Introduction

1   The ambiguities of national character

This book deals with the history of national character in European political and economic thought, c.1750–c.1914. It considers British, French, and, to a lesser extent, Italian authors – the latter being included to provide a comparison with a viewpoint originating from circumstances very different from those of Britain and France, where national unification and consolidation were achieved much earlier. The names of Montesquieu, Hume, Staël, Tocqueville, Carlyle, Mill, Taine, Durkheim, or Marshall suffice to demonstrate that national character was a cornerstone of social thought in the period in question. Attention has often been paid to the relevance of the theme in single authors, but national character has not become a standard point of reference to assess their contributions, and an overarching treatment, which narrated the vicissitudes of the idea rather than those of its exponents, has so far been lacking.[1]

Regarding an initial definition of national character, the one offered by Ernest Barker is only apparently banal: 'a mental organization connecting the minds of all the members of a national community by ties and connections as fine as silk and as firm as steel'.[2] Barker suggests the strength of national character, seemingly paradoxical in view of its non-materiality. I would go further by arguing that it benefits from a radical abstractness, which derives from the impossibility of assessing with any precision either its attributes or the range and efficacy of its effects. Even the most refined analyses carried out by social scientists today cannot make the idea any less elusive.[3] It is in its elusiveness that

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[1] That is not to say that the last few decades have been barren. Apart from contributions by historians on single authors and those by social scientists, chiefly social psychologists and business studies scholars, on national attitudes, the works dealing with the Victorian version of character are particularly notable; see esp. S. Collini, 'The Idea of Character: Private Habits and Public Virtues', in his *Public Moralists* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 91–118. For a survey of French thought on a subject closely related to national character, see T. Todorov, *Nous et les autres: la réflexion française sur la diversité humaine* (Paris, 1989). A book to which I am most indebted, similar to my own for inspiration and method but for the lack of a comparative approach, is G. Bollati, *L'Italiano: il carattere nazionale come storia e come invenzione* (Turin, 1983).

[2] E. Barker, *National Character and the Factors in Its Formation* (1927; London, 1939), p. 4.

[3] See, e.g., D. Peabody, *National Characteristics* (1985; 2nd edn, Cambridge and Paris, 1988).

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the secret of the fortunes of national character lies: as potentially all-embracing, it is able to be all-powerful, or at any rate decisive as a final and independent cause. Yet the constant attraction of national character to social thinkers would be unimaginable if it was not real at least to an extent. It is an intriguing notion because, for example, it would be foolish to deny that the English are different from the French only because we are unable to determine precisely, on empirical grounds, the manifestations, degree, and consequences of their difference. Although I could not agree more with Max Weber's statement that 'the appeal to national character is generally a mere confession of ignorance', there is indeed a grain of truth in the conventional wisdom about the various dispositions of peoples.[4] The size of this grain, and especially what to make of it, is another matter.

It is a peculiarity of national character that it is as likely to surface in a piece of communitarian critique as in a commentary on a football game, or in a text-book on international competition as in journalistic tirades about Frenchness or Englishness. Even a widely exploited catchword like 'national identity', which nowadays sounds more 'modern' than the stereotype-laden 'national character', often amounts to the same old stuff and proves equally over-comprehensive, and, in the end, equally elusive. In the spheres of academia, journalism, and politics, concerns with the character and the quality of citizens (either fellow citizens or those of other countries) variously recur, matched by the versatility of national character as a folk notion: something ordinary people resort to in order to account for the most disparate facts, from a country's parking habits to its military proficiency, from the efficiency of its tourist facilities to the tone of its political life.[5] It is my belief that national character needs historical conceptualization in order to be dealt with more consciously by those who care about intellectual discipline and clarity – in view of the support the idea may give to xenophobia and nationalism, this is no trivial task.

Having said that national character is an inherently abstract concept, naturally tending to comprehensiveness, some specifications of the book's scope are needed. First, I am interested in the ways in which a depiction of a national character was put to use, rather than in national character in itself or its validity as an explanatory tool. My goal is not to trace successive portraits of, say, English character but to show how a certain idea of the English worked within a definite framework of thought, and, in particular, to spotlight the purposes it served. Generally (and also relatively) speaking, highbrow depictions of national characters have not varied much over the centuries and have been close relatives of lowbrow national stereotypes. Traditional images of peoples,

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[4] M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. T. Parsons (1904–5; London and New York, 1958), p. 88.

[5] I was moved to write this book by a search for answers to questions like these (yes, even regarding parking habits which put me, as a cyclist in Florence, in constant danger), at the time that the magnitude of corruption in the Italian political system was unearthed (1993–5).

in some cases dating back to the early modern era or even the Middle Ages, may be traced at the base of the observations of even the most sophisticated pre-1914 social scientist. That is not to say that no alteration in national portraits occurred in the period of relevance here, but that it was marked by continuity rather than change; variations were usually subtle, and always maintained a link with the previous depiction. What did in fact change was the portion of the population taken to represent the national character. Typically, while the French philosophers of the eighteenth century limited their analysis to the leisured classes, thought to be the whole *nation*, post-revolutionary authors progressively extended their perspective to encompass all ranks. This extension, and the ways in which it occurred, is one of the major strands of my narrative.

The second specification follows from the first, and regards the variety and range of problems encompassed by 'national character'. Linking certain places to certain attitudes has been a constant preoccupation of the human mind since the Greeks at least. This is one of the discursive practices weaving Western civilization, covering a number of topics and standpoints touching on geography, politics, philosophy, medicine, and so on. Evidently then, because of geographical and chronological boundaries as well as politico-economic focus, the book considers only a fraction of a mammoth story. But this fraction has distinctive traits which mark it out, in spite of the long ancestry of the problem which lies at the core of writing on national character in the period 1750–1914: the relationship between a free government (and/or a market economy) and the quality of citizens. In other words, to return to a previous statement, national character was prevalently put to use in political and economic thought to assess this relationship. This is the essential viewpoint, albeit a very general one, which defines the subject matter of this book. National character was a vehicle, though one that entailed certain arguments and viewpoints to the exclusion of others. The book's main thread is variation in the discussion of national dispositions conveying the issue of peoples' suitability for liberty.

The following chapters are intended to explore two related contentions. The first is that, in the wake of Pocock and Skinner, the viewpoint of citizens' aptness for liberty should be distinguished from the specific idioms in which it was expressed. Republicanism of Machiavellian or Harringtonian origin should not subsume it; considering republicanism as an episode, albeit widely influential, seems in effect legitimate.[6] The issue of civic qualities (or civic virtues, or public spirit, and all other possible synonyms) has a history which is in itself larger than any particular strand of thought. That is, this history is complex and multifaceted, with each phase of it involving more than a single idiom – for instance, both that of civic humanism and that of climatology

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[6] On republicanism, see esp. J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton, 1975). See chapter 3 below for a fuller discussion.

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in the case of eighteenth-century France – and with the relevance of definite
idioms in the articulation of public spirit themes progressively fading in the
face of novel historical scenarios and problems. Bringing in Montesquieu's
esprit général and Hume's 'national character' as the starting points of analysis
places civic qualities in fitting discursive contexts, allowing for a richer variety
of motifs. My second contention is the pervasiveness of the issue of citizens'
dispositions over the period under consideration. In spite of the widespread
abandonment of civic republican tenets after the French Revolution in general
and the Terror in particular, the question of the intrinsic relationship between
government and citizens' attitudes gained momentum throughout the nine-
teenth century, when representative institutions were set up in France and other
Continental countries. Later in the century, the focus shifted towards the ade-
quacy of the human material to the demands of a mass society.

   In the eighteenth century, a tradition of thought about national character, with
its stress on climate, human physiology, and type of government as factors, in-
tertwined with another tradition, that of civic humanism, whose leitmotivs were
virtue, independence, and participation. The two traditions sometimes coexisted
in the same writer, in spite of the potential contrast between the situated out-
look of the former and the universalism of the latter. Yet the frames of reference
were not the same on the two sides of the Channel. The presence in Britain
of an indigenous idiom, that of Whiggism in its pre- and post-Burkean incar-
nations, introduced major differences between the two countries. In France,
there progressively developed a concern with 'public spirit' – that is, social
discipline, responsibility in electoral choices, a sense of interdependence and
belonging, and the willingness to operate and develop the institutions of self-
government – as an indispensable element for the effective workings of free
institutions and a complex society. From this angle, the crux of the matter was
not the temperament of a people derived from race or history (its peculiarly
'national' traits), but a set of attitudes of potentially universal application. The
full emergence in Restoration France of this perspective, following the pop-
ularity of classical republicanism among the eighteenth-century *philosophes*,
drawing inspiration from the pugnacious tradition of British Whiggism, and
preceding the theories of citizenship of late Victorian and Edwardian Britain,
provides an essential point of reference within the book. In accordance with
my first contention above, I regard the 'civic' thinking running through the
nineteenth century as an original intellectual phenomenon, motivated by the
political and social problems of the day, in spite of its obvious antecedents.
One of these was eighteenth-century Whiggism: the belief in the suitability of
the English for liberty, and in their determination to defend it, effectively con-
veyed 'public spirit' themes. Yet the nature of Whiggism was strictly insular,
resting as it did on a disparaging judgement of the French as a complement to
national self-assurance.

In documenting the gradual emergence of a separate 'civic' standpoint from
national character discourse, the book shows that other approaches addressing
citizens' dispositions were not dismissed altogether over the nineteenth century.
There was, on the one hand, a racial or racialist standpoint, and on the other, there
were various forms of the environmentalist stance, like the climatological, the
political–institutional, or the sociological; and sometimes racial and environ-
mental viewpoints were inextricably mixed. It is only an apparent paradox that
in the final decades of the nineteenth century the boost to the establishment of
the social scientific approach, with its refined forms of environmentalism, came
from evolutionary biology. The effect of Darwinism was nothing less than a
new conceptualization of man, resulting from a fresh emphasis on the collec-
tive dimension of life coupled with a richer and more momentous notion of
environment. Durkheim, whose 'collective representation' represents the most
thorough effort of the social scientific approach, built on this basis.

A useful criterion for discriminating among writers is whether national char-
acter was seen as an effect of institutions and in particular of government
(a perspective endorsed by many, but not all, eighteenth-century writers), or a
cause of the establishment and performance of institutions (as many, but not
all, nineteenth-century authors believed). Even some of those who in principle
acknowledged the interplay of the two elements may on close scrutiny show
a preference for one view or the other.[7] At first sight, this criterion may look
quite odd: for it is a very plausible supposition that within a country the interac-
tion of citizens and institutions induces a parallel and mutual determination, so
that the two elements would be, in practice, inextricable. Yet this picture may
suit England, where representative government in the modern sense originated;
elsewhere, setting up free institutions entailed in most cases a break with the
past, from which there arose the possibility of a mismatch between political
machinery and dispositions.

Given the book's aim to provide a narrative of the lines of development in
the perception of peoples' and citizens' attitudes, two difficulties arise. First,
the broad scope of the issue, as well as its popularity over the period, make
an attempt at a complete treatment impossible. It follows that the plan of the
book might have turned out differently. Other stories, with other protagonists
and other plots, may equally be on the mark, not least in view of the limitations
I have set myself. Highly educated opinion as expressed by political philos-
ophy and the social sciences has been dealt with, but of course the subject

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[7] For a formulation of these two main approaches approximating my own, although posited with
the analysis of civic virtue in view, see Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*
(2 vols., Cambridge, 1978), I, pp. 44–5. Skinner juxtaposes Hume as the greatest exponent of the
primacy-of-institutions outlook with Machiavelli and Montesquieu, who most authoritatively
spread the idea that 'it is not so much the machinery of government as the proper *spirit* of the
rulers, the people and the laws which needs above all to be sustained', p. 45.

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recurred in popular culture, as well as in travel reports, a form of literature
situated between the two extremes. To limit the ground to cover and to spotlight
the Anglo-French connection, the issues stemming from the encounters with
extra-European peoples have been excluded from consideration. The 'race'
figuring most in the book is the Celtic, or perhaps the Teuton, one, and not,
say, the Black. Furthermore, research has been limited to published material,
including posthumous pieces written for publication (or the classroom) but
excluding those connected with personal life; a public discourse, like that ad-
dressed in this book, is not necessarily reflected by private correspondence or
diaries. To give a significant example, the chapter on British opinion on the
Irish would have delineated a significantly different picture if private papers
had been taken into account. Finally, in a book devoted to national character the
lack of specific and lengthy consideration of John Stuart Mill, the advocate of
'ethology', may appear surprising. But in view of the amount of recent literature
on Mill and character, it should not. Mill is in fact called into play twice, in
chapters 7 and 9.

The second and more substantial difficulty encountered in achieving the
objective of providing a connected narrative, rather than a collection of es-
says, is the relevance of contexts. Besides the unquestionable existence of
recognizable threads running from the *Esprit des lois* to 1914, it is equally
unquestionable that the history of the idea of national character (in my sense)
owes much to specific, circumscribed debates, where the combination of par-
ticular events and situations with old or new arguments determined stances
affecting successive views of collective mentalities and habits. Yet it would
be wrong to believe that national character was discussed either in abstract
terms – as a concept of social and political thought, that is – or in order to tackle
specific and situated questions, since the two perspectives regularly merged.
For instance, Montesquieu's idea of *esprit général* was intended to support
the claims of the *noblesse de robe*; the 'Whig' picture of the English served
egregiously to defend the post-revolutionary arrangement first, and to foster the
enlargement of the franchise later; Hobson's model personality was thought
of as a response to new social pressures; in spite of all its social scientific re-
finement, Durkheim's concept of collective representation originated from a
reflection on France's instability; and so on. National character was a matter of
both conceptualized thought and situated interests and power, as all chapters
illustrate, albeit in different degrees.

A first consequence of this twofold level of discourse is that some minor
authors, and even sets of anonymous articles, have been considered to comple-
ment the contributions coming from the *maîtres à penser*. More fundamentally,
there arises in principle a choice between a treatment focused on issues – say,
notions of Englishness in the debate over the first Reform Act, or changing
views of French mentality between the Jacobins and Napoleon, or the linkages

established between economic performance and peoples' attitudes in the reports about the industrial exhibitions – and a treatment focused on authors. I have been led to prefer the latter approach by, first, my prevalent interest in high culture, and, second, by my concern with the theme of the shift from national character to 'civic' views, a concern calling for a treatment as co-ordinated as possible. Given this option, the Irish chapter amounts to an exception, grounded in the view that Ireland was the crucial battlefield for British literati at a time when the images of both Englishness and Frenchness were so firmly established in British culture as to make their further investigation unpromising; on the other hand, many eminent authors of the age, from the economists to Carlyle and Macaulay, wrote on Irish character. Although the book does not deal with all possible contexts or specific issues, all the writers considered are set within their historical milieux.

As for the watersheds of my story, which account for the division of the subject matter into two parts, the French Revolution figures as the focal point of the period 1750–1850, and then there is the consolidation of procedures and patterns of thought into the 'social sciences' during the second half of the nineteenth century. It is relevant to specify that the character spoken about was that of men, not of women. From Montesquieu onwards, the attitudes of the latter were thought to be part of the national mind only to the extent of their influence over men. Incidentally, many authors of the eighteenth and early and mid nineteenth century, especially in Britain, regarded the mere existence of this influence as a symptom of a faulty national character. Although men's view of women changed much within the period, the absolute prevalence of men as objects of evaluations of collective mentalities remained until at least 1914.

2   Climate and government: the discourse on national character

The roots of the connection between liberty and national character stretch back for centuries. The Greeks came to define their civilization and themselves in terms of liberty, in contrast with the 'despotic' kingdoms of Asia; since that time, the qualities required from the citizenry of a free community have provided a fundamental focus for national character discourses. The use of the term 'discourse', reminiscent of Foucault and Skinner, is not casual. National character as a political notion was talked about according to customary patterns for a very long time, spanning from antiquity to the end of the eighteenth century. This was a 'discourse' in the sense that the same arguments recurred, differently assembled, in spite of the variation of contexts and writers' intentions over the centuries. Authors introduced substantial innovations neither in viewpoint nor in the causal chains used to account for national characters, although they did stretch the meaning and implications of the traditional motifs.

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With regard to the themes and approaches formulated before Montesquieu, with whom my treatment begins, it is impossible here to make more than a few sketchy remarks about the crucial dualism of climate and government – of physico-geographical and political motifs, that is – as factors of collective character.[8] Antiquity abounds with statements about the efficacy of both. Greek ethnology was marked by the belief that racial and cultural differences were caused by climate, a view refined by the Hippocratic school of medicine with its investigations of the effects of 'airs, waters, and places' on peoples' characters.[9] Aristotle distinguishes between the suitability for liberty of peoples living in cold, hot, and mild climates; in the same *Politics*, one also finds passages about the need for public education to mould the citizen in accordance with the form of government: 'for each government has a peculiar character which originally formed and which continues to preserve it'.[10] The demoralization and humiliation of subjects is shown to be a chief means for the perpetuation of a tyranny; conversely, in *Nicomachean Ethics* it is said that the true statesman makes citizens good and law-abiding.[11] Plato's *Laws* contains themes which will recur again and again in my book, like the effects of climate and natural environment on the character of citizens, the necessity of laying down laws that do not fly in the face of such influences, and the political importance of unwritten rules and customs.[12] Generally speaking, Greek and Roman political thinking pointed out the power of laws and institutions to change attitudes, the Lycurgan constitution being cited ceaselessly as an instance of laws establishing customs; yet Solon was equally popular as champion of the argument that dispositions should determine legislation.

These patterns of thought maintained their power and vitality until the eighteenth century; hence there was established an unbroken tradition about the characteristics of peoples, whose recurrent motifs passed on from one author to the other. In early modern times it became a sort of axiom that Northern peoples were liberty-loving, in parallel with the revival of the theory about the softening effects of an overly generous nature.[13] As Machiavelli for instance illustrates,

[8] A fundamental reference is C. J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley, 1967).

[9] As vehicles of ethnological knowledge, see, e.g., Herodotus' histories, some of the dramatists' works, and the Hippocratic corpus. Thucydides' comparison between the collective mentalities of Spartans and Athenians is a celebrated early piece of evidence of the explanatory potential of national characters: *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. C. Foster Smith (4 vols., London and New York, 1919), I, bk I, lxx–lxxi.

[10] *The Politics*, trans. J. Barnes (Cambridge, 1995), 1260b10–20, 1276b15–35, 1288a5–20, 1310a10–20, 1327b20–38, 1337a10–30; the quotation is on 1337a15.

[11] *ibid.*, 1313a20–1314a30; *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson and H. Tredennick (Harmondsworth, 1976), 1102a5–12, 1103a14–26.

[12] *The Laws*, trans. T. J. Saunders (Harmondsworth, 1975), esp. 704–8, 747, 788, 793. For civic virtue as the purpose of education, see 643–5.

[13] Glacken, *Traces*, pp. 429–60.

some argued that laws could offset the undesired consequences of the natural environment; they should be devised with that aim in view.[14] It is hardly necessary to mention how Machiavelli's political construction, elaborating on the Roman moralists', focused on the interrelatedness between laws and citizens' patriotic virtues (their *bontà*: orderly behaviour, prudence, determination, martial spirit, honesty). From a standpoint very different from that of Machiavelli, Saint Augustine had already construed the worldly success of the Romans as a reward from God for their qualities of character.[15] The continuing success of ideals of public virtue well into the French seventeenth century is testified by Fénelon's *Télémaque*. Here the focus was on the king's capacity to create good *mœurs* (sobriety, frugality, industry, patience, attachment to liberty, martial courage, and modesty in women) through laws.[16] Bodin, a fundamental influence on Montesquieu and an authoritative advocate of the theory of humours as channels of climatic causes, held the same view as Machiavelli on the potential of laws over the natural environment.[17] From authors like Machiavelli, Bodin, Fénelon, Fontenelle, Du Bos, and Arbuthnot, Montesquieu inherited a combination of Hippocratic inspiration, climatological determinism, insights into the limits of government action, civic values, and an awareness of national character.

This 'paradigm', so to speak, came under progressively intensifying attacks in the second half of the eighteenth century, and did not survive the Revolution. With particular respect to France, it is arguable that the years 1789–1815 opened a new phase, in which the traditional clusters of argument gave way to fresh departures. It is true that these departures may have reworked the civic humanist legacy, but the straitjacket of a conventional set of motifs had gone, together with the feeling of continuity with the ancients, at a time when public morality appeared to many French of increasing importance but also dangerously out of control. As was often observed over the first decades of the nineteenth century, the Revolution had not only impaired the traditional sources of allegiance (the prestige of the monarch and religion, essentially), but had also jeopardized the very notion of social hierarchies. The people's frenzy during the Terror, which haunted the ruling classes for decades, posed questions about the political dispositions of the mass of the French which Napoleon's authoritarian regime left unanswered. It is not surprising, then, that the Restoration witnessed a debate on national character and public spirit, a debate which presents original features.

[14] *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* (1513–21), in N. Machiavelli, *Il Principe ed altre opere politiche*, ed. S. Andretta (Milan, 1997), bk I, ch. 1, pp. 105–8.

[15] *The City of God*, trans. H. Bettenson (413–26; Harmondsworth, 1972), bk V, chs. 15–16.

[16] *Les aventures de Télémaque*, ed. J.-L. Goré (1699; Paris, 1994). My thanks to Emma Rothschild for first indicating to me the relevance of Fénelon to the French Enlightenment.

[17] Glacken, *Traces*, pp. 434–47.

At this juncture speaking of an established 'discourse' on national character is no longer appropriate, because post-revolutionary writers perceived the problems of the age as radically novel, and, although their predecessors could give inspiration, they could no longer offer a set of ready-made conceptual frameworks. A major casualty of this recognition was natural environmentalism of classical origin, and faith vacillated even apropos the educational power of liberty – now conceived as embedded in representative institutions. The social world came to be construed as rapidly changing, in contrast with the static perception of the previous ages; this understanding could not but undermine the explanatory relevance of climate. The creation of representative governments in France caused bitter frustration and bewilderment, since they proved incapable of guaranteeing social discipline and participation. The political settings ushered in at first by the Revolution and then by the Restoration ought to have entailed that civic virtues, which had been a literary and philosophic ideal throughout the eighteenth century, turned into a mass practice. That this did not happen had the effect of shifting the focus from free institutions to the underlying qualities making up 'public spirit'. As regards Britain, where no constitutional discontinuity occurred, a post-revolutionary break in the traditional discourse on national character is less easily discernible, not least because of its features there. Climate, for instance, had been regularly dismissed throughout the second half of the eighteenth century, and the Scottish philosophers had introduced new social environmentalist approaches. However, while Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* did determine a shift in the national self-image in obscuring its defiant, 'republican' traits, military and economic dominance allayed previously widespread fears of moral decline of civic humanist origin.

The French Revolution itself can be seen as a consequence of profound social changes affecting the whole of Europe. It is arguable that, at the basis of the loss of grip of civic humanist patterns, there lay the rise of 'commercial society'.[18] The turning point, in perception if not in actual fact, came over the course of the eighteenth century in Britain, and during the revolutionary and Napoleonic years in France. In a traditional community, centred on the possession of real property as the criterion of independence and leadership, large family units involving relations of dependence, strong neighbourhood relations, and service in the militia, civic virtues naturally stemmed from feelings of affection as well as the self-interest of each freeman. A share in local government could look like an extension of the role of household master, while martial bravery was dictated by

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[18] Notable contributions to the definition of this concept are: P. G. M. Dickson, *The Financial Revolution in England: a Study in the Development of Public Credit 1688–1756* (1967; Aldershot, 1993); I. Kramnick, *Bolingbroke and His Circle* (1968; Ithaca and London, 1992); I. Hont and M. Ignatieff, eds., *Wealth and Virtue: the Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1983); J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1999), I, *The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon*, esp. pp. 95–109.