

NATIONAL IDENTITY: REBRANDING AND ADVERTISING THE NATION

Introduction

National identity persists in a globalising world, and perhaps the nation remains the pre-eminent entity around which identity is shaped.

Dominant theories of the nation are concerned with political economy and history, and the national cultural elements they refer to are either in the realm of high culture, are the 'invented traditions' and ceremonies concocted many years ago, or are versions of folk culture.

These are reified notions of culture, which, while certainly still relevant, are only a small part of the cultural matrix which surrounds the nation. (Edensor 2002: vii)

“Performing The Nation”

“Rather than the periodic displays of spectacle, the staging of tradition and the academic urge to classify races, customs and nature, this cultural process operates at a more mundane level.

For the idea of what constitutes the 'national' interest is part of that which grounds national identity in unreflexive forms of 'common sense'. (Edensor 2002: 7 sqq.)

- Benedict Anderson also adopts a set of assumptions about culture in his famous notion that the nation can be considered an 'imagined community', united by a 'deep, horizontal comradeship' (1983: 7) whereby national co-fellows are believed to constitute a bounded, 'natural' entity.
- “While some have complained that Anderson's focus on the imagined seems to ignore the socio-political realities of power and the organisational structures of the state, perhaps a more nuanced understanding is to consider that nations emerge out of contexts of social and cultural experience which are imaginatively conceived.” (Edensor 2002: 7 sqq.)

The literature on nationalism and national identity has been dominated by a focus on the historical origins of the nation cultures can be identified, ticked off according to a preconceived set of national characteristics. Bounded and self-evident, a nationally rooted culture is not imagined as 'the *outcome of material and symbolic processes but instead as the cause of those practices – a hidden essence lying behind the surface of behaviour*' (Crang, 1998: 162).

A national *cultural hegemony* must be *achieved, must offer plausible points of identification*, rather than being enforced by a cultural elite to whom a helpless mass is in thrall.

Rather, such elites (re)construct 'a conceptual language within which members of pre-existing ethnic, linguistic or political communities could express a sense of their collective being' (Cubitt, 1998: 2).

Smith is explicit in his understanding of culture as 'both an inter-generational repository and heritage, or set of traditions, and an active shaping repertoire of meanings and images, embodied in values, myths and

symbols that serve to unite a group of people with shared experiences and memories and differentiate them from outsiders' (1998: 187). It is useful that culture here is presented as dynamic.

Although Smith perhaps downplays invention and the malleability of cultural symbols, he offers a version of national identity in which he identifies practical and discursive connections rather than primordial ancestry and enduring cultural commonalities. (8-9)

Nevertheless, despite these virtues, the overwhelming focus on myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, religious beliefs, customs and languages postulates a reductive view of culture.

The huge emphasis placed on the ways in which language, traditions, emblems, festivals and sacred places epitomise continuity offers an overly historical approach which may well capture the processes undergone in some cases, but cannot account for the extremely dynamic and ambiguous contemporary **constructions of national identity**.

Advertising History, Nation and Identity: Civil Religion and Media Events

Anthony Smith

Smith almost seems to acknowledge this deficit, for he refers to a 'common, mass public culture' (1991: 14) besides the official, customary and traditional collective symbols and practices, Smith refers to the popular and the everyday.

Yet the emphasis in his work continues to be on the historical and the traditional and official.

For instance, he asserts that 'national symbols, customs and ceremonies are the most potent and durable aspects of nationalism.

They embody its basic concepts, making them visible and distinct for every member' (ibid.).

This stress on the obviously identifiable, tangible, spectacular cultural effects obfuscates the everyday, taken for granted, cultural commonsensical practices as well as the popular forms circulated in a mass culture.

Particularly in contemporary times, any identification of national cultures would have to include a range of other cultural producers – pop stars, advertisers, tabloid hacks, marketers, fashion-designers, film and television producers and sporting heroes – as well as a host of popular cultural practices including dancing, sports-spectatorship, common pastimes, holidaying and touring.

The cultural ingredients Smith recites certainly remain important elements in the constitution of national identities.

But notions about forms of 'national genius', the indivisibility of the nation, and its authenticity, are now under stress as nations become more complex, mobile and culturally hybrid.

The traditions now hold less weight. They have become part of popular mediascapes, are commodified, or become more diffused amongst competing groups.

John Hutchinson

The distinction between ‘modernists’ and ‘ethno-symbolists’:

The former espouse the idea that the creation of a (homogeneous) national culture is the work of an elite, instrumentally delineated and controlled, whilst the latter focus on the nation as historically constructed, ‘embodied in myths, symbols and culture’ (Hutchinson, 2001: 76).

Ethnosymbolists – among which Hutchinson includes himself – again insist on the pre-modern, ethnic basis of the nation. The contrast is useful in that it provides a model (contra the ‘modernists’) which questions top-down versions of national cultural identity.

However, Hutchinson’s account again essentialises culture by foregrounding the historical elements. Moreover, culture is inferred to be used entirely for instrumental reasons, to overcome blocked political advancement and further the aims of nationalists.

Michael Billig - *Banal Nationalism* (1995).

Billig suggests that the ‘*whole* complex of beliefs, assumptions, habits, representations and practices’ (ibid.: 6) which (re)produce national identity are reproduced in the banal realm of the everyday as part of the ‘endemic condition’ of nations.

Billig suggest the numerous signifiers and reminders of the nation that form part of everyday spaces, routines and practices, as opposed to that which is wielded during overt displays of nationalism. Crucially, this routine flagging is ‘mindless’ rather than consciously engaged in (ibid.: 41).

The reproduction of national identity, according to Billig, is grounded in the habitual assumptions about belonging that permeate the media, where the term ‘we’ is unreflexively used as a signifier of ‘us’ as members of the nation, by politicians, sports writers and broadcasters, and even academics.

No qualification is needed in this routine deixis. It is assumed that we – the readers or viewers are part of the nation – ‘*the*’ *economy, government, countryside is our economy, government, countryside*. This constitutes part of the way in which nations are ‘naturalised’, absorbed into a common-sense view about *the way the world is, and* invested with moral values, which elevate the national over other social groupings.

Popular Culture and National Identity

“‘Traditional’ cultural forms and practices of the nation are supplemented, and increasingly replaced in their affective power, by meanings, images and activities drawn from popular culture.”

Tim Edensor:

“I do not want to suggest that the tradition-bound ceremonies and other cultural ingredients which most analysts of national identity have concentrated on are now irrelevant, but that their power is now largely sustained by their (re)distribution through popular culture, where they mingle with innumerable other iconic cultural elements which signify the nation in multiple and contested ways.

In order to shift the focus to an exploration of national identity as expressed and experienced through popular culture, we firstly need to define popular culture.” (12)

Performing National Identity

- The metaphor of performance in order to explore how forms of national dramas are organised and enacted, and how the nation and selective qualities associated with it – are staged and broadcast.
- Performance is a useful metaphor since it allows us to look at the ways in which identities are enacted and reproduced, informing and (re)constructing a sense of collectivity.
- The notion of performance also foregrounds identity as dynamic; as always in the process of production. Performance continually reconstitutes identity by rehearsing and transmitting meanings.
- To fix an exact meaning of identity through enaction is almost impossible for action always takes place in different spatio-temporal contexts, yet it is necessary to transmit a sense of continuity and coherence.
- This mnemonic effect, embodied within the (national) subject, bestows an affective yet disciplined sense of belonging.

Memory and identity are thus incorporated into the performer. Moreover, such rituals specify the relationship between performers, and between the performers and the symbolic site (and the wider national symbolic space into which it is incorporated). Such rituals thus constitute powerful programmes for the enaction of collective remembering (and systematic forgetting) (Chaney, 1993: 20).

These global stagings also testify to the increasing mediatisation of grand national ceremonies (Thompson, 1995: 179–206).

Commentators refer to the televised broadcast of the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 as an event that heralded a national communion via the media. Likewise, the monarch’s Christmas speech, instituted in 1932, was a way for the monarch to reach her subjects over the airwaves, firstly by radio and latterly by television. The Royal Tournament, the Trooping of the Colour, and Royal weddings and funerals have been a staple of the British television diet in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Such events offer more affective and convivial shared theatricals. This mediatisation has also been accompanied by the commodification of identity, often through the tourist industry (discussed on pp. 133–140), and also the ways in which these grand rituals have promoted the selling of nostalgia.

Formal Rituals and Invented Ceremonies

Still the most obvious and recognisable ways in which national identity is performed are at those national(ist) ceremonies with which we are familiar, the grand, often stately occasions when the nation and its symbolic attributes are elevated in public display.

King's College London: Do We Need a National Identity?

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=71Z0UXUV_qo

Rituals and Sports

Probably the most currently powerful form of popular national performance is that found in sport, progressively more a global spectacle:

‘an embodied practice in which meanings are generated and whose representation and interpretation are open to negotiation and contest’ (MacClancy, 1996: 4).

Sport is increasingly situated in the mediatised matrix of national life, is institutionalised in schools, widely represented in a host of cultural forms and is an everyday practice for millions of national subjects.

These everyday and spectacular contexts provide one of the most popular ways in which national identity is grounded.

Rituals and Sports

These performances of national identity on the sporting field are no less persistent today. In football, French, German, Italian, Brazilian, English and Cameroonian national teams are easily identifiable by fans and journalists.

National stereotypes of sporting styles circulate amongst fans, and are propagated in the media.

Besides the routine deixis whereby readers are assumed to share in support for (‘our’) teams which Billig (1995) discusses, newspapers and television commentators seek recourse in fairly repetitive stereotypes. In the case of Boris Becker and Michael Stich, successful German tennis players in the 1980s and 1990s, English tabloid sports pages were full of comments about their German ‘efficiency’ and their likeness to ‘ruthless’ German ‘machines’.

F.R. Leavis

Despite Leavis’s campaign on behalf of ‘high’ culture, he also insisted on the necessity of studying ‘mass’, ‘popular’ culture in order to ascertain the harm he believed it was doing to the British nation.

Advertisements, films, pulp fiction and other popular cultural forms needed to be interrogated to tease out the damaging hypnotic receptivity they perpetrated.

These elements of mass culture were distinguished from an idealised ‘folk’ culture, which was conceived as embodying a spirit that kindled a sense of belonging, of knowing one’s place. In an organic world, a pre-urban *gemeinschaft* where *one’s identity* was part of an ingrained and unquestioned way of being.

The arguments of Leavis imply a necessity of a national guardianship over culture, and mobilise a particular view of England still familiar in nostalgic productions and ideologies.

As I have mentioned, in another formulation especially pertinent to the construction of national identity, *popular has been considered to be that culture* which is prevalent amongst the ‘people’.

Prominent here is the nostalgic celebration of folk cultures – a more valorised, seemingly ‘authentic’ collection of cultural forms and practices which are being erased by modern mass culture.

National elites, governments and patricians continue to perpetrate the idea that 'high' culture is something that the nation must be associated with, as a form of international prestige.

The national badges of high culture – national galleries, opera houses and international concert halls, national theatres, learned societies and high cultural institutions – remain marks of status.

It might seem that if we argue that there is no longer any dividing line between popular/low/folk culture and high culture, we are negating the very notion of popular culture

Tom Nairn (1977) talks of the 'janus face' of the nation, simultaneously looking backwards and forwards, and Homi Bhabha (1990) similarly proffers the national(ist) sense of 'double time' in the focus on the past and the future.

Thus national identity is in reality 'cross-cut by deep internal divisions differences, and "unified" only though the exercise of different forms of cultural power' (Hall, 1992: 68) to provide an illusion of commonality.

Thus religion, ethnicity and culture are utilised to assign in-group similarities and the differences of others. Cultural symbols can coincide with more inclusive manifestations which use those same symbols. For instance, the British flag (Union Jack) has been brandished by unthinking patriots as a symbol which connotes imperial power, tradition and national pride.

National Identity in the Global Cultural Matrix

Theories concerned with accounting for the changing conditions generated by globalisation, or those heralding a postmodern epoch, have focused on the decentring of identity, in contradistinction to previously bounded, coherent modern identities – like national identity – which are being superseded.

Greater social and actual mobility, the fragmentation of classes, the growing importance of consumption and the rise of 'identity politics' have increasingly influenced identity formation. Moreover, supposedly mobile identities increasingly move across various sites, amongst different people, and in diverse cultural contexts.

Castells (1996) has put forward the notion of a 'network society' emerging from processes of globalisation, comprising economic, political and technological flows; Appadurai (1990) has offered a highly influential scheme which suggests that globalisation is characterised by disjunctive flows of people ('ethnoscapes'), technology ('technoscapes'), information ('mediascapes'), ideas and ideologies ('ideoscapes') and money ('financescapes') which undercut nationally organised modes of distribution and control. Such ideas challenge bounded notions of society, since a host of interconnected flows and pathways impact in uneven ways in varied contexts.

Globalisation promotes the mutation of national identity resulting from 'the imposition of the conceptual grid of nationality on exchanges and interactions in the global arena' (Cubitt, 1998: 14)

Identity is always in process, is always being reconstituted in a process of becoming and by virtue of location in social, material, temporal and spatial contexts.

Recognising the intricacies of the social world requires that it be conceived as ‘a complex, heterogeneous nexus of entities and flows’ (Michael, 2000: 1), where power and identity are simultaneously transformed and reproduced, where new connections are made, and old constellations solidified.

Within such a matrix, national identity is being continually *redistributed*.

CONCLUSIONS

- Like other identities, nationhood is ‘constituted through powerful and intersecting temporal regimes and modes of dwelling and travelling’ (Urry, 2000: 18).
- For instance, as national and local territories become increasingly permeable, so iconic representations are peddled across the world as markers of national identity.
- What may be useful as marketing shorthand for tourists, entrepreneurs and television audiences may also be re-encharmed back home, repatriated to serve national(ist) interests.
- *National identity* has become decentred but has also been recentred, and is continually being redistributed in matrices which extend from the local to the global. And
- “I do not want to deny the global potentialities for rhizomic movement, as Deleuze and Guattari have it, to acknowledge the ways in which people can make lines of flight out of normative cultural arrangements.
- But a matrix exists in conjunction with rhizomic connections; indeed, it facilitates the making of horizontal connections.
- Crucially, though, it allows us to identify the cultural constellations forged out of the huge catalogue of intertextual reference points concerned with national identity”. (Edensor 2002: 33)