

The ideological work of the daily visual representations of nations

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ABSTRACT. This paper explores the ideological work performed by the inconspicuous flagging of the nation across four locations: Bucharest (Romania), Rotterdam (the Netherlands), Calgary (Canada) and Madrid (Spain). Using data collected between 2012 and 2016, the paper maps the use of the nation in outdoor signage across different urban landscapes. This mundane flagging of diverse nations performs a triple function: it reproduces the nation as a universal epistemic category, it entrenches mobility within the imaginary of contemporary urban life and it sanitises select mobilities and the power dynamics producing them. The ongoing use of the nation by different objects in our urban surroundings participates in the naturalisation of nationalism, furthering existing trends in the commercialisation of the nation and its reinvention as an innocuous brand addressing a global marketplace.

KEYWORDS: banal cosmopolitanism, banal nationalism, globalisation, visual studies

Introduction

As an international scholar, moving from one location to another, I am often struck by the intricate weaving of nations into the fabric of Western cities. Above entrances and on the rooftops of buildings, flags remind us of the country we are in. A myriad of billboards, advertising posters, commercial signs, car plates, souvenir shops or commercial window displays continue to invoke the idea of the nation and further inscribe it with new meanings. In a world of mobilities, what do these objects do to the very idea of the nation? The question matters, for the study of nations and nationalisms gravitates towards the political and the discursive, rather than the material and the mundane. Yet our material surroundings are the site where symbolic resources, objects and practices intersect in ways that often elude critical scrutiny. If, indeed, it is important that we gain an insight into how the structures of everyday life come to reproduce nationalism (Fox 2017; Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008), then the ideological work performed by our familiar surroundings needs to be brought forth as an object of analysis.

This paper thus adds to the discussion of when, where and how the nation becomes involved in the material infrastructure of urban life (Skey 2017). It maps some of the routines through which nations are implicated in four different urban settings (see Figure 1) by addressing the following empirical question: who flags which nation, how and for what purposes? Hardly tackled in the literature on nations and nationalism, this question elicits reflection on the ideological work performed by the use of the nation as an epistemic category – a category for ‘knowing’ places, people, objects, etc. – in a world increasingly concerned with the mobility of people, goods and ideas. After reviewing the theoretical implications of defining nationalism as an ideology, the paper presents empirical material collected across four different urban settings – Bucharest (Romania), Calgary (Canada), Madrid (Spain) and Rotterdam (the Netherlands). The flagging of nations in urban environments, it is argued, is an effective form of ideological reproduction, ‘fixing’ the meaning of the nation as a ‘natural’ epistemic category through which we come to know the social world and our position in it. Materialised in the form of various urban objects – commercial name plates, flags, advertisements, mailboxes, products, etc. – the nation enters the terrain of practical thought as a set of (positive) features allegedly mirroring social reality. Furthermore,

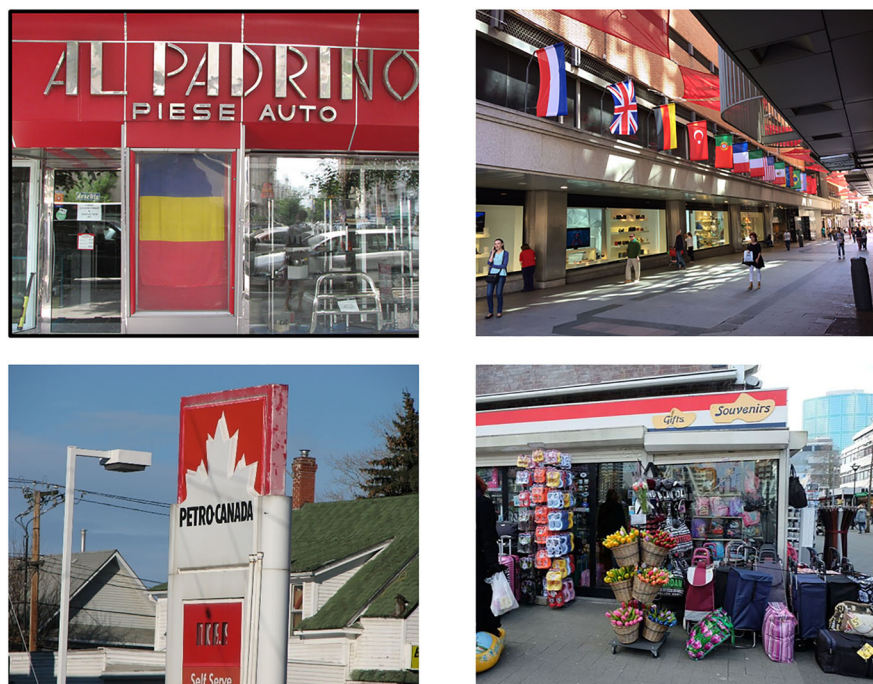


Figure 1. Visual markers of the nation (clockwise from top right: a car parts shop in Bucharest, an arts and culture retailer in Madrid, a gas station in Calgary and a souvenir shop in Rotterdam). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

as urban environments flag a diversity of nations, this process seemingly reconstructs a global world inside the nation. Importantly, this vision of the global remains an *inter*-national one with limited potential for the banal reproduction of a cosmopolitan orientation. Flagging different nations thus performs a triple function: it reproduces the nation as a universal epistemic category, it enshrines mobility as a *de facto* condition of the contemporary urban life and it reproduces as well as sanitises hierarchies of mobilities and nations.

Nationalism as a heterogeneous ideological field

Nationalism is approached here as an ideology (re)producing the very concept of the nation (Billig 1995; Calhoun 1997; Sutherland 2005). Originally regarded as a political ideology (Gellner 1983; Kedourie 1960), nationalism has been convincingly reframed as a world-view akin to religion or kinship – an explanation of the position of human beings in the social world and a source of comfort for their (modern) ontological anxieties (Anderson 1991: 10). Building on this argument, this paper further approaches nationalism through the lens of the work of British cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall. For Hall (1985: 99), ideologies are ‘frameworks of thinking’ or ‘ideas which people use to figure out how the social world works, what their place is in it, and what they *ought* to do’. Rejecting the simplistic (Marxist) view of ideology as a false consciousness masking the inequality of the relations of productions, he insisted that ideology is best understood as a ‘work of fixing meaning through establishing, by selection and combination, a chain of equivalences’ (Hall 1985: 93) that expands beyond the economic realm. The way we think is the battleground of power, as the ability to shape ‘perceptions, cognitions, and preferences in such a way that [we] accept [our] role in the existing order of things’ is central to the reproduction of existing social arrangements (Lukes 1975: 24 cited in Hall 1982: 65). Different social actors lay different claims to resources, attempting to fix their preferred meanings – meanings that would ease their access to and hold on power. Yet since states or elites are heterogeneous actors, the struggle over meaning also unfolds within their ranks.

Nationalism is a site of struggle over the particular set of ideas describing the nation. In this process, the latter is instituted as a taken-for-granted *re-presentation* (Hall 1997) of the social. This is achieved with the help of several key tenets that are generally stable: nations are said to have clear boundaries (both in terms of people and territory) and to be characterised by a culture (portrayed as shared systems of signification, belief, customs, etc.), temporal depth (historical presence) and common descent. Furthermore, nations are instituted as sovereign and intimately linked to a particular territory (Calhoun 1997). These tenets are rooted in an ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ logic, where the drawing of boundaries around the nation heightens and, on occasions, creates differences (ethnic, linguistic, religious, etc.). The latter, in particular, are positioned as a threat to the very existence of the nation. The world thus becomes an inter-

national struggle for self-determination and self-preservation, achieved via the policing of the physical borders and the symbolic boundaries. While these tenets constitute the structuring framework of nationalism, in practice, multiple chains of signification attempting to fix the meaning of the 'nation' coexist within the public sphere.

The question of ideological reproduction: from official to banal nationalism

The reproduction of ideologies rests upon them becoming 'taken for granted' (Hall 1985). In the case of nationalism, this happens via two inter-related dimensions: a top-down reproduction of ideas via state institutions as well as other institutionalised actors such as mass media (official nationalism), and their integration in everyday life via people's talk and performance but also via the mundane material infrastructure (banal nationalism).

Nation-building and nation-branding as top-down forms of nationalism

Gellner (1983: 33–4, 125) has described nationalism as necessary for the formation of new social bonds meeting the needs of modern industrial processes. Outlining the top-down reproduction thesis, he explained nation-building as a concerted, state or elite-driven effort to create 'standardized, homogeneous, centrally sustained high cultures' (Gellner 1983: 55). This is achieved through various cultural and economic policies which construct the idea of a nation (however defined in terms of its core features) and reinforce the nation–state–territory triad. Other social actors also contribute to nation-building efforts when it suits them. The corporate sector, e.g. makes use of the nation as a 'strategic difference' that can individualise otherwise generic goods/services in both internal and external markets (Thurlow and Aiello 2007).

The intensification of globalisation, premised upon the mobility of capital, goods and labour, complicates nation-building efforts. Nation-building policies have to make room for ideas, products, technologies, etc. from outside the nation-state. Under pressure to redefine their roles, states pursue 'increased marketization in order to make economic activities located with the national territory ... more competitive in international and transnational terms' (Cerny 1997: 262). As a result, nation-building practices also change. While states continue to unroll nation-building policies in traditional sectors such as education, they also opt for new practices that involve the brandification and commodification of nations to create competitive advantages for states on the global marketplace.

The practice of nation-branding – or the use of marketing techniques to develop and promote nations as brands (Aronczyk 2013; Kaneva 2011; Volcic and Andrejevic 2011) – is a notable example here. Although states have traditionally been involved in creating and protecting their image abroad, the

1990s marked the rapid popularisation of the idea that countries can be, and should be, marketed. Campaigns such as Cool Britannia, Incredible India or Creative Denmark sought to persuade external audiences to invest capital, develop demand for the 'nation's products' or industries or attract skilled labour and tourists. They produced new significations for the modern nation, linking it to a vision of the global as an environment of intense competition over scarce resources (Aronczyk 2013: 31). Via slogans, logos and an array of promotional materials creating a unitary visual representation, nation-branding campaigns attempted to fix the meaning of nations in simplistic and light-hearted ways. Furthermore, in becoming increasingly involved in the selling of products and services (Kania-Lundholm 2014), the nation turned into the promise of a competitive advantage in a global marketplace (Aronczyk 2009). Overall, these practices 'privilege the economic route to nationalism, meaning nationalism is increasingly reproduced by means of institutions and practices attached to the economic realm' (Castelló and Mihelj 2018: 6). Importantly, nation-branding practices de-politicise and de-historicise nations and nationalisms, remaining incompatible with the ideals of democracy (Aronczyk 2013; Kaneva 2011).

Bottom-up forms of nationalism: banal and everyday nationalism

While the increased commercialisation of the nation has been a focus of inquiry, particularly in the context of specific campaigns, less is known about how this makes its way into the urban fabric and how it intersects with other forms of nation-building. Much of the work in this direction has been spurred by Billig's (1995) seminal work on banal nationalism. Billig argued that the material arrangements of our everyday lives have been inscribed with national significance, resulting in the 'naturalisation' of the nation as a 'lived reality'. As hospitals and schools raise the national flag; streets are named after historical events or heroes, poets, politicians, etc. regarded as 'national icons'; identity papers record individuals' nationality, the explicit goal of 'building' the nation recedes into the background while the nation itself becomes a 'natural reflection' of the world around us (see also Edensor 2002).

Indeed, the problem of ideological reproduction cannot be divorced from mundane meaning-making processes. The top-down use of the nation by politicians or commercial enterprises provides discursive resources and subject positions which citizens are invited to use and occupy. Ideology, as Stuart Hall (1983: 60) has argued, works through the integration of these resources in everyday encounters with the world and with each other, gradually becoming taken-for-granted 'common sense'. In a similar way, Billig (1995: 38) has argued that the daily flaggings of the nation 'are so numerous and they are such a familiar part of the social environment, that they operate mindlessly, rather than mindfully (Langer, 1989). The remembering, not experienced as remembering, is, in fact, forgotten'.

While flags have been exemplars of this process, other artefacts, from stamps (Hoyo 2012), currency (Sørensen 2016; Wallach 2011), food (Hiroko 2008; Palmer 1998; Vackimes 2013) and airplanes (Thurlow and Aiello 2007) to bodies and landscapes (Palmer 1998), participate in this process. Yet in spite of this growing empirical interest in this direction, little work focuses on how these different objects come together, constituting an environment for daily life.

Criticism of the banal nationalism thesis points to its silence on how individuals actually make sense of these artefacts of banal nationalism. Advocates of the 'everyday nationalism' thesis (Antonisch 2016; Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008; Jones and Merriman 2009) argue that privileging the agency of everyday life provides 'a more complex picture of the world of nations than the one reproduced through the banality of nationalism' (Antonisch 2016: 40). As we delve into the minutiae of individual actions, agency appears paramount, further and further removed from the question of ideological reproduction. For example, the decision to purchase a certain brand may represent the concatenation of a variety of reasons and discursive resources, ranging from economic nationalism to convenience, personal style or mere indifference (Goode and Stroup 2015: 729). This line of argumentation is, however, less fruitful if everyday agency is not reconnected to the structural dimensions of everyday life (Hearn and Antonisch 2018). Billig's thesis of banal nationalism remains important, for it draws attention to how the nation is flagged on a daily basis by different social actors. This is not to deny that, at the level of individual interpretation, the nation may mean different things to different people (Billig 2009). Rather, as an analytical concept, banal nationalism focuses attention on the *process* of flagging – and particularly to its naturalisation. This process remains important in setting the nation as a context for individual meaning-making. In this sense, this paper insists on the importance of considering the ideological effects of the incessant 'flagging' of nations across a variety of urban objects across the landscape of everyday life.

One or more nations? From banal nationalism to banal cosmopolitanism

The banal nationalism thesis is also silent on the implications of globalisation (Skey 2009). The global is becoming a discursive resource involved in legitimising decision-making and mobilised by various actors, from states and commercial actors to individuals. In addition to that, global mobilities (Appadurai 1996) are also increasing the visibility of other nations within the local context, prompting suggestions of a shift from banal nationalism to banal cosmopolitanism (Szerszynski and Urry 2002, 2006; Szerszynski et al. 2000). Yet, such suggestions are hampered by the contradictory and often messy consequences of globalisation for the banal flagging of the nation. While we may be living in the 'age of cosmopolitization' (Beck 2004: 9), characterised by interdependence and increased awareness and presence of difference, it is still unclear what this actually means for people, not least because the

performance of cosmopolitan affinities and orientations remains structured by privilege, exclusion and exploitation (Millington 2016). Furthermore, as people 'move between more (or less) cosmopolitan attitudes and perspectives' (Skey 2012: 476), cosmopolitan orientations and the performance of national identities become interwoven (Hanquinet and Savage 2018; Meuleman and Savage 2013).

The literature suggests that cosmopolitanism is best understood as a continuum of different positions. Researchers are advised to look into the contexts within which particular forms of cosmopolitanism are deployed, asking how difference is flagged, by whom and for what purposes (Ong 2009; Skey 2012). Where the transformation of nationalism into a 'common sense' can be, to a great extent, tied to nation-building efforts, there are no comparable efforts for cosmopolitanism (the policies aimed at building a European identity constitute a notable exception here). Instead, the Other and cultural diversity seem to be mobilised primarily for commercial purposes, in differentiating goods and services. It is in this arena that the forms of economic nationalism discussed earlier – nation-branding or investing products with national significance – come to insert other nations into local contexts: 'A proliferation of companies now circulate the fantasy of global participation in their repertoire of marketing imagery ... more and more commodities invite us to take part in a global culture as we consume' (Stacey 2000: 98). Being marked by their association with a 'foreign' nation, such products are, perhaps paradoxically, also involved in signifying the 'global'. This repurposing of the discursive resources provided by nationalism for the global marketplace works by associating the nation with knowledge, qualities or skills that promise to deliver 'expertise', 'quality' and 'authenticity' (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014). Like nation-branding and economic nationalism practices, this further naturalises the nation as a category of experience, while simultaneously sanitising and repositioning it as a source of pride or of celebration of national difference manifested via individual consumption (Aronczyk 2013). By looking at how cosmopolitanism becomes signalled by the urban infrastructure, this paper contributes to further unpacking the ways in which commercialisation co-opts and rearticulates national difference.

Methodology

Given the paucity of empirical studies, this study took an exploratory approach to mapping the mundane reproduction of the nation in urban settings across four urban sites: Bucharest (Romania), Calgary (Canada), Madrid (Spain) and Rotterdam (the Netherlands). Exploration is needed when prior knowledge or pre-established methodological protocols are missing (Stebbins 2001). The phenomenon under study has to be approached in a way that retains 'flexibility in looking for data and open-mindedness about where to find them' (Stebbins 2001: 7). The driving question of the research design has been:

who displays the nation in public spaces, how and for what purposes? Thus, the focus has been not so much on the detailed analysis of select objects displaying the nation but rather in capturing their co-presence in public spaces.

This remains a difficult task, as urban settings are complex, consisting of not only a material infrastructure but also intangibles such as sounds, smells and movements. In such environments, 'making the implicitly national explicitly national' (Fox 2017: 40) is difficult. As this is supposed to work unconsciously, it does not easily lend itself to empirical observation. Furthermore, 'the boundaries between hot and banal vary from individual to individual and fluctuate in response to what's happening in the world' (Fox 2017: 40). As such, researchers may miss the ideological inscription within certain practices. Anticipating these challenges, this project focused on explicit references to the nation in public spaces (or visual markers of the nation). These were defined as the presence of textual references to nations (e.g. China/Chinese and Romania/Romanian) and flags (whether actual flags or images of flags) in urban spaces. Textual references to 'world', 'international' or 'global', along with maps or stylised images of the globe, and regional/supra-regional flags (namely, the European Union) were also included. These decisions did limit the observable material, reducing more complex practices of flagging nations to explicit visual references. However, in so doing, the data collection became more transparent.

Data were collected while touring the downtown areas¹ in the above-mentioned four locations (tours were done between 2012 and 2016, on a regular day,² and lasted 2–4 h per location). These are both touristic destinations and popular socialisation sites where locals go out for shopping, eating and entertainment. Tours entailed walking down the streets, without entering particular commercial spaces or public buildings.³ Each time a visual marker of the nation (as defined above) was noticed, it was photographed in its larger context (e.g. where it was used/displayed). Yet since the presence of such objects in the urban landscape is always changing, a complete record of them is impossible.

The collected visual markers were analysed by means of a surface-level content analysis that captured the actors displaying them; the types of objects that employed them and their location; the nations used; and the references to global, regional or international levels. By systematically recording these dimensions, the analysis provides an overview of the co-presence of these markers in public spaces. The frequency of such markers, along with their modality (Kress 1998), revealed patterns in the mundane presence of visual markers of the nation within and across the four locations, in line with the exploratory goal of this research project.

The data collection sites

The four data collection sites introduced variation in the data: Bucharest and Madrid are capitals with large populations (1,800,000 and 3,140,000

inhabitants, respectively). They are visually rich – a result of their administrative role and historical development. Rotterdam (population 620,000) is the second largest city in the Netherlands, while Calgary (population 1,000,000) is the third city in Canada. Compared to the two capitals, visual richness is lower here.

The four locations are also permeated by different flows of people. Romania has a low appeal for immigrant labour and people fleeing conflict areas, but Bucharest does attract white-collar professionals accompanying different foreign investments, as well as some tourists. Madrid, on the other hand, is an appealing destination for both labour and tourism. Migrants make up almost seventeen per cent of Madrid's population, most coming from Romania, South American countries and Morocco (Álvarez 2010). In the Netherlands, Rotterdam is growing into an increasingly appealing touristic destination. The biggest seaport in the world, Rotterdam, is described 'a real capital of multiculturalism; a bridge between Europe and the rest of the world' (Russo and van der Borg 2002: 634). Over half of Rotterdam's population is tied to diverse migration patterns that include former guest workers from Turkey and Morocco; flows from the former Dutch colonies; asylum seekers and refugees; and EU migration (Entzinger and Engbersen 2014). Immigration has also been central to the formation of the Canadian state, historically taking the form of racialised hierarchies of preferred immigrants. Chinese and Indian communities (the largest visible immigrant groups to date) have been affordable labour for the fast-developing industrialised economy. Over the past decade, Calgary has grown into a top destination for internal and external migration in Canada, fuelled by the development of the oil and gas industry. Immigration flows – mostly economic – come from the Philippines, India, China, Nigeria, Pakistan, Iran, the USA, the UK, Mexico and Republic of Korea (Calgary Economic Development 2015). Calgary itself becomes a touristic destination only for a month during the annual Stampede festival.

Patriotic pride runs high in Romania and Spain, where public discussions about the nation and its character are commonplace. Where Romanian nationalism is ethnic, preoccupied with the celebration of the Romanian nation and its 'exceptional' character, Spanish nationalism has to contend with the constant challenge of Basque and Catalan nationalisms (Muñoz 2009). The 'problem of Spain' (i.e. what constitutes the Spanish nation) is a hot topic of debate, often accompanied by strong feelings of national identification (Martínez-Herrera and Miley 2010; Muñoz 2009). This suggests an intense public display of national symbols across these two locations. In the Netherlands and Canada, ritualistic displays of national identity become important during important public events (soccer games in the Netherlands or Canada Day celebrations). This suggests that the presence of national markers beyond official institutions and outside public events should be minimal. Both countries have been showcased as tolerant societies, partly due to their political traditions rooted in cooperation and compromise. Yet where multiculturalism has become a feature of national identity in Canada, the Netherlands has

increasingly distanced itself from the multicultural ideal (Banting and Kymlicka 2010).

Flagging the nation in urban public spaces

The idea of the nation is constantly circulated and inscribed within urban public spaces (see Table 1). Three findings are discussed next: first, on a regular day, the nation is displayed by a multitude of objects. This diversity is driven by the business sector (more so than by public institutions and private citizens), naturalising the nation as a reflection of an alleged order of things. Second, while the nation is flagged for different purposes, this is done in a deceptively simplistic manner. Third, each urban context displays a diversity of nations, although in two of the places examined here, the local is flagged significantly more than other nations.

Weaving the nation into the urban fabric

On a regular day, the nations are flagged by various objects in our urban environment. In spite of Billig's (1995) evocative metaphor of the flag waving atop buildings, very few of the visual markers of the nation were actually found on rooftops. Instead, they were inconspicuously interwoven into the urban landscape within the visual field of passers-by. Echoing earlier observations on the increased reappropriation of the nation in the economic realm, the commercial sector was found to lead the banal flagging of the nation in urban settings (Table 2).

Restaurants, hotels and retail stores (mostly souvenirs and fashion stores) rely on references to the nation in their names, logos or publicity. The use of visual markers of the nation draws from long-standing marketing strategies linking nationality/ethnicity with the promise of a particular experience. Thus, restaurants invite us to taste 'authentic Indian cuisine' or 'traditional Italian food', while fashion and cosmetic stores advertise themselves as Italian or French. Hotels in downtown areas, usually catering to tourists, are recognisable from afar by the diversity of flags they display above their entrances. Next to hotels, souvenir stores are a staple in areas regularly visited by tourists. This was the case in Madrid and, to a lesser extent, Rotterdam.⁴ Souvenir shops are often marked by flags or references to the nation – and

Table 1. *The distribution of visual markers of the nation across the four research sites*

<i>Bucharest</i>	<i>Madrid</i>	<i>Calgary</i>	<i>Rotterdam</i>	<i>Total</i>
142	72	56	36	306

Table 2. *The distribution of visual markers of the nation across different social sectors*

	<i>Bucharest</i>	<i>Madrid</i>	<i>Rotterdam</i>	<i>Calgary</i>
Business sector	92	57	33	48
Public institutions	24	10	1	6
Private actors	26	5	2	1

so are many of the products on offer. For tourists, such objects have a metonymical function of standing in for the personal experience of a place.

Local consumption patterns also influence the presence of commercial actors in these downtown locations. Banks, telecommunication companies or tourism booking agencies incorporate the nation into their self-presentation. The nation thus remains a rich semantic and emotional reservoir for advertising and marketing purposes. In Calgary and Rotterdam, the nation is employed mostly by restaurants, followed at a considerable distance by banks and fashion stores. In Madrid, the tourism sector – a major user of visuals of nations – dominates the downtown areas. Bucharest, however, stands out in terms of the diversity of commercial actors making use of the nation. In addition to restaurants, travel agencies and retail stores, public notaries also perform an intense flagging of the Romanian nation. The public display of such offices, which are virtually everywhere in downtown Bucharest, is highly regulated. Each office is required by law to use the Romanian flag and to indicate its affiliation to national professional associations or institutions.⁵

The public sector continues to flag the nation. This plays out in the two capitals, where many public institutions are located in the downtown areas. Next to government and local administration buildings, these institutions also include postal services, theatres, hospitals, museums, educational institutions, public broadcasters, the police and the national lottery. The situation is different in Rotterdam and Calgary, which have fewer such public offices.

In Europe, car number plates were a ubiquitous reminder of both the nation and the EU. Like the display of flags by public institutions, car plates are regulated and standardised across Europe, containing the EU symbol and the country abbreviation. In Romania however, older number plate designs that contain only the national flag are still present. In Calgary, number plates display the name, symbol (a stylised rose) and slogan (Wild Rose Country) of the province, performing a complex flagging of overlapping understandings of the local, provincial, regional and national characteristic for Canadian identity (Leib 2011). Other displays of the nation included flags displayed by private residences or in cars' rear windshields. Bucharest was most diverse in terms of the types of actors relying upon visual markers of the nation. There, the name plates of several professional associations with offices in the toured areas include a reference to the country (e.g. the General Association of Engineers in

Romania). Next to these name plates, the national flags are usually present as well. Such references serve to not only locate but also establish these professional associations as specialised arms of the nation.

Visual markers of the nation were co-opted by various urban objects, ranging from the most common outdoor name plates, commercial window displays (including products, flags and posters) and advertising billboards to number plates, mailboxes, stickers or graffiti on walls, phone booths or lamp posts, badges on official uniforms or on passers-by's backpacks. Again, Bucharest stood out: here, the flagging of the nation co-opted a variety of urban objects – lamp posts, building walls and fences, urban art and monuments. To some extent, this reflects the lax application of public signage bylaws; to another, it mirrors the legitimacy of nationalism in the Romanian public sphere. Figure 2 showcases photographs of graffiti scribbled on the door of a small commercial enterprise and of bronze statues displayed in front of the national theatre. In both cases, the visual markers of the Romanian nation were not originally part of these objects, and, as such, they represent private expressions of national pride. The graffiti reads 'Bessarabia is Romania!', a reference to the myth of the 'Greater Romania' – a normative nationalist discourse on the 'rightful' geopolitical boundaries of the nation-state which would include today's Republic of Moldavia and some areas in Ukraine. This message, encountered more than once during the photographic tour, was part of an anonymous grassroots campaign to publicise the idea of unification via graffiti and other homemade visuals such as stickers and posters.

The deceptively simplistic flagging of the nation

The research design of the project focused the data collection process on words and flags (actual or stylised). When the nation was flagged via words, the latter performed four roles:



Figure 2. Visual markers of the nation in Bucharest: graffiti on the entrance to a commercial space (left) and the Romanian flag attached to a sculpture (right). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

- it indicated location or country of origin, including domain names for websites (e.g. France, Made in Spain);
- it qualified a product, service or quality (e.g. Italian restaurant, Swiss precision);
- it named a commercial entity or social actor (e.g. Canada Trust – bank and Japandroids – music band); or
- it addressed citizens as nationals (e.g. a poster displayed in a Calgary bank window addressed to US citizens).

The presence of both words and flags was often deceptively simplistic. In semiotics, visuals have been described as complex meaning-making resources: ‘a single picture may contain numerous highly sophisticated interrelated signs and multiple levels of meaning for many viewers or readers’ (Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver 2006: 50). This is certainly the case in advertising, which often juxtaposes different signs in order to create a persuasive message. This juxtaposition works to ‘fix’ the otherwise polysemic nature of signs by recommending a particular meaning (Barthes 1978: 39).

However, most of the visual markers of the nation collected here were part of simple semiotic objects: outdoor business name plates, products or flags. These forms of branding often lack elaborate representations. Like nation-branding practices, this simplicity fits their main purpose, which is to sell commodities rather than form communities (Bolin and Miazhevich 2018). Consequently, the nation appears as a simple, self-explanatory and clear-cut sign (see Figure 3). For instance, the outdoor name plate of a cosmetics retail store encountered in Madrid consisted of the brand name ‘Yves Rocher’ and the word ‘France’ printed on a pale green background (symbolising the brand’s promise of delivering natural beauty products). In Calgary, a pub’s name plate contains the name ‘Molly Malone’ (a reference to a well-known Irish folk song) on top of the words ‘Irish pub’. In such cases, the nation anchors (Barthes 1978) the possible meanings of the name by clarifying the type of establishment – and, by extension, the type of experience – on offer. While amenable to different interpretations, the nation is primarily a shorthand for stereotypical positive qualities which rub onto products or services.

In other cases, the nation is a part of the business name and accompanied by related signs such as flag colours or national symbols. These are slightly more complex semiotic objects. In Calgary, a gas station’s outdoor signage consists of the name PetroCanada printed against a stylised red and white maple leaf. The colours stand in for the Canadian flag, while the maple leaf is an icon of Canadian identity. Established in 1975 by the Canadian Parliament as a Crown Corporation, PetroCanada was part of the policy of economic nationalism advanced by the federal government as a solution to international dynamics of the time (Pratt 1985) and aimed at strengthening the ‘Canadian presence in the oil industry and identify[ing] new Canadian energy resources’ (Shaffer 2006: 67). The juxtaposition of words, flag colours and/or symbols associated with national identity (or, sometimes, with regional identities that



Figure 3. Outdoor business signs, from simple to more complex (clockwise from top left corner: cosmetics store in Madrid, pub in Calgary, retail store in Bucharest and gas station in Calgary). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

metonymically came to stand in for the nation, as in the case of the Sicilian *trinacria*) was common across all four locations – with restaurants (particularly Italian ones) standing out in opting for such promotional strategies. In Bucharest, the popular retail store ‘German Products’ used the German flag as a background for its outside name plate. The same name plate also described the type of products to be found in the store: electronics, appliances, house and garden items, clothes, gifts and toys. The reputation of Germany in Romania is that of a hard-working nation known for high-quality, reliable products. This promise extends over to the medley of products commercialised in the store. Somewhat confusingly, the store name plate also featured the logo ‘Scandinavian Experience’ (of the outdoor brand Björnson) plastered across the German flag. In this case, the region – Scandinavia – functions as a metaphor for products designed for extreme weather conditions. That this region has nothing to do with Germany matters little – the store’s promise of

‘German quality’ is reinforced by and simultaneously reinforces the value of a brand from a region that is less salient in the Romanian imaginary.

While flags are polysemic, they remain powerful semiotic resources in constructing an imagined community (Cerulo 1993; Eriksen 2007; Reichl 2004). On their own, or next to the name of a company or association, they remain recognised as the quintessential symbols of the nation-state (Bechhofer and McCrone 2012) and, on occasions, can arouse powerful emotional identifications with the nation (Schatz and Lavine 2007). On the connotative level, flags are amenable to multiple (though generally intersubjective) chains of signification (Reichl 2004). Yet this multiplicity of connotations is glossed over by their seemingly straightforward denotative layer: flags stand in for the nation, differentiating it from other nations. This makes them an ‘effective medium regardless of the level of literacy or political sophistication of collectivity’ (Smith 1975: 36).

Not one, but many nations: displaying inter-national diversity

Each of the urban contexts examined here displayed not just the local, but also other nations, adding to the ‘fantasy of global participation’ (Stacey 2000: 98) where the consumption of difference takes place within the familiar surroundings of our urban spaces.

Across the four research sites, different nations were flagged in different circumstances. In Bucharest and Madrid, we found more markers of the local than of other nations, while in Rotterdam and Calgary, the situation was reversed (see Table 3). The use of other nations – as well as of markers of the world – remained driven by the commercial sector. The alleged qualities of nations within local imaginaries work to distinguish otherwise generic products and services from each other, providing them with a competitive advantage. In Romania, presenting chocolate as Belgian or products as German draws from and further reproduces long-standing stereotypes associating *these* nations with quality and excellence. Furthermore, in cases where such stereotypes are generally absent – for instance, due to lack of direct contact between

Table 3. *The distribution of signs referencing the local nation vs. other nations (including references to the world, the global or the international) (percentages of total number of visual markers collected per location)*

	<i>Local nation</i>	<i>Other nations</i>
Bucharest	57	43
Madrid	55	45
Rotterdam	27	73
Calgary	30	70

the two groups – the Other becomes a promise of exotic difference. This is the case of non-European products that invoke unfamiliarity for the Western subject and promise that consumption will facilitate ‘a close encounter with a distant other’ (Stacey 2000: 104).

In all four locations, restaurants and food stores drew extensively from national symbolisms in order to construct the promise of an authentic taste and experience (Table 4). Restaurants’ names, logos or even façades made use of the nation to identify the type of products and the dining experience they offered. Iconic foods or beverages (e.g. jamon for Spain, cheese for Switzerland, pasta for Italy or polenta for Romania) were also present in the urban landscape on billboards or in commercial window displays. Figure 4 captures the billboard by the entrance of a food store in Bucharest advertising Greek feta cheese and olives, Italian cheese and salami, French foie gras, etc.

As a promise of an authentic experience, the nation functions like a brand that ‘conjoins a set of immaterial qualities to some set of commodity brand tokens, the latter offering a gateway to the former’ (Nakassis 2012 in Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014: 53). The generic nature of the features the nation comes to stand for – quality, precision, craftsmanship, or simply tasty produce and dishes – is glossed over. Instead, these features become an allegedly organic expression of the ‘inner essence’, ‘natural predisposition’ or ‘historical expertise’ of the nation. This also constructs a particular vision of the global as the sum of essentialised nations. As each of these nations appears to have its own speciality, the *inter*-national world becomes one of nationally defined specialisations and competencies. Furthermore, this recognition is constructed as universal. In suggesting that everyone would recognise and understand what ‘French’ or ‘Spanish’ mean when qualifying a product, these qualifiers are

Table 4. *The use of nations in restaurant and food advertisements across the four locations*

<i>Madrid</i>	<i>Bucharest</i>	<i>Rotterdam</i>	<i>Calgary</i>
American	Belgian	Chinese	Chinese
Argentinian	Bulgarian	French	Ethiopian
Indian	Chinese	Indian	French
Italian	French	Italian	Greek
Portuguese	German	Japanese	Indian
Spanish	Greek	Korean	Irish
Swiss	Irish	Surinamese	Italian
Thai	Norwegian	Turkish	Japanese
Turkish	Romanian	Vietnamese	Mexican
	Russian		Scottish
	Spanish		Thai
	Vietnamese		Vietnamese



Figure 4. Billboard for a Bucharest restaurant and food store featuring products from various countries. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

offered as mere reflections of an objective reality. This assumed that universal recognition is exclusively positive: German = high quality or Italian = fashionable. Individuals can, of course, easily add on their own meanings to these national stereotypes, albeit this is also a moment when negative stereotypes can become activated.

Yet in spite of this assumed universality, in each location, only certain nations can stand in for quality or for certain types of services. The diversity of nations flagged within each location reflects the inclusions/exclusions salient to the local national imaginary. At the same time, however, the latter is also transformed by a commercial agenda, often driven by the presence of new categories of consumers brought about by global flows of people: tourists and various types of immigrants. The retail sector is particularly sensitive to these flows, quickly sanitising and turning them into consumers looking for specific products or services. In Madrid and Bucharest, telecommunication companies cater to labour migration, albeit in different ways. A Madrid telecom offering cheap rates to Romania is a reminder of the presence of the Other within the body of the nation, while a Bucharest telecom offering cheap rates to Spain is a reminder of the new transnational ties between the two nations created by the exodus of Romanian labour. The flagging of different nations is thus implicated in the banal (re)production of different imaginaries of the global and of globalisation, contributing as much to the contradictory nature of these

processes as to the re-legitimation of the nation as a universal epistemic category. Commercial reasons contribute to the normalisation of difference within local nationalism but do so without undermining its basic tenets or its hegemonic position.

Discussion

Two decades ago, Billig opened up the discussion of a previously ignored aspect of nationalism: the ideological role of its mundane reproduction. Nationalism, he proposed, was not merely a political doctrine legitimising geopolitical boundaries but a ‘consciousness of nationhood’ (Billig 1995: 4). In Western nations, nationalism had become the hegemonic ‘common sense’, ‘ingrained in unreflexive patterns of social life, stitched into the experience and the assumptions of the everyday’ (Edensor 2002: 10). On a daily basis, the mundane flagging of the nation made nationalism an ‘endemic condition’ (Billig 1995: 6). In this section, I discuss how the shaping of our urban surroundings participates in the naturalisation of nationalism.

The comparative dimension of this project suggests that the flagging of nations is itself influenced by various factors, among which the visual richness resulting from urban design, the flows of people permeating different locations and the salience of nationalism in the public sphere. Across the four locations discussed here, Bucharest stood out in terms of the quantity of visual markers of the nation and the diversity of actors deploying it. Most of them were markers of the Romanian nation, addressing locals. This should not be surprising, as Romanian political and religious elites have, over the past decades, fuelled and normalised nationalism in the public sphere. While Madrid also displayed more references to Spain, they addressed tourists rather than locals.

The similarities across the four locations are more telling, suggesting patterns in the reproduction of contemporary nationalisms. While public institutions continue to insert the nation into the urban infrastructure of everyday life, the participation of other social actors further intensifies this process. The nation is now flagged primarily by economic actors and, to a lesser extent, professional associations, non-governmental organisations, etc. They attach the ‘nation’ to a diverse range of urban objects such as commercial name plates, flags, billboards and mailboxes. As Hearn and Antonisch (2018: 598) note, ‘while the everyday enactment of nationalism isn’t prescribed by social structure, it is framed and shaped by more immediate forms of social organisations that tie people into such structures’. In a similar vein, the diverse use of the nation in urban settings heightens nationalism’s salience as a ‘natural’ interpretive frame for our mundane sociality – strolling by commercial windows display, purchasing goods and experiencing a night out. The lay nature of these actors is significant, as it uproots the ‘nation’ from the sphere of politics and firmly moves it into the domain of consumption and individual lifestyle

choices. This represents a continuation of nation-branding projects and economic nationalism policies, as diverse social actors participate in the 'offload[ing] of the process of national identity-building onto the private sector' (Volcic and Andrejevic 2011: 600).

What are the ideological consequences of turning the nation into a catchy symbol, devoid of historical baggage and cleaned of any potential negatives (Marat 2009; Schroter and Schwekendiek 2015)? Like nation-branding, the visual markers of the nation promise 'happy nations' and innocuous 'soft nationalisms' that unite rather than divide. The adoption of the nation as a self-explanatory and powerful semantic resource for advertising cleans it of internal disagreement, effectively rendering the ideological struggle over meaning invisible. The use of 'Italy' in 'Italian restaurant' appears as merely a qualifier of the type of cuisine and experience to be expected of a particular commercial actor. When jamon is advertised as Spanish, the latter works as descriptor whose only role seems to be that of linking the origin to the quality of the product. While the passer-by can add her own semantic associations to 'Italy' or 'Spain', these signs interpellate her as a consumer, calling upon her to think of only the product. The nation, in this context, requires merely a simplistic decoding: a promise of freshness for pasta, pizzas and risottos in a lively, family-like social setting or a promise of quality for cured meat.

This furthers larger trends of depoliticising and sanitising the 'nation', while retaining and further enticing its emotional appeal (Stephens 2016). In being used to name, locate or explicate (products or services), the 'nation' appears to be simply asserted. The discursive struggle over the 'we' of the nation, linking it to a common history, territory, ethnicity, language, politics, etc., disappears. Traditionally, the latter have been used in legitimising different moral standards for the members of the nation vs. the Other. But in the urban settings investigated here, the 'we' of the nation is no longer articulated in relation to difference; it no longer appears to be involved in marginalising, excluding, discriminating or erasing the Other. Instead, the nation is reduced to familiar stereotypical traits such as luxury, taste, quality, precision or authenticity evoking warm emotions. The nation becomes a catalogue of positive qualities from which social actors – whether businesses or consumers – are invited to choose. The choice of one nation over another presents itself as solely an outcome of individual tastes and preferences – further contributing to the masking of structural and historical inequalities and tensions specific to contemporary neoliberal rhetoric (Gill 2014; Giroux 2003; Redclift 2014). Yet such choices are anchored in the nation's enduring capacity to mobilise affect. A 'nation's' ability to 'sell' depends on the positive feelings it evokes in specific political and historical contexts. In Romania, e.g. luxury can be French, but not Roma – and this cannot be divorced from the long history of dislike, prejudice and discrimination against the latter. Not all nations can mobilise positive associations in all locations: only select ones can provide strategies of distinction (Veblen 1973) for their consumers.

The ‘process of economization of the social’ thus takes over the ‘articulation and communication of nationhood’ (Kania-Lundholm 2014: 611). Nationalism sheds its darkness, turning into a means of naming, locating or explicating. While passers-by may not recognise the strategic intent behind the commercial flagging of nations, they are nonetheless interpellated as national subjects – and the diversity of social actors using the nation makes this interpellation ubiquitous. Like money, the nation becomes omnipresent in everyday life. Money, Hall (1983) explained, is the mediator of our understanding of the economic system, an otherwise abstract term. The circulation of money becomes ‘*the* most immediate, daily, and universal experience of the economic system for everyone. It is therefore not surprising that we take the market for granted, do not question what makes it possible, what it is founded or premised on’ (Hall 1983: 75). In a similar vein, ubiquity turns the nation into a hegemonic epistemic category, making it difficult to imagine viable, alternative forms of sociopolitical organisation. In that sense, our material urban surroundings narrow down the social imaginaries implicated in the very constitution of the social (Castoriadis 1987).

Last, but not least, our urban environments expose us to not just one but many nations. Downtown areas turn into huge shopping malls where each nation has its own stall. This ‘globalization of nationality’ (Thurlow and Jaworski 2003: 600) signals, above all, a world of mobility – of goods, people, tastes, etc. – facilitating ‘repeated encounters with difference in the banality of everyday life’ (Ong 2009: 460). The flagging of other nations, however, obscures barriers and hierarchies within mobilities. The telecommunication companies in Madrid, adorned with flags of Latin American countries or Romania, are linked to the specific flows of people present in this location but provide no context for the tensions surrounding them. They can equally appeal to migrant labour and tourists from these regions, blurring the difference between them. Furthermore, everyone can allegedly partake in their own national identity, regardless of location (as the customer can enjoy customised service – e.g. in their own language and for their own currency). Yet that is certainly not the case for everyone: immigration is an increasingly contentious issue in Europe, with ethnic and religious groups often singled out and marginalised when expressing their cultural identity. Even in Canada, where immigration and multiculturalism are implicated in the very definition of the nation, some groups are more welcomed than others.

The flagging of nations in urban settings invites ‘consumers to become “global” by participating in consumption of the Other. This constitutes consumers as “global subjects”, promising mobility through consumption’ (Stacey 2000: 141). This process emphasises interconnections between, and exchanges across, national spaces (Szerszynski et al. 2000), fostering a cosmopolitan orientation towards nations that have a lot to offer (e.g. the savour of Italian cuisine or the precision of Swiss watches). Others are lumped together, marked by their exoticism (Stacey 2000) or by their association with immigration. Some nations are simply missing from the local articulations of the global,

as they cannot mobilise consumption. Thus, imagining the global remains shaped as much by long-standing historical patterns, as by the commercial interests pushing for new and positive appropriations of nations with a profit-making potential.

To what extent can these commercial forces rearrange and produce new chains of significance within particular nationalisms? The flagging of nations to sell products and services ‘tames’ the experience of diversity. Enjoying Belgian chocolates or Spanish shoes in Romania is more about safe, personal enjoyment and performance of social status than acquiring skills for dealing with cultural difference. On the other hand, changes do take place: both tourists and ‘ethnic-Dutch’ in Rotterdam can enjoy the Turkish restaurants without knowing about, or necessarily positioning them as a reminder of, the contentious presence of Turkish labour in the Netherlands. Old signification chains can be broken, and new ones can be circulated. Yet the co-presence of multiple nations on offer makes it difficult to notice and to remember that hierarchies of nations exist and matter in the national imaginaries. This ‘soft cosmopolitanism’ has not, as of yet, proven able to resist and challenge reactionary forms of nationalism (Calhoun 2002: 887–8). Whether and how the new chains of signification spill over from consumption into political engagement remains an open question.

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Endnotes

1 The researcher has lived in these locations for longer periods of time, gaining cultural familiarity with these spaces. The question of what makes a location popular – or rather, for whom it is popular – involves normative judgements that can hardly be separated from the position of the speaker. Nevertheless, the areas surveyed in this project overlap with commonly held assumptions among both tourists and locals as to what constitutes a ‘downtown’ part of the city. Thus, the Bucharest tour took place on the main boulevards connecting Piata Unirii and Piata Victoriei; the Calgary tour took place around 17th Avenue and Kensington neighbourhood; the Madrid tour explored the area delimited by Opera, Calle de Arsenal, Puerta del Sol, Gran Via and Plaza de España; and finally, the Rotterdam tour took place in the area delimited by Rotterdam Centraal, Museum Park, Witte de Withstraat and Blaak. Skey (2017) suggests that such areas, while not representative of the city as a whole, are visually rich, which makes them particularly relevant to this project.

2 A regular day here means that there were no special events that would intensify the flagging of the nation in such spaces (for instance, electoral periods or national holidays).

3 In Rotterdam, the data collection was undertaken by a research assistant. To ensure consistency across the locations, the tour was put together by the researcher. Furthermore, the assistant was

instructed to look for textual references to the nation/world and flags (whether actual flags or images of) and was shown a sample of photos taken in the previous tours.

4 While Bucharest and Calgary have their own smaller touristic influxes, fewer souvenir shops were present in the toured areas.

5 Notaries are private actors providing public services such as confirming the authenticity of public documents, providing power of attorney and witnessing selling/buying or inheritance transactions between private individuals.

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