

# The Rhetoric of Nationalism

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Michael Billig's *Banal Nationalism* was a breath of fresh air when it was published in 1995. Many students of nationalism had grown more than a little tired of arguing about civic vs. ethnic nationalism or the distinction of benign patriotism from more dangerous nationalism. To my own considerable regret, I had turned in the text for my own first book on nationalism before reading Billig's book (Calhoun 1997). It is cited, in the relatively modest way possible when something is discovered only as one is making final revisions, and not as prominently as it should have been given our substantial agreement.

I cited Billig in a way I think is correct and appropriate, but limited. Moreover, the limits of my statement reflect some limits in the relationship between Billig's work and social science more generally that I want

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to address. I wrote: “Nationalism gives shape to soccer loyalties and the Olympic games, as well as to wars and economic competition (Billig 1995).” This is important and Billig made the case for it persuasively.

## The Pervasive Flagging of Nations

Billig in a sense opened the eyes of researchers to the omnipresence of nationalism and the question of when, in his words, it is flagged and unflagged. The last was a pun, of course, because national flags themselves could appear in flagged and unflagged ways. They could be a casual background in everyday transactions and fields of vision, or the focus of patriotic attention in ceremonies—or indeed military mobilizations. One of Billig’s key points was that, at least in “established nations” it was possible much of the time to forget the very remembering and reproduction of nationalism embedded in everyday representations (Billig 1995: 38). In other words, it is not just that we forget acts of violence that shaped our collective past as Renan famously observed (1990); we fail to see many of the ways in which we are led to remember to think of ourselves as nationals.

Since Billig wrote, there has been a dramatic expansion of attention to everyday nationalism. Examples are wide and interesting, from gymnastics to queers online to higher education itself. As in Billig’s original work, a recurrent subtext is that seeing the nationalism in each setting reminds us that we didn’t see it before. As Billig himself put it in the opening of the Conclusion to *Banal Nationalism*, “This book has been urging again and again: ‘Look and see the constant flaggings of nationhood’” (Billig 1995: 74).

This calls attention to the blind spots in *doxic*, uncritically taken-for-granted everyday life and in social science itself. We notice violent nationalist mobilizations and extreme nationalist politics but fail to spot the pervasive appearance of national symbols and the constant location of “the” nation as “our” location in the world. Billig was especially attentive to nationalism in linguistic representations, calling our attention to the way it crept in even when it was not part of the topic, indeed perhaps especially so. He emphasized, thus, the role of “little words” like

the definite article “the” which helps reproduce the notion of bounded, discrete nations even when deployed in seemingly apolitical popular culture and media reports. To say, “the nation was shocked”, does this work whether the shock involves a football loss or the disappearance of an airplane from distant skies. And of course football competitions and international news reporting are prominent among the many occasions for recurrent flagging of nations.

In addition to just noticing the pervasiveness of nationalist thinking, researchers have also brought attention to the ways it is presented. Though language was Billig’s special interest, researchers in recent years have paid more and more attention to visual representation. This includes symbolism and iconography, but also as with language there are constant apparently less loaded representations, like maps and the organization of museum galleries as presenting French or Italian artists. And of course there are flags: actual, literal flags. Scotland’s Saltire and England’s Cross of St. George evoke nations—and also stances toward nations. At the time of this writing, they also evoke a crisis of British solidarity. The flagging is seldom if ever entirely neutral.

## Hot Nationalism Depends on Banal Nationalism

In fascination with identifying examples of everyday nationalism, both flagged and unflagged, one of Billig’s key points has been slightly obscured: nationalist politics depends on the seemingly apolitical deployment of the rhetoric of nation; “hot” nationalism depends on banal nationalism. Billig left this somewhat implicit but it is of central importance. Nationalism is available for political purposes and dramatic moments of mobilization only because it is produced and reproduced in banal and everyday forms. This point is inadequately incorporated into the debates of both specialist scholars and broader publics.

There is considerable work to be done on the relationship between the banal and the dramatic, the partially unconscious everyday and the consciously manipulated forms of nationalism. This is a theme of other papers in this volume, and evident in contemporary cases from responses to immigration in France to the unfolding crisis in Ukraine.

The violence against writers and cartoonists for *Charlie Hebdo* provoked not just a defense of free speech but a “hot” mobilization of discourse about Frenchness, no less powerful for being bundled with other values like reason, civil peace, and secularism. Russian annexation of Crimea could proceed as easily as it did not only because of Western lack of historical memory and therefore anticipation but also because Russian identity had been nurtured in a host of mostly cool but still significant ways for decades, underpinned by naval presence, business relations, and a substantial repopulation of the peninsula.

All of us in Britain see aspects of the same phenomena daily in the question of Scottish independence and the partially reactive assertion of English national identity.

Billig didn't just show that banal or everyday nationalism exists and indeed is pervasive, but made the deeper point that it is crucial to the rest of nationalism. Still, his own emphasis was on demonstrating the existence of banal nationalism and this is the main point taken away by readers of his book. As a result, his book is mostly cited simply for the observation that there *is* banal nationalism. This is a pity, because most of political science continues to try to account for nationalism directly in terms of politics and interests. The problem is by no means limited to political science. Throughout the literature on nationalism, and even more in the press and popular accounts, there remains a bias toward seeing nationalism in a mixture of instrumentally pursued agendas and potentially bloody political passions. There isn't enough analysis of the underlying conditions for such conscious appearances of nationalism. Everyday nationalism is among these conditions.

Billig focuses mainly on the attachment people feel to “their” nation, explaining how everyday representations matter alongside more dramatic political engagements. In this he addresses very helpfully the characteristic forgetting and even denial that allows people in the West and especially perhaps in the US to think they have no nationalism, but only patriotism or calm and sensible civic feeling. Nationalism is seen mainly in other places and in extremists. But the successes of UKIP or France's *Front National* are made possible not just by persuasive demagogues or fear of immigrants. They are made possible by the constant reproduction of a sense of national belonging in everyday language use,

media, and even sports. This generates and reproduces an “us” identity in the sense of Billig’s teacher Henri Tajfel, one about which we are both prideful and defensive. The reproduction of identification with the Confederacy in the US South stands in the background of white supremacist identity projects—and violent attacks—that oddly merge a sort of American nationalism with challenges to the actual US state as well as to racial minorities.

The 1990 Iraq war is recurrently mentioned in Billig’s account. Discussion of it is perhaps where Billig comes closest to analyzing the ways in which broad patterns of everyday nationalism inform specific inflations of national sentiment and more dramatic action. But though I think Billig is broadly right, the underlying point hasn’t registered as fully in the literature as it might have done.

In this connection, Billig makes points that I think are sound but unfortunately underdeveloped in his book and missed in quite a bit of the literature. One concerns the elision between “nation” and “society” in much discussion. Billig points in particular to the prominence of this in much American sociology (he has Parsons especially in mind). There it reflects the particular penchant to forgetting nationalism that is connected to hegemonic power and a tendency to elide the idea of national and universal interests (Billig 1995: 98). But it is clearly a broader phenomenon than this. And while he wants to point out that it influences academic sociology, he also sees it as part of the more general forgetting of everyday nationalism. He doesn’t offer a sustained critique of the society/nation elision, though one can imagine that had he written one it would be similar to his critical analysis of the implicit nationalism of Richard Rorty’s philosophy. He would be interested in the fact that Parsons did this as an American, and thus that his own society was always implicitly behind his accounts that purported to be more universally about society. I think this is true, but it is also true much more generally that the very modern idea of societies as implicitly discrete and bounded units owes much to nationalism. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, the two ideas grew up together each informing the other (Calhoun 1999). This is one reason for what critics have called the widespread “methodological nationalism” of much social science—like the way statistics on a variety of subjects and the units of analysis in

comparative research naturalize as well as reproduce nations.<sup>1</sup> Or again, as Billig remarks, through “routinely familiar habits of language ... the world of nations will be reproduced as *the* world, the natural environment of today” (Billig 1995: 93). And “in so many little ways, the citizenry are daily reminded of their national place in a world of nations” (Billig 1995: 8).

In general, Billig seems simply less interested in explaining nationalism as such than in demonstrating that we habitually fail to see a lot of it, and therefore both misunderstand it and misunderstand our own participation in it—as citizens and as social scientists. He is more interested in how we situate ourselves in “our” nations than in how or why the idea of nation is in general currency. As a result, readers may miss the contributions he makes to more general explanation.

## Ideologies, Imaginaries, and Rhetoric

I think the argument would be stronger if Billig relied less on the notion of “ideology” to categorize nationalism. In the first place, this very easily locates it in the realm of politics and actually obscures the banal forms of its reproduction that Billig emphasizes. It is as though he thinks the general understanding of the way “hot” nationalism works is sound, but we are just apt to miss the ways banal nationalism reminds people of their national location and makes it easier to summon nationalist sentiment. Secondly, though perhaps not necessarily, this emphasizes the role of interests in constituting national identities. I don’t deny such interests and attendant biases, of course, but when we consider the general ubiquity of the national form, it is hard to see this as simply the sum of special interests. No doubt it derives in part from the existence of states, and Billig claims association with those who would explain nationalism by the rise of modern states with their sharp borders and administrative apparatuses that make them “power containers” (Giddens 1987). This view carries weight, but I think it may not do justice to the strength of what I would prefer to call the national or nationalist *imaginary*. I think it is important to see nationalism not just as an ideology that happens to be implicit in Parsons or any other sociologist,

but as a social imaginary that informs much more generally the way in which academics and others understand the idea and existence of nations. The nationalist imaginary is not simply an error by analysts, but an active part of the reproduction of a world organized in terms of nations. Analysts may participate in this uncritically or be more reflexively aware of it (Calhoun 2002, 2007a).

Benedict Anderson famously suggested that nationalism was not so much one modern political ideology, like liberalism or communism, as it was a pervasive way of imagining the world—more like religion and kinship. Billig cites Anderson several times and occasionally uses the notion of “imagining” the nation, so I think this is not foreign to his account. But he doesn’t make this idea a serious part of his theoretical toolkit or of an explanation of nationalism. And he does partially distance himself from it. He says “Benedict Anderson’s idea of the nation as an ‘imagined community’ is a useful starting-point for examining these themes—at least so long as it is realized that the imagined community does not depend on continual acts of imagination for its existence” (Billig 1995: 70). It seems to me that this deprives the idea of a good deal of its force.

Billig may be concerned to make clear that lots of the representations of everyday nationalism are in circulation without being mobilized in imagining anything in particular. We see the flag at the post office without thinking about it. Moreover, Billig seems to think that reference to imagining is inherently subjective and obscures the recurrent formal aspects of nationalism. But this implies an unfortunate dualism, as for example he claims that “national identities are forms of social life, rather than internal psychological states” (1995: 24). He is right to emphasize social forms, but surely this is a false opposition.

The idea of social imaginaries is precisely a bridge between the objectively recurrent and the subjectively enacted. It is because we have a social imaginary of the market or voting, to follow Charles Taylor (2004), that we are able both to take a variety of actions, indeed interactions, and understand ourselves and others as we do so. This speaks to a curious flatness to many accounts of everyday nationalism, including some of Billig’s: they limit themselves to representations, not developing the way in which these representations are embedded and reproduced

in action. Put another way, everyday nationalism consists not just of a bunch of words that happen to be repeated, but participates in grammar and syntax that make it hard to speak without reproducing national thinking. Billig makes clear that this is a matter of visual imagery as well as words, but it is also a matter of action, of phenomenologically inhabiting the world, not only of engaging with representations.

Anderson (1991) offers a number of illustrations of how the idea—and the lived reality—of nation is produced and reproduced through organizations of imagination. In a powerful analysis, he discusses how novels prepare the way for this imagination by presenting interacting storylines that suggest multiple personal histories entwined with each other even when the characters are not in interaction. In a famous image, he describes the (now dying) ritual of people all over a country reading their daily papers. His point is not merely that they get the same information (which of course they may not if the papers vary). It is that they are embedded together in both synchronicity and narrative and this—not similarity as such—helps produce a sense of commonality. In the 1991 revised edition of *Imagined Communities*, Anderson added a brilliant chapter on “census, map, and museum” as vehicles for imagining nations. To note that Billig doesn’t cite the revised edition would be mere pedantry were it not that it matches up with an apparent misunderstanding in which he suggests that imagining in Anderson’s sense is a purely internal state rather than a social form, and a matter of similarity rather than entwined lives. He takes Anderson’s example of newspaper reading to be about contents rather than practice.

More deeply, social imaginaries are crucial to the process of the production and reproduction of social reality. They are not merely subjective, but evidence of the speciousness of the sharp opposition between subjective and objective. They are ways in which some very firm and even in certain senses material realities come into being and continue to influence our lives. Corporations are creatures of social imagination; so are nations. I have addressed this elsewhere and won’t elaborate or fully develop the point here (Calhoun et al. 2015). But it speaks to everyday nationalism because this is not merely a set of “flat” contents on the surface of social life, but part of the process of social imagination that



makes national thinking and national sense of belonging available for politics.

The work of social imaginaries is often very prosaic. As Billig writes of being part of a country: “This place has to be unimaginatively imagined and the assumptions of nationhood accepted, for the routine phrase to do its routine rhetorical business. Through this routine business, the nation continues to be made habitual, to be inhabited” (1995: 107). In other words, the nation must be routine and commonplace some times and in some contexts for it to be available to extraordinary and dramatic mobilizations at others.

In addition, the reproduction of nationalism may take place in argument as well as agreement (as indeed the whole rhetorical tradition might suggest). Billig twice quotes Shotter (1991) to the effect that nationalism is commonly a “tradition of argumentation.” The nation is reproduced as a common reference point in debates over what the nation should be, how it should be defended, or its interests advanced. For this reason, a vital, agonistic public sphere may be a feature of thriving national solidarity not its enemy.

## Nationalism, Good and Bad?

The point is of significance for further research on everyday nationalism. For all of his refreshing willingness to think anew about nationalism, Billig sees it almost completely as pernicious. He offers a “confession” of his own participation as a sports fan who cheers the national sides. But though he apparently thinks that some manifestations of banal nationalism fall well short of evil, the implicit concern of his book is that everyday nationalism be recognized as on a continuum with “hot,” or dramatic, or violent nationalism. I think he is absolutely right to refuse the separation of supposedly benign patriotism from malign nationalism as though they were two completely different phenomena. He is right to refuse to generalize from the extremes of nationalism alone. He is right to refuse to let those who participate in everyday nationalism off the hook of responsibility for more abusive

nationalism. But in making this point, he misses something very important to the reproduction of both banal and dramatic nationalism.

To think that nationalism is always bad, and that banal nationalism simply underwrites the always available potential for more evil, obscures the importance of nationalism to some much more positive projects. I don't just mean that in times of war soldiers and indeed ordinary people may feel a sense of solidarity and that this is good. More basically, I mean that nationalism is integral to much of modern democracy. Nationalist discourse is integral to constructions of "we the people" (Smith 2003). A sense of common national membership is integral to acceptances of different opinions and even electoral losses. And beyond democracy, a sense of belonging to a common nation has underwritten many modern projects of economic redistribution and social welfare. The National Health Service has its name for a reason.

My point is not that these good institutions justify the evil actions undertaken in the name of nations. It is, rather, that a very significant part of how nationalism is reproduced is through its embedding in collective projects of national improvement.

The projects of national improvement often reflect explicit or implicit comparisons to other countries. "*They* are getting ahead of us," "*they* have more power, more freedom, more wealth, a better educational system, or better roads." As Billig argued, "the nation is always a nation in a world of nations. 'Internationalism' is not the polar opposite of 'nationalism', as if it constitutes a rival ideological consciousness" (1995: 61). This is clearly right, but often forgotten.

Forgetting the international character of nationalism is conducive to illusory notions of how globalization will affect nationalism. It never ceases to amaze me how many people have imagined that globalization will simply replace nationalism with a universal, cosmopolitan consciousness. Billig points out reasons why this is a fantasy, even though globalization does pose challenges to national states. I would go further arguing that nationalism, including reactive, defensive, and belligerent nationalism, is among the ways people respond to globalization (Calhoun 2007). Nations are not merely valued goods people defend against global challenges; they are resources people mobilize and augment to cope with global challenges. This extends to the solidarities

maintained in diasporas and not only solidarity against migrants but the projects of assimilation by which migrants are integrated into host nations which are not only enriched, but actually become more articulate about themselves in the process.

Billig wrote in the early 1990s. The Iraq War was in the background of his account, as I have mentioned. But so was New Labour. This was a dramatic moment of simultaneously mobilizing and forgetting nationalism. Enthusiastically cosmopolitan, the coiners of the phrase “Cool Britannia” were also banally and constantly nationalist.

Of course, we live with new and interesting manifestations of nationalism today. The UK may shortly be dismembered. Britain is uncertain whether its national sovereignty, interests, and essentially symbolic being are threatened by membership in the EU. There is perhaps more “hot” nationalism in the West than there was when Billig wrote. It appears in responses to immigration, to Islam, to conflict in Eastern Europe. But there is always an entanglement of “hot” nationalism with the everyday—and this is manifest in the extent to which the financial crisis of 2009 and after brought not an EU of reinforced solidarity but one of much more nationalist discourse.

## Conclusion

Billig has called our attention to the pervasiveness of both flagging nationalism and rendering flagging self-consciously unflagged—that is, deploying the symbols and rhetoric of nationalism in ways that stay mostly below the level of explicit consciousness. But it is worth considering also practices and projects in which there is active unflagging. I have in mind humanitarian action. Sometimes this has manifest national dimensions, especially when funded by governments. USAID may ask that its (national) logo appear on every bag of wheat it ships. But NGOs often go out of their ways not to flag nationality. Media representations of humanitarian suffering, likewise, tend systematically to be devoid of flags (though these may appear on the uniforms of those said to cause them). This doesn’t mean that the intentionally non-national altogether escapes nationality and even nationalism. The

effort to help suffering strangers relies in part on ideas of who we are in relation to them and on nationally shaped views of the situations of distance suffering—US views of Darfur and South Sudan, for example, and UK views of Afghanistan. There is a tension and negotiation between the flagged and unflagged that merits more exploration.

Finally, it is worth remembering that nationalism and related concerns like fascism, racism, and intergroup relations are not the only thread running through Billig's work. He has written widely in social psychology, and very importantly on rhetoric. Without sustained discussion of either the history or theory of rhetoric, I have tried in this paper to bring out the importance of a rhetorical view of nationalism. This appears in *Banal Nationalism* in various places and ways; deepening social science engagement with rhetoric is of wide importance and strengthening it will enhance our ability to understand nationalism, appeals to identity, and projects of political mobilization.<sup>2</sup> Rhetorical analysis is a part of the so-called linguistic or discursive turn of the 1990s that has not taken off as much as the others. Also of value is exploring the link between rhetoric and language on the one hand and emotions on the other. As Billig wrote (though he said much less about affect in *Banal Nationalism* than in some of his other works), hatreds are commonly justified in the name of love (57). We could add that however justified, they often have roots in shame (Scheff and Retzinger 1991).

But let me close with two summary thoughts. Michael Billig's book, as I said at the outset, was a breath of fresh air. He offered a range of compelling insights and he offered help to those who would think a bit outside the box of conventional analyses of nationalism. One must hope both that Billig's book continues to be reprinted and read and that his subsequent interlocutors get the attention they richly deserve.

## Notes

1. Many have commented on methodological nationalism from Anthony Smith to Ulrich Beck, for whom it was an important focus of critique. The term was first used, so far as I know, by Herminio Martins in 'Time and Theory in Sociology', pp. 246–94 in J. Rex, ed.: *Approaches to Sociology*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974 (Martins 1974).

2. See Billig's other books, including especially *Arguing and Thinking: a Rhetorical Approach to Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, rev ed., 1996) (Billig 1996).

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