

Research in Brief

How to Do Things with Brands: Uses of National Identity

Melissa Aronczyk
New York University

“Nation brand is national identity made tangible, robust, communicable and above all useful.”

— *Simon Anholt, 2008*

Just when the hegemony of the national form seemed well and truly on the wane, its claims to authority and legitimacy compromised by all manner of networks, “scapes” (Appadurai, 1997), and flows, a series of contemporary events has re-ignited the national discourse. Current crises of value—economic, political, cultural, and moral—have raised the possibility that the protections and provisions offered by the nation-state may be powerful antidotes to the anxieties of global disjunctures. Amid calls to regulate and rebuild the architecture of global integration, the potential of the national imaginary has come once again to the fore.

As national leaders try to re-assert their jurisdictional boundaries, they have drawn heavily on their countries’ cultural identities to promote their constituencies as exemplars of both domestic distinction and international fitness.¹ Along with declining possibilities for investment in tangible sources of national wealth, a country’s intangible wealth—its “good reputation”—is increasingly evoked as a means to gain the most prominent seat at the appropriately high-stakes table. The problem is that there are many tables to sit at; and it is not always clear how to construe” this reputation in a way that is equally appealing to all possible players. National governments have been convinced of the need to harness, measure, and market this valuable resource, and they have turned to the experts in “reputational value” to help them do so. These experts are nation-branding consultants,² and their self-styled *raison d’être* is to create and communicate a particular version of national identity that will make the nation *matter* to a wide range of audiences. With their quasi-academic journals and textbooks,³ proprietary indices and rankings of metrological effectiveness, and an acute awareness of the power of the press release, nation branders purport to offer national leaders the “robust” identity they require to retain both their own and their jurisdiction’s relevance in the context of global transformation.

Melissa Aronczyk currently teaches in the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University, 239 Greene Street, 7th Floor, New York, NY 10003. Email: melissa.aronczyk@nyu.edu.

My research is concerned largely with trying to understand how we got here; that is, to highlight the conditions that have led us to assert the need to make national identity “useful” and to ask about the implications that the principles and practice of nation branding might have for our self-understanding as national citizens and global subjects, for our commitment to the terms of political self-determination, and for our ideals of public communication. A number of problematic assumptions underpin the injunction to brand, which are questioned too infrequently by nation branding’s proponents and practitioners. Using the tools, techniques, and expertise of corporate promotion to narrate national interests does indeed “re-territorialize” the nation, though as the clients of these nation branders have found, it is often on fairly shaky grounds.⁴ If the brand has become a dominant genre by which the nation is expressed, what other formations and fantasies are elaborated in the process?

One such conceptual shift has been the perception by governments that they must act decisively in the face of globalization. Presented by turns as symptom and cause, framed as inexorable and endemic, globalization is constituted as an agentless imperative requiring drastic and immediate measures by nation-states to either surf or stem its tides. But as Neil Brenner, among others, has pointed out, globalization is an “essentially contested term” (Brenner, 1999, p. 39) that indexes a vast range of research areas and forms: economic studies of labour and organization; issues of citizenship, migration, and mobility; factors in cultural production and protection; and studies of political power and democratic transformation. Moreover, the fervour of rhetorical justifications for change in the name of globalization does not appear to be matched by its practical effects. Indeed, as Colin Hay and his colleagues (Hay, 2006; Hay & Marsh, 2000; Hay & Rosamond, 2002) have repeatedly and rather convincingly shown, discourses and rhetorics of globalization are at least as likely (if not more so) to engender policy change as any material factors. As such, a nuanced understanding of globalization requires us to investigate not only the impact of material realities on policy and social structure, but also the ways in which *ideas* of globalization become institutionalized and normalized, since policymakers and governments enact decisions in their jurisdictions informed equally by empirical and ideational factors (Hay & Rosamond, 2002).⁵ Ironically, the indeterminacy of the globalization idiom appears to be the key to its effectiveness in the paradigm of the nation-as-brand, for the “new and improved” national identity is proffered as a solution to the global on multiple fronts. The brand is meant to represent the nation’s distinct and unique value among diverse international publics: investors, tourists, migrants, workers, scholars, arts and sports franchises—anyone who might have cause to bring their economic, symbolic, or human capital to bear on one country instead of another, equally viable option.

The issue then becomes one of determining how to name and define this value. Thus a second facet of the brand’s appeal in this context is its pretence to mediate the nation’s value as both a market and a moral category. Just as brand value in the corporate world can now be monetized on asset statements independently of the object itself, its conditions of labour, and the site of its production, so national identity can now be made tangible through the proprietary tactics of the

nation-branding consultants, who develop and conduct public-opinion polls, surveys, focus groups, and other instruments to obtain purportedly quantifiable metrics in order to rank their clients' "national assets, characteristics, and competence" (Anholt, 2007, p. 2). One prominent example is the Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index, developed by the "guru" of the nation-branding movement, Simon Anholt—who, if his book jacket is to be believed, also coined the term.⁶ This index takes the pulse of international public perception by polling individuals in 50 countries about their views of a target country's structure of governance, exports, tourism, people, culture, heritage, investment, and immigration. "Every responsible government in the global age," writes Anholt in a 2007 report, is duty-bound to take steps in the management of their nation's reputation, since

the only sort of government that can afford to ignore the impact of its national reputation is one which has no interest in participating in the global community, and no desire for its economy, its culture or its citizens to benefit from the rich influences and opportunities that the rest of the world offers them. (Anholt, 2007, p. 13)

A key dimension of the nation-branding process is to assemble, in the early stages, a number of different groups—business interests, government parties, civil society actors, and citizens—in a "grassroots"–style approach to the creation of the new national identity. The premise is that in order to be effective, the brand must be the conceptual product of all of its "owners" or "stakeholders," as national constituents are called in this context. Moreover, implicating individuals from multiple levels of society in discussions about how to define the national self appeases those who would criticize the practice's potential for elitism.

This premise is undermined, however, in at least two crucial ways. First, positioning constituents, rather than brand consultants, as the "owners" of the brand effectively releases the consultants from any responsibility for its effectiveness. True to their professional category, nation-branding consultants see their work not as an act of creation, but as one of facilitation, guidance, or "teaching," as one consultant I interviewed put it. Their own role is necessarily short-lived, allowing them to move on to other lucrative projects elsewhere. Unfortunately, my research suggests that this is sometimes also a goal of the government actors in the branding process. While the state helps to foot the bill to create these identity narratives, making use of national cultural production as well as sentiments of cultural sovereignty to "repatriate difference" (Appadurai, 1997) and creativity within the country's borders, these narratives often accompany a concomitant decline in state accountability and responsibility with respect to culture. Indeed, the ultimate responsibility for the brand's success or failure lies neither with the consultants nor with the state, but with its citizens, who are enjoined to "live the brand" and embody its values and are castigated for being poor cultural ambassadors if they do not.

This, I suggest, is where the phenomenon becomes most problematic. Though national projects of sovereignty and self-determination have always been determined to a certain extent by international forces, this version of "global nationalism" (Sklair, 2001) is about something more. It is not merely a matter of marketing distinctly Canadian or Macedonian or Jamaican goods or services

abroad; attracting the “right” kinds of investors, skilled immigrants, or tourists; or ensuring that the country’s political and cultural luminaries have the right angle and degree of international spotlight. Put simply, nation branding purports to be about what it means to call oneself a national citizen.

What is contained within these objectives to make national identity “robust” and “useful” is the presumption that the prior version of national identity was neither. Consultants see their work as helping to improve an identity that is “always already there.” As with nationalist discourses, which appeal to the primordality of certain categorical identities within the nation, here too national identity appears as a prepolitical, given force, neutral until taken up by nation-branding consultants, subjected to evaluation, and mobilized for the cause at hand. And if national identity is constituted in this paradigm as prepolitical, the work of nation-branding is presented as *post*political—where the nation remains necessary not as a democratic resource for active participation or equal recognition, nor as a geopolitical force to mediate international conflict, but as an ensemble of non-threatening fragments of culture, history, and geography determined by committee. This is the basis of the brand’s rising popularity in foreign-policy circles as a vehicle for public diplomacy.⁷ In its ability to combine diverse motifs of heritage and modernization, domestic and foreign concerns, and economic and moral ideologies, nation branding is presented as a “2.0” version of nationalism, as a more progressive form of patriotism than its chauvinistic or antagonistic counterparts.

In his classic set of lectures, *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), the philosopher John Austin explores the meaning of “perlocutionary” acts, describing these not as rhetorical utterances, nor as statements of truth or falsity, but rather as a kind of performance, with practical effects as well as conceptual consequence. Perlocutionary acts are “what we bring about or achieve *by* saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring, and even, say, surprising or misleading” (p. 109). Of what, indeed, are we persuaded or convinced by the nation-brand paradigm? And what is achieved by this conviction? The task at hand is to contemplate what sorts of “expert” knowledge are institutionalized and normalized by the process and how these knowledges participate in re-framing national identity as a cultural form.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank the managing editors of the *CJC* and the current issue’s guest editors, Josh Greenberg and Graham Knight, for their interest in this research. This paper is a highly condensed version of my argument in “Branding the Nation: Mediating Space, Value, and Identity in Global Culture” (Aronczyk, 2009).

Notes

1. I do not mean to suggest that the politics of identity were not in play in previous articulations of national sovereignty. Indeed, the assumption that identity-based appeals in contemporary politics mark a break from previous paradigms, as Craig Calhoun (1995) argues, is most often an ideological stance contrived to separate what ought to be seen as “properly political” from representations of power in other realms.

2. By “consultants” I mean to refer to a category of professionals whose primary role is to offer advisory services to national leaders in the general arenas of reputation, image, and identity. This includes a highly circumscribed group of individuals and firms devoted to the practice of nation branding specifically, but it can also extend to encompass advertising and marketing executives, “creativity” or “competitiveness” gurus, business and social science academics, and others who see their work as influencing policy prescriptions that regulate the intangible attributes of countries for the purposes of national development.
3. Recent textbooks include Jaffe & Nebenzahl (2006) and Dinnie (2008).
4. For specific examples from my research of nation branders’ identity strategies and their implications for distinct territories, see Aronczyk (2008b).
5. Monica Prasad (2006) makes a trenchant case along these lines in an extensive study of the rise of free-market policies in Britain, France, Germany, and the United States. Although globalization is invoked repeatedly by these countries’ political leaders as a causal factor in the adoption of these policies, Prasad finds little empirical evidence to support this. It was less *globalization* that instigated such policies in these countries, she suggests, than aspects of the political process that fostered general *impressions* of the need for global competitiveness.
6. While not comparable directly in terms of scope or purpose, other national “image”- or “value”-based ranking systems contribute to the nation brand’s overall effects. The World Values Survey (www.worldvaluessurvey.com), for example, which employs far more exhaustive and long-range metrics than the Nation Brands Index, is used widely in European countries. Some systems claim to measure perceptions in individual categories of national reputation, such as the Country Brands Index (for tourism-related perceptions), developed by FutureBrand/Weber Shandwick, and the Corruption Perceptions Index, monitored and prepared by Transparency International (www.transparency.org).
7. For some overviews of the relationships between public diplomacy, “soft” power, and brand strategy, see Mark Leonard (2002) and the articles in Jan Melissen (2005) and Cowan & Cull (2008).

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