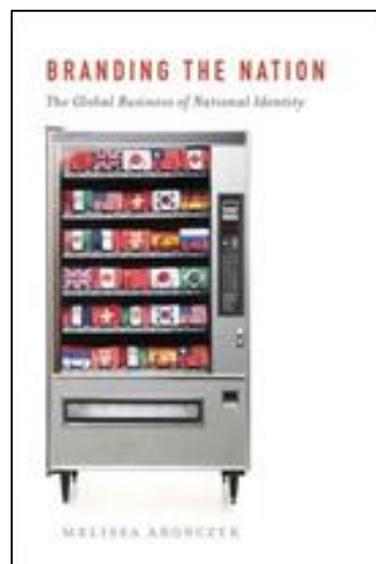


Reviews

Branding the Nation: The Global Business of National Identity by Melissa Aronczyk. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. Paperback, pp. 226, £16.99 ISBN – 978-0-19-975217-1. Language: English.

This book documents the forays of governments around the world into the neo-liberal practice of nation branding. Through interviews with politicians, civil servants and industry professionals, Melissa Aronczyk illuminates much of the ethos behind the practice and the structural codes that prevail within the industry. The book is written by an academic—Melissa Aronczyk is an Assistant Professor of Journalism and Media Studies at Rutgers University—who also has experience as a branding practitioner through her work in the industry in Canada. Grounded in theories of marketing and nationalism, this volume gives particular attention to attempts at branding Poland and Canada. As Aronczyk notes, efforts at nation branding tend to follow previously tested narratives in accordance with the balance of power within the branding industry. Though she provides a good overview of nation branding practices in various contexts, Aronczyk does not discuss the extent to which nation branding furthers the process of cultural homogenisation and commodification associated with globalisation, an omission stemming from her failure to critique the propaganda purpose of political communications.



Chapter One, entitled ‘Nation and Brand: Keywords for the Twenty-First Century’, explains the usefulness of marketing to the consolidation of national identity and the external appearance of the nation. Aron argues that with the declining relevance of the nation-state in international affairs, a marketing strategy provides nationalism with resilience amidst the challenges presented by globalisation. Aronczyk writes well throughout the book and her description of the suitability of nation branding to today’s highly mediated world particularly caught the eye. However, the following quotation also accentuates Aronczyk’s somewhat uncritical enthusiasm for nation branding:

Nation branding conveys to the world that the nation is not only visible but also well regarded in international circles. Moreover, as an intensely visual practice, the nation's brand image itself – its logos, slogans, typefaces, and symbols – is well suited to the global vernacular of modern media. It is the quintessential national shorthand for today's hyperbolic global information context. (Aronczyk 2013: 17)

Aronczyk's discussion of nation branding's relationship with 'soft power' and 'public diplomacy' in her first chapter is problematic. She asserts that '[n]ation branding is defined as a form of soft power, in contrast to the hard power of military or economic assets. Softer than sticks, less coercive than carrots' (p. 16). First of all, nation branding is not a form of soft power, although it can be a form of public diplomacy depending on the aims of the policy. This is because soft power is bestowed upon an entity as a possible outcome of its actions. Therefore, to speak of nation branding as a form of soft power assumes its positivity. Secondly, the author's distinction between 'soft' and 'hard' power is simplistic since military and economic assets can be used to generate soft power—a good recent example being China's naval hospital boat, the Peace Ark, being deployed to areas of the underdeveloped world to provide medical assistance and training to those who would otherwise go without. This lack of understanding of soft power colours the rest of the book, because the author's conviction leads to a lack of critical insight around the practice of nation branding and its established negative effects, some of which will be discussed here.

Chapter Two, 'The New and Improved Nation: How Culture Became Competitive', provides a concise overview of the history of nation branding, with emphasis on post-Franco Spain and its attempts to re-brand during the 1980s. In particular, it looks at the Spanish state and La Caixa bank, which worked on complementary branding strategies. Here, Aronczyk rightly explains through a sizeable literature review that such movements highlight the shift from a welfare state to a corporate state, in that the state has become an 'institutional unit of productivity', where the 'notion of international competitiveness [has] shifted from the realm of the corporate firm into the domain of the state, so that competitiveness [becomes] not a problem of management but a problem of governance' (p. 38). However, Aronczyk does not critically analyse such a move, merely seeing it as a product of the prevailing neoliberal international system, or a logical next stage in capitalism's long march. In contrast, political scientists like Karl Polanyi in *The Great Transformation* (1944) have argued that the state's double role is to protect its citizens from the imposition of market economics on some areas of public life, while also ensuring a vibrant national economy. If allowed to penetrate certain areas like, such as social welfare or cultural expression, marketization may lead to the destruction of society itself. At stake, therefore, is the extent to which the branded nation of the corporate state increases the likelihood of this outcome. Moreover, it problematizes Aronczyk's claim that nation branding is a form of soft power, as the practice often leads to backlash from domestic and international groups who see it as cultural commodification and homogenisation.

Chapter Three, 'Living the Brand: The Identity Strategies of Nation-Branding Consultants', discusses the strategies used by nation branding consultants. Aronczyk focuses on Simon Anholt, who is widely seen as a 'guru' on the subject, while also providing some diagrams that students of place branding will probably have seen before in some version: for

example, there is Simon Anholt's nation branding hexagon. Chapters like these form an important part of texts on the subject as they offer key insights into the mentality and priorities of leaders within the industry.

Chapter Four, 'Creative Tension, Normal Nation: Branding National Identity in Poland' is the first of the in-depth country discussions. The most interesting aspect of this chapter is Poland's use of British place branding expert, Wally Olins, as it reflects the extent to which foreign communications professionals have been utilised by national governments in the branding process. Aronczyk describes how Olins came on board to much furor because of his legacy as author of the book *Corporate Identity* (1989) and the assistance that he had already provided to the branding of other prominent world locations. Aronczyk asserts that this was part of the Polish government's strategy to ensure buy-in from Polish people to the branding exercise. However, this approach underscored the lack of confidence of the Polish people in that Poland believed it required external assistance if it was to improve its national brand. Aronczyk also discusses the 'perception gap' in this chapter. This is, for example, the Western belief that Poland is a small, authoritarian, faraway state, when in reality it is quite large, democratic and less than a three-hour flight from the UK. However, in keeping with Aronczyk's lack of critique of the nation branding process, she fails to engage with the argument that the increasing prevalence of a communications bureaucracy, and a foreign bureaucracy at that (in the case of Olins and his team), is detrimental to Poland's young democracy. Marxist critique would therefore argue that the use of nation branding consultants represents an unjustified use of a 'transnational promotional class' within politics that operates primarily for the benefit of a 'transnational capitalist class' (p. 38). This results in the widespread exclusion of cultural practices that are deemed unprofitable, no matter their cultural prestige.

Chapter Five, 'From Bland to Brand: Transforming Canadian Culture', discusses the branding of Canada. Aronczyk argues that Canada's multicultural diversity, liberal values, and general placidity needed to be catalysed into a more dynamic national brand if the country was not to be over-reliant on a few key industries and generally left behind by other countries successfully harnessing the power of nation branding. The key discussion here is the extent to which branding ought to emphasise an image that stretches the reality of the experience of visiting or investing in the branded country. Thus, the narrative of a long-term aspirational branding strategy should be realistic and not overtax the imagination, for deception can never be a viable long-term business strategy. Moreover, spinning Canada's multiculturalism into an apparent attribute for foreign investment neglects the country's aboriginal history. Finally, there is the unmentioned consideration that branding Canada beyond its current image of slightly docile and uncompetitive mediocrity may have further-reaching negative consequences for its soft power: with increased prominence comes increased scrutiny. An example of this phenomenon is the conduct of Canadian mining operations in Guatemala who, as Dougherty notes in the article 'The Global Gold Mining Industry, Junior Firms, and Civil Society Resistance in Guatemala' (2011), have poisoned water supplies to peasant villages and failed to compensate adequately for the resultant health problems and the loss of livelihood from the collapse of local farming industries. This small anecdote reflects the wider reality that a larger international profile can lead to greater

international scrutiny, which may result in a loss of attractiveness for Canada. The argument can therefore be made that governments use nation branding in an effort to limit the public criticism that is likely to occur from prioritising economic growth over political, economic, sociological, cultural and environmental issues. In this regard, nation branding is not so much about soft power, but about appealing to economically viable groups of people in the hope that, together, they can exclude those who lack economic capital or those likely to protest neoliberal practices.

Chapter Six, 'Trading Spaces: The World Tour', provides a whistle-stop tour of many other countries including Botswana, Chile, Estonia and Georgia, and their attempts at nation branding. In sub-sections, Aronczyk gives a series of overviews that are unfortunately too brief to provide in-depth perspective or critique.

The book is a useful addition to the growing literature on nation branding. The breadth of the author's knowledge on the subject results in some fascinating insights into nation branding's history, the output of different countries and the philosophy behind such moves. While the study is theoretically framed by studies of nationalism and marketing, these are only really effective in explaining the rise and consolidation of nation branding, and the appropriateness of its strategy to the media-oriented neoliberal world system. Beyond a critique of nationalism as a cause of social immobility, such a framework does not facilitate critical analysis of nation branding. However, it seems critique was not really Aronczyk's intention. Rather, she provides a platform to the proponents of nation branding and only sporadically challenges the quotations that she selects. Consequently, the student of nation branding must often revert to their prior knowledge of political science, and the arguments of political scientists, for critical analysis.

References

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COLIN ALEXANDER is a Lecturer in Communications Studies at Nottingham Trent University, UK. His research into international political communications has covered the issues of public diplomacy, soft power and nation branding and has spanned several continents. His book *China and Taiwan in Central America: Engaging Foreign Publics in Diplomacy* will be published in 2014. [colin.alexander@ntu.ac.uk]