

Nation 'branding' to promote states in the global market has serious consequences for social diversity within European countries

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*One largely overlooked consequence of states competing in globalised markets is the incentive for political authorities to use marketing techniques to create a coherent 'brand' for individual countries. **Melissa Aronczyk** writes on this type of nation 'branding', noting that it has three largely negative consequences: the involvement of relatively unaccountable marketing experts in decision-making; the downplaying of components of national identity which do not project the desired image; and the reduction of national identity to a single configuration, neglecting the fact that there may be competing conceptions of what a state's national identity consists of.*



Over the last two decades, national leaders in Europe and beyond have turned to branding consultants, PR advisers and strategic communications professionals to help them make their jurisdiction 'matter' in a globally integrated world. Nation branding is seen as a form of soft power: gentler than sticks, less coercive than carrots, the creation of a conscious strategy that draws on a nation's territorial, cultural, and commercial specificity promises to attract broader international legitimacy than the use of traditional power resources.

But what actually happens to the nation when it is reconfigured as a 'brand'? What are the implications for governance, policy making, and citizenship when commercial tools, techniques and expertise are brought to bear on national belonging?

At one level, my book, *Branding the Nation*, is an account of the political, cultural and economic conditions in which the idea of nation branding developed. I trace the rise of competitiveness policies, the commercialisation of culture, and the widening application of corporate strategy to non-market institutions, documenting the transformation of business in the articulation of national identity over the past forty-five years.

But my ultimate goal is to demonstrate the troubling effects of this practice on national sovereignty. If the purported aim of nation branding is to reassert the importance of the nation-state in a so-called borderless world, its overemphasis on investment, tourism and trade has the potential to eclipse national obligations to social equality, diversity or solidarity.

Based on an analysis of branding efforts in twelve countries, I identify at least three consequences of branding the nation. First, there is a general lack of accountability by branding consultants. Second, branding efforts have led to the creation of an environment of zero-sum competitiveness, where only the aspects of a culture that are



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deemed economically viable are promoted as part of the branded national identity. Finally, nation branding cannot embrace multiple identities.

Lack of accountability

Nation branding exercises typically begin by proxy: national leaders hire specialised consultancies to educate them and their constituencies about the benefits and processes of branding. But consultancy, even at its best and most ethical, is by definition not a long-term commitment. The absence of oversight or responsibility by nation branding consultants results in a systematic lack of accountability for their decisions.

Nation branding consultants do not see themselves as responsible for either the implementation of their visions or the success of the effort. The kinds of skills required for governance and those required for corporate management may overlap, but they are not always well aligned, and serious divisions exist between public and private sector actors at the level of ethical commitment, as well as in the basic understanding of what resources ought to form the basis of collective wealth.

Zero-sum competitiveness

Nation branding projects are frequently justified on the basis of global competition. In a global marketplace of limited resources, both material and symbolic, so the argument goes, national citizens must adopt a 'competitive identity' that promotes their authentic and unique cultural values and distinguishes them from their national counterparts.

In a nation branding paradigm, however, only those cultural values and attitudes which are deemed economically viable are acceptable. Successful nation branding is largely understood in terms of capital- and investment-friendly policies, tourist infrastructures and intellectual property regimes. These policies and regimes are frequently accompanied by the reduction of state provisions; and they orient economic activity toward growth at any cost – an orientation that recent experience has taught us is wholly unsustainable.

The spirit of competition that is promoted as the basis of national legitimacy is a distorted Darwinism, in which some nations are 'effective' for globalisation (deregulated, open for business, entrepreneurial) and others are not (parochial, backward, radical). Nation branding determines a system of values that privileges certain traits as more evolved than others, with those nations at the bottom of the rungs forced to move upward along a uni-linear modernist path rather than considering alternative directions for development.

Living the brand

In the eyes of nation branding experts, the ultimate responsibility for the success of the branded national identity lies with the nation's citizens. It is they who must 'live the brand' – that is, perform attitudes and behaviours that are compatible with the brand strategy and that reinforce the tenets of the 'new and improved' national character.

There are two problems with this way of looking at national identity. The first is that it assigns responsibility for national success or failure to national citizens rather than to government, industry or infrastructure. It downplays the very notion of representative government and furthers the justification for the retrenchment of state provisions.

The second problem with this approach to national identity is that it presumes the existence of a single and homogenous national 'essence': a core set of values that can be recognised and agreed upon by all citizens. While nation branding pays lip service to public participation and the diversity of opinions, its reliance on a 'core idea' to represent a national population comes at the cost of recognising internal differentiation, resistance, or conflict.

To illustrate these points, consider the case of Poland. In December 2003, the Polish Ministry of Commerce, in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, retained the services of a British branding firm to create a new Polish national identity on the eve of the country's accession to the European Union. Polish participants saw the creation of a 'brand' identity as part of its drive toward economic, political, and cultural normalcy after 1989. But they

also saw it as a continuation of a project started long before: to return to their rightful place in Europe, to reclaim their history and cultural memory, to reassert their national spirit in the face of the multiple antagonisms that had plagued their centuries-long history.

These mythopoetic tropes infusing Poland's national narrative were tightly bound up with the Polish participants involved in the branding project; but the themes of integration, normalcy and return were interpreted very differently by the branding consultancy. To the branding consultants, these themes were indices of economic change, not historical continuity. Any elements of Poland's past that might counter the market-oriented, EU-friendly image the consultants were trying to instill were to be sidelined.

Thus the rhetoric of inclusion of the national brand was countered by a barely veiled politics of exclusion – of the symbolic legacies of *Solidarność*, for example; and of the older generation in Poland, whose historical experience was anathema to the brand propositions.

What is revealed in this thinking is the recognition of what branding cannot do: account for the plurality of voices, legacies, and competing visions of the nation-state. But indeed, this is the very point. Branding erases the prominence of those attributes which might compromise the legitimacy of the nation-state in a global market democracy.

Global market legitimacy and national sovereignty should not be opposed, as though one can only exist at the cost of the other. But neither should they be made synonymous. In order for the nation to continue to matter, we need more sensitive interventions that recognise both the value of alternative imaginaries and the possibilities contained in diverse visions of modern globalisation.

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