity, but find that they cannot do so without endangering their future.

The kind of debate on national identity that has taken place in India is to be found in almost all developing countries. They want to modernize themselves, but they also want to retain much of their traditional ways of life. Since the two are not easy to reconcile, their deeply divided self-consciousness periodically triggers off intense debates about who they were and have become, where they are going and what kind of society they are creating. When the changes brought about by modernization affect their most cherished institutions, especially religion, the structure of the family and the relations between the sexes, they draw such volatile groups as the petty bourgeoisie, the artisans and the urban migrants into political life. The debate on their national identity then becomes polarized, fierce and even violent.

At independence Algeria gave itself a modern and secular identity. A few years later the cry of 'depersonalization' and 'loss of national identity' was heard in many parts of the country, and demands were made to 'repersonalize' it by restoring its 'traditional Islamic identity'. As the movement gathered momentum and led to a fierce clash of the two conceptions of national identity, the Algerian republic faced its severest crisis in the early 1990s. Democratic elections gave the Islamicists a majority, which the frightened secularists subverted with the help of the army. Like Algeria, Iran under the Shah opted for a secular national identity. Unlike Algeria, India and the post-war Germany, the Shah sought to give himself and his modernist project a historical legitimacy by linking up with the pre-Islamic classical past. The marginalized Islam, refusing to see itself as just one phase in Iran's long history, began to claim the monopoly of its 'soul'. As the modernist project bit deep into the traditional institutions and unsettled the social balance, the Islamicists under Khomeini won enough popular support to take over the country. Other countries in Asia and Africa have faced or are facing similar battles.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> For a fuller discussion, see my 'Nehru and the national philosophy of India' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 26 (1991), 35-48, and *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform* (Delhi, Sage, 1989), ch. 2. The appeal to a 'new national philosophy' is to be found in the rhetoric of almost all newly independent countries.

<sup>13</sup> See Kemal H. Karpat (ed.), *Political and Social Thought in the Contemporary Middle East* (New York, Praeger, 1982). For a fuller exploration of why the search for identity often ends up in a fundamentalist *cul-de-sac*, see my 'The concept of fundamentalism', in Aleksandras Shtromas (ed.), *The End of 'isms'?* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1994).

They are now joined by countries recently liberated from the Communist rule. The debates on national identity there centre not only on the appropriate paths of economic development but also on the centrality of religion, the place of indigenous or 'imposed' minorities in the national life, and the best way to interpret and incorporate the years of communism in their conceptions of their character and history. In some cases such as Bosnia, the stark contrast between the country's self-conception and the outsiders' view of its has internationalized and added a new poignancy to their search for national identity. Most Bosnian Muslims see themselves as European Muslims, as Europeans who only happen to be practising Islam, whereas most of their neighbours and even the west perceive them as muslim Europeans, as Muslims who happen to be living in Europe. Since the West tends to define Europe in predominantly Christian terms, its definition not only de-Europeanizes the Bosnian Muslims but also regards them as an alien and illegitimate presence.

I have so far sketched the different ways in which the concept of national identity entered political discourse in different countries and the kinds of debate it provoked. The countries concerned experienced a sense of decline, disorientation, discontinuity or disunity. This led to critical self-reflection on their history, their characteristic strengths and weaknesses, the ways in which they needed to change and their hopes for the future with a view of developing a coherent conception of themselves that could both give them the necessary self-confidence and guide and legitimize their choices.

Since the debates about the nature and locus of national identity in different countries had a common origin in a sense of crisis, they shared several common features. Because the nature of the crisis varied from country to country, and because different countries have different histories, cultures and political structures, the nature and content of their debates varied greatly. In Britain the debate on national identity was triggered off by several interrelated factors of which the general feeling of *economic and political* decline was the most important. Given the country's imperial and industrial history, the debate had an inescapable historical orientation, and was centred around the form of self-understanding and the qualities of character that had once stood it in good stead and which many thought could be revived.

In Germany the debate on national identity had a largely *moral and political* origin. It was provoked not by a sense of decline but by a profound sense of discontinuity caused by the Nazi experience and by the anxiety about the stability of the post-war democratic institutions. Unlike Britain Germany was not unified until the late nineteenth century and could not hope to revive a past historical period. Its debate on national identity therefore was largely future-orientated. The national identity was not to be revived or retrieved but reconstituted, and the past was to play only a limited role in it. Unlike Britain and Canada, the German debate also raised large questions about the country's sense of historical continuity and how it was to relate to its past. The questions bore remarkable resemblance to the familiar philosophical discussions about the nature of personal identity.

The Indian situation was not too different. A country that had been under foreign rule for centuries and which had never before been united lacked a single and continuous past to turn to. Even the Hindu revivalists could only appeal to the great *cultural* achievements of classical India, and knew

that these could not provide the necessary *political* elements for their collective self-definition. The debate on national identity therefore centred around the *political and cultural* regeneration of India. In Canada the debate on national identity was provoked not by a sense of decline or discontinuity, but by disorientation and disunity generated by Quebec nationalism and to a lesser extent by the fear of American domination. The debate therefore took a predominantly *constitutional* form and centred around redefining the structure of the Canadian state. In Iran, Algeria and other countries debates on national identity raised religious issues that did not figure in their counterparts elsewhere, had to cope with the colonial rupture in their history, and were conducted in different idioms. In short there is no single and homogeneous discourse on national identity, but a plurality of discourses sharing some features in common but differing in their logical structures and ways of defining, debating and reconstituting national identities.

In different countries debates on national identity involve different kinds of perplexity and agonizing choices. In those with a continuous and not too shameful past, the present can be integrated with it, and the search for identity involves no discontinuity. In countries with a fragmented, discontinuous or disastrous past, the search for identity involves at least a temporary break with it and some measure of historical discontinuity. Some of them can have either a future or a past but not both, at least for the present, and must rely on a deliberately induced historical amnesia to maintain their political stability. Furthermore since they cannot always turn to their past for inspiration and guidance, they must either muddle through as best they can or seek inspiration from only the partially relevant historical experiences of western states. Not surprisingly they lurch from one extreme to another, promiscuously play with different alternatives, and find it difficult to evolve coherent identities.

## II

In the previous section I outlined the kinds of debate on national identity that are taking place in different countries. The debates are clearly uneven and often marred by conceptual confusions. I might mention three by way of illustration. This is not intended to discredit but to clarify the debate, and to suggest how the profound issues it raises can be more fruitfully discussed.

First, the debates about national identity that we have sketched are all about the identity of a political community.<sup>14</sup> A political community is a territorially concentrated group of people bound together by their acceptance of a common mode of conducting their collective affairs, including a body of institutions and shared values. It is a public institution shared by its members collectively, as a community. It is not shared by them in a way that we might share a piece

<sup>14</sup> The term national refers to both the nation and the state. Hence the debate about national identity can be about the identity of the nation as well as that of the state. One can ask what constitutes the identity of a specific political community or a state, as also wherein lies its identity as a nation or a self-conscious and cohesive ethno-cultural community. Since the various debates that I have sketched pertain to the state, I concentrate on it.

of cake, but in a way that we share streets, parks, the institutions of government, and so on. And it is common to them not in a way that having two eyes is common to all human beings, but in a way that a dining table is common to those seated around it. The identity of a political community lies in what all its members share not individually but collectively, not privately but publicly, and has an inescapable institutional focus.

Many discussions on national identity do not appreciate this distinction. They look for the identity of a political community in the traits of temperament, character, habits, customs, social practices, etc., in a word in the cultural or ethno-cultural characteristics that are supposed to be common to all its members. These are all personal or individual characteristics, rarely shared by them all, and even then as individuals and not as a collectivity. They do not pertain to their public or political life and at best define and distinguish Germans or Canadians but not Germany or Canada. The tendency to locate the identity of a political community in the cultural characteristics of its members and to equate it with national character is evident in the German as well as the British New Right discussions of national identity mentioned earlier.

The confusion between the political and the cultural life of a community has unfortunate consequences. It equates the political community with the culture of the dominant ethnic or national group, and undermines its public, open and shared character. This means that one cannot be a full citizen of, say, Britain unless one is culturally British or even English and shares the character and the cultural practices that are supposed to be common to the British people. Britain must then, like Germany, either deny citizenship or at least equal citizenship to those who are not ethnically or culturally British and do not belong to the British 'nation' even though they might have lived there for years, or vigorously assimilate them. In either case it marginalizes a large body of men and women, treats them as second class citizens, and encourages much intolerance. Furthermore, since few if any cultural characteristics are common to all British people, and since these are complex and not easy to specify, the cultural definition of British national identity invariably leads to a biased and ideologically abridged definition of 'Britishness' and distorts the British way of life.

The second confusion in the discussion of national identity centres around the concept of *identity*. In most discussions of national identity the term is used in one of two senses. First, it refers to the inner structure and the organizing or constitutive principles of a community: that is, to the way it is constituted and its different parts are integrated into a coherent whole. Secondly, the term national identity is used to refer to what is unique, peculiar or specific to a community and distinguishes it from others.<sup>15</sup>

Although the two senses are related, they have different thrusts and implications. In the first sense of national identity, the intention is to explore a community from within and to elucidate its constitutive characteristics.

<sup>15</sup> The excessive preoccupation with difference vitiates the discussions of both personal and national identity. It is strikingly absent in many Conservative writers. See, for example, the discussion of national identity in Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London, Methuen, 1962), chs 5 and 7. The obsession with being different is largely a legacy of certain kinds of liberalism and, of course, Romanticism. It is to be found in J. S. Mill's *On Liberty*, ch. 3 where individuality is sometimes but not always equated with being different. For references to the celebration of difference as the very basis of identity in Herder, Schleiermacher and others, see Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* (London, Hutchinson, 1960), ch. 4.

Whether these characteristics are unique to it and make it different from others is immaterial. Difference *is* important, but it is ontologically secondary and derivative. It is, of course, most likely that since every community has a unique history, geography, economic and political structure and so on, its constitutive characteristics would be different from others. But even if they are not, that is not a matter of anxiety. And when they are different, it is not the difference *per se* but the fact that it springs from the kind of community it is that is important.

In the second sense of national identity the relationship is reversed. Difference is made the basis of the identity of the community, and the latter's constant concern, if it is not to erode or lose its identity, is to maintain its differences from others at all cost. When so defined, the preoccupation with national identity leads to paradoxes and is ultimately self-defeating. Since difference from others constitutes the community's identity, others become its constant frame of reference. It measures itself against them lest it should become like them. It therefore becomes other-directed and preserves its identity at the expense of its autonomy. The second sense of identity also fetishises difference and discourages inter-communal borrowing. It encourages the community to pay far more attention to how and how much it differs from the others than to whether or not it is true to itself. It also leads it to stress only those aspects of it in which it differs from others and to distort and falsify its way of life.

The second sense of national identity has dominated most of the debates on the subject. Many Germans continue to be obsessed with *Sonderweg* and feel deeply worried that their post-war democratic institutions will assimilate them to the West and undermine their identity. Many Canadians ask how they differ from the Americans and how best they can preserve these differences. Quebec nationalists ask the same question about themselves and the rest of Canada. In Japan the preoccupation with national distinctiveness has generated an extensive literature known as *nihonjinon*, and in Russia anything inconsistent with the 'Russian Idea' is dismissed as anti-national. This is just as true of Algeria, Iran and most developing countries. In all these cases similarity to others is perceived as a deep ontological threat, and differences from them are given undue importance. Hardly anyone asks why it is important and desirable to remain different, whether all differences or only those deemed to be worth preserving are to be retained, and if the latter, how they determine these.

The third confusion relates to the *nature* of national identity. For some it is historically determined, a brute and unalterable fact of life, and passively inherited by each generation.<sup>16</sup> All one can do is to acquire a more or less authentic understanding of it and conform to its imperatives. Some others take the opposite view that national identity is a matter of collective choice, a historical project to be executed by each generation in the light of its needs and circumstances. The inherited identity is a product of past choices and can be altered at will.<sup>17</sup> For yet others, national identity both is and is not a matter of collective choice. Every generation is free to define its national identity but

<sup>16</sup> A recent clear statement of this view is to be found in Roger Scruton, *The Philosopher on Dover Beach* (London, Carcanet, 1990), ch. 28.

<sup>17</sup> This view is common to Marxist and even some liberal writers. See Stuart Hall's article in Stuart Hall, David Held and Tony McGrew (eds), *Modernity and its Futures* (Cambridge, Polity, 1992).

not as it pleases. It is a product of and deeply shaped by its inherited identity and can only change the latter within limits.<sup>18</sup>

The first two views are deeply flawed. The first what I might call a realist or substantialist view of national identity, is refuted by the historical experiences of every known community. Since national identity is a product of history, it can also be remade in history unless one naively assumes that history somehow came to an end at a particular point in time. The realist view also fails to appreciate that a community's identity is not a substance but a cluster of interrelated and relatively open-ended tendencies and impulses pulling in different directions and capable of being developed and balanced in different ways. The second, what I might call a volitionalist view of national identity, fails to appreciate that a community is not a *tabula rasa*. Its historically evolved structures persist over time and restrict choices. To say that each generation is free to redefine its national identity in the light of its needs is to ignore the basic fact that its very definition of the needs and of what it considers acceptable ways of satisfying them are shaped by the inherited way of life.

The third, what I might call a constructivist view of national identity is the most satisfactory, provided that it is not interpreted in a mechanistic manner. The past is not a passive storehouse of material from which each generation chooses whatever it likes for the reconstruction of its national identity. Nor do inherited institutions limit its choices in a rigid and mechanical manner. The past never passes away: it lives on in the present. A coherent view of national identity must grow out of a constant dialogue between the past and the present in which each interrogates and illuminates the other. Neither the Germans nor the Indians nor any other community can for long insulate their self-given national identity against the impact of their past. Since their past is divisive, painful or humiliating, they may wisely keep it in a state of suspended animation, but they must over time find ways of grounding their new identity in their critically interpreted history and reconciling their past with their future.

In addition to these three confusions, there are also several others bedevilling the discussion of national identity. These include such untenable beliefs as that the national identity is a coherent whole, that it can be stated in a crisp formula, that it can and ought to be fostered by the state, that it can be insulated against change, that the state derives its legitimacy from its capacity to express and preserve the national identity, and that no society can last without a collectively shared thick identity.<sup>19</sup> Every political community, especially one as complex and atomized as ours, needs a broadly shared and inescapably thin conception of itself. But the search for such a conception can easily produce murderous consequences if not freed of the kinds of confusions mentioned earlier.

<sup>18</sup> See David Miller, 'In defence of nationality', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 10 (1993), 3-16.

<sup>19</sup> For criticisms of some of these confusions, see the articles by Anthony Arblaster, David Marquand, David Miller and myself in *New Community* 21 (1995). The entire issue is devoted to national identity. See also my 'Politics of nationhood' in K. von Benda-Beckman and Maykel Verkutyen (eds), *Cultural Identity and Development in Europe* (London, University College of London Press, 1994).