

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

KRISHAN KUMAR, *The Making of English National Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 397 p.

Much of the rhetoric about interdisciplinary work today is hype. Said to be more “creative,” “innovative,” and “original” than discipline-based research, contemporary interdisciplinary work in Canada is often either atheoretical policy research or ideologically-based drivel. Krishan Kumar’s *The Making of English National Identity* (2003), on the other hand, is exactly the kind of scholarly work promised, but seldom delivered, by the most vocal proponents of interdisciplinary research. A theoretically insightful, empirically grounded, politically important, and wonderfully written tour de force, Kumar’s book provides a brilliant challenge to sociological, historical, and popular orthodoxy on the question of English nationalism. It is a terrific book and a must read for anyone interested in theories of nationalism, the distinctiveness of the English, or the question of what Kumar calls “imperial nationalism.”

Kumar provides answers to a number of important questions. Why has English national identity been historically less robust than many other forms of nationalism? Does it make sense to think of Ireland, Wales, and Scotland as “internal colonies” on the “Celtic fringe” of an imperial England? What is the distinction between ethnic and civic nationalism, and how does this play out in the history of England and the British Isles? How is the politics of empire linked to the question of English nationalism? And what seems a likely and/or possible future for Britain in the context of a new Europe, globalization, and a new multi-ethnic society? Kumar addresses these questions, while making a contribution to a general theory of nationalism. He adds original methodological insights to debates among sociologists, historians, and cultural studies scholars.

A general theory of nationalism as well as an historical sociology of the modern world system must explain the exception and particularities of the English case. In contrast to France, for example, “not exclusion and opposition, but inclusion and expansion, not inwardness but outwardness, mark the English way of conceiving themselves” (ix). The English found their identity, as Kumar puts it, “as constructors of Great Britain, creators of the British Empire, pioneer of the world’s first industrial civilization” (ix). The unique contemporary political arrangements between Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales in the context of the United Kingdom complicate attempts to understand English and British nationalism, as does the historical role all four nations played in the construction of Empire.

Kumar tells this story with remarkable skill and mastery of the details, while offering an insightful theoretical account of “missionary” or “imperial” nationalism.

Kumar critiques American sociologist Michael Hechter’s influential *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development* (1999) without underplaying the fact that “the stories of Wales and Ireland” are “tales of conquest and colonization by the English” (71). Despite a long history of fighting and war, the terminology of colonialism does not quite fit the Scottish case, since Scotland’s domination is better understood as what Kumar calls the “Anglicization by stealth” (77) of a nation never conquered. Moreover, the English conquest of Britain was “slow, piecemeal, largely unplanned and often the result of local initiative and local invitation” (84). Furthermore, the language of internal colonialism lets Scottish, Welsh, and Irish elites and landowners off the hook in the process, for it was often they who “turned to England for assistance and support” for their own economic, political and military power plays (84). Kumar provides a powerful critique of the rational choice theorist Hechter’s book that, Kumar suggests, was written without ever having set foot in the British Isles. Kumar backs up his little jab, however, with a far better engagement with a vast amount of empirical cultural and historical evidence than one sees in *The Celtic Fringe*.

Kumar’s argument is not a defense of or an apology for English conquest and brutality, especially in Catholic Ireland. He reminds us, however, that the industrial revolution and British Empire were collective national projects. Belfast, Glasgow, and South Wales were central to the industrial revolution. Scotland, in particular, produced a “chain of brilliant inventors and engineers,” as intellectual and cultural innovations were produced as much in the periphery of Great Britain as in its core. But not all the Irish or the Celts were victims, of course. It is worth remembering that when one looks at the military and bureaucratic institutions that went with empire, “the English were equaled or outnumbered by Scots, Welsh and Irish” (170). The Scots, for instance, were “of all the British nations, the most prominent in the British Empire” (171). The internal colonial model does not quite capture all this. The downplaying of English nationalism helped them create and dominate Great Britain, and together an empire was built that also tended to soft-peddle English identity in the interests of a larger imperial and missionary project. It is a provocative and convincing argument.

If the sociologist Hechter is put to the intellectual sword for building a model that lacks historical specificity and detail, Kumar is just as penetrating and critical when dealing with the work of historians of English nationalism. Sociology is organized by topics (family, education, organizations, etc.) and enriched by diverse theories and methods. In contrast, history as a discipline downplays theory, is united behind the archival method, and is organized by geography and by timeframes. Consequently, there is a bias within the history profession that leads scholars to argue for something unique, special, or important for their

particular time and place. Thus in the case of the debate about English nationalism, historians display a “natural propensity” to “find the original example of national consciousness in ‘their’ own period” (41). Kumar provides an engaging critique of the historical literature that attempts to establish a 16th century English nationalism. He productively engages Liah Greenfeld’s controversial and radical claim that English nationalism – not Weber’s protestant ethic – was central to the emergence of capitalism. Moreover, while academic historians tend to dismiss Toynbee as an amateur who over-generalizes, Kumar argues that this hostile or even “insolent” attitude has meant that contemporary scholars have ignored some of Toynbee’s insights into English and Scottish history in the middle ages and his emphasis on the links between Britain and the wider European and Western context (41). Specialized disciplines can indeed bring blindness as well as insights.

There are things to quibble about in Kumar’s book. Kumar, as with many cultural studies scholars, is too quick to dismiss survey data as “superficial,” even though his careful and scholarly use of literary and popular cultural sources would make a contemporary empirical sociologist of culture proud. Kumar could have made more use of quantitative data to discuss contemporary trends and public opinion in Britain. Perhaps the importance of religion could have been discussed in more detail, both in the past and today. The specific details of Kumar’s account of British and English history will be debated widely by specialized scholars in these respective fields. And I would have liked to hear more about the specific ways Kumar thinks his analysis could help shape contemporary debates about making English nationalism a potential model for “a truly civic nationalism” (273). St. George’s crosses are appearing more often today when England competes in international soccer matches, Kumar points out, replacing the Union Jack. English nationalism seems to be emerging with new strength, after the end of empire, as Britain is becoming more decentralized and as globalization changes the nation’s very cultural and ethnic character. Far more could have been said about all this.

Still, if this is the kind of scholarship that the proponents of cultural studies in Canada today have in mind, then this sociologist and interdisciplinary skeptic will sign up as a joint member in both the sociology and cultural studies intellectual communities. Kumar’s book sets a standard for evidence, clarity of writing, and what Edward Said calls “worldly” cultural criticism seldom matched by the type of “cultural studies” scholarship today that seems to reject the basic scholarly standards of traditional sociology, history, and literary criticism. Although Kumar’s work probably requires considerable sophistication and background historical knowledge, the book could be used in an advanced fourth-year seminar on nationalism or British studies. It would make excellent reading for graduate sociology classes in comparative-historical sociology, theories of nationalism or identity, and political sociology. It is all too easy to construct national myths of special contributions to civilization, torn out of historical, economic, political and cultural context. Kumar’s scholarship brings enormous learning and evidence to bear on these broader issues, showing

us how an historical sociological imagination can contribute insight to wider public debate.

Neil McLaughlin McMaster University

© Canadian Sociological Association/La Société canadienne de sociologie