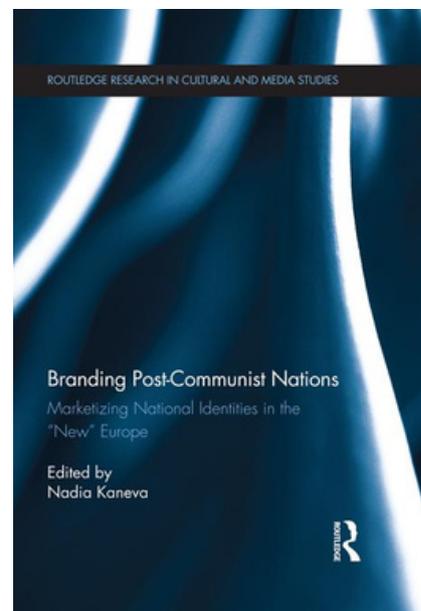


Reviews

Branding Post-Communist Nations: Marketizing National Identities in the ‘New’ Europe by Nadia Kaneva (ed.). New York and London: Routledge, 2012. 254 pp, ISBN - 978-0-415-88275-0

This edited book documents and critiques the recent forays of Central Asian, Eastern European, and Russian governments into the neoliberal practice of Nation Branding. The book seeks to advance the field by introducing its readers to little-known case studies, while also addressing the domestic and international pitfalls that ‘second world’ states can experience as they submit themselves to greater integration with the prevailing world system. Overall, the book examines fundamental changes made to the cultural industries of Eastern Europe as it emerges from communism. It approaches the topic as a sociological critique of Political Economy under the premise that an assessment of social spaces in terms of their commercial value may be socially divisive, limits cultural production to that which is financially viable, advances the hegemony of the West and is a likely a form of neoliberal self-colonisation.



The volume is edited by Nadia Kaneva, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Media, Film and Journalism Studies at the University of Denver, USA. Beyond the editor’s introductory chapter, the book is set out into three distinct sections, each with several contributors. The first concerns ‘Promises and Problems of Post-Communist Nation Branding’ (Nadia Kaneva, Gerald Sussman and Robert A. Saunders) and is non-country specific. The second section deals with ‘Agents, Institutions, Practices’ and focuses on Estonia (Sue Curry Jansen), Bulgaria (Nadia Kaneva) and Poland (Pawel Suroweic). The final section discusses ‘Representations, Mediations, Narrations’ and provides Slovenia (Zala Volcic), Romania (Alice Bardan and Aniko Imre), Hungary (Laszlo Kulcsar and Young-ok Yum) and Serbia (Branislava (Brana) Mijatovic) as country case studies. The book does not have a concluding chapter.

The contributors approach the concept of Nation Branding with varying degrees of cynicism. Through their country case studies, some (e.g. Estonia) explicitly critique the very practice of Nation Branding as culturally inept, socially derogatory, and politically and economically elitist, while others (e.g. Poland, Slovenia, Romania) focus not so much on the

ideological disparity of Nation Branding but on the particular country's 'success' in engaging with this neoliberal practice, and the divisions that occur within society as a result. This approach is the result of Kaneva's ambition for the text and her selection of contributors, most of whom have backgrounds in Sociology, Political Economy, media and cultural studies. As a result, the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu provides the theoretical framework for many of the chapters. Particularly prominent is Bourdieu's social critique of Neoliberalism, which holds that a transnational economic elite manufacture a discourse that is seen as just by the majority, but which only serves to consolidate the position of powerful. Thus, while insisting on their civic credentials, Nation Branding projects are actually a guise for the further immersion of society into an ideology that insists on its own determinism. As such, questions surrounding Political Economy form the main argument of the book.

All the country contributors are experts on their country of focus and either reside in the region or have performed fieldwork over an extended period to write their chapters. As such, a sub-theme of the book is to provide general education to its readership on the regions of Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the former Soviet states; a vast area bordering Germany and China at its extremes that suffers from many misconceptions, problems of perceived similitude and ignorance by those in the West. However, this approach also ensures that the book is full of interesting and useful anecdotes from the world of Nation Branding. For example, Saunders discusses how second world states like those in Central Asia and Eastern Europe are particularly sensitive to the impact of what he terms 'alternative narrators' in Nation Branding. He provides the example of the Kazakh government's initial displeasure at the international mockery their country received following the release of the *Borat* film. This displeasure was short-lived following their realisation that the film's popularity had actually helped put Kazakhstan on the map for many Westerners. Saunders writes:

In 2005, the foreign ministry threatened legal action if the British prankster did not cease his use of Kazakhstan as a prop for his humor. Paradoxically, the ensuing controversy helped Kazakhstan develop its tourism industry: despite Borat's disinformation campaign, many young Westerners realized that Baron Cohen's "Boratistan" was purely a plot device for his strange brand of humor and wished to learn more about the real Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan's embassy in the United Kingdom reported record numbers of visa applications from British tourists in the wake of the MTV awards show, which ambassadorial staff readily attributed to Borat's burlesque. (p. 59)

The Kazakh experience is therefore one of the best examples of neoliberal self-colonialism, while also demonstrating the fickleness of those in the Nation Branding industry and the subservience of the cultural industries to capital accumulation.

A range of Social Science research methods are used by the contributors to the book. Several of the authors used qualitative, semi-structured face-to-face interviews with relevant politicians, branders and other industry professionals, while others used research methods associated with Ethnography such as participant observation, document analysis, thematic analysis of branding campaigns and close study of local media output. The methods used are explained at the start of each chapter and work well to provide the reader with a sound ana-

lytical overview of the country in question. The diversity of the methods used also pre-empts monotony.

The country case studies provide useful insight into new socio-political scenarios where Nation Branding has tried to flourish. This is the main contribution of the text to wider Political Communications literature. However, neither the introductory chapter nor the subsequent contributions spend sufficient time digging into the concept of Nation Branding and the book never really arrives at an agreed academic definition of the term. At its crux, Nation Branding is an act of political communication and should be introduced and defined using Political Communications theory.

As such, it is Saunders who provides the most concise, if descriptive, definition of Nation Branding.

The community of nations has come to function as a marketplace where states must define and differentiate themselves in order to attract foreign direct investment, add value to their export products, promote tourism, and develop their diplomatic and strategic alliances. This set of activities is most commonly identified as Nation Branding. (p. 43)

Yet this still does not explain Nation Branding as a fundamental act of communication by a government. After reading the book, I devised my own definition of the term: Nation Branding is the attempt by a government or its nominated subsidiaries to communicate simplistic and normally utopian premises regarding that nation to domestic and international audiences. These communications are based on the prevailing ideological dogma of the nation's elite and are tasked with consolidating or inculcating nationalism amongst the citizens of the nation, attracting capital from overseas, and improving the strategic position of the source government.

Thus, given the contestation over its use and academic critique over its fundamental necessity, it would have been valuable if one chapter had hosted a discussion on Nation Branding's definition and the term's wider contribution to Political Communications. As it is, the chapter by Sussman provides a considered appraisal of terms like Nation Branding, public relations, marketing and advertising, all of which he correctly argues are hucksterism for propaganda. What is more, when providing his Political Economy critique of Nation Branding, Sussman puts forward one of the main messages of the book.

The maintenance of the corporate state requires an intensification of public persuasion through various forms of promotional speech and text in order to divert citizens from the cognitive dissonance that follows the unwillingness of the neoliberal state to protect public interests. (p.42)

But beyond Sussman's contribution we do not see much critical analysis of the definition or of its affiliation to literature on Political Communications. Perhaps most indicative of this is the constant referral to texts by Nation Branding professionals like Wally Olins and Simon Anholt rather than academic experts on propaganda such as Harold Lasswell, Walter Lippmann and contemporaries like Jozef Batora and Philip Taylor, although Sussman does refer to Lippmann briefly (p. 25). Perhaps critiquing Nation Branding through the propaganda

frame would have revealed many consistencies between Communist and Post-Communist regimes. For example: government reactions to dissent, the credibility of state propaganda, and the 'aura of legitimacy' surrounding advice from the West for the publics of these countries. Thus, the book appears to largely assume that Post-Communist states have been transformed, but this has been made without an analysis of the communications dynamics of the nation in question before its movement from communist control.

Beyond these issues, the Political Communications frame would also have offered opportunities to ask fundamental questions beyond that of Political Economy on why Nation Branding has become popular. As it is, the contributors offer varying degrees of critique of Nation Branding and its political, economic and social effects. However, for Political Communications the answer lies somewhat in advances in communications technologies, inasmuch as the monopoly of the state over international information transfer has declined to such an extent that it becomes increasingly difficult to discuss government policy in terms of 'us here' and 'you over there'. Therefore, citizens have an increasing ability to view the actions and rhetoric of their government overseas without domestic filters, and governments are increasingly aware that the audience for their activities is potentially limitless. The rise of Nation Branding as universal narrative thereby reflects the fluidity that technological advancements have afforded Political Communications.

Branding Post-Communist Nations: Marketizing National Identities in the "New" Europe is a well-written and informative book that introduces its readers to less familiar areas of the world. It is a useful addition to the syllabus for those interested in contemporary Post-Communist politics, Nation Branding, marketing, and international business. However, beyond the case studies themselves, it will do little to expand the theoretical understanding of those interested in Political Communications.

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