NATION BRANDING: A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY TRADITION

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**Nation branding in perspective**

It was with some reservations that I accepted to contribute a response essay to this volume. Please understand: this has nothing to do with the excellent contributions you will find herein. It has to do, rather, with the intensity of my years of critical study of the phenomenon and my disappointment that this problematic practice continues to grow. Over the many years I devoted to examining the professional industry of nation branding, I began to feel like a volunteer firefighter at a five-alarm wildfire, trying desperately and with insufficient resources to contain the flames as they blazed unbound across geographic and intellectual territory.

When my book, *Branding the Nation,* was published in 2013, I hoped it would throw some ash on the fire. The heart of the argument in that book was that applying the metaphor of brand to the form and content of the nation was not a neutral exercise. It was a concerted effort by business and political elites to transfer power from the state and its citizen protections to business concerns and capital-generating industries. The relative failure, over the last twenty-five years, of nation branding campaigns to actually “work” in a long-term perspective to improve countries’ political, social or cultural status is a result of the gap between what was continually promised and what was actually taking place: short-term, elite-led, self-serving projects for market reform with few clear beneficiaries, save the nation branding consultants who initiated the projects. Hard-won battles for citizen welfare protections or national redistributive policies in the postwar era were undone by state leaders’ fears of being left behind in the competition for footloose international capital; and their subsequent turn toward private industry to help them “win” this zero-sum game.

What I did not expect was that *Branding the Nation,* instead of dousing the fire, would fan the flames instead. Students of marketing and public relations thanked me for my fine “textbook” that appeared to them to indicate best practices for brands; market researchers followed me on Twitter; academics quoted passages from the book as evidence of the industry’s success. In sum, my critical views were taken as excellent lessons for how to build a better brand.

How did this happen? One conclusion we can draw from the overall positive reception of nation branding is that the principles of business today dominate the popular imagination. While this statement could be made over multiple eras, I am referring to the particular set of business principles emerging in the 1970s and early 1980s that extended the precepts and purpose of commercial management across social and political institutions and positioned the corporation as the fulcrum of societal transformation. The success of this transformation is evident in the unquestioning adoption of “brand” as a synonym for political and cultural transformations at the level of the nation-state.

Another possibility is that my work, and that of like-minded colleagues, was insufficiently critical of nation branding. Had I wielded a sharper tongue and a defter hand, I might have had greater success in cutting off future generative discourses at the knees. Yet history has shown that capitalism is surprisingly good at absorbing its own critique. This is true not only for writings about nation branding but also for actual experiments in nation branding in different countries. Nation branding is used by many national governments as a form of ‘beta-test’ – a systematic exploration of different models of governance, and different appeals to national pride, to ascertain which are most effective for capital generation (Brenner, Peck & Theodore 2009). Incorporating risk models like nation branding into governance has dramatic knock-on effects for culture and politics (Appadurai 2015; Lee & LiPuma 2012).

A third possibility, and the one with perhaps the greatest consequences for academic scholarship, is that we have confused ubiquity with universality. Nation branding is presented as everywhere applicable and everywhere accepted. It appears as a corollary to the most uncritical interpretations of globalization: a necessary marker of identification and coherence, a language for all nations on a global stage. But it is important to remember that globalization is not in fact a universal phenomenon, if by universal we mean that it affects all spaces on the globe equally, evenly and simultaneously. Like nation branding itself, globalization is a Western-dominated, market-oriented process predicated on making winners and losers. It is not applied the same way in all spaces and it does not benefit all affected parties.

In this volume we have a variety of rather creative and well-researched attempts to reveal aspects of the historical record that correspond to the set of features characterizing nation branding. Some essays reveal a concern with media representation and coordination; others focus on public displays of national culture; still others consider the communicative implications of products wrapped, so to speak, in their national flag. Each of these chapters adds depth and dimension to stories whose endings we thought we already knew. Nonetheless, and at the risk of disappointing those readers who seek to expand the legitimate ground on which the phenomenon may rest, it is my view that nation branding cannot be propelled back in time, *avant la lettre.* It is not the fault of these thoughtful chapters; it is that this phenomenon, as I understand it, cannot be divorced from the context of its emergence. Neither can it be separated from the specific bases of knowledge and expertise required to power this practice in the international community.

I rest my argument on three foundations, each of which I examine below in terms of the use of the concept for historical analysis: the origins of nation branding in industrial requirements; the genre of branding as a business vernacular; and points of reference for ongoing research.

**Origins of nation branding**

It is notable that each of the chapters in this volume sets up a different definition for nation branding. The polyvalence of the phrase is part of its power. To undo its mythical pull, we require a contextual analysis that digs into the emergence of the specific phenomenon as it was initially conceived and practiced. Put another way, how was nation branding made *thinkable* and *observable* in the modern era?

I have written elsewhere that the nation branding industry appears at the confluence of (a) regulatory industrial transformations in the 1970s and 1980s; (b) the “spatial fix” required by the globalization of capital flows; (c) challenges to the nation form amidst the rise of sub-, supra- and transnational forms of affiliation and migration; and (d) processes of mediatization that placed overweening emphasis on communication speed, visuality and virtuality (Aronczyk 2013). Developing a discipline of national identification that could fit these requirements seemed important for state leaders searching for ways to prove their jurisdiction still mattered in a rapidly globalizing context.

But it was not to matter in the same way for all populations nor for all geographic territories. That the solution of branding the nation emerged from the corporate world is a crucial point. The concept of brand cannot be separated from its origins in business. The commercial aims of nation branding since its development have been clear: nation branding is not only about making the nation meaningful for its populace; it is about making the nation matter for international capital attraction. The nation’s brand clearly communicates value to its “target audience”: investors, tourists, and consumers. The message is far less clear for less visible, more fragile or more needy populations.

It is this history that makes nation branding qualitatively different from, for instance, nineteenth- or twentieth-century art shows; wartime policymaking; or international diplomatic missions. Efforts to align national branding with idealized democratic objectives, or with broad notions of visibility and perception, miss the crucial ways in which branding is at its heart a commercial enterprise aligned with profiting some at the expense of others.

This is what discounts the otherwise appealing essays by Scaglia (chapter 4) on China’s 1935 international art exhibition in Britain and Krenn (chapter 6) on American traveling art exhibits in the mid-twentieth century. The origins, motivations and ultimate outcomes of these projects, which themselves can be traced back to at least the eighteenth century (Colley 1992), are not reducible to the mediatized, monetized and marketized efforts of the contemporary brand. To situate these art exhibits as prototypical instances of nation branding is to miss the distinctly modern marriage of market and moral ideologies that characterizes the commercial project of nation branding.

A better starting point is found in the history of the commercial corporation. Starting in the early seventeenth century, and formed by royal British decree, entities such as the East India Company and the Russia Company married patriotic sentiment with trade activities (Colley 1992). In the mid-nineteenth century, as companies grew in size and scope, the design features of corporate holdings gained importance, not merely for aesthetic purposes but as a form of internal synchronization and external communication. Industrial rail and shipping magnates sought to develop a visual identity for their business concerns, coordinating architecture, livery, staff uniforms, logos and typefaces (e.g., Raizman 2003). These visual designs typically reflected their national homes (even if their owners were non-nationals).

In the 1920s and 1930s, businesses developed, or commissioned from graphic designers, what were then known as “house styles” – logos, slogans and symbols that spurred instant recognition of the company’s products along with its nascent desire for a “relationship” with its consumers – a form of social value. Ascribing a deliberate social value to the corporate entity was meant to inspire coherent and disciplined identification among employees and investors as well as convey the corporation’s values to the public. Over time this style became known as “corporate identity.” With the name change came a more expansive understanding of its role. First, corporate identity programs involved a more systematic coordination of the “holistic” relationships among a company’s products, its production and distribution processes, and its public reputation. Second, corporate identity began to be recognized on accounting balance sheets as a separate line item, meaning that the company’s style – its brand – was an asset that could be valued separately from its “brick and mortar” holdings.

It was in wartime that commercial and state purposes were combined most dramatically, and where parallels between national “branding” and business incentives were most disturbingly revealed (e.g., Heller 2008). Such parallels also provide strong justification for why it is in autocratic regimes that nation branding achieves its greatest efficacy, as Viktorin’s and Gripentrog’s chapters in this volume demonstrate. As Viktorin (chapter 7) points out, the rapid transformation of Spain’s image from fascist state into European tourist destination could only have happened under the leadership of one who would brook no opposition. Gripentrog provides a compelling account (chapter 5) of Japan’s surprisingly successful pre-WWII cultural outreach in the United States to mask its political alliance with Nazi Germany. Less dramatically, but as relevant, Kühschelm’s (chapter 3) thoughtful examination of campaigns to promote Swiss and Austrian products as part of the national self-image shows the importance of recognizing historical efforts at national cultural representation as resting on particular economic bases.[[1]](#endnote-1)

**The genre of branding**

At the current conjuncture, the brand has become, to borrow a phrase, a “rascal concept”: “promiscuously pervasive, yet inconsistently defined, empirically imprecise and frequently contested” (Brenner, Peck and Theodore 2009: 184). The dramatic rise in academic articles and books over the last two decades that place “branding” at their center is not so much attributable to an empirical increase of brands in the world as it is to the expansion of the term to account for a surprisingly heterogeneous range of phenomena. This tendency risks collapsing fine-grained and complex distinctions among terms with robust genealogies and established applications.

The word “brand” has been wielded by scholars as a synonym for image, reputation, style, identity, public opinion, influence, trust, mediatization, exhibition, visualization, self-representation, symbolic value, coordinated messaging, diplomacy, publicity, international cooperation, promotion, and even – with strong implications – culture. This latter application may have roots in the Cold War tendency to see culture as a functional attribute in international relations (Gienow-Hecht and Schumacher 2003). This is not to say that culture was *not* deployed as a foreign policy instrument in different historical periods and world regions. Rather, I wish to argue for a rethinking of culture as context instead of as cause in international relations and its attendant scholarship. The flourishing of cultural approaches to international relations since that time offers multiple resources to expand and nuance the culture concept.

Clearly, brands do have cultural resonance. They reflect and instantiate cultural norms and beliefs. They are designed to achieve popular recognition, create collective meanings, maintain a coherent, consistent message, and, through familiarity, build consumer trust. But to the extent that they tell stories about who we are or what we want to be, brands must be understood as a particular genre. Branding is a form of storytelling conceived primarily to satisfy the needs of the storyteller, and only secondarily (if at all) the needs of the listener. They are designed to incite, motivate, and justify decision-making, yes, but they do so in ways that are not endemic to equal representation or recognition. They are not developed for purposes of mutual understanding, public deliberation, or common goodwill. They are developed as strategic and instrumental tools to achieve a pragmatic goal that benefits the interests of its developers.

In the dominant paradigm of the nation branding industry, culture and identity are conceptualized as highly useful *tools* of international relations. Nation branding practitioners present their practice as more media-friendly, relatable, and long lasting than the traditional, closed-door, diplomatic means of communication among nations.

This is an appealing argument; but it is inaccurate, in my opinion, for a number of reasons. The way in which marketing strategists have conceptualized identity and culture isolates both concepts as a separate domain, that is, separate from economy and society. This ideological move inhibits the potential for analysis of culture in relation to political economy.[[2]](#endnote-2) It is also a deeply ahistorical perspective on culture and identity, considering the extent to which historical structures of social relations, patterns of exploitation or empire, and the monuments and documents of memory prevail in contemporary political discourse and practice.

In the typical approach adopted by the nation branding industry, culture appears as a modular unit; that is, as elements of an international discourse that can be unproblematically transferred wholesale to different national settings or used to explain transnational relations. But “there is a complex interplay between each local culture and the international discourse” (Steinmetz 1999: 26) as well as differences within national cultures. Culture is not a singular or bounded unit anywhere. When state theory is “open to cultural analysis…the boundary between the state and the nonstate [can] be seen as a variable discursive effect” (G. Mitchell, qtd in Steinmetz 1999: 26) rather than a concrete barrier.

The nation branding paradigm appears to project a strong distinction between the nation and the state, namely that the nation may be cultural but the state is not. Yet as the international relations scholar Beate Jahn (2003: 28) has argued, “…the precondition for the establishment of government is some sense of shared values. And it is the presence of these shared values – a common culture – which makes the establishment of states possible in the domestic sphere and its absence which prevents a similar development in the international sphere” (i.e., there is no “world state”). Similarly, Steinmetz (1999: 24) observes that state officials engage in cultural practices and discourses that affect their policy decisions.

When we treat brand as technology instead of as ideology, we miss the ways this phenomenon is symptomatic of the social and political role of business in modern society. To brand is neither a neutral nor an easily transposable process. Nation brands cannot be exchanged for national culture by recourse to observations about shared values or meanings. Given its self-interested, commercially minded, and profit-centered orientation, we cannot align nation branding unproblematically with democratic or diplomatic objectives, regardless of what its practitioners and proponents might argue.

**Writing nation branding into history**

Research and writing on nation branding are dominated by members of what I have elsewhere called the transnational promotional class: a loosely allied group of individuals who stand to benefit in some way from promoting the nation form (Aronczyk 2013). The prolific output of materials by nation branding practitioners, along with their clients’ brand books, media campaigns, spokespeople, and administrative conferences, is heavily inflected by these authors’ ongoing desire to achieve legitimacy for their practice while attracting future clients.

By drawing too heavily on practitioner texts as reference points for historical investigation, we risk losing the analytical purchase of the critical academic scholar. Moreover, we become implicit collaborators in promoting business knowledge as intellectually dominant. To describe nation branding as a form of social justice, or to argue that nations have “always” been brands, or to liken nation branding to nation building, as practitioners have done, is to accept the primacy of a social framework embedded in market principles. Indeed, these texts are less sociohistorical accounts than they are valuable data to be mined – evidence of a particular mindset in a particular era about how society should work and what skills and roles are required to achieve this vision. This perspective can help qualify the practitioner claims that McAllister (chapter 2) relies on in his discussion of U.S. civil war documents. Hoefte’s discussion (chapter 8) of Suriname’s misguided branding campaign and Ociepka’s (chapter 9) analysis of the brand strategies of European postcommunist regimes would also benefit from greater reflexivity toward the intentions of their interlocutors; but the chapters engage the reader by maintaining a focus on the specific campaigns and the motivations of the actors dedicated to carry them out.

There is a profound gap between the practice of nation branding and what intellectuals want nation branding to be. In the column marked “potential” we dream of its value as a form of collective identification, a modern expression of deeply felt beliefs and a sense of purpose in a modern globalizing era. But in the “actual” column we find a series of damaging implications: a) urban and regional attempts at capital generation, often marginalizing or drawing funds away from non-urban spaces; b) monies moved from welfare projects to capital intensive ones (e.g., tourism attraction, foreign direct investment schemes, tax havens); c) treating citizens or residents as “stakeholders,” with the accompanying attitude that these citizens or residents are not just participants in the future of their home territory but are also responsible for its success or failure. “Living the brand” has drastic consequences when the life choices presented to them involve untenable decisions.

To propel a distinctly modern phenomenon like nation branding back in time requires that we take account of this gap. The study of national culture requires a study of the ways that this culture is made tangible for those who experience it. The separation of society into spheres – political, cultural, economic, and so on – is an analytical project, not a practical one. To assess the reality that members of society experience in everyday life, now or in the past, requires a totalizing assessment. It is for this reason that expressions designed to characterize particular features of this paradigm – “stakeholders,” “brand assets,” “transparency” – have a cultural valence that cannot be assessed independently of the context of their emergence.

**The nation in the twenty-first century**

What is the role of the *nation* in nation branding? This question often gets left out when the analytical lens is too closely trained on branding and its effects. Yet it is a surprising omission at a time when talk of the nation and its futures is particularly prevalent. If there is one uniform outcome to be discerned from the recent political upheavals in the U.S. and the UK, it is that we have certainly not moved into a post-national era. From Brexit to border walls, to the eruption of social movements on race and religion, political discourse in the twenty-first century reveals an ongoing preoccupation with the contours of the nation.

When intellectuals argued, in the early part of this century, that the nation still matters in the world, they pointed to instances of collective identification, citizen protections, and forums for free expression (Calhoun 2007). What was not then anticipated was that the concept would be used as a shield for some identifications, protections and freedoms against the protections and freedoms of other would-be national members. The current waves of anti-immigrant, anti-elite and anti-cosmopolitan rhetoric illustrate the degree to which the promises of globalization have not been realized for all who are affected by it.

It is evident whose interests nation branding was designed to serve. Nation branding was presented to its potential national clients as a salve for the aches and pains of global transformation. It promised its government adherents continued power and influence in a world where the nation-state seemed to be disappearing. Its promises were far less clearly articulated to the citizens who would be subject to new regimes. But as a form of “global nationalism,” nation branding appeared attractive to many constituents (Sklair 2001). The question now is what role nation branding plays in an atmosphere of renewed nationalism, where the national sentiment in many places is ugly and antagonistic.

Here is where the historical record has much to teach us. Some have argued that the current political rhetoric around the nation reflects an older notion of sovereignty and a desire for tradition – however distorted by nostalgic sentiment (Calhoun 2016). If this is the case, it is the task of the historian to teach us how and why these older conceptions have come to matter again, and with what consequences for our collective future.

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**Notes**

1. See also Victoria de Grazia’s *Irresistible Empire* (2005) for evidence of the intricate yet inseparable links between cultural diplomacy and consumerism after the Second World War. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For a corpus of work on cultural political economy, see writings by the sociologist Bob Jessop. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)