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In a work of unusual ambition and rigorous comparison, Roberto Romani considers the concept of 'national character' in the intellectual histories of Britain and France. Perceptions of collective mentalities influenced a variety of political and economic debates, ranging from anti-absolutist polemic in eighteenth-century France to appraisals of socialism in Edwardian Britain. Romani argues that the eighteenth-century notion of 'national character', with its stress on climate and government, evolved into a concern with the virtues of 'public spirit' irrespective of national traits, in parallel with the establishment of representative institutions on the Continent. His discussion of contemporary thinkers includes Montesquieu, Voltaire, Hume, Millar, Burke, Constant, de Stael and Tocqueville. After the mid-nineteenth century, the advent of social scientific approaches, including those of Spencer, Hobson and Durkheim, shifted the focus from the qualities required by political liberty to those needed to operate complex social systems, and to bear its psychological pressures.

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