18. The Role of National Character

Salvador de Madariaga (1886–) is a Spanish diplomatist and writer who was Director of the Disarmament Section of the League of Nations from 1922–28 and his country’s delegate to the League from 1931–36. The existence of national character has been one of the most hotly contested points of political and anthropological study. Even today the so-called “national character” school as represented by Margaret Mead and others has about as many critics as it has supporters. The number and character of studies in this area, however, would indicate that the fact of national character has gained wider acceptance today than when Madariaga’s treatise first appeared. Furthermore, the experiences of recent history with the “elementary force and persistence” of the Russians at Stalingrad, the industrial and military inventiveness of the Americans, and the technical thoroughness and lack of moderation of the Germans support this conclusion.

In this excerpt, three major propositions are emphasized: first, that the direction of domestic policies and the nature of foreign policies are peculiarly influenced by the elusive but incontestable character of a people; that these traits are neither exclusively hereditary nor environmental, but rather the result of a unique and mysterious combination of the two; and that no observer of the international scene concerned with interpreting the behavior of national policy-makers can safely overlook these facts of national mind and will.

Salvador de Madariaga

Strange as it may seem, national character is not universally accepted as a fact of nature. The time-honoured argument is still heard that, if a Chinese new-born baby were brought to London and educated at Eton and Balliol, the result would be undistinguishable from Sir Austen Chamberlain (to quote, with all respect, a typical Englishman). Yet, even if we admitted this preposterous suggestion, the fact would remain that the Chinese baby in question, if left in China, would make a typical Chinaman, and that is surely the crux of the matter. It may be argued that, in this example, racial differences are so considerable as to amount to a difference in species. Yet, even within the same race, even within the same continent, the existence of

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distinct national characters is one of the obvious facts of nature. It leaps to the mind's eye. It is keenly felt by our intuition.

This subject, however, is so open to misconception that, in order to make clear my point of view on the matter, I may perhaps be allowed to quote here an opinion I have published elsewhere, on the fundamental ideas bearing on national and international character.

If you were to ask a Frenchman (before the War) what his idea of Englishmen was he would probably answer: They are hypocrites with practical sense. It is a curious thing that national character is usually summed up by the voice of universal opinion as a pair of features, one a quality, the other a defect. Thus, to the pair hypocrisy-practical sense which represents the Englishman, correspond clearness-licentiousness for the Frenchman, thoroughness-clumsiness for the German, dignity-cruelty for the Spaniard, vulgarity-vitality for the American. It is as if, in this big village of the world, each individual nation had been sketched down by its neighbours to its fundamental features—more or less accurately understood—and in this operation a good and a bad quality had remained, witnesses to the double origin of the human soul.

However hasty these sketches of national types may be, they have the merit of establishing beyond doubt the great fact which many a dogmatic internationalist would have us forget: There is such a thing as national character. Opinions may differ as to the influences which create or alter it. Race, climate, economic conditions, may enter for a greater or a lesser part in its inception and development. But the fact is there and stares us in the face. History, geography, religion, language, even the common will are not enough to define a nation. A nation is a fact of psychology. It is that which is natural or native in it which gives its force to the word nation.

A nation is a character. . .

The territorial setting of nations determines that other microcosm, national character. Here, the difficulties of observation are increased by the fact that the character of the whole must be induced from the acts of individuals or groups of individuals. Inconsequence is raised to the second power. History, i.e. the record of the facts of the collective being, is only an element of study, less useful than might at first appear, and not without its pitfalls; for it is either told by contemporaries, who are biased, or by writers too far removed from the facts to be able to render their inner meaning. Then, again, perhaps the deepest and most effective tendencies of national character are the most difficult to observe, for they are, as it were, diffused in the national atmosphere, and like light and air are not seen. Here, more perhaps than with individual character, divination is more useful than observation,

and feeling than logic. Through the poetical faculty it is possible to guess some of those mysterious relations within nature which give their value to metaphors—for were they not the symbols of the secret sympathy of things, metaphors would be but mere intellectual toys.

In the above pages will be seen the criterion here adopted as regards national character. First and foremost, an earnest endeavour to conquer the obstacles which stand in the way of all useful work. Nor are they all easily overcome. We must resign ourselves to consider as inevitable the most important of them, i.e. the inherent relativity of our knowledge, a law of practical psychology as it is of rational mechanics. Whatever we may say or feel about other people's characters is bound to be governed by our own character, and therefore resembles estimates of movement made from moving bases, such as the measuring of the speed of a boat from another moving boat. Other difficulties are not insuperable, yet are seriously to be watched and guarded against: such as national prejudices, inborn or cultivated, and ethical estimates, both of which inevitably tend to warp the impartiality of our observation. To this category would also belong pseudo-scientific ideas, in particular that pest of international psychology—the belief that language kinship implies likeness in character through race kinship. No unnecessary hypotheses have been made. Race has been relegated to very few (one or two) footnotes. Language has been treated as an important sign of national psychology, after due elimination of the error just mentioned. An earnest effort has been made to secure national and also ethical serenity and impartiality in the estimate of the facts observed—an attitude rendered relatively easy by the author's deep conviction that qualities and defects are intimately intertwined, . . .