



# The Channel Tunnel and English National Identity



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search

contents

**Eve Darian-Smith, *Bridging Divides: The Channel Tunnel and English Legal Identity in the New Europe* (University of California Press)**

1. I will never think of Kent in quite the same way. In addition to being a county in England, Kent is also a legal, psychological, and inter-national/state/community entity that has also been an historical source, a legal and political ideal, and a point of demarcation. As Darian-Smith notes, the county and the channel, or at least their mythical existence, have been important aspects of English national identity. As a result, the building of the channel tunnel, which creates a fixed link between England and France, raises profound issues "of law, identity, and territory" (page 8). The discussion of English identity in *Bridging Divides* focuses on the complex, and often contradictory, existence of Kent, an existence which has been at the center of recent debates over the Channel Tunnel and the changing relationships between Britain and the European Community.

2. Darian-Smith has chosen a very appropriate and timely topic to weave together several themes in English national identity -- the garden, the island, the common law -- with contemporary concerns for the political imaginary, post-colonialism, and symbolic geography. The debates over the channel tunnel bring together a wide range of competing political, national, and legal ideals, which focus attention on the problems and possibilities that are emerging with the European Community, and by extension with the reorganization of political structures throughout the world. And what her discussion encourages us to do, in the end, is to rethink the terms of the political debates, specifically when they either reaffirm the nation-state or resolve the nation-state into a global/local model. The emerging organizations and contests are not so easily contained: there are bureaucratic structures, material structures, and a host of other factors: psychological, historical, national, and so on, which all help form the terrain on which specific contests are engaged and ideals articulated. As she notes in her introduction,

Inasmuch as the Tunnel is grounded in English and French national, regional, and local contexts, it is also a significant feature in the emerging pan-European political, economic, and cultural spheres. (page xiii)

3. Kent, by representing the English side of the channel, has always been an important point of transit between England and the continent (or France, the distinction is never very clear). But with the channel the English also saw a natural distance between the island, *their* island, and the continent. The distance was both geographical and existential. The channel helped the English think of themselves as English. The connection between territory and national identity is best seen in Darian-Smith's contrast between English common law, which is connected back to a local identity that has existed since time immemorial, and continental law, which is exemplified by the Napoleonic Code.

One of the key concepts sustaining England's ideology of freedom and its

linkage to the state territory was the doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty. Having no codified legal system, English common law derived its legitimacy from having existed since time immemorial, thus predating sovereign authority. (page 31)

4. The common law is important for Darian-Smith's discussion insofar as it is through common law that the English nation is strongly connected to a specific place as well as extended back through time. It may be objected here that the author's account of "England's ideology" is simplified. While common law is clearly an important element of the English political order, there are also alternatives, such as can be found in many key English political theorists (Hobbes, Locke, Bentham, Mill and so on), where common law is at the very least subject to rational analysis, if not the activities of other players, such as the king and the contemporary political body. While this may be true -- she does not even mention most of the key English political theorists -- it may also be tangential to her argument. What she is primarily concerned with are the ideological commitments of contemporary England, and in particular of the inhabitants of Kent whom she has interviewed and interacted with. For them, the common law is much more important, and much more material, than what some theorists have said.
5. But if this is true, then Darian-Smith ends up repeating the same progression that she is analysing: taking the beliefs of Kent to stand for the beliefs of the English, which leads her to ignore alternate accounts of "England's ideology of freedom." Kent and common law are, of course, important sources of English national identity. What she does not discuss, however, is why either Kent or the common law are the *only* important sources. As a result, rather than a general account of the creation of the English national identity, the book offers a detailed analysis of one specific concept or ideal, and leaves to one side other, possibly competing, concepts and ideals. The book thus offers an interesting analysis of the interconnection between land, politics, and history within one narrative, but there is no sense of how complex either the Kentish, English, or British communal imaginary could be.
6. According to Darian-Smith, one of the key threats that was articulated in terms of the tunnel was the dual threat to English sovereignty and to the English legal system. The tunnel, by physically connecting England to Europe, became a place where the challenges to English legal, political and national autonomy must be fought. However, not only is the Tunnel "a symbol of the breaking down of European state borders" (page xiii), it is also often viewed as a threat to the integrity of English national identity. The fear harkens back to the Napoleonic wars, if not the invasion by William the Conqueror. But the fear also includes a significant amount of post-colonial racism. One chapter of the book focuses on the threat of rabies which the tunnel represented to some people. As Darian-Smith's discussion proceeds, two things become clear: rabies is more a psychological than a practical fear (what animals would be willing or able to travel through such a long tunnel?) and the fear is as much a nationalist as a medical fear. It is a fear of uncontrolled exchange.
7. But Kent is also a county that has epitomized English identity through time. In part, this is because Kent has a strong sense of historical identity, going back to Caesar's invasion in 55 B.C. and then to King Ethelbert in the 6th century. The discussion of Kent as the epitome of the English nation leads Darian-Smith to consider the relationship between landscape, geography, and the nation-state. Her approach here derives from contemporary discussions of such writers as Bhabha, Anderson, and Foucault. Here, she is concerned with several important and connected topics: the relationship between the nation and the state, the importance of the channel as a site of national imaginary, and the importance of the island as an image of the territorial nation-state.

8. I would like to draw attention to two general problems with her analysis. The first is that she moves between discussions of the channel and the island as images of English identity, as if they were more or less equivalent. But different kinds of exchanges are connected to islands and channels. If channels encourage thoughts of bridges and tunnels, then islands encourage thoughts of ships. Darian-Smith's discussion of bridges, which is based on Heidegger's work, is valuable, but there is no discussion of the alternative, which is at least as important to the British national imaginary.

9. The second general problems with the discussion is that it was very much a Kent-centric account, as if the people who lived on the coast of the channel were in fact the most important (or only) people who where interested in the channel or the tunnel. Some mention is made of various people in France who were interested in building tunnels, such as Napoleon, but there is no concern for why people in France wanted to connect the island to the continent. I am also thinking in particular of a passage in Kant's *Philosophical Anthropology* , which reads

Since the coastlines of England and France are close to each other and separated only by a channel (which could well be called a sea), the rivalry of these two people nevertheless produces in each of them a different turn of political character in their conflict: on one side apprehension, and on the other hatred. (Kant, *Anthropology* , page 178)

10. Finding reference to the channel in the political writings of a continental philosopher suggests that the image of the channel has a broader currency. Darian-Smith is interested in how people in England, and particularly from Kent, articulate the channel tunnel in terms of what the channel has meant, as a site where the nation and the state are constructed. Analysing the progression from Kent to England to Britain is important and very well done, what is lacking, however, is a sense that the channel is relevant beyond that progression.

11. The discussion nonetheless points to a range of significant connections between geography and national identity. I particularly enjoyed her discussion of gardens. As she writes:

Cultivation became an important ontological frame, and, through its linkage to the English garden landscape, translated into a visual aesthetics of power. The imposing of the English garden across the whole of Britain is a dramatic visual and experiential demonstration of how England was conflated with, and came to represent, the greater British nation. (page 45)

12. The importance of gardens as an ideal of English cultivation can be seen throughout the 18th and 19th century. In a footnote Darian-Smith discusses missionary gardens in southern Africa, while other examples could be found from around the world, whether in the English settlements in Australia or colonial outposts in India. The gardens of Kent not only spread around Britain, they had spread around the globe.

13. Darian-Smith maintains the focus on the tunnel and on the relationship between England and France throughout the book. On the one hand, this is valuable insofar as she does not try to bring too many other topics into the discussion. On the other hand, however, it is left to the reader to think through how her discussion would connect to other aspects of English identity. There is no mention of other identity narratives occurring at the time, such as the "collector of the world" or the "born in the forests of Germany" or the "inheritors of the Roman Empire." France figures highly as the other to England, while there is no mention of Spain, the new world, or the South Pacific. It may be worth considering, for instance, the relationships between the image of the

channel and the exploration narratives of Dampier, Anson and Cook. One thing that would come into focus then is the trans-European scientific and reading community, which often existed awkwardly in both national and universal groups. But these people are not part of *Bridging Divides*, in part because organization of the book privileges the Channel Tunnel as the most important bridge, both literally and figuratively, between two clear and distinct nations.

## Bibliography

Kant, Immanuel. *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. Mary Gregor (trans.) Martinus Nijhoff: The Hague, 1974.

[Brian Richardson](#) holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Hawai'i. His dissertation focused on the concepts of space, travel and empire in the voyages of Captain Cook. He can be reached at [richards@hawaii.edu](mailto:richards@hawaii.edu). His dissertation is available at <http://www2.hawaii.edu/~richards>.

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[muse](#)

[search](#)

[contents](#)

[top](#)

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