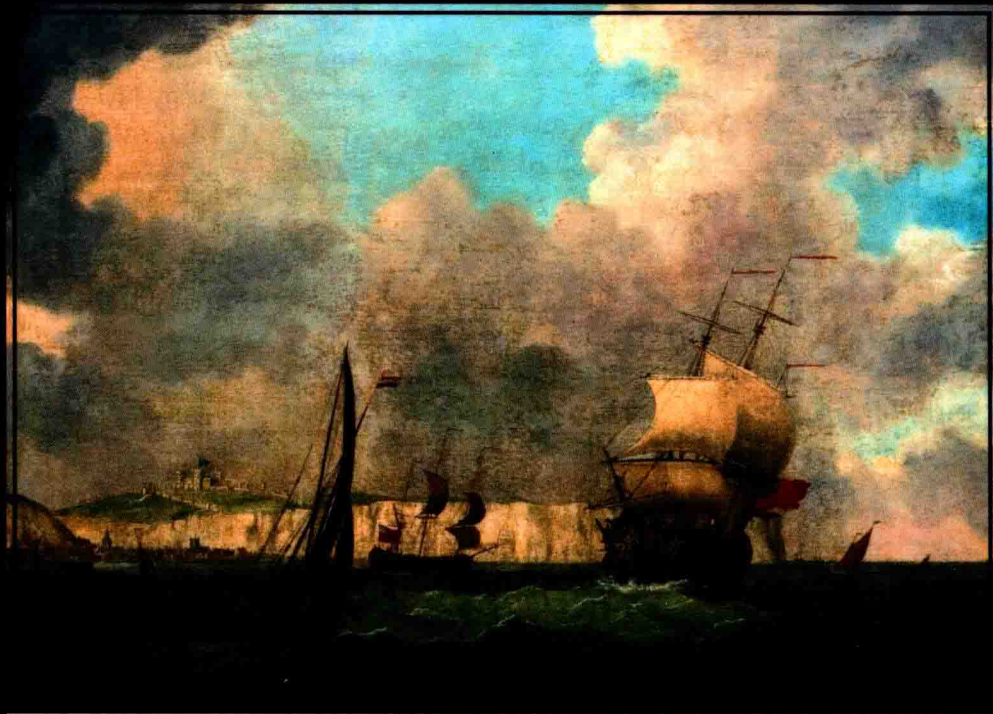


BRITISH FOREIGN POLICY,
NATIONAL IDENTITY, AND
NEOCLASSICAL REALISM



Amelia Hadfield-Amkhan

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Amelia Hadfield-Amis



ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.
Lanham • Boulder • New York • Toronto • Plymouth, UK

Published by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
A wholly owned subsidiary of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
<http://www.rowmanlittlefield.com>

Estover Road, Plymouth PL6 7PY, United Kingdom

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hadfield, Amelia.

British foreign policy, national identity, and neoclassical realism / Amelia Hadfield-Amkhan.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.


ISBN 978-0-7425-5567-9 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-4422-0546-8 (electronic)

1. Great Britain—Foreign relations—19th century. 2. Great Britain—Foreign relations—20th century. 3. National characteristics, British. 4. Great Britain—Politics and government—19th century. 5. Great Britain—Politics and government—20th century. I. Title.

JZ631.H33 2010

327.41—dc22

2010016342

™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

British Foreign Policy, National Identity, and Neoclassical Realism

To Adnan and Alexander

Preface

Considerate la vostra semenza:
fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza.

—Dante Alighieri¹

This book is the fruit of a long and abiding interest in national identity and a more recent interest in the cultural underpinnings of foreign policy. Its contents represent a rather colorful family, blending British history, International Relations theory (IR), and cultural studies. This cross-disciplinary foundation has required some fairly muscular bridge building over the years, but it is an exercise not without its rewards.

The first reward is the enjoyment gained in blending disciplines and subfields, allowing me to incorporate history, English literature, theories of nationalism and identity, comparative politics, and finally IR theory in coming to grips with state behavior. This conglomeration transformed an undergraduate interest in Englishness into a long-standing commitment to exploring the role of national identity in the mythology and behavior of states. I was, for instance, struck early on by T. S. Eliot's *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* and its ability to decode postwar British society and the motivations behind British foreign policy. Eliot argues that "we become more and more aware of the extent to which the baffling problem of 'culture' underlies the problems of the relation of every part of the world to every other."² Eliot is correct, but there is still work to be done in linking national culture to foreign policy, and in understanding how national identity and nation building have emerged, in the words of

Henry Kissinger, as new concepts “not previously found in the diplomatic vocabulary.”³

The second reward has allowed me to remain passionate about history. I first caught “naval fever” years ago from reading Robert K. Massie’s *Dreadnought*.⁴ I then contracted a bad case of “tunnel fever” from reading the satisfyingly histrionic invasion literature of 1882. I nearly succumbed to jingoistic fervor by surveying the media discourses of the Falkland Islands crisis. And I am still tussling with the schizophrenia of various British attempts to define its role in Europe. Suffice to say, a very real interest in seeing history as a living national narrative led to later analyses to discern how national stories act as resources, justifications, and sometimes excuses for a state’s foreign policy behavior.

The case studies were a delight to write. Chosen to represent points of crisis from the past two centuries, they draw on a series of rather unusual connections. They demonstrate how, for example, in 1882, the role of landscape and invasion literature played a central role in quashing the construction of a tunnel to France, why particular London plays touched a nerve about navy fever, accelerating the construction of eight dreadnoughts in 1909, how media-sponsored jingoism and vicarious imperialism operated in a postwar climate to explain the robust defense of far-flung islands, and finally how attributes of sovereignty, economic nationalism, and multiculturalism continue to underwrite British attitudes toward Europe and the euro.

Drawing on a wide range of historical, political, and cultural materials, the case studies all explore how nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century English and British national identities are catalytic for British foreign policy decisions. They allow the reader to examine these episodes from the dual vantage point of cultural input and foreign policy outcome. They also individually and collectively highlight the role of decline. There is something rather compelling about the diminishment of a great power over time, the erosion of cultural certainty, the slippage of material leverage. All states must admit to some form of change in the span of their existence. Hovering between ambition and delusion for more than two centuries, Britain, and its English “core,” has undergone a most radical transition. The changes that have forced its society and government into periods of deep self-reflection are carved into its culture and etched into its policy stances on key issues of sovereignty, territoriality, security, and monetary policy. These same issues act as meta-themes of the case studies, showing the reader the infinitely complex task by which successive periods of British government elites, and the wider populace, relied upon the “ancient lights” of an unspoken but implicit code of Englishness to direct their course in the world.

Lastly, after having explored the role of national identity from a cultural, comparative, literary, and historic perspective, IR theory set me on the path to considering how it also obtains as a political force and a foreign policy variable. The students and teachers of IR theory who read this text will be aware that structural realism continues to dominate most schools and subfields within IR, including foreign policy analysis (FPA). Realism's steadfast focus upon the dynamics of power, aggregation, and balance has maintained the elegant but conceptually abbreviated framework of structural equilibrium but underplayed a host of other factors better suited to explaining both national policy choices and international distributions of power. As a result, the discipline in both its American and European incarnations lacks the tools to study the ethnic, cultural, and national nuances affecting the foreign policy of the modern nation-state.⁵ I would suggest that the best remedy to date is neoclassical realism, which acknowledges the major principles of realism regarding state behavior, but does not regard them as a priori to, or exclusively exogenous of, other forces. I have found that neoclassical realism operates neatly and persuasively to explain a range of foreign policy issues. Its canon is readable and interesting, it advocates progressive and alive to new perspectives. States are understood to be competitive, even warlike, but also innately social vessels containing unique collective perceptions, varying institutional setups and myriad histories, all of which produce a political culture that is *purposive*, not *purposeless* in the final analysis. National identity, as a key driver of political culture, functions in the four case studies as an *intervening variable* that connects the external challenges of the Victorian, Edwardian, and postwar eras with the particularist domestic responses of the British state and its underlying English nationhood to visibly influence its foreign policy behavior.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Over the past few years, the following people have read, commented on, or informed my work, and I would be remiss in not thanking them: Chris Brown, Valerie Hudson, James Rosenau, Andrew Williams, Thierry Balzacq, and Richard Whitman. Within the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Kent, where much of the text was completed, I should like to acknowledge Ruth Blakeley, Jonathan Joseph, Michael Burgess, and my Brussels supervisor, Jarrod Wiener. All these individuals have directly and indirectly helped me to ponder and refine many of the concepts and approaches found within the following pages. The University of Kent also granted study leave to complete the research

during its initial preparation at the University of Kent Brussels, and its final stages in Canterbury. I particularly wish to thank Zeynep Arkan and Joseph Dutton, two postgraduate students in our department, for their invaluable and cheerful help in formatting and finalizing the text under considerable time pressure, while James Worley Soeren Keil provided last-minute formatting assistance.

The British Academy, the International Studies Association (ISA), and the University Association for Contemporary European Studies (UACES) have all granted funds to enable me to travel from Istanbul to San Francisco, from Zagreb to Cambridge, for conference attendance, the presentation of research, and archival explorations. I would also like to thank Ronald Linden from the University of Pittsburgh and series editor at Rowman & Littlefield. Our chance meeting at a conference in The Hague in 2006 turned a quick drink into an uproarious dinner, during which I expounded on the merits of national identity and he proposed a suitable harbor for my research. His advice on the preparation of the proposal and the approach to manuscript has been invaluable. I also wish to thank Jessica Gribble, former associate editor at Rowman & Littlefield, for her enthusiastic advocacy of the original project, as well as senior editor Susan McEachern for their professional support and friendly assistance.

I take greatest pleasure in thanking those family members who have put up with endless yarns about dreadnoughts, rantings about realism, pontifications on Parliamentary bills, sermons on security, orations on the euro, lectures on the Falklands, and of course enthusiastic outpourings about national identity. I would like to acknowledge the loving support of my parents, Ann and Alec Hadfield, who have always encouraged my academic efforts and have taken great pride in the various outcomes that have resulted over the past few years. My sisters, Mary and Elizabeth, have been constantly supportive, providing both sisterly encouragement and friendship.

While he himself would be happier if I omitted this final acknowledgment, this book would simply not have been possible without the loving encouragement of my husband, Adnan Amkhan. For a lawyer, Adnan has a suspiciously large number of social science texts and a highly refined understanding of international relations. His dedication to logical thinking and intolerance of obfuscation have acted as a tonic to the heavy verbiage that can accrue in multidiscipline approaches. His boundless patience with my research and his personal pride in the outcomes have genuinely helped steer me toward any illuminations that may appear in the following pages. Finally, I have had the privilege of mothering my son during his first year while the manuscript took shape. This book is therefore dedicated both to Adnan and the princely Alexander Caspian.

NOTES

1. Dante Alighieri, *La divina commedia, Inferno*, canto 26, lines 118–120. Translates as “Consider your origin; you were not born to live like brutes, but to follow virtue and knowledge.”
2. T. S. Eliot, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), 27.
3. Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 648.
4. Robert K. Massie, *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War* (New York: Random House, 1991).
5. Yale H. Ferguson and Richard W. Mansbach, “The Past as Prelude to the Future? Identity and Loyalties in Global Politics,” in *The Return of Culture and Identity in IR Theory*, ed. Yosef Lapid and Friedrich Kratochwil (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1996), 21.

Contents

Preface	ix
1 Introduction	1
2 Conceptual Foundations: Neoclassical Realism, Foreign Policy Analysis, and National Identity	23
3 Analyzing National Identity, National Interests, and Foreign Policy	43
4 The 1882 Channel Tunnel Crisis: Englishness and Territoriality	67
5 The 1909 Navy Scare: Englishness and National Security	101
6 The 1982 Falklands Crisis: Englishness, Britishness, and Ontological Security	135
7 The 2003 Euro Debate: Englishness, Britishness, and Sovereignty	165
8 Conclusion	203
Bibliography	211
Index	247
About the Author	255

1

Introduction

Every border excludes as much as it includes, and these successive redefinitions of nation act like circles in the set theory of numbers, overlapping and intersecting one another. . . . How does interaction with others define us and define our neighbors?

—Alberto Manguel¹

Identity matters. The need to express who we are as individuals and groups is one of the strongest societal forces in existence. Expressions of identity at the national level feature as characteristics by which nations identify themselves, usually against a series of “others.” These national characteristics are no mere menu of attributes, they portray the character of a given people, one in which their history, traditions, values, and state institutions fuse into a form of collective self-reference. Identities are largely culturally derived. They may be primordial, constructed, or enforced but all are derived from the national narrative that informs a given society and its surrounding state unit, of its character, its values and traditions, its territory, people, and institutions.

The roots of identity are also political. Political expressions of national identity therefore affect the contours of a state’s history, dictate its national interest, and underwrite its foreign policy. As such, identity demands attention as a key factor influencing the makeup of state units, the choice and ranking of their national interest, and the motivation and execution of their domestic and foreign policy. Identities are central in helping the modern nation-state to define and defend itself, both existentially and practically. Within the social sciences, identities have slowly emerged as a category of

analysis, revealing the various cultural and political forces that drive national groups and influence the policies of the state unit.

The primary goal of this book is simply to shed more light on the links between the “input” and “output” of foreign policy. Specifically, it illustrates how national identity operates visibly to inform the national interest, and viably to constitute and motivate the foreign policy choices of states. This goal is then further refined to explore how aspects of contemporary English and British national identity have influenced understandings of the English nation, the British state, the content of British national interest, and the rationale of British foreign policy. This is accomplished in four separate case studies: the attempt in 1882 to construct a subterranean tunnel to France, the 1909 naval race to build eight Dreadnoughts before Germany, the 1982 Falklands War with Argentina, and the 2003 decision to retain the pound instead of adopting the euro, the currency of much of the European Union. As will be seen, all four episodes provide rich historical examples by which to observe forms of contemporary national identity operating as foreign policy “inputs” derived from cultural and political discourses, catalytic to the “outputs” of British foreign policy.

The second goal is to draw attention to the burgeoning school of thought known as neoclassical realism and its utility as a conceptual framework. Emerging over the past decade from a predominantly American perspective, neoclassical realism fuses classical realist understandings of states and state behavior with sophisticated treatments of domestic forces. As explored in chapter 2, neoclassical realism has proven to be a robust method by which to explore national identity as an “intermediary variable,” helping analysts to connect the external forces of international society with the particularist forces of domestic decision making.

The focus on foreign policy constitutes the third component. The book demonstrates the tremendous range that national identity possesses both as a theory of state (entailing unit-level construction and composition) *and* as a theory of foreign policy (entailing unit-level policy choice). With the practical assistance lent by neoclassical realism, identity operates as an intermediary variable that helps us to deconstruct the cultural and political history of a unit, examine the ambiguous interplay between “state” and “national” structures, explore the formation of national interests, and ultimately appreciate the constitutive and even causal influences of national culture upon the formulation of foreign policy.

From the perspective of working with cultural forces, national identity remains for many an unapproachable and thus unusable factor. For those keen on avoiding the deluge of definitions and methodological demands that accompany the treatment of culture in analysis, identity can feasibly be treated as a rather thin feature. For instance, functioning merely as a generic, instrumental category describing state behavior in terms of roles—

balancer, peacekeeper, regional leader, hegemon, and so on—identity can operate as a category or label expediently adopted by states, and easily changed. Understood merely as a form of national *attire* rather than a deployable *attribute*, national identity has languished as an ambiguous series of characteristics by which to identify a state, or through which a population identifies *with* a state. Within IR theory, constructivism has certainly raised the status of identity as a workable variable. Identity operates as part of the endogenous machinery of state formation and plays a key role in the socializing processes of states. This has allowed a healthy new focus on identity as a catalytic factor affecting state behavior; however, mainstream constructivism provides only an abbreviated introduction into the full potential of identity to determine national interests and orient foreign policy. For many, identity remains a corporate state label, an all-purpose aggregate that bundles all manner of intangible forces in an unpalatable lump. While some categories of state identity do indeed function in this way, a deeper understanding of national identity generated by cultural studies, sociology, social psychology, anthropology, and history still hovers on the sidelines. For those keen to plumb such interdisciplinary depths, the challenges are certainly tougher, but the analytical rewards are likewise greater.

This book advocates a richer perspective, one where national identity is not only a generic state attribute common to the form of all national societies and modern state units, but also an utterly unique nexus of symbols and strategies that provides the state with the unique content of political culture, from which it can construct its national interests and orient its foreign policies. As one of the most potent and pervasive social forces, national identity is a form of “self-ordering, calling forth particular social structures and functions and values.”² Identities help to define and to defend the ordered self at the individual, societal, and state level, in cultural, economic, and political ways. As Philip Allott suggests, from identity derives three central structures of statehood: national security, as “the primary interest of the nation”; national culture, in order to educate, enliven, and commemorate the nation’s unique characteristics; and government, as the “axiomatic basis for the derivation of legislation and executive action.”³ Together, the structures of national security, culture, and government are bound up in a layered process of self-ordering that allows all people to feel connected in some sense to their wider—if imagined—national community, while simultaneously placing this same power of intangible association in the service of a unified government with defined policy aims.⁴ As history shows, this has frequently been done powerfully enough for individuals to live by and to die for their identity. Both the governing elite and national publics are particularly affected by the portrayal of national identity as symbolic of their worth and uniqueness; contextualized by interactions with a series of external others, the

national community gradually constructs a series of self-referential *narratives* that over time constitute a national political culture.

Containing both strategic and symbolic elements, national political cultures operate in three ways. First, they function as a repository for both sophisticated and abbreviated forms of national self-identification; second, they are indicative of the material resources and normative principles required to secure and prosper the state unit, usually by informing the content and sequencing of the national interest; third, national political cultures underwrite the motivations for a spectrum of foreign policy stances drawn upon by the state for its continued existence in international society. Thus, the generic issues of security, strategy, cooperation, conflict, alliances, isolationism, and regionalism that all states face can only be fully understood as foreign policy responses wholly derived from a genetic national political culture that is as imagined as it is tangible, as symbolic as it is strategic, and as mythic as it is material.

To understand how foreign policy can be simultaneously generic and genetic, how, in Kissinger's words, it must be both "based on some fixed principle in order to prevent tactical skill from dissipating into a random thrashing about" and capable of constant redefinition "upon each occasion as it arises," one must take a step back and understand the central role that national identity plays in constructing foreign policy. This in turn requires one to appreciate the enduring paradox by which national identity itself is characterized.⁵ Simply put, the process by which a national society chooses to identify itself, its interests, and its actions is both *identical to* and *utterly different from* those of its neighbors. This generic/genetic dyad comprises all national identities (and frequently compromises analyses that fail to account for it). All identities—individual, collective, national, regional, multilateral—are perennially torn between their originating ideals seen as fixed and ageless and the need to constantly adjust to internal and external change via ongoing redefinition. As will be seen, this paradox is duplicated precisely in the composition and orientation of foreign policy.

WHY NATIONAL IDENTITY AND FOREIGN POLICY?

Is an approach linking national identity and foreign policy particularly novel? Arguing that national identity plays an important—even causal—role in both public and foreign policy, as well as affecting state behavior and international patterns, may strike many as obvious. For those outside mainstream IR, ideas, ideologies, histories, and institutions have always been a natural source for the substance of public and foreign policy. National identity if anything may appear to be overdone in many fields, seized upon as an easy, even trendy, method of explaining the apparent opposi-

tions of social fluidity and permanence. Equally, foreign policy studies is a natural arena in which to examine the cultural imperatives that drive the domestic and discursive dynamics of each nation-state in its international interactions. Surprisingly however, neither the role of national identity nor its catalytic connections to foreign policy have been the focus of any sustained investigation within mainstream IR or indeed within foreign policy analysis (FPA). Indeed, the limited treatment of both still implies that theorists are culpable of a “continu[ing] neglect [of] domestic politics and transnational relations, the very factors that had much to do with the unexpected end of the Cold War,” as well as various post-Cold War transformations and post-9-11 security issues.⁶ Further, the failure of theorists to envisage the nature of Cold War policy fallout plays a key role in the rise of domestic factors favored by neoclassical realists, which forms the main conceptual foundation for this book.

Using a conceptual foundation based on neoclassical realism, the central aim is, therefore, to suggest that national identity determines a critical mass of cultural self-reference and self-preference, which when politicized, gives substantive content to the national interest and justificatory form to its foreign policy. Neoclassical realism has developed into an especially intriguing school of thought to pursue such a question because it enhances the explanatory power of classical realist principles with the inclusion of domestic, “second image” dynamics. The new tripartite methodology thus incorporates the pursuit of power as the independent variable, a specific foreign policy outcome as the dependent variable, and domestic contextual influences (such as the perception of the nation or national power) as the intervening variable. For this text, national identity functions as the chosen *intervening variable* that constitutively—and on occasion causally—connects the pursuit of power at the behest of external forces with the particularist domestic construction of foreign policy. When deconstructed, national identity reveals itself as a composite of majoritarian and marginal discourses revolving around “core values,” ideas, histories, and traditions that over time crystallize into forms of collective self-reference and preference. Policy makers then draw upon symbolic and/or strategic aspects of this national narrative to assist them in ranking a series of national interests and/or to provide the justificatory content for a particular policy. Foreign policy is therefore the vehicle by which a national state defines and defends itself in the context of international “others.” Simply put, we can understand the translation of historically derived national values into state policy as the transformation of the *discourse* of national identity into the *discursive practice* of foreign policy.

Within the four case studies, national identity operates as a repository with the capacity to explain the strategic aspects of British foreign policy on military, territorial, and financial issues, as well as the symbolic aspects

of the national self. The fluctuating national identity at work in British foreign policy is familiar to most. Certainly much British foreign policy from the eighteenth century onward possesses a unique, but not necessarily uniform, bias toward pragmatism, isolationism, and exceptionalism, while twentieth-century policy contains increasing levels of defensive anxiety and existential angst. In deconstructing Palmerston's famous assertion of 1856 that British "interests are eternal, and those interests it is our duty to follow," Kissinger suggested that British foreign policy "required no formal strategy because its leaders understood the British interest so well and so viscerally that they could act spontaneously on each situation as it arose, confident that their public would follow."⁷ Many have accepted this at face value. However, the current approach can take neither the absolutist quality of British interests, nor the intuitive informing of these interests for granted. Instead, it examines how external forces driving Britain's pursuit of state power and security were pursued according to, and mediated by, the internal dynamics of English exceptionalism. Frequently, this national self is sourced from understandings of Englishness, subsumed beneath, but not wholly negated by, an overarching British national identity. As a result, the forms of Englishness encountered in the four case studies largely informs the strategic content of British foreign policy, rather than its tactical implementation.

To be clear, the attributes of Englishness and Britishness explored in the case studies are not taken as given. Both Englishness and Britishness operate as historical discourses whose core attributes retain vestiges of changelessness while undergoing enormous transformations; the former can be traced to medieval forms of self-reference, and the latter are associated with attempts to construct the unit of Great Britain from the early eighteenth century onward. As a discursive but functionally unproblematic intervening variable by which to test foreign policy outcomes, national identity has been chosen simply because it represents the most accessible portion of national culture by which to analyze British foreign policy choice. Specifically, national identity functions as the most concentrated core of self-conceptions inherited by a society. The majority of identities operate by crystallizing salient domestic forces that inform the nation-state of its modes of self-reference at any given time. These modes of self-reference subsequently provide a cognitive filter by which both public and elite decision makers understand the plethora of external challenges, the forms of self-preference and policy stances required to successfully reposition the state relative to others.

Under the aegis of neoclassical realism, national identity operates as an active intervening variable that, first, rejects realism's traditional foreclosure on domestic explanations and, second, provides a linchpin between domestic ideas of Englishness and the foreign policy practices of the British state. This may provide something of a remedy to Rosecrance and Stein's la-