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NATIONAL IDENTITY AND
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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PERSONAL IDENTITY, NATIONAL IDENTITY AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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PREFACE

Social and political theory presents an ongoing problem of conceptualisation. In the attempt to bring intellectual order and comprehension to the grand kaleidoscope of human behaviour, it is essential either to categorise or to abstract. By the very nature, however, of the processes of categorisation and abstraction, there is an unavoidable tendency to move, by degrees, away from the existential flesh and blood reality of humans in action towards concepts about their action. Of necessity these concepts are theoretical and ideological. They are intellectual modes of comprehension. Frequently, they are lenses through which behaviour is examined, rather than the behaviour itself perceived in new forms. As the concepts concerning behaviour become more abstract, or borrow by analogy from other fields of ‘scientific’ research, so the actions under study become less the flesh and blood humans and increasingly the reified ideas of the researchers themselves. This intellectual procedure is elegant, exciting and often insightful – but, by its very nature, it risks distance from human reality.

The natural, intellectual dynamic of removal away from existential reality is compounded by the scarcity of generally agreed psychological and social–psychological theories which can facilitate – by way of being clear methodological tools – the researchers in remaining in contact with their living, breathing subjects.

This tendency of abstraction away from the dynamic realities of human action exists in International Relations as much as in any other academy of the social sciences. There is, however, a certain explicit drama in world politics – its archetypal actors are the gods War and Peace – which can make any such abstraction appear insensitive scholasticism. Yet, intellectual rigour demands that we be able to categorise and to abstract the crucial issues of international political behaviour.

The research presented here is concerned with certain fundamental problems in political and social theory. These problems can be stated
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quite cruelly. Why do individuals and mass national populations give their loyalty to the nation-state? Why are they prepared to die for it? What are the structure and dynamics of their psychological attachment? How is it evoked? How does it affect government decisions and international politics?

This work, then, is precisely an attempt to understand this one particular aspect of international political and social theory in a theoretically insightful and methodologically rigorous way without at any time losing sight of the essential human actor. To do this, it employs a psychological theory which acts as the methodological bridge between individual action and theoretical interpretation. The first chapter provides a general background to the use of psychological theory in political research and the second chapter explicates the actual theory – identification theory – which is used as the methodological tool of this research. The reader who is in a hurry may, if she or he wishes, read only the opening and closing pages of both those chapters and skip the detailed expositions. The reader, however, seeking a secure anchor in the psychological theory employed, will need to follow the psychological thread all the way through before it is applied to the actual stuff of politics.

A brief word about rigour. Because this research is concerned with mass action, and with the structure and dynamics of the nation in relation to the state, its mode of approach is necessarily one of macro-theory. The historical and empirical evidence presented to illustrate the theory is, therefore, of a macro and of a general nature. The canvas is unavoidably large and, as such, the brush strokes are also large. This necessary tendency towards generalisation is offset, I trust, by the strict rigour with which the theoretical thread is pursued. My argument stands or falls on the strict coherence of its internal logic as identification theory is applied first to the individual, then to the mass national group and then to its effect on international political behaviour.

My research also indicates that identification as a dynamic behavioural imperative has not previously been made explicit. As such, it has not previously been applied to social theory generally or to international relations theory in particular. I feel myself lucky to have been able – via an exegesis of Freud, Mead, Erikson, Parsons and Habermas – to make explicit the dynamic character of identification, the imperative to identify and then to enhance or defend identification. I apply it in this book to the problematics of national political integration and of mass national mobilisation as it affects international
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relations, but am certain that a dynamic identification theory can be the basis for substantial further research in other areas. It solves the problem, in many situations, of finding a coherent methodological link between individual and group or mass behaviour.

My concern with holding a clear theoretical focus on the human dynamic is based partly in the fact that during the years 1969–72 I was lucky enough to undergo psychoanalysis with one of the founders of the psychoanalytic school in Britain, Edward Glover. He was in his eighties by the time that I lay on his couch (in fact, a very comfortable armchair) and I was, in fact, his last analysand. My analysis did not keep to the strict psychoanalytic rules as we often entered into discourse and I was deeply impressed by his clear, rigorous and insightful mind. Eight years and a career-change later, as a ‘mature’ student studying for my first degree – in International Relations at the London School of Economics – I found myself reading his books War, Sadism and Pacifism and his wonderfully titled The Dangers of Being Human.¹ I owe him a great debt of gratitude.

At the London School of Economics I had the good fortune to be taken under the wing of Professor F.S. Northedge. His major interest, as a student and then as a teacher of International Relations, had been in a psychological approach. In fact, his first completed manuscript had been precisely an attempt to integrate twentieth-century psychological theory with International Relations theory. This had been unsuccessful, he explained to me, because it lacked an integrating skeleton. He nevertheless had the generosity of spirit to lend me his thirty-year-old manuscript as an example of ‘how not to do it’. Later, as we discussed my own ideas, he aggressively warned me not to write anything that was obvious. His was a strenuous but enjoyable encouragement for which I am grateful. I admired his rigour, his good humour and his Christian socialism.

I am also grateful to the whole Department of International Relations at the London School of Economics, students and staff, for their stimulation and companionship.

For detailed and extremely helpful comments on an early manuscript, my thanks to James Mayall. Professor Percy Cohen was kind enough to read and then be encouraging about an early version of chapter 2. Michael Nicholson was also generous in his analysis and his encouragement, helping me to clarify certain important points.

This book was originally written as a piece of doctoral research at the London School of Economics. Michael Banks was an admirable
PREFACE

supervisor, leaving me alone when I wished to be left alone and rigorous in his analysis when necessary.

I need also to acknowledge the Montagu Burton scholarship which helped fund me for two years of my research.

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