

REVIEW: ENGLISH NATIONAL IDENTITY

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Krishan Kumar, **The Making of English National Identity**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003, 382pp, Hb. £47.50, ISBN 0521771889, Pb £17.95, ISBN 0521777364.

If any further evidence were required of the extent to which questions of nationalism and national identity have caught the sociological imagination in recent years, then it is provided by this book, written by a sociological 'big hitter' best known for his examination of weighty concepts such as (post-)industrialism and (post-)modernity (see Kumar 1978 and 1995). Kumar brings the same lucid approach evinced in these earlier works to his treatment of nationalism. Yet in taking the example of England, he has chosen to examine a rather unusual case; one which, far from providing a straightforward exemplification of the nation as Anderson's 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983), has in fact been conceived as an 'unimagined community' (Condor 1996). England is a place where the kinds of nationally-framed self-examination so common to other countries are comparatively absent – or at least they have been. It is no coincidence that Kumar's book is published at a time when (largely due to events beyond their immediate control) the English are proving increasingly willing to engage in national introspection.

There are three major elements upon which Kumar's argument rests. First, that nationalism is above all a *popular* phenomenon: national status cannot be accorded to geographical entities where only an elite group have a national self-conception. Second, that it is often difficult to tease apart English and British national identity – a problem familiar to students of nationalism in these islands. Third, that Englishness is, or has been, essentially a 'missionary' or 'imperial' nationalism. This is a claim that has recently been

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addressed by Kumar himself (see Kumar 2000) and also by Wellings (2002). The intertwining of Englishness and imperialism is essential to understanding the historical inconspicuousness of English nationalism. English dominance of what Kumar characterises as the 'two English empires' of Great Britain and the overseas colonies necessitated the playing down of Englishness – playing it up would have threatened the very integrity of these enterprises.

But a key question for Kumar is the extent to which English nationalism was extant before becoming subsumed within these larger entities. To this end, he conducts a thorough examination of the various earlier historical candidates for the origins of English nationhood (from around the eighth to the eighteenth century). That each one of these fails Kumar's examination is due principally to his insistence on the popular nature of nationalism. These earlier claims for English nationhood exhibit a confusion of concepts such that 'state' is mistaken for 'nation', or demonstrate a disjuncture between state and people, between an elite whose ambitions and outlook remained essentially *supranational* and the masses whose loyalties and perspectives adhered to the *subnational* realms of locality and region.

For Kumar, then, the 'moment of Englishness' did not arise until the late nineteenth century. Thus, while we are wont to think of distinct English, Scottish, Welsh (and perhaps Irish) identities flowing together to constitute Britishness, Kumar's argument implies that a truly English national sentiment did not in fact emerge until long after Britishness had become well-established. Indeed, it was the beginnings of the decline of the British project which created the space for a popular Englishness to emerge for the first time. Kumar attributes this decline to the first signs of a loss of confidence in the imperial project and to growing secularisation and the cessation of wars with the Catholic French, which undermined the Protestant dimension of Britishness (see also Colley 1992). He also emphasises the importance of the widespread emergence and pervasion of more cultural forms of nationalism during this period, including those in Ireland, Scotland and Wales, which, in defining themselves in contradistinction to the English, encouraged the latter to emphasise their own distinctive qualities. Indeed, much like the other culturally-based nationalisms that were emerging elsewhere in Europe at that time, a key feature of this English national expression was a rediscovery and celebration of the common 'folk'. Another element common to many other national identities was the valorisation of, and identification with, things rural. Yet there were more specifically English

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dimensions too (and these continue to inform contemporary English self-conceptions): a somewhat anti-industrial sentiment (for more on which see especially Wiener 1981); a preference for the practical and utilitarian and a mistrust of the abstract and theoretical; and a strong emphasis on the distinctive tradition of English literature. In his argument that the standardisation of the English language itself was another important element in this emergent identity, though, Kumar appears to be on rather less sure ground. A standard English based around the speech of the southern gentry, and principally fostered in the elite public schools, is not redolent of the kind of 'popular' nationalism that his thesis otherwise insists upon.

Yet the flourishing of an English rather than British nationalism was inevitably halted somewhat by the experience of war in the twentieth century, both because the First and Second World Wars had the effect of once more encouraging an English disavowal of nationalism *per se*, and because of their obviously positive effect upon British national sentiment. Other factors ensured the robustness of Britishness during this period: the empire, although doubtless weakened in some respects, continued to play a prominent role in the public consciousness, and did not reach its peak in terms of territory and population until after the First World War; the British nature of the economy, especially through the programme of industrial nationalisation; the growth of a genuinely British labour movement and Labour Party; the establishment of the welfare state and the BBC; and the enduring popularity of the monarchy.

Consequently, it is the decline of nearly all of the above, coupled with other developments – the revival of 'Celtic' nationalism; the entry into and subsequent growth of the European project; secularisation and globalisation – which have, towards the end of the twentieth century and now, at the beginning of the twenty-first, again undermined Britishness and created the space for English national identity to become prominent once more. But, as Kumar concludes, the problem is that even given these conditions, Englishness appears to be at best reluctantly imagined as a distinct identity:

[t]he walls that encircled the vacant space of Englishness have, one by one, crumbled. The English have been forced to ask themselves the kinds of questions that other nations have engaged in for a long time. Not surprisingly, not having a tradition of enquiry of this kind, they have found it difficult to find satisfying answers. (p.250)

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Moreover, having developed a sense of themselves only in the context of Britishness, the English have shown no great enthusiasm to jettison 'their erstwhile British brethren' and 'go it alone' (p.250). This may be true up to a point, but what Kumar does not account for is the large measure of *indifference* which the English exhibit toward the future destinies of those in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, a sentiment which suggests that the obstacles to 'going it alone' may in fact be less formidable than he implies.

There are also other, more substantial, problems with Kumar's thesis, all of which can be related to the three major elements of his argument outlined above. First, Kumar's definition of nationalism in popular terms creates the conditions whereby it is *inevitable* that the older historical candidates for English nationhood will fail his test. He states that these earlier manifestations of Englishness did not constitute a nation 'in the accepted sense of the word today' (p.48). Looking at them as he does through a contemporary lens ensures that they cannot be understood as representations of nationhood. Kumar's insistence that national identity must include popular consciousness will doubtless satisfy most sociological opinion, but the historians whose arguments he critiques may take issue with his premise. Second, Kumar is surely correct to stress the entanglement of English and British identities, but this very entanglement sometimes reduces the force of his arguments. If Britishness and Englishness are so interchangeable, 'are so interfused as to be virtually indistinguishable' (p.156), how are we to know when manifestations of the latter are the 'real thing'? His description of nationalism in the twentieth century implies both a merging and a parallel flourishing of Englishness and Britishness; so again we have the problem of these being presented as both 'enmeshed' and 'parallel' identities. Admittedly, this is a problem of which we are all prisoners, and any criticism should thus be tempered with this fact. Perhaps more problematic is Kumar's comparatively uncritical acceptance of the presence of a British national identity during a period (around the eighteenth century) when he so vigorously denies the existence of Englishness. He thus does not take on board the possibility that the existence of popular nationalism *per se* may have been dubious at this time.

That dimension of Kumar's argument which suggests that it is important to see Englishness and Britishness as in some senses interchangeable and yet at the same time distinct also raises some problems with regard to the third major element of his thesis – the imperial nature of English nationalism.

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Although he accepts that the terminology of colonialism is not appropriate to the spread of English power to Scotland, he nonetheless believes that the thesis of 'internal colonialism' (see especially Hechter 1975) can offer illuminating insights when considering the national identities of the various peoples of the 'British' Isles; indeed, his description of Britain and Ireland as 'the first English empire', or as 'England's "internal" empire' suggests as much. Yet any notion of Englishness somehow spreading to encapsulate Scotland (a notion that is consistent with Kumar's argument that, even prior to political union, Scotland had effectively been 'anglicized by stealth' (p.77)) sits somewhat uneasily with the survival (and contemporary prospering) of a distinctive Scottish identity. The conception of Britain as a kind of 'England writ large' is, as Kumar concedes, further problematised by the extremely active role which the non-English peoples played in both overseas and 'internal' empires – their strong participation in the latter amounting to 'a virtual colonization in reverse' (p.86). In short then, Kumar's imperial argument often appears to rest on the assumption that Britain *was* essentially a kind of 'greater England' while at the same time being at pains to stress that this was not strictly so. But, as noted above, Kumar is far from alone in facing this dilemma. Further, he is clearly not guilty of the careless conflation of Englishness and Britishness committed by others – indeed this very habit is exposed by Kumar at the very outset. It is also true that, in a book about English identity, he devotes ample space to Scotland, Ireland and Wales, when other nominally British works often reduce them to 'walk on parts'.

All the above criticisms are therefore qualified ones. The essentially popular nature of nationalism, the interfusing of Britishness and Englishness, and the fundamentally imperial character of the latter, are all persuasively conveyed. Furthermore, these critical comments should not detract from a work that is hugely convincing and comprehensive (the bibliography alone – running to some fifty pages – indicates a daunting degree of scholarship). Kumar has written a book which, in its detail, clarity and wide-ranging nature, makes an important contribution to a debate that is of considerable topical importance. Debates about Englishness have inevitably been stimulated by those developments which appear to have changed radically the nature of that identity to which it has been so closely bound: Britishness. A number of these developments have already been noted, but there are at least two more which merit our attention. Most recently, devolution has challenged the English tendencies of 'unthinkingly taking the Union for granted' (p.255) and

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the easy conflation of England and Britain. Equally important is the firmly established and evolving multicultural, multi-ethnic nature of contemporary Britain – most prominently contemporary England. This renders some of the elements upon which English identity has formerly been based anachronistic and exclusionary. Kumar's conclusions suggest that a future Englishness may need to perpetuate the symbiotic relationship it has enjoyed with Britishness (albeit a radically changed Britishness) rather than entailing a re-imagining of a distinctly English identity. Given its historical subsumption within imperial identities both 'at home' and overseas, the building of such an identity would, argues Kumar, effectively have to 'begin from scratch'. Whether the people of England have the appetite and wherewithal for that construction project only time will tell.

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