



Self and Nation

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Self and Nation:
Categorization, Contestation and Mobilization

Steve Reicher and Nick Hopkins



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Preface

Proverbs for Paranoids, 3. If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about answers

Thomas Pynchon

Nations, nationalism and national identity are all around us. Finding evidence is no more difficult than finding sand on a beach. For those who investigate the more arcane aspects of the world this might seem to give us an envious advantage. But there is a major cost. Because nationhood constitutes such a central aspect of our social world, there is much at stake when one comes to trying to understand it. No one who wishes to comment on the relevant phenomena can expect to find a hushed and pliant audience waiting for enlightenment. Quite the opposite in fact. We must try and raise our voice above a Babel of voices. We must contend with a welter of preconceptions. We must be aware of the considerable personal and political investments which buttress those preconceptions and make them hard to challenge.

Both the positives and the negatives of studying nationalism are exemplified in the following passage. It is taken from a column by Douglas Alexander in the *Glasgow Herald* entitled, 'Old national stereotypes should be cast aside', which we came across not as part of our study but rather when taking a break from our work. Alexander (2000) writes:

National identity seems to be the political equivalent of internet shares at the moment. So popular is the issue that last week alone saw a much-reported interview on Englishness by Jack Straw [Home Secretary in the British Government], a major article on Britishness by Gordon Brown [Chancellor of the Exchequer], and suggestions of a shift in Alex Salmond's thinking on Scottish independence [Salmond being the leader of the Scottish National Party]. For all the talk of focus groups and poll-led politics, this interest is a heartening instance of political dispute mirroring intellectual discussion. Over the past year such discussion about the 'new Scotland' seems to have been never-ending. With Tom Devine's *The Scottish Nation* adding a welcome historical perspective, acres of newsprint have been given over to discussions of the character and characteristics of post-devolution Scotland.

So, even when you try and get away from nationhood, you can't help running slap bang back into it. On the surface, what Alexander does is confirm our claims concerning the omnipresence of questions about national phenomena. However, of equal importance is his illustration of the ways in which these questions are asked and the presuppositions that allow them to be asked in this way. The most common question takes the form: What is the character of the nation? What does it mean to be Scottish or to be English, or to be German or Latvian or indeed of

any nationality? Alexander may question the particular terms in which the national identity is characterized. He may feel that old national stereotypes need to be discarded for new ones. To be more specific, he may wish to make tolerance a central value when it comes to determining 'what is a Scot'. But he takes it as a non-negotiable given that there is a singular and distinctive national identity which is lying out there just waiting to be discovered. It is this general presupposition which we aim to challenge.

Perhaps, though, Alexander is atypical. Perhaps his presupposition that we can find a singular national identity stems from his concern with the break up of the British state and the creation of devolved parliaments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Such a context of division is bound to lead to a focus on difference and hence a need to identify exactly what it is that renders any one nation different from others. If we looked at a context which involved bringing nations together in supra-national Union rather than a context where a supra-national state was being divided into constituent nations, we might find less credibility given to the idea of the singular national identity. So consider the following. It is taken from a book called *We Europeans* (Hill, 1997), which is promoted by an organization called 'Understanding Europe' whose aim is to promote a joint European future. Hill states his purpose as to discover the 'cultural ids' of different European nations – that is the deep characteristics which drive the actions of each population. However, he wishes to discard 'the ethnic folklore that has clouded Europeans' perception of one another for far too long: the rude frivolous Frenchman, the idle pretentious Spaniard, the dull humourless German (not forgetting his archetype, the bull-headed sabre-scarred Prussian) and so on' (1997: 12). The reason is that such 'one-liners' are inevitably simplifications and distortions, but not that the notion of a single national character is a problem. Hill therefore goes on to state that:

I feel the attempt to correct some of the most pernicious deformations of national character, in more than a single phrase, can serve some purpose. The fact that the French may seem rude to many foreigners may in fact . . . conceal a much more subtle complex of characteristics: self-absorption (my favourite), directness, eagerness to spark a response and *desinvolture*. (p. 13)

It is clear, then, that the assumption of national singularity is not affected by whether one champions international disintegration or integration. However, if we pursue Hill's argument just one step further, we can see that national singularity is not entirely unrelated to the opposition between disintegration and integration. He writes:

If the generalizations in this book do something to correct the folkloric stereotypes of the past, they will have served their purpose. In any case I offer no excuse. It seems to me that there is no better combination than British inventiveness, French wit, Slav music, Italian cuisine, German perfection, Spanish reality, Dutch decency, Scandinavian fairness . . . in short, the best combination in the world. (pp. 13–14)

What Hill is doing, then, is to substitute definitions of identity which characterize other nations in such terms as to render contact (let alone integration) as undesirable

with a new set of definitions which render integration both possible and mutually advantageous. So, at the same time as claiming to discover the single authentic identity which accurately describes what people are like in the here and now, it could be argued that what Hill (and Alexander) unwittingly demonstrate is that there are multiple competing definitions of national identity and that these are as much orientated to sustaining different projects for the future as to describing the present state of the nation.

That is precisely what we will argue. We want to create a shift from questions of the type: ‘what does it mean to be Scottish’ to questioning the different consequences of the different ways in which Scotland is defined. In other words, we wish to move from a view of national identity (and social identity more generally) as solely about *being* and start investigating the way in which it is also related to the process of *becoming*. We intend to examine how identity is used to mobilize people in support of, or in opposition to, different forms of political project and is thereby instrumental in directing the evolution of our social world. For us, the link between identity and mobilization must be moved centre stage.

This is easy to state, but far more difficult to fulfil. Firstly we must work against the weight of political interests. If a particular political project is underpinned by a particular definition of identity, then political ascendancy can be guaranteed by mythologizing that definition as the sole authentic definition (we shall see much evidence of such activity in the following pages). The ability to mythologize particular definitions of a particular identity is, in turn, aided and abetted by the general myth that there is always a single valid definition for any given identity. Our attack on that myth would therefore (if, by any chance, it were successful) constitute a blow against ideological domination – and it is unlikely that those interested in domination would take such a blow lying down.

Secondly, we must work against the weight of popular preconceptions and thirdly – as Alexander accurately observes – we must equally work against the weight of intellectual assumptions. In talking about identity as a matter of becoming, we are breaking with the perceptualism that has dominated social psychology for half a century and more. We are suggesting that human mental life does not derive from a passive contemplation of the world but from active engagement in the world – from the ways we are, we want to be and are capable of being. Social psychology needs to relate human understanding to the structure of human action. More specifically, we need to relate national identity to the structure of national action.

But, as we shall shortly see, even the most cursory examination of nationhood reveals that this is a two-way relationship. Certainly, national identity may shape collective movements, which create national structures, but equally national structures are crucial in shaping the way people identify themselves. In the terms we have used above we are not simply proposing that a focus on *becoming* supplants the focus on *being*, but rather that we must examine how the one supplements the other. The task of a fully rounded social psychology is to help explain the dynamic and evolving relationship between the way in which our self-understandings create the world and the way in which the world creates our self-understandings. We consider that an examination of national phenomena

can help us to develop such a rounded psychology. Conversely, such a psychology is necessary to understand the complexities of nationhood. To put it in a phrase: our ambition in writing this book is to use nationhood in order to develop psychological understanding and to use psychology in order to develop our understanding of nationhood.

In order for the reader to understand how we have sought to realize these ambitions, it may help to give some background concerning the way in which this volume came about. The book is, in fact, one of two books that started life as one book. By the time we had written the original draft it was clear that the thing was neither fish nor fowl – or rather, it was both fish and fowl, which made for a rather unappetizing combination. It started with some two hundred pages in which we engaged with the dominant traditions in social psychology in order to explain and position our own approach. It then continued with a further three hundred pages in which we used nationhood as an exemplary case through which to validate this approach. However, as both our editors and their reviewers pointed out, the theoretical discussion was rather arcane for many of those interested in nationhood and the issue of nationhood may not have been of major concern to all those interested in the theoretical controversies. So we decided to separate the package, to create one book which was mainly theory (perhaps still with a hint of nationhood in some of the examples) and another – this one – which summarizes the theory but then concentrates on illustrating and applying it through a study of the relationship between national identity and national being. Each book stands alone and there will be more than enough theory in the following pages. However should anyone wish to examine the roots and the justification of our model, and if they would like to consider the more general implications of this model for an understanding of the human social subject, we would refer them to the other volume (Reicher, in press).

There is another significant manner in which this book has changed in the re-writing. At first, our argument was based largely on the analysis of how Scottish politicians and the Scottish media and activists in the various struggles around the formation of a Scottish parliament used and contested the idea of Scottish nationhood. While this debate may have seemed of almost unsurpassed importance to those living in Scotland, we fully recognize that it may have seemed far less significant to those living further away. However, our aim was not to be parochial. Our logic was based on what Clifford Geertz has had to say about the relationship of culture to human nature and hence of particularity to generality.

Geertz notes how, for many, the hunt for human nature involves looking for that which everybody shares in common and hence ignoring what is specific to different groups. He describes this ‘stratigraphic’ approach in the following terms: ‘At the level of concrete research and specific analysis, this grand strategy came down, first, to a hunt for universals in culture, for empirical uniformities that, in the face of customs around the world and over time, could be found everywhere in about the same form’ (1993: 38). In contrast, Geertz himself advocates a synthetic approach. Because it is in the nature of human beings to be cultural, we can only discover that nature by paying close attention to its manifestations in the details of a culture. In other words, generality is to be found by respecting, not by

denying specificity: 'If we want to discover what man amounts to, we can only find it in what men are: and what men are, above all other things, is various. It is in understanding that variousness – its range, its nature, its basis and its implications – that we shall come to construct a concept of human nature that, more than a statistical shadow and less than a primitivist dream, has both substance and truth' (1993: 51–52).

Following Geertz, we wished to explore the general relationship between the ways in which identity is constructed and the ways people act through a detailed appreciation of the Scottish case. But this wasn't appreciated quite so much by our editors and our reviewers. They were concerned that, however valid our argument, it might be ignored as being 'only about Scotland'. So, in the re-written text, we use examples from all around the globe as evidence of the identity–action relationships which we are claiming. We show that they don't only obtain in one small part of one small island on the north western periphery of Western Europe. However we do still tend to follow through our analysis of these relationships by focusing on Scottish examples – and that for the simple reason that our evidence is so much richer, so much more direct and frequently so much more eloquent when it comes from Caledonia. It is therefore worth saying a few words about this evidence and about the context to which speakers were referring.

Scotland's history, especially in relation to England and to Great Britain, is long and complicated. After an enduring period of feudal domination by English kings, Scotland finally won its independence after the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314. Independence lasted until 1707 when union was declared between the two countries and the Edinburgh parliament was dissolved, although Scotland retained a separate church, as well as separate legal and educational systems. Initial opposition to the Union soon died down. However, throughout the second half of the twentieth century, support for some measure of renewed Scottish autonomy grew. This blossomed dramatically in the 1970s with the capture of parliamentary seats by the Scottish National Party (SNP), a party based on the call for Scottish independence. In 1979, a referendum on the issue of devolution (that is, a separate parliament for Scotland within an overall UK framework) was narrowly lost. In fact, more voted for than against, but a clause had been inserted to say that, as well as a majority of those voting, 40 per cent of the entire electorate must support the measure before it could be enacted. That threshold was not reached. By the 1990s, the question of Scotland's constitutional status in the UK had again risen to the fore and, in the 1992 general election, formed the major issue in Scotland and, to some extent, in the UK as a whole. Within Scotland, there were four major parties. Labour and the Liberal Democrats supported a devolved parliament. The SNP supported independence. The Conservatives supported the status quo. The contest was fought with passion and seriousness and continued to reverberate throughout Scotland long after the Conservatives (having won a majority of the seats throughout the UK as a whole) were returned to power. If their UK majority ensured the temporary survival of the status quo, the Labour victory of 1997 brought a referendum on devolution, which was soon followed by the re-establishment of a Scottish parliament in 1999. Of course this is not the end of the matter.

The 1992 election lies at the heart of the analysis developed throughout this book. Over the period before and after the election date we interviewed 52 candidates and senior activists spanning all the parties (20 of whom were MPs). We attended and recorded 16 election meetings, some by a single candidate, some involving all the candidates in a constituency. We also recorded 12 public rallies, demonstrations or fringe meetings organized at the parties' annual conferences and connected with the election and its aftermath. So too we recorded meetings or rallies organized by non-electoral groups (five) and several events as diverse as demonstrations in support of sacked Scottish workers and the annual commemoration of the Battle of Bannockburn. Finally, we continued to collect major public speeches and statements on the matter. In the case of public statements we have identified the speaker. In the case of private interviews we have respected the anonymity of the speaker and only identified him or her by a number, political party and by political position. The one exception, in this as in so many other things, is the late Conservative MP, Sir Nicholas Fairbairn. He was more than happy to be identified and so we have done so.

We are particularly grateful to all of those who gave us their time, who agreed to long interviews and who provided us with so much material. There are others who have given us a great deal, but in different ways. We owe much to those who read the original text in various forms and provided us with helpful comments, which we have tried to take on board. We are also grateful to those who have discussed the ideas in this book and given us cause to think and sometimes to reconsider. It is always hard to remember all those who are included in these two categories, but they include Mick Billig, Susan Condor, Alex Haslam, David McCrone, and Jonathon Potter. We owe a particular debt of thanks to Ziyad Marar at Sage who was more than an ordinary editor, who encouraged us and who made a crucial intellectual input to the shaping of the book.

We also depended on several other forms of support. The research was conducted without an external grant. This meant that we ourselves conducted the interviews, attended the meetings, joined in the rallies and demonstrations – but we would have had it no other way: we wanted to be there! However, it also meant that in addition to accumulating a growing pile of audio-tapes we incurred all sorts of expenses. We are indebted to Dundee University's Psychology Department (especially Nick Emler and Alan Kennedy) for tolerating (and subsidizing) such behaviour and to the University's own Research Initiatives Fund for a small grant towards the transcription costs. Over a number of years, the Dundee Department's secretaries – especially the remarkable Liz Evans, Linda Fullerton and Lynda McDonald – and a number of others outwith the Department (most notably the equally remarkable Carol Larg) spent many hours carefully transcribing our tapes (and providing us with their own thoughtful insights on what they had heard). To all of these, a genuine thank you.

Most importantly, we would like to thank our partners, one teenager, two cats and one dog for putting up with our moods. They have had much to endure but now the pain is over. Or rather, it is now the reader's turn.

But there is one final point we wish to make before we get down to business. This book has been a genuinely collaborative effort. Neither one of us would or

could have done it without the other. However, unfortunately the linear nature of text means that one name has to come first and the other second. So we tossed a coin. It came down tails and the book was authored Reicher and Hopkins. It could as easily have been Hopkins and Reicher.

1 The National Question

Psychology in a world of nations

We have said it before, but let us say it again: the aim of this book is to use social psychology to answer some questions about national phenomena and to use national phenomena to pose some questions about social psychology. This might seem an obvious task, and one might reasonably suppose that it had been undertaken with such frequency that any new attempt would be jostling for room in a very crowded space. Yet, on closer inspection of that space, one finds a remarkable absence – or rather, a remarkable pair of absences.

For all the huge and burgeoning literature on nations and nationalism, there is virtually no explicit consideration of the psychological mechanisms which mediate between structural, cultural and ideological considerations on the one hand and action on the other. Even more notably, psychology is frequently excluded from the family of disciplines that are invited to discuss the nature of national phenomena. For instance, in his review of explanations of nationalism, John Coakley (1992) provides a taxonomy based on the definition of the phenomena to be explained, the disciplinary approach to be adopted and the ideological approach that is taken. Under ‘disciplinary approach’ he lists:

political science; philosophy; sociology; anthropology; geography; sociolinguistics (history has been omitted on the assumption that the contribution of many historians who have addressed this subject on a theoretical level will fall under the heading of one of the above disciplinary perspectives, all of which, in any case, tend to adopt an historical approach to the topic). (pp. 2–3)

Just as the study of nations is booming, so social psychology is a growth area covering an increasing number of topics as reflected in a diversifying array of journals. What is more, after prolonged neglect (cf. Steiner, 1974), group and collective processes are receiving renewed attention. Between 1974 and 1989, 5.9 per cent of articles in top mainstream social psychology journals were concerned with some aspect of group processes or intergroup relations. Between 1990 and 1995 the average grew to 10.6 per cent, with the figure for 1995 alone standing at 14.9 per cent (Hogg & Moreland, 1995; Moreland, Hogg & Hains, 1994). Further, two new journals have started in the last couple of years alone: *Group Dynamics* and *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*. As these titles would suggest, their remit is limited exclusively to collective phenomena. Yet, for all this interest, nations and nationalism have received scant attention.

In the first two volumes of *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, not a single article has been devoted to such phenomena. Looking at an admittedly

non-random sample of social psychology textbooks on our bookshelves (Baron, Byrne & Johnson, 1998; Brewer & Crano, 1994; Brown, 1965, 1986; Forsyth, 1987; Hewstone, Stroebe & Stephenson, 1996; Hogg & Vaughan, 1998; Levin & Levin, 1988; Moscovici, 1972; Pennington, Gillen & Hill, 1999; Sabini, 1992, 1995; Wrightsman & Deaux, 1981) only two contain any mention at all of anything to do with nations and both of these are limited to passing reflections covering no more than a single page: one on whether we have clear stereotypes of different nations (Brewer & Crano, 1994); the other as to whether different nations have different values (Wrightsman & Deaux, 1981). This isn't because textbooks are somehow atypical. A computer search of psychology journal articles over the period 1987–1994 reveals eight articles on nationalism and 11 on national identity. This compares with 485 articles on a specific personality characteristic (neuroticism) and 3174 on rats!

This is not to deny that there are many papers in which national identity is employed as a dependent or independent variable, but these are cases where the nation is not of interest in itself, nor are the particularities of national categories a focus of study. Indeed these are glossed over since the nation is only employed as a convenient domain in which to study more general phenomena – stereotyping, intergroup comparison or whatever (cf. Billig, 1995; Condor, 1997, in press). There are, of course, some exceptions to this sorry picture and there are incipient signs that psychologists are beginning to treat the nation more seriously. We shall be dealing with these exceptions in the next chapter. Nonetheless, in broad terms, there is little doubt that students of the nation have ignored psychology and that students of psychology have ignored the nation. If this double absence is remarkable enough in itself, it becomes even more remarkable when one considers the extent to which the issues and the concepts used by each are so inhabited by the other. It is as if, on each side, a central member of the family had been banished to the nether regions and, while never spoken of by name, still haunted each and every conversation.

This is, perhaps, most obvious in studies of nations and nationalism. If the revival of peripheral nationalisms in Western Europe sparked the new wave of study and if the emergence of nationalisms following the break up of the Soviet Union only added to the impetus, the most acute concerns accompanied the periodic upsurges of violence, most notably around the break up of Yugoslavia. To quote from the back-cover blurb for Michael Ignatieff's account of his journeys into the new nationalism: 'modern nationalism is a language of the blood: a call to arms that can end in the horror of ethnic cleansing' (1994). Such concerns lead to a frequent definition of nationalism as a psychological category (Giddens, 1985) and, more particularly, an equation of nationalism with the psychological categories of passion and of sentiment (Hooghe, 1992). The combined taint of extremity and irrationalism also leads to a widespread suspicion concerning all manifestations of nationhood. In Kitching's delightful phrase, 'son, when they raise your flag, raise your eyebrow' (1985: 116).

However, there is a danger in reducing nationalism to its most intense manifestations. As Gellner (1994) observes, nationalism may be an important and pervasive force, but it rarely leads to violent disruption. If we limit our concern

with the phenomena to those moments when people are preparing to die, or else to kill, in the nation's name, we would conclude that, however spectacular, nationalism is generally of little relevance to the way in which we live our everyday lives. Gellner's own description of nationalism is revealing in this respect. He likens it to gravity – a force that exerts its pull upon us in both spectacular and mundane ways. Sometimes it may cause things to crash to the ground, or apples to drop on our heads. But it also shapes the way we act in less obtrusive ways. To borrow Billig's term, it is banal nationalism – the way we presuppose a national frame for everything from what counts as 'the news' to what we understand as 'the weather' – that may ultimately have the greatest impact upon us (1995). By focusing on the periodic explosions of nationalist fervour we miss the fact that nationalism is the ideology through which people act to reproduce nation-states as nations (Billig, 1996).

But even in these banal forms, where national identity is not overtly asserted but rather taken for granted and where a national frame of reference does not lead one to kill but shapes the way one scans and understands a newspaper, one is still invoking a psychological category. One is dealing with the ways in which people understand who they are, the nature of the world they live in, how they relate to others and what counts as important for them.

It is not only nationalism and national identity that invoke psychological constructs. Increasingly, the very concept of nation has come to incorporate a psychological dimension. Perhaps the two most famous quotations in this regard are from Rupert Emerson and Benedict Anderson. Emerson states that: 'the simplest statement that can be made about a nation is that it is a body of people who feel that they are a nation; and it may be that when all the fine-spun analysis is concluded this will be the ultimate statement as well' (1960: 102). Anderson defines the nation by saying that: 'it is an imagined political community' (1983: 15). However, these two are not alone. Walker Connor states that: 'many of the problems associated with defining a group are attributable precisely to the fact that it is a self-defining group. That is why scholars such as Ernest Baker, Rupert Emerson, Carleton Hayes, and Hans Kohn have consistently used terms such as self-awareness and self-consciousness when analysing and describing the nation' (1994: 104).

To introduce a psychological dimension to the definition of nations does not mean ignoring other dimensions. In Anderson's case, quite the opposite is true. His analysis centres on the material conditions of national subjectivity and may best be seen as contributing to a materialist theory of consciousness (Kitching, 1985). We will consider these conditions in more detail later in this chapter. For now we simply want to stress that, even if psychology must not be allowed to supplant other social scientific analyses, an understanding of nations and nationalism requires it to be re-admitted to the debating table.

To try and address the conditions of national imagination without considering the nature of human imagination will be a futile exercise. To analyse the cultural battles over the definition of national identity without understanding how people come to assume and inhabit such identities, and how the identity then shapes what they do, may be an interesting exercise in its own right, but it does not get us very far in understanding nationalism. How can nationhood come to be so important to

people and have such an impact on their actions? Why and when will national identity lead to violence against members of other nations? How is it that the Serbians of 1999 can be so moved by the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 and the slights or triumphs of the distant past can exert such influence on present-day behaviour? Without finding a way of articulating the social and the psychological rather than subsuming one under the other, we will be left, like Paul Valéry, simply wondering at the nation as ‘something unquantifiable, an entity which cannot be coldly defined, that is determined by neither race, language, land, interests nor history: that analysis can deny, but which nonetheless resembles, as by its proven all-powerfulness, passionate love, faith, one of those mysterious possessions which lead man there where he did not know he could go – beyond himself’ (quoted in Privat, 1931: 3; translated by the authors).

Having looked at social psychology in the study of nationhood, let us turn to nationhood in the study of social psychology. The first and most obvious point is that, if this latter study is concerned with the understanding of behaviour in social context (cf. Israel & Tajfel, 1972) then the context in which we act is a world of nations. For Eric Hobsbawm, the twentieth century both began and concluded as an era of nationalism. The national conflicts that tore Europe apart in the 1990s were the old chickens of Versailles once again coming home to roost (Hobsbawm, 1994). We are, to use Balibar’s phrase, *homo nationalis* from cradle to grave (1991b: 93). Castells (1997) goes yet further and argues that it isn’t just that the nation is the predominant form of collective being in the contemporary world. Rather, nationalism has re-invigorated the very possibility of collective identity in an age of individualism.

The apparent ubiquity of nations has led to claims that there is something eternal and necessary about them. Smith (1986) refers to the widespread assumption that nations were as natural as the human body itself – an assumption that bridges popular, political and academic divides. According to the South African Broederbond intellectual Nico Diedrichs, nations are of divine inspiration: ‘God does not only work through men, but also through nations . . . An effort to obliterate national differences thus means more than collision with God’s natural law. It means an effort to shirk a divinely established duty or task’ (quoted in No Sizwe, 1979: 23). According to Régis Debray, they embody a natural logic: ‘We must locate the nation phenomenon within general laws regulating the survival of the human species’ (1977: 28). However, the most developed expression of this viewpoint is to be found in the work of Friedrich List (cf. Gellner, 1994). List argued for a nationalist ontology: people may not always construe themselves in terms of nationhood, but national divisions are the motor that drives history forward. The political task is to turn the nation ‘in itself’ into the nation ‘for itself’. If this is reminiscent of Hegelian–Marxist language, that is because List was involved in a direct polemic with Marx and Engels over the issue of whether class or nation should be given ontological priority. There are those, such as Gellner, who have declared List the victor: ‘The supposition that [nations] will be dismantled, anticipated by Marxism, is the *real* chimera – and not ethnically defined protectionism, as Marx thought. In all this, List was superior to Marx, and much more prescient’ (1994: 19; emphasis in the original).

Irrespective of whether Gellner, List, Debray and Diedrichs are correct, the very fact that their views have such currency is evidence in itself of the predominance of national consciousness alongside national forms throughout the world that we live in. So whether spoken of or not, it is often the nation that frames the concerns that guide social psychological research, it is often the nation that social psychologists have in mind when they address collective phenomena and it is often through the contemplation of national phenomena that social psychologists frame their core concepts. It may help to provide a concrete example of each.

Genevieve Paicheler (1988) illustrates how the emergence of social psychology as a distinct discipline in the USA during the 1920s was bound up with the concerns of nation formation. The growth of Fordism and of mass production demanded a mass market in which the new volume of products could be sold. The division of a population into separate groups – German Americans, Italian Americans, Anglo-Americans and so on – with different tastes was an obstacle to the emergence of this market. What was needed was a new and singular national consumer with unified tastes. The task of psychology, as clearly enunciated in the editorials of new social psychology journals, was to help in fitting the individual to the needs of the nation.

In such a context, hostility between groups of different national backgrounds became a serious issue. The perception of others as different and as negative required urgent attention, and it received such attention in the form of stereotype research. The pioneering study of Katz and Braly in 1933 presented college students with a list of adjectives and asked them to indicate which were typical of ten groups. While the groups included ‘Negroes’ and ‘Jews’ and while the paper was entitled ‘Racial Stereotypes of 100 college students’, it is notable that most of the groups chosen were nationalities and that the paper is generally described as concerning nations. For instance, Brewer and Crano (1994), in one of the two references to nationality that we found in recent text books, present the Katz and Braly results in a three-quarter page box under the heading ‘National Stereotypes in the United States’ and they then ask ‘following are the four characteristics most frequently assigned to ten nationalities by US college students in 1933. How many of these stereotypes do you think would still be held today?’ (p. 463). Katz and Braly’s actual discovery of considerable consensus about the nature of particular groups and the differences between groups led them to express strong fears about the breakdown of community.

It continues to be true that nations are used by psychologists as exemplary instances of stereotypes and stereotyping processes (see Spears, Oakes, Ellemers & Haslam, 1997, for a recent overview of the literature) and indeed of many other group processes besides (Condor, in press). It is also true that the very concept of a group in social psychology has been defined in relation to the nation. Work on groups and group processes in psychology has, over recent years, become increasingly dominated by the social identity tradition (Tajfel, 1978, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Part of the appeal of the theory is that it seeks to explain the behaviour of large-scale collectivities and not just the small groups of traditional laboratory research. So, when Tajfel seeks to define the social group in such a way as to understand how people who are not co-present and have no personal