



Karner, Christian (2014) Signs of the nation: resisting globalization? In: *Znakowe wartosci kultury*. WUW Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warsaw, pp. 157-174. ISBN 978-83-235-1904-1

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Christian Karner



Signs of the Nation: Resisting Globalization?

Across large parts of Europe, and beyond, we are currently witnessing a curious phenomenon of what may be most succinctly described as a semiotic merging of hitherto arguably separate social domains: those of consumer capitalism, on one hand, and of various symbolisms of national identity, history and (self-)ascription on the other. Prominent manifestations of this include what has come to be called „nation branding” (Dinnie 2007). This is the phenomenon of nation-states now concerning themselves particularly with their economic image and employing brand consultants, to measure and rank the associations their „people, products, governments, culture, education, tourist attractions, and lifestyle” trigger internationally (<http://www.simonanholt.com>), to ascertain possible business benefits. In its unapologetically instrumentalist register with singularly economic undertones this is a marked departure from nation-states’ well-known but much older pre-occupation with their „world position” (Spillman 1997), or wider standing in the international order, that was formerly tied to geo-political importance, historical image and derived symbolic status. Yet more poignantly, we are now surrounded by national flags not just in their „traditional” spaces (e.g. flag posts, international borders, official documents and buildings) but we see them being „worn” and „carried” as markers – of exactly what I will attempt to illuminate in this paper – on t-shirts, bags and consumer items of many other kinds. These, and this is my starting assumption, are evocations of the nation qualitatively different from, for example, an oath of allegiance being sworn or a national anthem being sung, as the latter are largely non-commodified cultural-political practices. *What, then, is this apparent blurring of the world of commodities and the domain of national symbolism all about, how might we read it, and which theoretical and methodological tools might help us in the process?* In what follows, I discuss these questions by drawing on a series of discursive-visual „snapshots” from various European contexts, while focusing on the theoretical work demanded by this curious blurring of „the national” and „the bought and sold”.

In wider conceptual terms, and keeping with the overall spirit of this volume, this essay also offers some inter-disciplinary reflections on the value of signs, and the concept of sign values, as mirrors of social formations, identities and changes. In doing so, this essay takes Jean Baudrillard's work as a point of departure, but regards it as „merely” one theoretical node in a wider conceptual web to be woven in what follows. I begin by theoretically contextualizing my subsequent exploration of how the conspicuous blurring of consumerist and national(ist)-symbolic practices can be approached methodologically and conceptually. Central to my discussion is the question as to which existing social and cultural theories help illuminate what turn out to be two very different drivers of the blurring of national symbols and commodities: first, the instrumentalist, arguably distinctly late capitalist (Jameson 1991) marketization of historically entrenched, emotionally charged symbols; second, the bottom-up evocation of a purportedly formerly non-commodified realm (e.g. the reified nation) as a means of criticizing the perceived consequences of contemporary globalization.

Theoretical Contextualization

As a first step in this discussion I propose to (re)turn to three seminal theoretical threads with a view to indicating how they may be productively interwoven in the service of an analysis of commodification, the effects of social crises, and the characteristics of contemporary globalization.

With his influential reading of economic anthropology and the historical schematization he derives from it, Jean Baudrillard provides a pertinent point of conceptual departure for my later argument:

Alluding to primitive [sic!] societies is undoubtedly dangerous – it is nonetheless necessary to recall that originally the consumption of goods ... does not answer to an individual economy of needs but is a social function of prestige and hierarchical distribution ... Goods and objects must necessarily be produced and exchanged (sometimes in the form of violent destruction) in order that the social hierarchy be manifest (Baudrillard 1981: 30).

Invoking Malinowski, Baudrillard thus observes a historically clear, though now vanished category distinction between „economic function and sign function”; while the former characterizes conventional commercial activity, the latter was epitomized by „symbolic exchanges” – such as the Trobrianders' *kula*, the closely scripted circulation of ritual objects – that both organized and reflected a „social system of values and status”. The distinction between economic and sign functions, which we may paraphrase as describing the differences between markets and traditional social hierarchies respectively, is complemented by a further seminal opposition in Baudrillard's work (1993): namely

that between the *semiotic order* of commodity exchange on one hand, and the *symbolic order* of gift-exchange and other pre-capitalist, socially „embedded” (Polanyi 2001) economic mechanisms on the other. As Mike Gane illustrates, Baudrillard concurs with Marcel Mauss in insisting on „the superiority of the symbolic order over the semiotic order (the obligation of gift over the cash nexus) while witnessing the apparent destruction of the former by the latter”; what is more, Baudrillard considers Marx’s distinction between use- and exchange value insufficiently „radical” and insists on the purportedly more fundamental conceptual contrast between symbolic exchange and commodity exchange (Gane 1993: x). The full heuristic force of this opposition emerges from Baudrillard’s historical reading, proposing that although „symbolic exchange is no longer the organizing principle of modern society”, contemporary life is nonetheless still „haunted” by the symbolic, its „hark[ing] back to primitive formations” and its „radical utopia ... [that] intrude[s] at every level of contemporary society” (Baudrillard 1993: 1).

While Baudrillard, to whom we shall return in due course, arguably provides analytical purchase with regard to the peculiarities of contemporary consumer society, a second theoretical strand offers wider insights into structural changes and dislocations that give rise not only to such nostalgic „hauntings” and utopian intrusions but to a more general state of collective reflexivity and mobilization. This second theoretical thread is provided by Pierre Bourdieu’s early sociology. In *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu (1977: 72–79) famously formulates his conceptualization of the habitus as consisting of the „durable, transposable dispositions”, „cognitive and motivating structures”, „schemes of thought”, perception and appreciation that facilitate „regulated improvisation”. Perhaps best thought of everyday cultural practice, and as such both informed by history and enabling structural reproduction, the habitus is closely related to doxa, or the „universe of the undiscussed”. It is there that Bourdieu locates structural transformations and the potential for their contestation. In moments of „objective crisis”, Bourdieu (1977: 168–169) postulates, doxa – the realm of cultural commonsense – is potentially transformed into a politicized domain of reflection, collective debate, and competing mobilizations; in periods of dislocation or far-reaching change, „when the social world loses its character as a natural phenomenon”, a previously taken-for-granted cultural doxa is thus turned into a „universe of competing discourses”. Superimposing Bourdieu on Baudrillard, then, one might read the displacement, or colonization, of the symbolic by the semiotic order typical of our „liquid modern” (Bauman 2000) consumer society as creating crises, and the symbolic „hauntings” observed by Baudrillard as amongst the discursive reactions generated by the consciousness-raising effects of such crises. Or, in the empirical terms of my later discussion, one may query if some appearances of national

symbols in the domain of markets and commodities are indicative of a crisis-induced „harking back” to an older, increasingly precarious symbolic order.

The *doxa-crisis-discourse* model of change and reactions to it also has implications with regard to wider dimensions and experiences of globalization. My third pertinent theoretical strand is derived from Arjun Appadurai’s (1990: 308) understanding of globalization as entailing a series of „global flows” (i.e. *technoscapes*, *mediascapes*, *financascapes*, *ideoscapes*, *ethnoscapes*). Crucially, Appadurai recognizes that the transnational circulation of technology, media messages, capital, ideas/images/ideologies, and people has not resulted in cultural standardization but, on the contrary, in tensions between the global and the local, in the „mutual cannibalization” of the forces of homogeneity and heterogeneity. Turning to select empirical examples next, this raises intriguing questions: How does this „contest of sameness and difference” (Appadurai 1990: 308) manifest in the cultural realm of signs? What role do various prominent national signs play here? How explicit or subtle, reflexive or non-reflexive is such semiotic «cannibalization»?

Commodifying the national?

At this point, and to begin to address the questions just raised, the following „snapshots” appear to offer some of the required empirical momentum.

Sport has long been recognized as a chief realm, within which national identities are defined, celebrated, performed and remembered (e.g. Edensor 2002: 78). Continuing my introductory remarks I would now like to formulate the follow-on question as to what, if anything, happens to core symbols of national identity – and those who display or encounter them – when they are (re)appropriated for corporate, advertising purposes? There is no present shortage of such seeming commodification of national symbolisms. The particular example to be introduced here, and to which I shall return again later, is that of the appropriation of Austria’s national flag by one of the country’s largest beer breweries – *Stiegl*, whose company colours match the Alpine Republic’s national colours (i.e. red-white-red). *Stiegl*’s online shop offers a wide range of commodities in red, or red-white-red: from beer-related items, to clothing (e.g. hats, headbands, winter jackets, watches, sunglasses, t-shirts), to sports items (e.g. footballs, „retro” Austrian football tops); and, most revealingly, a modified Austrian flag, bearing *Stiegl*’s brand logo at the heart of the flag’s central white stripe (<https://www.stiegl.at/eng/de/onlineshop/catalog/view/product/14/317/>). Advertised as an Austrian skiers’ supporter’s item, and going for € 1.50, the item has also made regular and widespread appearances at home fixtures of the national football team, being waved by many in the crowds

of patriotic supporters. What, then, are we to make of a flag that is clearly recognizable as the national flag and encountered in a traditional setting for the performative celebration and assertion of national identities (i.e. amongst [home] supporters at international football matches), but to which, seemingly, a particular brand is also laying claim?

A second snapshot, or perhaps more accurately a constant stream of such snapshots, is provided by the Union Jack as a currently near-ubiquitous feature on a vast range of consumer items. What is remarkable about this is two-fold: first, the fact that Union-Jack-bearing bags, t-shirts etc. can be spotted with remarkable regularity not only across the UK but also in cities on the continental side of the English channel; in the absence of „consumer ethnographies” one can only speculate if such items may currently carry connotations of *cool Britannia*, or assumed British trendiness, for their non-British users and customers. Second, the conspicuous display of the Union Jack on diverse kinds of fashion items (e.g. from jumpers and jackets to handbags, trousers, umbrellas, mobile phone cases etc.) constitutes a further significant departure: while very particular items of material culture (e.g. the red phone box), industries (e.g. the „northern” factories of the Industrial Revolution), or brands (e.g. Rolls Royce, the Mini) have a long history of close association with Britain (Edensor 2002: 176–185), the current semiotic wave of commodified Union Jacks is both quantitatively and qualitatively different – insofar as the flag now pops up on just about any purportedly fashionable commodity, whatever its brand, place of production, or geographically intended consumer audience.

We begin to get a possible analytical handle on these snapshots by considering another seminal argument formulated by Arjun Appadurai (1988: 13, *italics added*), which replaces reified (/fetishizing) definitions of particular objects as intrinsic commodities with an alternative focus on „the *commodity situation* in the social life of any ‘thing’ ... [when] its exchangeability ... [becomes] its socially relevant feature”. The significance of this approach to our present concerns becomes apparent in Igor Kopytoff’s elaborations on „the cultural biography of things” that recognizes „commoditization as a process”. Kopytoff observes that although out of the „total range of available things” any given society considers only some appropriate as existing or potential commodities, such definitions are subject to change over time. Moreover, Kopytoff proposes a diametrical opposition between *commoditization* and *culture*: while the former „homogenizes value”, culture – here defined in the Durkheimian sense as a „sacralizing” force – resists commoditization by „singularizing” some things as being „set apart” and hence precluded from the „potential onrush” of the market; this applies, Kopytoff suggests, to „the symbolic inventory of a society: public land ... state art collections, the paraphernalia of political power, royal insignia, ritual objects and so on” (Kopytoff, 1988: 64: 73). In light of these

arguments, our above snapshots – *Stiegl's* Austrian flag and the commodified Union Jack – might be read as indicating that national flags have now entered into a commodity situation, with national cultures no longer able to resist the onrush of the global market. Such a reading would add to Fredric Jameson's (1991) influential definition of late capitalism as characterized by the relentless commodification of formerly extra-economic realms (i.e. nature and the unconscious) (also see Karner 2008: 164). This then seems to suggest that national symbols are perhaps next in line to being „colonized” by multinational capital.

Suggestive as this may appear, there are at least two reasons why our snapshots warrant closer examination and why they, and many others like them, may also be subject to alternative interpretations or at least pose further questions. The first indication is grounded in key semiotic insights concerning the „polysemic character of complex communication” (Tudor 1999: 66). With regard to national identities, such polysemy has been demonstrated most conclusively by Molly Andrews' (2007) oral history revealing the contrasting meanings attached to the American flag, and uses made of it, by advocates and opponents of the first Gulf War respectively. Projected back onto my present examples, this ultimately makes a case for „reception studies” investigating how citizens-cum-consumers actually *decode* (Hall 1980) the commodified versions of their (or others') national flags. However, this goes beyond the scope of the present paper and therefore has to remain the object of important future research. The second dimension that complicates the above reading of *Stiegl's* (Austrian) flag and the ubiquitously „branded” Union Jack is the question of reflexivity or its absence. In his seminal work on *Banal Nationalism*, Michael Billig alerts us to how taken-for-granted aspects of the everyday are instrumental to the on-going and largely unnoticed reproduction of a world of nation-states. Prominent amongst such quotidian forms of banal nationalism are the daily, ubiquitous but rarely reflexive „waving of flags” that surround us all and a range of „linguistically microscopic ... familiar habits of language”, such as forms of linguistic *deixis* that operate „beyond conscious awareness” and reproduce social boundaries through the habitual use of personal pronouns (we, they, us, them) or other means of „rhetorical pointing” at „here” as opposed to „there” (Billig 1995: 37–43; 94). What is more, Billig (1995: 44) also draws attention to the difference and relationship between such everyday, banal nationalism and moments of „hot nationalist passion” respectively. The latter constitutes a form of explicit, self-conscious „social closure” (Wimmer 2004: 6), a hardening of institutional boundaries and deliberate intensification of social and symbolic exclusions imposed on „the other”. In terms of our earlier snapshots, this raises important questions as to whether those particular flags are being „woven”, „worn” and „carried” in acts of barely noticed banal nationalism or, alternatively, if they constitute self-aware expressions of hot nationalist pride.

Further, and as crucially, what are the social conditions conducive to banal nationalism turning „hot”? Or in Bourdieu’s earlier-quoted terminology, what are the specific crises transforming doxa, including people’s taken-for-granted and routinely practiced national identities, into competing discourses that include forms of hot nationalism?

... Or appealing to that which lies beyond the market?

While I shall return to the issues just raised in due course, let me next introduce another empirical snapshot, one that indeed condenses the effects of crises as catalysts for reflexive mobilizations of national identifications and solidarities. However, this particular phenomenon also suggests that „the nation” is not only potentially subject to late capitalist commodification, as suggested by the interpretation sketched above, but that it can serve as a vehicle and symbol of critique of, and resistance against, global market forces.

This is shown by current, near pan-European campaigns for „fair milk” or, more accurately, for viable milk prices to be paid to local farmers. Coordinated by the European Milk Board (<http://www.europeanmilkboard.org>) and its national members, the „fair milk” campaign reacts against the steady decline in milk prices since 2001, aggravated by rising production costs, which have jointly driven thousands of farmers across Europe out of business (<http://www.fairmilk.org/de/fairmilk/warum-kommt-die-faire-milch.html>); the campaign calls for fairer prices – to enable currently struggling farmers to continue, to safeguard „unique agricultural land” and scenery, and to sustain rural life across Europe, its high quality dairy production, and countries’ „food sovereignty” (<http://www.fairmilk.org/de/fairmilk/was-bewirkt-die-faire-milch.html>). On a symbolic level, the „fair milk” campaign centres on life-sized figures of the „plastic cow Faironika”, which can be spotted on fields and at protests across Europe, significantly always painted in its respective national colours (e.g. red-white-green in Italy, blue-yellow in Sweden etc.), and which signifies farmers’ calls for sustainable prices and the associated future benefits to local producers, consumers and environments (<http://www.fairmilk.org/de/fairmilk/was-ist-die-faire-milch.html>). Crucially, the respective national flags painted on *Faironikas* across the continent can here not be read as indicative of a widening commodification of all things national: on the contrary, in these cases national symbolism works to invoke extra-economic solidarities and identifications and to channel discontent with, and opposition to, the consequences of seemingly unfettered, transnational market forces. In the terms of my theoretical point of departure, one may therefore propose that fair milk campaigns and the national flags they utilise provide another instance of what Baudrillard describes

as now marginalized symbolic orders still „haunting”, or „intruding” upon, contemporary consumer society.

Conceptually relevant here is Stephen Gudeman’s understanding of any economy as being shaped by a dialectical *tension*, whose specific forms and manifestations change with time and context, between the „domain of the market” and the „domain of mutuality”:

Shot through ... with competition *and* mutuality, with antagonism *and* community, economy encompasses more than most economists ... allow, and is more complex than most anthropologists realize ... In part, individuals live from the competitive trade of goods, services and money that are separated or alienated from enduring relationships ... But people also live from goods and services that make, mediate, and maintain social relationships. Through *mutuality or community* things and services are secured and allocated, by means of continuing ties, such as taxation and redistribution; through cooperation in kinship groups, households, and other groupings. (Gudeman 2012; 4–5, *first two italics added*).

Gudeman’s opposition between impersonal markets and enduring, mutual relations of support and solidarity enables us to read phenomena like *Faironika* and their appeals to long-established, national identifications (i.e. mutuality) in a struggle against the local consequences global market conditions, relations and forces. However, localities and nations are not, or no longer, alone in appealing to or making use of the „value domain of mutuality”. Discursive and semiotic invocations of the latter can indeed also be observed as „top-down-” or „from-the-outside-in” strategies. This is demonstrated by the fact that multinational corporations and brands have long discovered the national pull. To provide but one relevant illustration, McDonald’s Austria’s 2011 „report on sustainability” – not a concept the company’s critics tend to credit fast-food giant McDonald’s with – is worth mentioning. In a noteworthy semiotic form of national *deixis* (Billig 1995), the report’s cover depicts a map of Austria. From there, it proceeds to tell the company branch’s story and ethos as having been „born in the USA”, and now being „made in Austria”, as „thinking globally, [and] acting locally”. McDonald’s Austria thus here portrays itself as a key investor in all things Austrian, as being committed to „rules for fair dealings with one another”, as a „major employer in the regions”, as showing social and environmental responsibility, and as being open to „dialogue and critical discourse” (McDonald’s Austria 2011: 6–7, 13, 16; *my translations*). Whether an act of impression management in response to the company’s critics or not, what matters for our present purposes is the fact that we here encounter a multinational corporation deliberately tapping into, as it has done for a number of years, and – one needs to acknowledge – supporting a mutuality domain: „[McDonald’s is] a major partner for Austria’s agriculture ... [supporting] sustainable and regional production ... beef, [now free-range] eggs, milk, bread and potatoes are 100% Austrian ... we are the biggest gastronomical

partner for Austria's farmers" (McDonald's Austria 2011: 22, *my translations*). Such discursive and institutional entanglements between McDonald's and a national domain of mutuality notwithstanding, it is of course also clear that we are here witnessing a powerful, global market actor whose primary goals are inevitably set by business-considerations.

Invocations of extra-economic ties and responsibilities are thus more typically articulated in „bottom-up fashion", by the (relatively) disempowered or undeniably marginalized, whose appeals to the mutuality domain are less likely to work within, but more likely to actively criticize and oppose, the existing parameters set by global markets and their auxiliary institutions and actors. This is powerfully illustrated by the *Occupy Movement*, described as the „first worldwide postmodern uprising" (Brucato 2012: 77), one of whose chief advocates portrays the movement's critique of widening political and economic inequalities and resistance against neoliberalism as follows:

The Occupy movement has been repeatedly accused of being a protest without a cause. This is flagrantly false. Its cause is the reform of the political economy of global capitalism ... [T]he main demands are clear enough: Politics in the hands of the 99 percent, not of the 1 percent that control the large corporations ... Rebuilding a mixed economy with a proper balance of markets and governments ... Shifting public funds into training and education so that young people can develop the skills needed for gainful employment ... Taxing the rich and the financial sector ... Building or rebuilding a social safety net and active labor market policies ... Reinventing key services, such as health and education, to bring them within reach of everybody (Sachs 2012: 466; 473).

What is particularly noteworthy here is two-fold: first, the clear appeals to revive, re-invigorate or create mutuality domains that are, in this reading, depleted by unfettered market relations and the disempowerment of both governments and the vast majority of people; second, even though there are no national symbols at work here, this account nonetheless invokes political functions and provisions – the collection of taxes, education, social welfare etc. – that are generally those of the (nation-)state. It thus seems that in the absence of new local, transnational or global institutions, and even when devoid of national symbolism, the most vocal opposition to neoliberal globalization still relies on the structures and categories that underpin(ned) our world of nation-states.

Language, *myth*, contextualization

Having introduced such diverse snapshots – *Stiegl*, the commodified Union Jack, *Faironika*, and invocations of extra-economic mutuality domains by these most unlikely of „bed-fellows" (i.e. McDonald's and the Occupy Movement)

– it would appear that each of their analyses still requires further conceptual/methodological momentum. I would like to propose, by way of my next argumentative step, that such momentum can be derived from Roland Barthes' (1972) seminal reading of „myth as a semiological system”.

In what is arguably his most influential text, at least in terms of the theoretical work accomplished therein, Barthes builds on Saussurean structural linguistics and its core premise – the „tri-dimensional pattern” of any *sign* as being constituted by, first, a *signifier* (i.e. its outward form) and, second, a *signified* (i.e. its meaning/concept), with the relation between them being a matter of cultural/linguistic convention. According to Barthes (1972: 114–115), myth involves two „semiological systems”: a first (linguistic or visual) layer of conventional signs, per definition comprised of signifiers-signifieds; second, such fully constituted signs then act as signifiers in a „*second-order semiological system*”, which is the location of myth and defined as a „*metalanguage*”. Taking „language itself, photography, painting, posters, rituals, objects, etc.” as its „raw materials”, myth is thus constructed on top and on the basis of such first-order significations; incorporating and building on „semiological chain[s] which existed before it”, myth develops a second system of distinctly ideological connotations. First order signs thereby act as signifiers for a secondary layer of signification, whose second-order signifieds transmit myth; on this mythical layer, and amongst other features, historically contingent assumptions and ideas are naturalized, wherein Barthes detects a chief characteristic of ideology (Barthes 1972: 141–142). Applied to our earlier snapshots, Barthes' model suggests that each of them works not just in the obvious ways – as first order signs, or straightforward national flags that just happen to be variously worn, sold, bought, carried or painted onto plastic cows, or as particular invocations of a (national) realm partly beyond or outside the market – but that that they need more careful deciphering.

The *conditio sine qua non* to Barthes' method of reading mythical/ideological significations is one of careful contextualization. This involves working closely from the mythological sign, on both of its two semiological layers, to its wider social contexts and back again. Barthes' most famous example, that of a magazine cover depicting a Black soldier saluting the French flag, illustrates this: approached as myth, its analysis requires, as Barthes shows (1972: 119), detailed contextual knowledge of „the general History of France”, its republican ethos (and concomitant assimilationism), „French imperialism ... its colonial adventures, [and then] present difficulties”. Only such detailed contextual information allows for the ideological assumptions transmitted by the second order signifiers-signifieds to be extrapolated. Before sketching what this approach might add to the analysis of my snapshots, a reminder of what is at stake in them is in order. This is most succinctly provided by Kopytoff's

already quoted „cultural perspective” on commodities: the proposition that their „production” is not just a material – but also a „cultural and cognitive process” whereby commodities are „marked as being a certain kind of thing”; this leads to Kopytoff’s next realization, namely that the (contemporary Western) definition of „physical objects and rights to them” as the quintessential „universe of commodities”, and their diametrical opposition to the „universe of individuation and singularization” (e.g. people, or the „paraphernalia of political power), is highly context-specific and, as such, subject to change (Kopytoff 1988: 64). As suggested earlier, the semiotic/discursive blurring of national symbolism and the world of consumerism can plausibly be read as an indication of such a historical shift, with parts of the nation-state’s „symbolic inventory” (e.g. flags) seemingly being commodified. Importantly, however, our snapshots work in ideologically diverse ways. Although each of them reveals various „intrusions” of the domain of national symbolism into the semiotic order of consumer capitalism (or *vice versa*, but generally a blurring of these social realms), their political motivations, or lack of motivation, and trajectories differ markedly. It is those very different ideological trajectories that Barthes-ian semiological analysis and its emphasis on contextualization can help illuminate.

Thus returning to my first snapshot, *Stiegl*’s appropriation of the Austrian flag, such contextualization needs to include the following: Austria’s post-1945 history of national identity redefinition and renegotiation, in gradual and growing opposition to previously dominant, pan-Germanic self-understandings (e.g. Bruckmüller 1992: 262) and, until the mid-1980s, in widespread distortion of Austria’s Second World War history informed by what has come to be known as the „victim myth” (e.g. Uhl 2006). The post-war period of economic and ideological reconstruction led to an era of growing prosperity and remarkable political stability, in which by the 1980s and into the 1990s Austrians reported levels of patriotic pride that ranked amongst the highest in Europe and beyond, at one point even surpassing those recorded in the US (Rathkolb 2005: 25–26). Particularly relevant here are the most commonly identified objects of such national pride: in a much-cited survey from the mid-1980s, for example, Austrians ranked the country’s scenery, historical treasures, and – most importantly for our present purposes – sporting achievements as their main sources of patriotic pride and attachment (Reiterer 1988: 118–119). The period since the mid-1980s has been defined by diverse crises and far-reaching social and political transformations, many of them tied to the globalizing pressures and forces typical of our era of *liquid modernity* (Bauman 2000). As I have shown elsewhere (Karner 2005; 2011), such successive and far-reaching crises have – in Bourdieu-ian fashion – transformed a previously stable national habitus, generally positively connoted but largely taken-for-granted for many,

into a discursive realm of cultural-historical reflection, intense debate and political polarization; both Austria's version of the neo-nationalisms (e.g. see Gingrich and Banks 2006) that have swept Europe over the last decade and a half and some prominent reactions against it can very plausibly be read in precisely these terms. Taken together, and in line with a Barthes-ian approach, all these contextual factors suggest that there is indeed more to be said about *Stiegl's* flag than it being a form of banal nationalism being commodified; on its mythical-ideological „layer”, it echoes the significance of sports – particularly skiing but also moments in the country's football history – to prominent Austrian self-understandings, while also inadvertently reflecting (the Alpine Republic's) recent history: the close, sometimes uneasy proximity – arguably epitomized by the company's logo superimposed on the Austrian flag – of globalizing, commercializing pressures and patriotic attachments.

The beginnings of a critical, Barthes-ian reading of the widespread commodification of the Union Jack, meanwhile, arguably requires contextualization in relation to what Paul Gilroy has termed „postcolonial melancholia”, which relates an often un-reflected upon „pain of the loss” of former imperial power and global standing to „opposition to the intrusive presence of ... incoming strangers” (Gilroy 2004: 110). As acknowledged earlier, this discussion cannot purport to illuminate the motivations and decodings of individuals bearing Union Jacks on their consumer items, which would require different methodological strategies that lie beyond the scope of the present essay. As such, however, my argument is in line with Roland Barthes' approach to contextualizing myth which, rather than focusing on the readings by particular members of its intended audiences, captures the wider connotative domains of which myth is a part and the social contexts out of which it emerges. I would like to propose, then, that the contemporary British connotative domain to the (commodified) Union Jack includes British „postcolonial melancholia” in one of its manifestations: growing and ever more visible opposition to European Union membership. The latter has built on what have historically been already high levels of EU-scepticism, with a recent further increase in British opposition to „Brussels”, the discursive metonym of all things constructed as unwanted European impositions, reflected in the electoral successes of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) as well as in the government's promise, subject to a Conservative electoral win in 2015, of a referendum on Britain's future (non-)EU-membership. In some of its manifestations, current anti-Europeanism in the UK can be described as a form of „social closure” (Wimmer 2004), along national boundaries and in opposition to the perceived consequences of intra-European migration. This shows, for instance, in the widespread discursive tendency, in and beyond the tabloid press, to particularly construct Eastern European migrants as a strain on public resources, as a threat

to British workers, or as „benefit tourists” (see, for example, *Daily Telegraph* 2013). Such sentiments and discourses opposing intra-European mobility seem utterly impervious to the far more complex socio-economic realities revealed by a current study that has shown that recent European migrants, in particular, „have made a positive fiscal contribution, even ... when the UK was running budget deficits” (Dustmann and Frattini 2013: 1). These contextual dimensions allow for the following reading of the connotative and social contexts to the current pervasiveness of commodified Union Jacks, bearing in mind that signifiers of identity inevitably mark self-other boundaries: they suggest, to re-appropriate Paul Gilroy’s (1991) most famous terminology, that at present *there ain’t no, or only very little, European blue in the Union Jack*; and that the „cultural pessimism” and „economic chauvinism” (Gingrich and Banks 2006) detected in the neo-nationalisms of Europe’s smaller (but affluent) countries have, in the context of a prolonged economic crisis and far-reaching austerity, also got the UK firmly in their grasp.

Within present constraints of space, what might we say about the social contexts and mythical-ideological connotations of my other snapshots? In relation to *Faironika* and the „fair milk” campaigns, contextualization must cover the market conditions faced by Europe’s dairy farmers. Those are summarized by the European Milk Board (EMB) as follows: a „flooding of the market”, particularly since 2008, that has led to large surpluses and, consequently, a drastic drop in milk prices approximating, at times, half of farmers’ production costs; against this backdrop, the EMB calls for a „reformed political framework” to „secure milk production that is economically, ecologically and socially sustainable for 500 million European consumers”; it advocates European countries „right to food sovereignty” and calls for healthier market conditions; key to the latter are the future avoidance of surpluses, producers being able to make a living through the market rather than having to rely on public funds, and a degree of protectionism against the „systematic dumping [through] low-price imports of milk and dairy products” (EMB Positions 2013). Read through our theoretical framework, *Faironika* – and its self-reflexive use of national colour symbolism – can thus be read as a form of ideological protest against market conditions that are widely perceived to be unjust and to disadvantage local farmers; „fair milk” campaigns therefore appeal to national solidarities with „our farmers”, employing the *deixis* of (banal) nationalism in the service of a political-economic struggle against a market dominated by large, multinational agro-business. This is further reflected in the EMB current participation, along with 60 European civil society groups, in the „Alternative Trade Mandate Alliance”, which criticizes the EU’s existing trade policy and advocates an alternative that „puts people and the planet before big business”:

The current trading system isn't working. Tons of food ... get thrown away while millions of people go hungry. EU trade policy has played a significant role in ... exacerbating the current crises in our economy, food, energy and the environment. But the recent launch of the EU-US trade negotiations shows that the EU wants more of the same, namely destructive trade agreements which eliminate social and environmental safeguards in the pursuit of corporate profit (EMB News Details 2013).

And how about McDonald's Austria and the Occupy Movement respectively? Contextualization with regard to the former, and its perhaps surprising discursive commitment (which to the company's critics may appear to be mere „lip service") to regional production and sustainability, requires us to recognize the widespread popularity and strength of the movement for locally produced, ideally organic food in Austria. This was reflected, for example, in a 1997 petition against genetically modified food signed by 1.2 million Austrians (of a population of just over 8 million); or by the fact that since 2008 Austria has had the worldwide largest proportion of organic farmers, who by 2006 were cultivating 13.5 percent of agricultural land, compared to a considerable more meagre 3.4 percent across the rest of the EU (Gruber and Bohacek 2006: 11; 49). Against this backdrop, it is of course hardly surprising that a multinational corporation such as McDonald's would, through its Austrian branch, come to embrace a national/regionalist/localist discourse. Indeed, it surely makes very good business sense to do precisely that.

Finally, let us briefly return to the Occupy Movement, which started as „Occupy Wall Street" in September 2011 and subsequently extended transnationally, arguably to become „Occupy Global Capitalism", a „popular revulsion against a global economic system that has caused vast inequalities in income, claimed new victims of poverty and unemployment, and that lacks a moral and political framework oriented to the needs of the millions of people being left behind by global economic change" (Sachs 2012: 463). As argued earlier, the movement's most significant facet to the present discussion is that it also firmly focuses on an extra-economic „mutuality domain" which it defines, in stark contrast to McDonald's or other multinationals adopting a register of (regional) sustainability, as diametrically opposed to the (global) market. This emerges, for example, from an essay about the Occupy Movement by Lawrence Weschler (2012: 397) who describes the concept of absolute human rights (e.g. „the right not to be tortured ... to secure lodging, a decent livelihood, adequate health care") as a „magical assertion" in the face of, and in opposition to, the „tyranny of the market". I earlier suggested that as a social movement opposed to neoliberal globalization and to consumerism as, arguably, its cultural ethos and ideology of legitimation, the Occupy Movement may not have employed national symbolism but that it nonetheless appealed to social functions primarily associated with the (nation-)state. However, more detailed

contextualization reveals the movement's ideological trajectory more fully, its ethos of anti-consumerist resistance and an apparent willingness to organise and think outside established social and political categories:

The occupation encampments [in] approximately 1,400 cities in fall 2011 provided a vivid template for the 99 percent's growing sense of unity. Here were thousands of people ... from all walks of life, living outdoors in the streets and parks, very much as the poorest of the poor have always lived: without electricity, heat, water, or toilets. In the process, the managed to create self-governing communities. General Assembly meetings brought together an unprecedented mix of recent college graduates, laid-off blue-collar workers, and ... the chronically homeless ... What started as a diffuse protest against economic injustice became a vast experiment in class building. The 99 percent, which might have seemed a purely aspirational category early in the fall of 2011, began to will itself into existence (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 2012: 305).

Concluding reflections

Needless to stress that the contextualization and Barthes-inspired readings of my chosen snapshots offered here are incomplete, merely tentative sketches, so-to-speak. Each of them clearly calls for further research and commentary. This having been said, and by way of a conclusion, I would like to do more than merely call for more empirical research, self-evidently necessary though this is. To connect some of the threads of the theoretical „web” I promised to weave at the outset, let us briefly return to Jean Baudrillard or, more accurately, to some of the secondary literature about his work:

Baudrillard's argument is that the „conspicuous consumption” ... analysed by Veblen in his *Theory of the Leisure Class* has been extended to everyone in the consumer society ... Whereas such display is confined to the upper classes in Veblen's book, Baudrillard sees the entire society as organized around consumption ... through which individuals gain prestige, identity, and standing ... Baudrillard ... argues that capitalism establishes social domination through [this] imposition of a system of sign values ... This model rules out in advance, however, the possibility that consumption might be a sphere of self-activity ... An alternative perspective on consumption is found in the work of Michel de Certeau ... [who] shows various ways in which consumption can serve ... self-valorization and ... promote the interests of individuals and oppositional groups against the hegemony of capital (Kellner 1989: 21; 27).

Kellner's comments enable us to distil key insights generated by the present essay. First, our snapshots raise the intriguing question as to how to read national symbolism that has seemingly become part of the „system of consumerist sign values”. As we have seen, some such examples (e.g. *Faironika*) can be read as „intrusions” of a *symbolic order*, through which opposition to the „hegemony of capital” is indeed articulated. Second, and in partial divergence

from Certeau's focus, examples such as the „fair milk” campaign say less about individual consumers' acts of resistance in the realm of daily life than they do about the collective mobilizing potential of symbols of locality, regionalism or the nation, as mythical signifiers of the purportedly familiar and trustworthy, in an era dominated by global market forces. Third, and as we have also seen, this does not capture the different ideological trajectories of all of our snapshots, some of which require more careful contextualization in relation to their respective national histories, to present crises, or to some of the social movements responding to them.

Looked at in conjunction, and their multi-directional ideological trajectories notwithstanding, our snapshots echo parts of Appadurai's seminal depiction of globalization as entailing multiple transnational flows (i.e. of people, ideas, finance, images, technology etc.) as well as a resulting „contest” between the forces of „sameness and difference”. What is more, Bourdieu's *doxa-crisis-discourse* model also resonates in some of our examples and their wider contexts. As a final theoretical note and node, Kellner's above cross-reference to Michel de Certeau provides interesting food for thought. Key to Certeau's discussion in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) is the opposition between individuals (i.e. discussed as consumers, readers, workers, pedestrians etc.) and the „web of power” that surrounds them; while the former employ „tactics” of resistance and temporary escape (e.g. workers spending time on the job other than intended by their employers), power controls space and is exercised through various „strategies”. Certeau's conceptualization of power and resistance can be summarized by the following sets of relations:

Power : resistance :: *strategies* : *tactics* :: control of space : manipulation/diversion of time

When read through Zygmunt Bauman's depiction of *liquid modernity*, for example, empirical examples like the ones examined in this essay point towards the following conceptual adjustment to, or partial inversion of, Certeau's framework:

Power : resistance :: time/*tactics* : space/*strategies* :: capital : nations :: mobility : fixedness

Rather than mere theoretical trickery, these altered relations echo our earlier snapshots and offer insights into the power dynamics of our contemporary era. Nation states, quintessential modern power containers able to control (their) space/territory, thus now find themselves at the mercy of what Bauman (2000) describes as „nomadic” capital; the latter's local investment

has become temporary, „until-further-notice”; ultimately, power therefore now rests in mobility, the ability to flow, to relocate at a whim. Conversely, being spatially rooted and fixed seem to have become hallmarks of relative powerlessness and disadvantage vis-à-vis „mobile capital”, whose fickleness, whose time-bound, merely temporary presence, arguably now holds yesteryear’s chief power-player (i.e. the nation state) hostage. Each in their own way, our snapshots reflect different facets of, and diverse responses to, this new geometry of power.