

Beyond Pug's Tour

National and Ethnic
Stereotyping in Theory
and Literary Practice

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"HAVING HISTORY": A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF ANGLO-BRITISH AUTOSTEREOTYPES

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Social psychological perspectives on stereotyping

Social psychologists usually trace their interest in stereotypes to three seminal texts.¹ The first is Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion*, published in 1922. In this oft-quoted (but, one suspects, now seldom read) treatise, Lippmann, a radical journalist, expressed concern over the extent to which the public could act as informed citizens in complex modern societies. Lippmann argued that, with the advent of mass society, the social world had become

altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. And although we have to act in that [real] environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage with it.²

He used the term "stereotypes" to refer to these simplified "pictures in our heads" which he regarded as essentially second-hand images, fed to the public through the media.

The second influential text, published a decade later, took the form of a report of an empirical study. Whereas Lippmann had been concerned with the ways in which the advent of mass society had necessarily limited the possibility of a democratic politics based on an authentic public opinion, in this article the term "stereotype" was deployed to address a more specific phenomenon of contemporary anxiety: the puzzling issue of the continued existence of prejudice within democratic society. In a paper entitled "Racial stereotypes of 100 college students", two

1. I should like to thank Alan Collins, Mark Levine, Rosemary McKechnie, Graham Park and John Soyland for their help with this article.

2. Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, New York, 1922, 16.

psychologists, Donald Katz and Kenneth Braly,³ reported a study in which North American university students were asked to indicate which of a given list of adjectives were typical of ten ethnic and national categories. These authors applied the term "stereotype" to refer to those characteristics most frequently attributed to each category (Germans, for example, were most frequently described as scientifically-minded, industrious, stolid, intelligent and methodical; the English as sportsmanlike, intelligent, conventional, tradition-loving and conservative; and Negroes as superstitious, lazy, happy-go-lucky, ignorant and musical). The authors concluded that the level of agreement between respondents was too great for these images to have been formulated on the basis of personal experience. They concluded, like Lippmann, that the existence of stereotypes reflected the breakdown of community and the pernicious and wide-reaching influence of the media in mass society.

The third, and most direct, ancestor of contemporary social psychological thought on stereotyping was Gordon Allport's *The Nature of Prejudice* published in 1954. Like Katz and Braly, Allport used the term "stereotype" in the context of a liberal account of the persistence of ethnic prejudice in the USA. Allport also adopted Katz and Braly's narrow definition of a stereotype (as a "fixed belief" associated with a category) and he also expressed concern over the way in which ethnic stereotypes are "continually revived and hammered in ... by our media of mass communication".⁴ Like Lippmann, Allport was pessimistic about the ability of individual citizens in mass society to conduct their life on a fully-informed basis. He argued that, in order to operate effectively in their everyday lives, human beings cannot rationally weigh up all the information at their disposal before they act in any social encounter: "a million events befall us every day. We cannot handle so many events. If we think of them at all, we type them." He argued that the human mind must "think with the aid of categories", and stressed that "we cannot possibly avoid this process. Orderly living depends upon it."⁵ However, whereas Lippmann's solution involved an anti-democratic appeal to the

3. Donald Katz and Kenneth Braly, "Racial Stereotypes of One Hundred College Students", *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 28 (1933), 280-90. Although this article is often discussed as a social psychological development from Lippmann's treatment of stereotypes, it is not at all clear from the text that the authors were, in fact, familiar with Lippmann's work.

4. Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, Reading, Mass., 1954, 200.

5. *Ibid.*, 20.

authority of experts over public opinion, Allport's work was infused with Enlightenment ideals. Like Katz and Braly, Allport advocated educational programmes to counteract the over-simplified images of ethnic groups presented in the North American media.⁶ And like Katz and Braly he was concerned to consider the potential role that academic psychologists might play in dispelling these myths.⁷

It has now become conventional for social psychologists to use the term "stereotype" in the narrow sense established by Katz and Braly and later by Allport: to refer to the attributes commonly associated with particular social categories. However, over the past sixty years social psychological research has diversified enormously, with the consequence that the term "stereotype" is now used in a confusing variety of ways. To some authors the term has come to signify beliefs about a social category (such as a nation or ethnic group) whereas to others it implies beliefs about *the members* of a category, or, more specifically still, beliefs about the personality characteristics of the members of a category. Whereas some authors have followed Katz and Braly's lead and use the term "stereotypes" to refer to widely-shared or consensually-held beliefs about a social category, others do not see agreement between people as a necessary feature of stereotypic social perception. Some etymologically-pedantic commentators insist that the term "stereotype" should refer to fixed, rigid or unchangeable beliefs about a category, but others are keen to emphasize the context-contingent and flexible nature of stereotypic social perception. Some researchers have suggested that the term "stereotype" should pertain to those beliefs about a social category which are demonstrably false. Others, however, have argued that the accuracy of stereotypic representations should be regarded as an open question.⁸

6. Lippmann, in contrast, expressed the opinion that stereotypes are "obdurate to education or criticism" (65).

7. Although Katz and Braly were optimistic about the ability of academic psychologists to dispel popular myths concerning ethnic and national character, Allport was rather more circumspect on this issue. By the time that Allport was writing, psychologists had begun to reflect on the extent to which the Nazi "holocaust" had been ideologically supported by academic psychological "facts" concerning racial difference. For further discussions of this issue, see Michael Billig, *Psychology, Racism and Fascism*, London, 1979.

8. For overviews of social psychological work on stereotypes and stereotyping, see *Cognitive Approaches in Stereotyping and Intergroup Behavior*, ed. David Hamilton, Hillsdale, NJ, 1981; Arthur G. Miller, *In the Eye of the Beholder: Contemporary Issues in Stereotyping*, New York, 1982; Jacques-Philippe Leyens,

One issue over which there is still a good deal of agreement is that stereotypes should be regarded as simplified social percepts. Stereotypes are generally regarded as simplified in two respects. First, stereotypes are regarded as simplified (mis)representations of social reality. Lippmann regarded the "pictures in our heads" to be a simplified representation of "the world outside", and Katz and Braly and Allport emphasized that stereotyped images which overlook variation between group members are necessarily "over-generalized". Second, stereotypes are seen to result from the operation of simplified thought-processes which, to use Lippmann's phrase, "preclude the use of reason". For Lippmann and Katz and Braly, stereotypes were seen to derive from the simple-minded, passive reception of media images rather than from rational thought grounded in personal experience. Allport shared this perspective, but also emphasized the ways in which stereotypes may be formulated, and used, *in order to* "maintain simplicity in perception and thinking".⁹

Since the mid-1970s the idea that stereotyping simplifies the process of social perception has been widely adopted. However, whereas Allport emphasized the undesirable consequences of simplified thought (pointing, in particular, to the association between irrationality and prejudice¹⁰) more recent writers have tended to regard such simplification not as a necessary evil, but rather as a matter for celebration. As one commentator put it, "In terms of strictly psychological processes, there is nothing evil, immoral, or inferior about stereotyping. Its central operating characteristics — categorization, inference, anticipatory thinking, and planning — are obviously adaptive, functional and 'good'."¹¹

Vincent Yzerbyt and Georges Schadrin, *Stereotypes and Social Cognition* London, 1994; Charles Stangor and James Lange, "Mental Representations of Social Groups: Advances in Understanding Stereotypes and Stereotyping", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 26 (1994) 357-416.

9. *The Nature of Prejudice*, 192.

10. For an account of discourses of prejudice and irrationality, see Michael Billig, Susan Condor, Derek Edwards, Mike Gane, David Middleton and Alan Radley, *Ideological Dilemmas: A Social Psychology of Everyday Thinking*, London, 1988.

11. *In the Eye of the Beholder*, 31. For analyses of the possible political ramifications of this discursive turn, see Michael Billig, "Prejudice, Categorization and Particularization: From a Perceptual to a Rhetorical Approach", *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 15 (1985), 79-103, and Susan Condor, "Race Stereotypes and Racist Discourse", *Text*, 8 (1987), 69-89.

Social psychological commentaries on stereotyping have, since the mid-1970s, gradually dispensed with the nostalgic vision of lost community and the value of human rationality and democracy. Authors now typically portray human beings as inevitably inhabiting a world of busy, fleeting, multiple images. In this bewildering ("chaotic") landscape, rational deliberation is no longer treated as a desirable human attribute. To the contemporary social psychologist stereotypes are useful, *because they preclude the use of reason*. Thinking is often represented as a time-wasting and troublesome activity: "stereotypes ... do not save people the trouble of thinking *en passant*, but rather as their cardinal function."¹² Typically, contemporary social psychological texts liken human beings to computing devices hampered by limited capacity, engaging in automatic and efficient "information processing". The 1980s also saw the adoption of a set of monetarist metaphors, with human beings being presented as "cognitive misers"¹³ using stereotypes in order to rationalize their cognitive economies. In the 1990s these are beginning to give way to a new set of conservationist metaphors. Stereotypes are now increasingly discussed as procedures which help human beings to "preserve" their limited cognitive "resources".

Over the past thirty years, then, it seems that there has been a radical transformation in the type of questions that social psychologists address when they use the term "stereotype". Social psychologists working in the 1990s rarely refer explicitly to those public anxieties associated with modernity which so concerned the North American writers in the first half of the century (democracy, urbanization, alienation, mass communication, the confusion of the individuals pilloried and buffeted by an uncontrollable maelstrom of fleeting images). The normalization and moral retrieval of stereotyping as a cognitive process has been accompanied by the birth of a new human subject. Social psychologists now present "stereotyping-man" as a programmed machine, working

12. Daniel Gilbert and Gregory Hixon, "The Trouble of Thinking: Activation and Application of Stereotypic Belief", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60 (1991), 509-17. These sorts of approaches do not deny that human beings do need to think. What they suggest is that stereotypes free up the cognitive system to enable people to think about "other" matters. The presence of stereotyping is seen to indicate that a perceiver is not thinking about or attending closely to the group they are describing. The implication is that when people do think about social categories they necessarily eschew stereotyped (generalized) representations, and speak only of the unique characteristics of individual category members.

13. This expression was first coined by Susan Fiske and Shelley Taylor. For an example of its use, see their *Social Cognition*, Reading: Mass., 1984.

largely on automatic pilot, able to deal effectively with (and left essentially unconcerned with and unconfused by) the chaos and the disorder of the world he inhabits. The prejudicial consequences of stereotypic thought are still occasionally raised as an object of concern to the social psychologist, but this and other potential worries are not generally seen to impact upon the consciousness of "stereotyping-man" himself.

Given the decline of a social problem approach to stereotyping, it is perhaps not surprising that recent years have also witnessed a marked decline in concern for the role of the media in social psychological accounts of stereotyping. A recent overview of the literature by Leyens, Yzerbyt and Schadrin in their *Stereotypes and Social Cognition* makes only one passing reference to the media, and an extensive review by Stangor and Lange makes none at all.¹⁴ When social psychologists do discuss stereotyping with reference to the media they tend to adopt one of two perspectives. First, they adopt the "socialization" approach evident in the work of Katz and Braly and of Allport. In this case, stereotypes are seen to be contained in and distributed by, the media and other agents of socialization. For example, Miller notes:

stereotypes are ready-made for most of us — they are provided by our culture. We acquire them in the process of being socialized, and in expressing stereotypes, we are, in a sense, reinforcing them.¹⁵

Stereotypes are, it is assumed, passively and uncritically absorbed by viewers who, in their turn, come to use these images in order to make their dealings with others more rapid, efficient and less wasteful of precious time or attention.

The second way in which social psychologists typically address the role of the media is not as a source of pre-digested pictures of the world, but as an aspect of the world itself. Media images are treated as stimuli which the reader or (more often) viewer needs to process as efficiently as possible.¹⁶ Although individuals are regarded as active processors

14. See n. 8 above.

15. *In the Eye of the Beholder*, 27.

16. This sort of perspective is often implicit in the social psychological literature. For a relatively explicit statement of this perspective, see Myron Rothbart *et al.*, "From Individual to Group Impressions: Availability Heuristics in Stereotype Formation", *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 14 (1977), 237-55.

rather than as passive recipients of media images, it is not proposed that people participate in a rational, thoughtful engagement with the messages in the media. Rather, people are seen to filter information reaching their senses in a relatively automatic, largely unconscious, manner, in order to relieve pressure on their cognitive systems. This work has certain parallels with those analyses of the media which focus on the accuracy with which viewers process and subsequently recall information from news broadcasts¹⁷ or explore the success with which media-producers get their message across to the receiving public.¹⁸

Both of these perspectives may be contrasted with developing social scientific theories of audience activity which (perhaps rather belatedly) have attempted to take on board ideas concerning the interpretative activity of the reader from literary criticism and cultural studies. Theorists adopting such perspectives consider the ways in which media viewers actively participate in the process of sense-making.¹⁹ This work emphasizes the ways in which different audiences may interpret particular media images in various and often (for the analyst) surprising ways. This interpretative activity may, on occasions, take the form of critique or subversion and ironization of media images. More generally, it is suggested that people engage in a continual process of sense-making by (re)interpreting media images through the contextual frames provided by commonsense ideologies.

It is possible to identify some parallels between this literature and recent social psychological perspectives on social representations upon which I shall be drawing (largely tacitly) in this essay. As characterized by Serge Moscovici,²⁰ this work considers the ways in which formal

17. For example, see Barrie Gunter, *Poor Reception: Misunderstanding and Forgetting Broadcast News*, Hillsdale: NJ, 1987.

18. For an example which is particularly relevant to the subject-matter of the present chapter, see David Uzzell, *Heritage Interpretation*, II: "The Visitor Experience", London, 1989.

19. Illustrative examples may be found in the following texts: John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, Boston, 1989; John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television*, London, 1990; Christine Geraghty, *Women and Soap Opera*, Oxford, 1992; Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, *Enlightened Racism*, Boulder: Col., 1992; Sonia Livingstone, "Implicit Representation of the Characters in Dallas", *Human Communication Research*, 13 (1987) 339-420.

20. See, for example, Serge Moscovici, "The Coming Era of Representations", in *Cognitive Analysis of Social Behaviour*, eds Jean-Paul Codol and Jacques-Philippe Leyens, The Hague, 1983; Serge Moscovici and Miles Hewstone, "Social Representations and Social Explanations", in *Attribution Theory*, ed. Miles

texts and bodies of knowledge become transformed (rendered "palatable") as they enter the arena of public discourse. Moscovici's work has been subject to some criticism for its tendency to presuppose the existence of a singular, internally coherent system of shared representations. Other commentators, most notably Jonathan Potter, Margaret Wetherell and Michael Billig,²¹ have argued that the public sphere comprises multiple, often contradictory, repertoires or commonsense ideologies from which individuals may draw in order to construct understandings of the social world.

In this essay I shall attempt to apply some of these ideas to an understanding of one common stereotype held by the Anglo-British: the idea that their country "has history". My aim in this is twofold. First, I wish to suggest that the process of stereotyping may be a rather more complex, thoughtful, process than most contemporary social psychologists suggest. The cliché that the British nation "has history" might well be described as an over-simplified image. Nevertheless, I shall argue that this representation is not necessarily used in a simple-minded thoughtless way by people in their everyday lives. Rather, I shall suggest that the public have available to them a number of different ways of making sense of the idea that their nation "has history", and, as a consequence, this stereotype may — far from saving people the trouble of thinking — on occasions constitute food for thought.²² Second, I shall not be assuming that there exists any simple, unidirectional, flow of images from the media to the public, nor that, influenced by the media, people will display a consensual commonsense. Certainly, the idea that "our country ... has history" has clear parallels with contemporary media representations of national "heritage", and also with the way in which "our national history" is represented in some forms of political rhetoric. However, I shall be assuming (largely implicitly) that public understandings are as much constitutive of as

Hewstone, Oxford, 1983.

21. See, for example, Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell, *Discourse and Social Psychology*, London, 1987; Jonathan Potter and Ian Litton, "Some Problems Underlying the Theory of Social Representations", *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 24 (1985), 81-90; Michael Billig, *Arguing and Thinking*, Cambridge, 1987, and *Ideology and Opinions*, London, 1991; *Ideological Dilemmas* (n.10 above).

22. For further accounts of this approach, see Susan Condor, "Social Stereotypes and Social Identity", in *Social Identity Theory*, eds Dominic Abrams and Michael A. Hogg, London, 1990; "Denken over sekse als sociale categorie", *Tijdschrift voor Vrouwenstudies*, 14 (1993), 280-94; and *Ideological Dilemmas*.

constituted by media representations.²³ Moreover, even on those occasions when clichéd representations are gained, in part, from the media, it need not be assumed that the public will necessarily receive and thoughtlessly regurgitate these images in a uniform way. Rather, as we shall see, people may be able mentally to chew over images of "our national history" and to digest them in various ways. Nor do people necessarily lack reflexive capacities concerning the possible ideological consequences of discourses concerning national heritage and tradition: like social theorists and social psychologists, they too may express anxieties about prejudice.

A nation with history: Anglo-British autostereotypes

I shall start this section with a disclaimer: the research I shall be discussing concerns the expression of national stereotypes in a single and very restricted social context: that of the research interview.²⁴

23. In addition, I shall not be assuming that education provides the public with a true image of their national history, which may be contrasted with the false images promoted in the media, but shall, rather, be assuming that educational practices and texts are cultural products which reflect and in turn help to reproduce various types of commonsense historical and national consciousness.

24. Social psychological research on stereotypes has almost always used the sort of technique pioneered by Katz and Braly. Although the methods have been modified somewhat in recent years, it is still the case that studies of stereotyping typically involve presenting research subjects with a questionnaire comprising of a list of adjectives ("lazy", "efficient", "shrewd", and so forth) which they are required to use to describe the members of a particular national or ethnic group. Questionnaire studies have many advantages for the social psychologist: they allow for the economical collection of large quantities of information, enabling an analysis of the extent to which particular stereotypes are shared within different societies and the extent to which they endure over time. Such studies allow for the quantification of social perception in a manner which enables the analyst to explore, for example, the conditions under which people actually use ethnic or national stereotypes, and the motivational and cognitive processes involved in stereotype maintenance and change. But, however useful this sort of method may be for many purposes, it nevertheless restricts analyses in important respects. First, it impels a respondent to describe a "group" in terms of the personality characteristics of its members. This may be overly restricting when the object of concern is, for example, a nation. Second, this sort of technique restricts the analysts' ability to consider the meaning of the stereotypes thus revealed. There is a tendency in the social psychological literature to assume that the meaning of adjectives is transparent, and can be interpreted without the need to consider co-text or rhetorical context. In contrast, although the present study looks at the articulation of stereotypes in a very restricted context, it does at least enable the researcher to read particular stereotypes in the context of the

Specifically, I shall consider the ways in which a sample of Anglo-Britons²⁵ responded to the question: "How would you describe your country?"²⁶ For the purposes of this article I shall focus on one particular stereotype which appeared to be widely-shared amongst the respondents: the idea that the Anglo-British nation "has history". This was the most common theme to emerge from the interviews (nearly three quarters of all respondents discussed, or alluded in passing, to the fact that "their country" "had history"). These respondents often granted "our national history" a pivotal status in their account — it was frequently the first thing that a respondent mentioned when attempting to

story that the respondent is telling.

25. This study was originally conceived as part of a wider project concerning the national self-definitions of the English. There exists an enormous amount of ambiguity (and ignorance) amongst the English concerning the appropriate situations in which to use the categories "England" and "Britain", and most of the respondents do not use these terms consistently. For a further discussion of this issue, see my "Unimagined Community? Some Social Psychological Issues Concerning English National Identity", in *Changing European Identities*, eds Glynis M. Breakwell and Evantha Lyons (in press). The respondents were 140 white people who were currently living in England, had not lived outside England for any extended period of time, and who had two English parents. 76 of the respondents were male and 64 female, and they were aged between 21 and 72 years. Approximately half of the respondents could be defined as middle class, and half working class. Respondents were recruited from community centres and adult education classes from four areas of England: the North West (Manchester); North London; the South West (Bristol and surrounding rural areas) and the Midlands (Wolverhampton, and surrounding rural areas).

26. This was the opening question of the interviews. In the interests of simplicity I shall be restricting my account to answers to this question, since the analysis of answers given to subsequent questions necessarily entails complex narrative analyses which take account of what the speaker has already said in response to previous questions. Whilst these data are clearly interesting (not least because they allow an analysis of the contradictions within a particular speaker's account), a simple analysis of answers to the first question is sufficient for my current purposes. It should be noted that this opening question does not specify how the respondent should define "their country". This was done to allow the speakers room to define themselves as either "English" or as "British". For the purposes of this essay I shall not consider the differences in the accounts of those who defined their country as England or those who saw themselves as British. Preliminary analysis did not indicate that there were any substantial differences with respect to any of the issues I shall be discussing in this chapter.

describe their country.²⁷ In the majority of cases, this allusion to "our history" took a similar form.²⁸ The respondents did not, in general, present chronological accounts or stories. Often, they did not even allude to any specific historical details or events. Rather, their references to national history took the form of reified accounts in which "history" and "the past" were presented as objects "owned" by the nation. I have termed this form of representation a "heritage trope".²⁹

The heritage trope

Let us start by considering one example of the use of a heritage trope in the following quotation:

Well / first I'd say that Britain is a country which has a colourful history / an interesting past / we are lucky / it is a good country to live in // I think (Woman aged 27).

Here we can see how the speaker reifies "history" and "the past": both are referred to as something that Britain presently "has". Reification is also signalled by the use of the adjective "colourful", carrying with it the implication that British history can be regarded as a visible presence. Many of my respondents presented national history as if it were a visible entity. They often achieved this through a reference to "tradition" constructed as the visible enactment of "the past" in the here-and-now. In the following quotation, for example, we can see how "tradition" may be used as a synonym for pageantry:

England is a country with a lot of tradition / lots of history. We

27. When quoting from respondents, I shall use the following notation. When the respondent had said something before the quoted extract, I shall indicate the fact by prefixing the quotation with: [...]. In all other cases, the words I quote were uttered in immediate response to the question. Pauses are indicated by slashes (/), with each slash indicating .5 second.

28. This was doubtless due in part to the constraints of the interview context in which they were presented.

29. A similar phenomenon has been identified by Michael Billig in his account of "Collective Memory, Ideology and the British Royal Family", in *Collective Remembering*, eds David Middleton and Derek Edwards, London, 1990. Billig notes that "It is possible for a collectivity to have as its object of commemoration the past itself rather than a specific past event. What is recalled is not an event, whether genuinely historical or mythical, but the feeling that the collectivity possesses a history" (62).

have the Queen and the Royal family and things like the trooping of the colour and the changing of the guard (Man aged 25).

Respondents also referred to the visibility of tradition in popular festivities. In the following example the speaker talks of "watching" tradition:

[...] People here have /// they do things in traditional ways // Like / they still like watching things like morris dancing and the maypole and things like that / um which is silly really, because it is all so old fashioned but // it is their tradition and they still like having it (Man aged 39).

Another reification device involved a discursive association of national history with the physical environment. My interview respondents often presented British or English history as if it were physically embodied in places and buildings. They presented history as a site which may be visited, or as a vista which may be viewed:

[...] I don't think I would like to live in another country / I like the idea of the history and tradition of Britain. I wouldn't feel comfortable in a country like America, which has so little past / so few old buildings // so little in the way of history (Woman aged 52).

Well // when you think of Britain / you think of the way we have preserved our history. We are still very history-minded. In fact more so now // cos in the past there was a / a lot of destruction of the countryside and of the old cities and a lot / of old buildings were destroyed and we nearly lost our history altogether. But now // I think that we are more aware of the need to preserve our history. It is important to us to preserve old buildings and to keep the countryside looking traditional / with hedgerows. The British I think are more concerned with this than / perhaps are other / Europeans. We are less inclined to value technology and like more // to conserve things (Woman aged 34).

Several other respondents mentioned "our national history" in conjunction with the "beautiful countryside":

England is / it is a land with a lot of beautiful countryside / with lots of history. It is a country which foreigners admire. They like our traditions and the greenness of the countryside and all the heritage that is in the country (Woman aged 51).

Although the most common reification devices used by my respondents involved the spectacular portrayal of "history", "tradition" and "the past", they also occasionally sought to locate national history in "memory":

It's a country with lots of memories // and / the people try hard to keep these memories alive. In fact its memories may be too long / and / in Britain people sometimes hang on to memories which may / be / best forgotten (Woman aged 63).

In the following quotation, the speaker refers not specifically to "memory" but to "knowing" the past:

[...] and / well it is one with a long history. We have lots of history. And that / makes it interesting to live in, because / because we can know what life was like in the past / and other countries can't always / umm // Americans come to Britain to find out about their / family trees (Man aged 40).

This quotation also illustrates another way in which national history may be discursively reified: by equating it with the lives of real human beings and with family genealogy.

These reified representations of "our history" as a thing that the nation "has" are reminiscent of Moscovici's account of the processes of "ontologization" and "figuration", by which (scientific) constructs are rendered concrete and "almost visible" as they enter popular commonsense.³⁰ Similar forms of representation are also apparent in the discourses of England/Britain as an "old country" promoted to the public through a diverse array of media such as museum displays, and texts such as school history books and the promotional literature associated with heritage theme parks and other didactic historical leisure facilities.³¹ In particular, the sort of monumental and aesthetic notion of

30. See "Social Representations and Social Explanations" (n. 20 above).

31. For examples of this work, see, Priscilla Boniface and Peter J. Fowler, *Heritage and Tourism in "The Global Village"*, London, 1993; Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline*, London, 1987; David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge, 1985; *The Museum Time-Machine*, ed. Robert Lumley, London, 1988; *Myths of the English*, ed. Roy Porter, Cambridge, 1992; Colin Sorensen, "Theme Parks and Time Machines", in *The New Museology*, ed. Peter Vergo, London, 1989; Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*, London, 1985. Some authors have regarded the development of commonsense understandings of "history" as existing in the "here and now" as an ideological

national history articulated by many of my respondents is a prevalent feature of texts associated with English Heritage.³² As illustrated by some of the quotations cited above, the people who took part in my study often presented "our history" as a feature which distinguishes "our nation" from others, and fantasized "other" nationals as the envious voyeurs of the fact and extent of "our" national history.³³ This, again, parallels a prominent theme in media presentations of the national heritage. The idea that "our history" (concretized in visible sites and practices) represents a *distinctive* attribute of the British nation is, perhaps not surprisingly, a recurring theme in the tourist literature. A fairly typical example may be found in the opening paragraph of the English Heritage pamphlet on Stonehenge:

Stonehenge is the most important prehistoric monument in the whole of Britain. It is unique, and there is nothing else like it in the world. From the earliest times it has aroused the awe of visitors as one of the wonders of Britain.³⁴

This is an interesting example since Stonehenge (here presented as a unique wonder-of-Britain) actually pre-dates the British nation by more than two thousand years, a fact of which the author (who is Professor Emeritus of Archaeology at the University of Wales) was, presumably, quite well aware. Similar assertions concerning the distinctiveness of the national heritage may be identified in political debates. For example, in the parliamentary debate on the National Heritage Bill, Esmond Bulmer

accomplishment of English heritage. Martin Robertson in the 1992 *unso* pamphlet, *Exploring England's Heritage: Dorset to Gloucestershire*, contrasts this public awareness of history existing in the present with an earlier (and, by implication, less satisfactory) situation in which "[h]istory was looked upon as a procession might be, with things appearing, going past and vanishing" (1).

32. The National Heritage Bill defines the national heritage as, "any land or building which is ... of outstanding scenic, historic, architectural or scientific interest".

33. For a discussion of the particularization of the British nation, see Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, London, 1995, and Robin Cohen, *Frontiers of Identity: The British and the Others*, London, 1994. The idea that social categories are defined comparatively, and that group members are inclined to construct images which present their group as positively distinct from relevant outgroups has a long history in social psychology. This idea is discussed extensively in *Differentiation between Social Groups*, ed. Henri Tajfel, London, 1978.

34. Robert Atkinson, *Stonehenge and Neighbouring Monuments*, London, 1987.

MP described "our nation" as having been "the seat of the greatest Empire since Rome". He went on to suggest that "our" nation is

second only to Italy in its architectural heritage. For hundreds of years we have been able to draw on the best that the world had to offer in ideas, natural resources, and the decorative arts. This is our incomparable heritage.³⁵

Although it is possible to identify parallels between the ways in which my respondents described "their country" as "having history" and the "heritageable" apparent in contemporary tourist literatures and publicized parliamentary debates, is it sufficient to conclude that ordinary folk have passively absorbed, and subsequently echo, this representation in a thoughtless way? It is interesting to note that, whereas social psychologists tend to assume that the individual will naturally process and simplify information reaching their senses, heritage managers often adopt the conceit that ordinary folk, left to their own devices, will not know what to think. One recent text, for example, justifies the education of the public concerning their national history thus:

The past is a country which is very difficult to relate to, for the consistent overlay of the works of new ages and cultures on those already present puzzles the onlooker, who desperately tries to tie things together to aid understanding and instead brings confusion upon himself [*sic*].³⁶

Some social theorists have, however, been cautious about assuming that the messages presented to the public in texts such as school history books, heritage displays, televised parliamentary speeches, or TV costume dramas are automatically "taken on board" in the form in which they were intended. Patrick Wright, for example, has speculated that people may interpret such messages through the lenses provided by their pre-existing "everyday historical consciousness", although he does not explore this issue in any detail.³⁷

As a concrete example of the way in which members of the public may reinterpret or refuse particular media representations of national

35. *Hansard*, 3 December 1979.

36. See *Exploring England's Heritage*, 1.

37. Michael Bommes and Patrick Wright, "Charms of Residence: The Public and the Past", in *Making Histories: Studies in History Writing and Politics*, ed. Richard Johnson et al., London, 1982; and *On Living in an Old Country*.

history I should like to consider the ways in which my respondents associated national heritage with a sense of family lineage. Several of my respondents, like the man quoted earlier, spoke of "our national history" with reference to kinship and generation. The representation of (national) historical process and periodization in terms of family ancestry and individual lives is, of course, implicit in the use of the metaphor of "national heritage", and once again we may note parallels with the promotional literature of the tourist industries. A recent example may be found in a flyer advertising the York Castle Museum which is headed by the caption "Catch up with your past ... your parents', your grandparents' and your great, great, great, great grandparents!" (punctuation as in the original). However, somewhat paradoxically given the current effort on the part of the producers of heritage displays to replace an élitist notion of the national past with a populist one, as *On Living in an Old Country* indicates, it seems that the British citizens I interviewed were, in fact, more inclined to reify history through reference, not to personal autobiography and genealogy, but to the Queen and Royal lineage.³⁸

The first thing that I think about with Britain is the Royal family.

Not just the Queen / but the whole history of Royalty / and the way we can look back at the long history of the Royal family. It's a sort of link with the past /// it's not the same as just learning a list of presidents (Woman, aged 46).

This phenomenon may not be confined to this particular study: it has notable parallels, for example, with Steedman's findings concerning the way in which children may refuse the populist messages of school history lessons.³⁹ I have also identified similar phenomena in other

38. Michael Billig has noted the importance of the Royal Family to constructions of British national distinctiveness in his "Collective Memory, Ideology and the British Royal Family" (n.29 above), as well in his *Talking of the Royal Family*, London, 1992. This is also reflected in this quotation (and many others like it), in which the speaker emphasizes that "having" a Royal family is "not the same" as having a catalogue of presidents. When respondents in my studies mentioned the Queen and the Royal Family, they often did so in the course of discussing history and tradition. In this respect, we can see how the Queen and the Royal lineage are also serving a reification function: they allow us to imagine historical process in terms of the births, lives and deaths of a succession of real individuals.

39. Carolyn Steedman, "True Romances", in *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, ed. Raphael Samuel, I: History and Politics, London, 1989.

contexts. One study I conducted recently involved observing the behaviour of visitors at the Wigan Pier heritage centre. In this case it was clear that, even though the displays made no reference to the Royal Family and were, in fact, attempting to draw visitors into a populist discourse ("The Way We Were" is the title of one display), the visitors nevertheless often drew upon élitist discourses when discussing these displays. They typically introduced themes of Royal genealogy alongside their own autobiographical memories ("I remember that, it was just before the abdication"), or supplemented (and on occasions supplanted) discourses concerning the everyday lives of (working class) citizens with more glamorous, colourful myths of the Royal family.⁴⁰

The observation that Anglo-Britons may, on occasions, prefer Royalist accounts to populist representations of national heritage is perhaps unsurprising given the extent to which the British nation has conventionally been constructed in terms of "the crown" rather than "the people".⁴¹ Although most analyses of national and ethnic stereotypes have generally supposed that the media speak with a single voice, at any one time the public is presented with a variety of conflicting representations of national heritage. Museums, heritage displays, school history books, political debates, national newspapers, TV documentaries and fictional texts present the British public with a variety of different accounts of national history: populist and élitist, celebratory and critical, national insular and global. All of these are potentially available for the construction of (and also, in their turn, reflect) various forms of popular historical consciousness. The fact that we may observe some people prioritizing élitist constructions of national history in some contexts need not be taken to imply that Royalist myths constitute some form of ideological straitjacket which prevent any people from ever using alternative accounts.

What does it mean to "have history"?

In what follows I shall suggest that although the stereotype that "our country has history" is widely shared, this need not indicate the existence of a uniform commonsense. I shall focus in particular on the ways in

40. It is, incidentally, interesting to note the extent to which British people more generally use events such as Royal weddings to organize and date their own autobiographical memories. For an account of this, see Martin Conway, *Autobiographical Memory*, Milton Keynes, 1990.

41. For discussions of this issue, see Tom Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass: Britain and Its Monarchy*, London, 1988, and my own "Unimagined Community? ..." (n.25 above).

which speakers may draw on stereotypes of Anglo-British heritage and tradition in conjunction with a variety of commonsense notions of time and history in order to construct a number of rather different arguments about their nation and about themselves as citizens.

Endurance over time: the discourses of national vitality and national destiny

Many authors have observed that the British nation has conventionally been attributed with a continuous national history. Such representations, it is typically argued, promote images of national security and engender a sense of national identity among British citizens.⁴² This construction is exemplified in the well-known quotation from Herbert Butterfield:

Because we in Britain have maintained the threads between past and present, we do not, like some younger states, have to go hunting for our own personalities. We do not have to set about the deliberate manufacture of a national consciousness, or to strain ourselves, like the Irish, in order to create a "nationalism" out of the broken fragments of a tragic past ... Our history is here and active, giving meaning to the present.⁴³

More recently, similar constructions have been identified in the well-crafted speeches of British Conservative Party politicians.⁴⁴

In his account of the heritage industry in the 1980s, Robert Hewison suggested that the tourist industries and the British Conservative government "conspired" to produce an image of the British nation characterized by a "blurring of today and yesterday".⁴⁵ This sort of bracketing of historical time is particularly apparent on those occasions when the nation is described with reference to an enduring "national character" or traditional "way of life". A recent example may be found in John Major's much-publicized address to the 1994 Conservative Party

42. Theorists often point to the way in which national identity requires a sense of the historical continuity of the nation. For discussions of this issue, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, 1983.

43. Herbert Butterfield, *The Englishman and His History*, Cambridge, 1944, 114.

44. See, for example, J. Chambers, "Narratives of Nationalism: Being British", *New Formations*, 7 (1989), 83-103; Christopher Hill, "History and Patriotism", and Raphael Samuel, "Continuous National History", in *Patriotism* (n.39 above).

45. *The Heritage Industry*, 83.

conference in which he eulogized at length on the endurance of traditional Anglo-British⁴⁶ ways of life, painting a picture of a rural folk passing their time playing cricket and cycling to church down country lanes. This allusion to national tradition did not simply blur the distinction between today and yesterday; it also promoted an image of a secure tomorrow. John Major assured his audience that these "unamendable essentials" of Britain would still survive in fifty years' time. Similar sorts of representations were also apparent in some of the responses I received in my interviews. I have already noted how many of my respondents explicitly evoked notions of tradition when describing "their country". The endurance of these "traditional ways" was often attributed to the conservative character of the folk:⁴⁷

[...] The British are quaintly traditional people. They have insular philosophies. They are not interested in modern life but like to live in the past (Man aged 36).

More generally, the respondents' descriptions of typical Anglo-British habits and ways of life commonly presented the nation as if it were caught in a picturesque time-warp:

[...] In Britain, men wear bowler hats, and ladies wear cotton frocks. They drink tea in the afternoon and eat roast beef on Sundays // Policemen ride bicycles // and are polite to everyone (Man aged 24).

In fact it seemed that, in this respect at least, my respondents' accounts of "their country" were *overwhelmingly* characterized by a blurring of today and yesterday. In general, they did not appear inclined to perceive *contemporary* aspects of Anglo-British life as nationally typical.⁴⁸ I shall

46. The examples he gave are all English.

47. Since Katz and Braly's research in the USA in the 1930s, questionnaire studies of national stereotypes have typically demonstrated the pervasiveness and resilience of the stereotype that "English" or "British" people may be characterized as "traditional" and "conservative".

48. This failure to see the phenomena and artefacts of one's everyday world as marked in terms of national particularity may indicate the taken-for-granted nature of the nationalist frame. For a discussion of "banal nationalism", see Michael Billig's book (n.33 above), and for a discussion of the functional invisibility of Anglo-British "national" characteristics, see my "Unimagined Community? ..." (n.25 above).

