

# Book Reviews

**Book:** Aronczyk, Melissa, 2013: *Branding the Nation. The Global Business of National Identity*. New York: Oxford University Press.

**Reviewer:** Simone Polillo, University of Virginia, [sp4ft@virginia.edu](mailto:sp4ft@virginia.edu)

In *Branding the Nation*, an engagingly written, sophisticated book on the determinants and significance of national branding campaigns, Melissa Aronczyk asks two main questions: how have marketing agencies, particularly international ones, become so central to the presentation and shaping of national identity, both domestically and internationally? And second, does the nation still matter in a time of heightened globalization, seemingly unstoppable crisis, and virtually unchallenged market dominance? Unlike a long and well-established literature on the sociology of development, primarily focused on the ways in which globalization creates opportunities for countries to present themselves as different and unique, thereby enhancing their prospects for upward mobility in the international division of labor, Aronczyk looks at the branding process with very critical eyes. She presents it as a top-down process, orchestrated by a "transnational promotional class" located predominantly in London, that draws on the US managerial literature on competitiveness for its ideological cohesion, and on quantification through surveys that probe how "the world" sees a particular focal country for its legitimacy. This transnational promotional class consults with national governments to construct impactful images of the nation (ultimately embodied by a logo supporting a core idea or slogan) with the goals of making the nation attractive to foreign capital, and increasing its competitiveness by shaping how it is perceived by international capital markets.

Two aspects of the branding process make it particularly problematic. First, despite its insistence on quantifiable metrics in order to assess the potential of a proposed campaign at the planning stage, once the brand is created, the transnational promotional class never admits failure: the responsibility for any promised outcome that does not materialize is squarely laid at the government's feet. Thus branding is asymmetric in its consequences. Second, the branding process ultimately has to lead to just one message, spoken with just one voice: this necessarily means

the suppression of alternative narratives, the homogenization of difference and the dampening of political conflict. Thus branding contributes to both the depoliticization of decisions that, were they taken on a more participatory basis, could enhance rather than weaken the democratic process; and the perpetuation of the myth that markets, and the economic logic they embody, are better mechanisms of governance than the political process, precisely because they allow the shedding of differences in the name of competitiveness.

I do not want to give the impression that this is exclusively a theoretical book. While the first two chapters indeed focus mainly on situating the argument in a broadly critical and rather abstract literature on globalization as neoliberal finance capitalism, the second half of the book is empirical. One chapter (perhaps the best in the book) discusses in great depth how the Polish government branded its nation as one of "creative tension," a phrase which was supposed both to make sense of Poland's troubled historical relationship with Russia and the West, and to correct an alleged perception of its status (by domestic and international audiences) as "abnormal." "Creative tension" captured and domesticated the contradictions of Polish "national character." And yet, paradoxically, there was no easy way to translate the phrase into Polish! The consultants therefore also had to embark on an educational project aimed at teaching the Polish people how to use the phrase (and what alternatives to use when the phrase was not properly understood.) Moreover, the brand was couched in a rather exclusionary language, driving a wedge between the older generations (identified with a difficult past Poland wanted to shed) and the creative and pro-market youth, the true actor in this narrative of progress. This chapter is thus particularly successful in highlighting, and providing concrete evidence for, the contradictions and pitfalls of national branding.

Another chapter deals with the debates around the branding of Canada, a country priding itself on its diversity, yet troubled by a perception that it is "mediocre." Here the analysis is a little confusing, as Aronczyk's frame around issues of multiculturalism and pluralism does not sit well with the perceived problems branding consultants are called in to address. There is, in other words, a gap between the empirical evidence and the theory. A third em-

pirical chapter extends the analysis to nine additional cases, and while this necessarily requires a compromise in terms of depth, the discussion of the branding experiences of Georgia, Chile, Jamaica, Germany, Sweden, Estonia, Botswana, Uganda and Libya is informative and gives a sense of the global importance of the problem.

I have two small points to make by way of critique, but they should not take away from the main contributions of the book. First, like the critical literature on globalization Aronczyk uses as a theoretical starting point, her analysis at times exaggerates the power of the globalization process, and the homogeneity it allegedly imposes on states. But many would argue that globalization is multiple and uneven rather than uniform and univocal. Second, and relatedly, it is unclear whether national branding has the far-reaching consequences for the state and the nation theorized by Aronczyk, and specifically, whether all nation-states will have at some point or another to submit themselves to the prescriptions of this transnational promotional class, or whether there is a world-system dynamic at work, making some countries more susceptible than others. Also, it is unclear whether national branding, with its heyday in the period the book focuses on (the early 2000s), will continue to exercise its influence in the current phase of globalization. It is true that nation-states across the board have been increasingly engaging in self-presentational and reputation-boosting practices since World War II, for instance practicing what Olick calls the "politics of regret." But this is a different literature from the one Aronczyk draws on. The book opens up interesting new venues for research, which will productively inform and advance our understanding of the nation and the state under globalization.

**Book:** Borch, Christian, 2012: *The Politics of Crowds. An Alternative History of Sociology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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In "An ABC for the History of Sociology" Jennifer Platt (2008) lists why one "may be interested in work on the history of sociology". Incidentally, she writes that historical work might help explain why the once important concept of "mass society" has faded away. In *The Politics of*

*Crowds*, this question is touched upon by Christian Borch, professor with special responsibilities in political sociology at Copenhagen Business School, but in a much broader context than is customary. After reading the book, one knows a good deal more about an almost forgotten strength of sociology: reasoning about crowds in modern societies. Shedding light on this intellectual tradition, it also deepens our knowledge of sociological theory. It thus is a fine combination of history of sociology, reasoning about sociological theory and, consequently, theoretical agenda setting.

The main thesis is relatively simple: The starting point of the book is the observation that the topic of crowds was central to sociology during its intellectual formation. The crowd was a classic theme for sociologists such as Gabriel Tarde, Georg Simmel and Robert Ezra Park. It had to be taken into account when studying modern society. During the process of sociology's disciplinary formation, however, it lost its place at the center of sociological reasoning. The notion was reconceptualized successively: from crowds to masses, from "mass society" to collective behavior and social movements and finally beyond recognition. These are the major steps Borch traces in his analysis of the evolution and transformation – or rather the reconceptualization – of the crowd as a semantic concept from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century.

*The Politics of Crowds* is lucidly written and very well researched. It consists of eight chapters framed by an introduction and a short epilogue. The first four chapters deal with the intellectual roots of crowd thinking in France, Germany and the United States. The development of the topic after World War Two is analyzed in the last four chapters. The book has several strengths and not all can be highlighted here. One clearly derives from its title. *The Politics of Crowds* has three meanings creating a productive tension. First, it means the struggle over the demarcation of the discipline of sociology. The issue of "the crowd" was part of the debates concerning sociology's definition, as well as its demarcation from neighboring fields. Secondly, the crowd was problematized from different angles in the political spectrum. Third and finally, Borch interprets the evolution of crowd thinking with regard to different political contexts throughout history. Due to these changing aspects of the politics of crowds, the argument goes, the intellectual treatment of the subject has changed. And in the end, indeed, it faded away as a research topic of sociology.

Particularly valuable is the part on the intellectual traditions of crowd thinking in France, Germany and the United States, covering the period from the late nineteenth century until the 1930s. The relations between all three meanings of crowd politics show up best in these three chapters. In each case study, the author carefully traces the evolution of the crowd topic and shows how it was reinterpreted. I find it very illuminating how the crowd problematic was part of the struggle over the definition of the discipline of sociology, the politics of definition. Borch, for example, identifies how Emile Durkheim's and Talcott Parsons' definitions of sociology had an impact on the crowd topic in France and the United States, leading finally to its exclusion from the discipline. Moreover, he links these intellectual trajectories or rather histories of crowd semantics to the problematization of crowds, which differs due to the social and political horizons in the three countries: conservative in France, leftist/Marxist in Germany and liberal in the United States. An example of how these differences concerning crowds were emphasized in the French and German contexts is the problematization of the crowd in relation to modern democracy: "Whereas Le Bon had feared democracy, because he believed it to instigate the rule of crowds, Michels' analysis demonstrated that crowds will never rule" (p. 95). The author also discusses crowd semantics and their shifts in the context of the wider political circumstances. The German case study, dealing with crowd thinking and its links with the working classes and political development before, during and after the First World War, is particularly interesting. 1

Another merit of the book is the elaboration of the relations between the works of different authors in terms of the crowd topic. After reading the book one knows more about the intellectual connections between – to name but a few – Gustave Le Bon, Sigmund Freud, Theodor Geiger, Elias Canetti, David Riesman and Peter Sloterdijk. This short list indicates that the author goes beyond the realm of sociology, which is necessary especially for the period since sociology shifted the crowd to neighboring disciplines. In order to investigate crowd semantics in "post-modern conditions", which Borch does in the last chapter, it is even essential to consider non-sociological work. These interesting connections between theorists of crowds lead us to the book's subtitle and a critical question.

Why is this work an *alternative* history of sociology? It centers on a topic that once was important for sociology but almost got lost, the marginalized tradition of crowd reasoning. It focuses mainly on the works of thinkers usu-

ally not included in the canon of sociology. Accordingly, although *The Politics of Crowds* is a fascinating book in the history of sociology I think that the author should have made more effort to show how it differs from other histories of sociology. Merely to claim that it is alternative seems insufficient, since several ways of writing its history exist (Moebius 2004). It would be interesting to learn more about the characteristics of Borch's approach, which he develops in the introduction, especially how it differs from other possibilities of composing sociology's history. Thus I felt the absence of a discussion of his semantic history approach vis-à-vis other approaches (e.g. Chapoulie 2009), one in which he would elucidate in what respects this is an alternative history of sociology.

This, of course, is a minor criticism. The book certainly increases our knowledge about the history of sociology. The author rediscovers almost forgotten theoretical concepts and ideas and partly neglected authors. Moreover, thinking about crowds provokes questions that can lead to new ways of thinking about modernity and society, as well as new perspectives on current research problems. This is a strength of the history of sociology in general and hence of *The Politics of Crowds*.

And what of economic sociology? The book might be of only minor interest to economic sociologists since it does not deal directly with any of the subjects of the field. However, the history of sociology could be the foundation for new research questions. And this work contains such a foundation by offering an interesting agenda for sociology, particularly for economic sociology. In the epilogue, the author suggests that the notion of crowds, as well as the notion of "suggestion", which was central to the works of Le Bon and Tarde, is useful for studying contemporary phenomena of modern capitalism. He mentions the actions of traders and their depiction of the market, as well as financial speculation. This outlook for future research is a good end for the book, but not the end of Borch's encounter with the topic. In his ongoing research project "Crowd Dynamics in Financial Markets" he follows the intellectual tradition of crowd thinking and applies it to phenomena economic sociologists are probably more interested in.<sup>2</sup> However, there is no doubt that for a thorough understanding of crowds in the realm of financial markets the theoretical insights Christian Borch demonstrates in this history of sociological crowd semantics are indispensable.

## Endnotes

1The original publication dates are mentioned in the text by Borch, of course. However, the bibliography does not contain them. This is something of an inconvenience in a historical work.

2Information about the research project can be found online: <http://info.cbs.dk/crowds>.

## References

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Platt, Jennifer, 2008: An ABC for the History of Sociology. In: *Timelines. Newsletter, History of Sociology Section, American Sociological Association*, 1-2.

**Book:** K. Bluhm/B. Martens/V. Trappmann (eds), 2014: *Business Leaders and New Varieties of Capitalism in Post-Communist Europe*. Routledge: London and New York.

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What are the current characteristics of Central European economies and what is the role of business leaders in governing these economies? How do business leaders see their role in companies and what is their perception of industrial relations, trust, cooperation and other values essential for economic activity? *Business Leaders and New Varieties of Capitalism in Post-Communist Europe*, edited by Katharina Bluhm, Bernd Martens and Vera Trappmann, aims to answer these questions. The various chapters of the book address the issues from different angles: historical and contemporary, institutional and personal. This last aspect is made possible by a unique survey conducted in Hungary, Poland and Germany. The inclusion of Germany (and subsequent analysis of eastern and western European countries) provides considerable insights into the ideational evolution of business elites after reunification. It also creates an opportunity to compare the eastern European cases with a developed market economy.

In the introductory chapter the editors set the scene for the following chapters by reconstructing debates on the applicability of the “varieties of capitalism” approach to the post-communist context. Key to this discussion is the interplay of business elites and the new capitalist order in Central Europe. Importantly, the authors point out that given the strong ideational pressures regarding the shape of capitalist institutions (deregulation and liberalization) and the impact of German companies on Central European economies, one would expect significant institutional similarities. A similar process characterizes economic discourse. However, as the authors put it, institutions in the countries analyzed display striking diversity.

The book’s underlying hypothesis is that the ideational convergence went further than the institutional convergence, the former – in the form of neoliberalism – being pervasive also in western Europe, leading to neoliberalism and the market economy becoming synonymous, and the latter displaying inertia due to historical legacies.

As the editors emphasize, both the elite approach, and the “varieties of capitalism” approach, as applied to Central European countries, tend to treat the economic regimes as static. The authors find two major difficulties when applying the “varieties of capitalism” approach to Central European countries: first, the original approach refers to the most developed market economies; second, the locus of such economies is the nation-state. However, the economies of Central and Eastern Europe are only part of the bigger chain of transnational economic exchange. Therefore, acknowledging the challenge of direct implementation of the “varieties of capitalism” approach in Central and Eastern Europe, the authors prefer to talk about foreign-led or dependent market economies, while at the same time treating international influences with caution, acknowledging the major role of historical legacies in market making. Finally, the authors depart from the “pure” version of the “varieties of capitalism” and try to combine it with a Polanyian perspective, which due to the metaphor of the “double movement”, is more analytically suitable to accommodate the process of market-making and its related policies.

The first three chapters analyze the context of transition for each of the countries studied, but also business leaders. Importantly, the authors approach each country from slightly different angles and a number of national peculiarities are brought to the surface. Accordingly, the chapter on Poland outlines its type of capitalism: strong reliance

on foreign companies, lack of a long-term developmental strategy, several obstacles to entrepreneurship and a weak civil society. This configuration leads to several inconsistencies within the model, legally defined as a "social market economy", but in practice following neoliberal prescriptions. Due to such an imitative and inconsistent strategy, several contradictions persist. The Polish model of capitalism has to a significant extent been shaped by foreign investors. A survey among business leaders reveals several interesting cleavages, especially between business leaders employed in foreign and in domestic companies, which reflect the institutional inconsistencies.

In the following chapter, the authors attempt to locate Hungary in the "varieties of capitalism" framework. This chapter relies strongly on long-term historical developments, including reformist state socialism. The authors argue that, contrary to other post-socialist countries, in Hungary the economic (and political) system change was preceded by the change of business elites. This was a major factor enabling extensive privatization of Hungarian companies, and resulted in a "small transition" from socialist to the dependent market economy. In the short term this strategy proved successful, but in the long run it has contributed to the structural instabilities of the economy.

The third case study focuses on Germany, with particular attention to the east–west divide. The authors conclude that Germany has undergone a double transition: the first one in terms of unification and a parallel one in terms of the meaning of the "German model". Germany represents a unique experience in this respect, as the institutional framework from the west was implemented in the eastern part of the country. However, due to the inability of economic actors in the east to comply with the stringent requirements, the whole model started to erode. Importantly, the origins of the business leaders concerned affects their perception of the "German model". At a general level, the leaders display homogeneous views in accordance with the principles of the model, but when analyzed more in detail significant diversity appears. While only a minority of respondents support the "pure" German model, the majority do subscribe to some version of it. Therefore, the hypothesis of a farewell to the western German model is not clearly confirmed.

The second part of the book consists of a number of chapters on more specific, often cross-country analyses using the collected quantitative data.

The study by Janky and Lengyel gives unique insight into contractual trust in the post-socialist context. This is the first study of this type covering Central and Eastern Europe, which puts the issue of social cohesion into a framework of economic relations. The chapter starts from an important point, often missing in the comparative literature on the political economy of post-socialism: during the socialist era there was a variety of political-economic structures, and consequently, after 1989, the structures of the newly constructed capitalist order have faced different historical legacies. By analyzing various forms of trust, the authors conclude that, contrary to the expectations, the levels of trust in the western and eastern parts of Germany are similar and significantly higher than in Hungary and Poland. However, eastern lands share several features of Hungary and Poland: the lack of institutionalized norms and reliance on personal networks.

Similar findings are presented by Bluhm and Trappmann regarding cognitive concepts of corporate social responsibility. Once again, the German managers' views (and activities) are closest to the neocorporatist concept. At the same time, the paradoxical finding is that there is a strong support for state intervention in Poland (often labeled "neoliberal"). The authors depart from a traditional differentiation between explicit and implicit CSR and replace it with more nuanced concepts of minimalist, liberal and neocorporatist companies' responsibilities and the concept of statism. Interestingly, only half of the surveyed companies fall into one of the four categories, with the biggest support for neocorporatism. Once again, Hungarians, Poles and, to a lesser extent, eastern Germans express their support for the idea that companies should have less influence.

The chapter by Trappman, Jasiński and Przybysz analyzes the perceptions of formal labor representatives in the three countries, as well as those of members of employers' organizations. The latter aspect of labor relations, covered in this chapter, is particularly important, as it has been less researched. Employers' representation density grows with the size of companies in the whole sample; however, it is considerably smaller in Hungary and Poland. Also, anti-union sentiment is stronger among smaller companies, as well as among business owners. Poland remains the country in which business leaders show least support in this respect. Importantly, the leaders' attitudes to industrial relations are strongly driven by the institutional environment, for example the existence of labor organizations.

The final chapter of the book deals with the drivers of business leaders' influence. The authors, Bluhm and Martens, show that the first-generation business elite is being slowly replaced by a new one. However, the differences in attitudes that one could ascribe to the elites socialized in market economies, compared with the older one, are not as great as one might expect. Importantly, significant differences exist between countries.

This book is an ambitious (and successful) attempt to map out the varieties of capitalism in post-communist Europe, mainly from the micro-perspective. Such an approach, based on a large sample of interviews, is a major contribution both to mapping the characteristics of business leaders in the regions, but also to understanding the factors behind particular values, beliefs and actions.

The authors find several inconsistencies at the institutional level in the studied economies, which corroborate previous research. However, such inconsistencies – often contradictions of views on particular issues – are also visible on the individual level of business elites. Therefore, the book provides microfoundations for the capitalist model in Central Europe. An important feature of the book is that the survey was conducted in 2009 and 2010, when the

beliefs of business leaders became more sharply defined and their actions more deliberate.

The book opens up a future research agenda in at least two respects. First, it seems essential to include other countries from Central and Eastern Europe to make it possible to map the post-socialist variety beyond the Visegrad group. Second, the contributions in the book signal important differences among business leaders, which call for a more thorough examination of involvement in employers' associations, the mechanism through which leaders' views are channeled into the political sphere.

To sum up, the book is a collection of articles which contribute much to our knowledge of post-socialist varieties of capitalism. The differences between these countries are more pronounced than is usually argued, which has its source in institutional structures. The uniqueness of the data and the multifaceted analyses collected in the volume, as well as the balanced mix of background information and specific topics contribute to the attractiveness of the book, which is essential not only for students of Central Europe, but also for those interested in comparative political economy.