

Designer nations: Neo-liberal nation branding – Brand Estonia

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This article critically examines the emergence of nation branding as a commercial practice at the end of the Cold War by conceptualizing it as a means for nations to redefine and reposition themselves within the master narrative of globalization. It examines the industry literature of the nation branding movement, which seeks to legitimate the practice. It argues that nation branding is an engine of neo-liberalism that explicitly embraces a reductive logic, which privileges market relations (market fundamentalism) in articulations of national identity; also contends that nation branding is a risky business that can backfire, since its success depends, in large part, on the intuitive knowledge of individual industry ‘creatives’. It maintains that the methodology of nation branding, qua methodology, is profoundly anti-democratic. It offers recommendations for making nation branding more transparent and accountable to democratic values, but also explores Umberto’s concept of ‘semiotic guerrilla warfare’ as a possible strategy for disrupting nation branding and redirecting initiatives to rethink national identity in more democratic directions.

Keywords: globalization; neo-liberalism; market fundamentalism; postmodern branding; brand equity

Public sphere theorists document and lament the ‘tragedy of the commons’ (Hardin, 1968): the erosion of civic engagement and privatization of public space, resources, services, culture, knowledge, language, and nature. Even species and genes can now be patented and privatized. The branding of nations, using public relations and marketing to craft national images and identities, represents an especially provocative example of this phenomenon, one that marks a significant departure from classic understandings of the public trust of liberal democracy. In effect, nation branding transforms national identity into intellectual property (van Ham, 2002).

Nation branding has been described as ‘one of the most contentious political concepts of our time’ by Wally Olins (no date, p. 1), the designer of brand Poland and one of the nation’s leading branding apologists. Yet, Hankinson (2001, p. 139) noted, ‘The branding of locations has attracted relatively little interest in the academic literature’. With few exceptions, sociologists and communication scholars have ignored the movement.¹ This is puzzling since nation branding is an applied communication practice that is supported by public policy and funding, and encouraged by international development and trade organizations including the United Nations, World Bank, World Trade Organization and others.²

The commercial practice of branding nations is closely linked to the deployment of narratives of globalization at the end of the Cold War. Addressing the subject

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indirectly, Vincent Mosco (2001, p. 2) suggests a point of departure for thinking about nation branding. Although he fully recognizes the multi-dimensional and contested character of the concept, Mosco contends that 'globalization' may be best understood as an attempt to create 'a brand for the world' rather than as a theoretical or applied tool for analyzing contemporary political and economic processes. According to Mosco, the most successful brands turn 'the mantra into the myth' – that is, they 'tell stories, animate conversations and extend narratives'. Viewed in this way, globalization is '[m]ore than just a way of branding the world, it informs the world with a story about how different people come together to transcend their messy differences to create a universal culture'.

Taking Mosco's claim one step further, globalization can be thought of as functioning as the controlling myth or master narrative into which individual nations, Brand Estonia, Cool Britannia, Magical Croatia, Incredible India, etc., can project their respective micro-myths and articulate their aspirations for wealth, power, and enhanced visibility. If globalization brands the world and explains the new cosmological order, then nation branding mythologizes the component parts of the new order. Branding not only explains nations to the world but also reinterprets national identity in market terms and provides new narratives for domestic consumption.

Nation states have, of course, always used flags, colors, slogans, anthems, origin stories, and other symbolic forms to establish and mark their sovereignty; and they have usually mobilized the best available talents to carry out these projects. In today's media savvy world, this means drawing on the skills of experts in design, marketing, public relations and media production. Moreover, nation states have seldom, if ever, been free of material ambitions. What distinguishes nation branding from these efforts is that the primary motivation, the *raison d'être*, of nation branding is commercial ambition. That is, nation branding transforms civic space into what Anne Cronin (no date, p. 1) calls 'calculative space': space that is constituted by marketing data and decision making rather than conceived in terms of social relations or governance. By constantly reiterating the commercial nature of public space, Cronin (p. 18) argues, calculative space can produce a 'new type of reality' and cultivate new orientations to that reality.

Nations are complex, heterogeneous entities; and national identities are, to be sure, forged through representational practices that are historically and socially conditioned, multi-layered and dispersed. Nation branding is, however, a practice that selects, simplifies and deploys only those aspects of a nation's identity that enhances a nation's marketability. Nation branding does not just selectively distill and valorize what is. It is a dynamic process that incorporates a vision of a new reality: what branders call an 'aspirational element'. As part of the branding process, government and corporate sponsors are expected to commit public and private resources to creating this new reality, which is designed to further amplify the nation's marketable qualities. In effect, the purpose of the aspirational element is to produce more calculative space. Some constituents of nation branding that contribute to the production of calculative space are: (a) overt embrace of commercial language, practices, and assumptions, reflecting the post-Cold War ascent of the logic of 'market fundamentalism';³ (b) formation of public-private partnerships to advance specific trade, industry or corporate interests along with national agendas, policies and ideologies; (c) use of private contractors to determine

the salient features of a nation's identity, based upon what can be marketed to tourists, international investors, and potential trade partners; and (d) reduction of the input of citizens to what can be measured by market research. Even public diplomacy, a nation's attempt to shape its image and influence public opinion in other nations (that is, its propaganda), has come under the purview of nation-branders. For small nations, branding is not only outsourced to private corporations, but in most cases to foreign corporations, for example, 'Brand Estonia' was contracted to the British firm, Interbrand (a division of communication giant, Omnicom Group), and designed and developed in New York.

Nation branding, as a distinctive construct and specialized commercial practice, is a very recent development although its forerunners, destination branding and place branding have been profitable public relations enterprises for decades (Kotler, Haider & Rein, 1993; Morgan, Pritchard & Price, 2002). The Irish Republic's 'Young Europeans' campaign in the 1970s and 1980s, promoting its educated young workforce to the European Union and American investors, and Spain's revamping of its national image after Franco's death are frequently cited as prototypes for nation branding (Fanning, no date; Olins, 1999; Gilmore, 2002). The 'Cool Britannia' initiative (Leonard, 1997) of the early Blair years was the first nation branding effort to attract significant mainstream media attention, controversy, and criticism, with some of the coverage framing the concept as superficial, silly and easy fodder for satire (Freely, 1998; *Wired*, 1998). In response to the negative publicity, nation branding advocates quickly came to the defense of their product. Maintaining that nation branding is widely misunderstood and unfairly maligned, Olins' *Trading Identities* (1999) was the first major contribution to this effort. Others followed with Simon Anholt (2003; 2007; Ahnold & Hildreth, 2005) establishing himself as the most prolific promoter of nation branding and related products and services (see www.earthSpeak.com/), including a recently launched, pro-branding journal, *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*.

Branding nations: Industry perspectives

Most major international public relations firms now offer nation branding services; however, the originators – those who retroactively modeled, rationalized, integrated and further developed the kinds of marketing efforts that had succeeded by trial and error in Ireland and Spain – are located in London. They recognize one another as sharing a common and privileged understanding of the practice (Aronczyk, 2007a). This core group can be thought of as drawing loosely on a 'shared cultural repertoire' (Lein, 1997, p. 226; 2003, p. 173) and set of practices and experiences, which newcomers to the field lack; and Olins and Anholt can be considered the 'thought leaders' of the nation branding movement. This cultural repertoire is the focus of my analysis.

The publications of Olins and Anholt, along with early articles on nation branding in *Brand Strategy*, *Journal of Brand Management*, and an Interbrand sponsored online resource, brandchannel.com, offer extensive explanations and defenses of nation branding (definition, significance, uses, mechanics), which are widely cited and reiterated in later accounts. They are, in effect, legitimating documents for the practice. That is, they seek to disarm what Olins describes as the 'visceral antagonism' that nation branding arouses among 'the most unlikely

individuals and groups ... from every part of the political and social spectrum' (Olins, 2002, p. 241).

I explore the drift toward privatization of foreign policy, which the commercial branding of nations represents, by examining this industry literature, which provides a window into the assumptions, priorities, and logic of nation branders. Brand Estonia is profiled because it is treated as an exemplary case in the early branding literature (Gardner & Standaert, 2003). Moreover Estonia is a 'paperless government', which means that it is an unusually transparent example of nation branding with a substantial amount of its branding-related data accessible online.

National identity

In the span of historical time, all nation states are recent, post Enlightenment inventions. As such, they are consciously crafted, literally built: in Benedict Anderson's (1981) resonant phrase, they are 'imagined communities'. To succeed, national visions must symbolically mark and justify claims of territorial integrity; create, evoke, and cultivate a sense of national identity as well as project a shared sense of fate or destiny that implies continuity with a heroic and mythic past. This mythic past or origin story becomes part of the collective consciousness of a nation. It is not, however, based upon 'what has actually been preserved in popular memory'; to the contrary, as Eric Hobsbawm (1983, p. 13) points out, it is 'what has been selected, written, pictured, popularized and institutionalized by those whose function it is to do so'.

In democratic nation building, that function is dispersed, albeit skewed to favor the scribbling class, broadly conceived, politicians, pundits, preachers, poets, publicists, scholars, and other 'publicans' – to use the precise eighteenth century term. According to liberal social contract theory, democratic decision making is supposed to be secured in public discussions and debates, which are governed by rules that make it possible for the widest possible range of views to be heard. The theory assumes that the most persuasive position, which within the Enlightenment tradition is also presumed to be the most rational, will prevail if citizens are informed and responsible. Practice is, of course, much messier than theory; however Hobsbawm (1983, p. 263) cautions that in the past, 'conscious invention [of national tradition or identity] succeeded mainly in proportion to its success in broadcasting on a wavelength to which the public was ready to tune in'.

This left much to chance. By the mid-twentieth century, public relations and marketing firms had become deeply entrenched in efforts to remove that chance by 'rationalizing' these processes through 'perception management' (Carey, 1995; Ewen, 1996; Sproule, 1996). The triumphal emergence of the US from the Cold War accelerated and globalized these initiatives.

Multi-national public relations and advertising firms are now routinely commissioned by client states to 'brand' national images or identities to: (a) create greater visibility; (b) attract foreign investors and tourists, and expand exports; (c) enhance a nation's geo-political profile among the member states of international organizations such as the United Nations and the European Union; (d) generate national pride and internal solidarity; and (e) repair damaged reputations.

Nation branding emerged in the 1990s to meet both ideological and pragmatic needs of nation-states and transnational corporations. The abrupt end of the Cold

War produced geo-political identity crises, forcing nations to rethink their alliances and positioning in the world. In the master narrative of globalization, which quickly gained traction in Western policy circles, 'market' replaced 'war' as the foundation metaphor. Globalization encouraged devolution of the nation-state by promoting the privatization of public property and services, and sought to integrate the world market and promote trade by reducing trade barriers. Under the new regime, a nation's power and prestige would, in theory, be judged by its performance in the marketplace rather than on the battlefield. Countries possessing global brands like Nike or Sony, were well-positioned to compete within the new order, while others were faced with the challenge of leveraging the visibility of their products. Before long, as Olins (1999) put it, countries and products were 'trading identities'. Companies recognized that positive national identities attracted investments, visitors, and demand for exports. Conversely, government leaders seeking to increase exports began to promote the national brands of companies. This convergence of interests produced the public-private partnerships that made nation branding possible and attractive to government and corporate leaders.

The postmodern branding revolution

Coca Cola, Nike, Budweiser, Gap, Nokia, Marlboro, Red Bull, Estonia: all bear the imprimatur of the postmodern, global branding movement, which gained momentum in advertising, marketing, and public relations in the 1990s. What distinguishes postmodern branding from conventional, commercial product advertising and marketing is that the brand itself – the symbolic associations attached to it and the logo it represents – becomes the focus of promotional efforts.

Indeed postmodern branding does not even require a tangible product. In the late twentieth century information economy of credit cards, electronic commerce, and global trade, branding extended beyond retail marketing to financial institutions, wholesalers, and distributors. Where, for example, brands had once affirmed the sanitary quality of ingredients in sausages, they now signaled institutional power, capitalization, transnational reach and leverage. By the late 1980s, brands themselves, not just the commodities they represent, acquired significant exchange value; that is, the reputation of a brand, its visibility, and most significantly for our purposes, the non-utilitarian or intangible qualities consumers associated with it, added to a company's equity. In 1998, for example, Philip Morris, a tobacco company suffering from a damaged reputation, purchased Kraft, a food producer with a wholesome reputation, for 12.6 billion dollars, six-times what the company's business and assets were worth on paper (Klein, 2002). Today, brand experts estimate that branding can account for as much as 40 to 60 per cent of a company's worth. Anholt (2003) estimates that branding could now account for as much as one-third of global wealth; that the combined, intangible value added to the world's 100 top global corporations by branding is almost a trillion dollars; and that it is roughly equal to the combined GNP of the 63 countries the World Bank defines as 'low income'. Estimates by branders are self-serving and undoubtedly inflated, but brand equity does have cash value, which materializes when companies are sold.

By the 1990s, growing brand equity led to a radical shift in corporate marketing strategies with enormous infusions of funds going into promoting brands instead of advertising products, especially brands targeting members of upscale trend-setting

demographics (Ries & Ries, 2002). As Naomi Klein (2002, pp. 15–16) puts it, ‘For these companies, the ostensible product was mere filler for the real production: the brand’.

Brand development became the new design focus. Highly charged constellations of meanings and values, symbolized by distinctive logos, are now carefully crafted to provide customers with the illusion of participation in exclusive communities, lifestyles, and experiences. That is, brands carry social cachet. They even contribute, albeit in complex and sometimes contradictory ways, to the development of individual and group identities (Warde, 1994). According to branding advocates, the new, postmodern approach to branding is

deeply anchored in psycho-sociology, it takes into account both tangible and intangible attributes, e.g. functional and emotional benefits. Therefore, those attributes compose the beliefs that the brand’s audience recalls when they think about the brand in context. (Grimaldi, 2003, p. 1)

Performing a surreal semiotic dance on Marx’s grave, postmodern branding experts see branding as providing a solution, however illusionary, to the alienation produced by advanced capitalism: the fragmentation of communities, loss of meaning and intrinsic satisfaction in work, and widespread spiritual ennui. Turning this fundamental idea of the Marxian diagnosis on its head, branders reason that what capitalism has wrought, capitalism can package and take to market. Postmodern branders change the sign of commodity fetishism from a minus to a plus. Instead of a condition to be critiqued and redressed, alienation becomes a commercial opportunity to be celebrated and capitalized.⁴

Branding has become a lucrative profit center, not just for corporate brands but also for branders, designers and managers, who hype their own hype. Designer water is the metaphoric flagship of the new branders. They claim that if water, the most common element on the planet, can be branded and sold at premium prices to affluent consumers who have ready access to safe municipal water resources, then, almost anything can be. Moreover, branding enthusiasts claim branding adds value to everything it touches, including the consumer. So it was only a small but audacious step for branders to grasp the enormous opportunity that branding civic entities – nations, regions, states, counties, provinces, cities, even neighborhoods – could offer. It was also an especially timely step as the 1990s were a watershed period of nation building and rebuilding.

Nations as brands: Estonia, ‘A Nordic country with a twist’

Enter Estonia, and Britain, Belgium, Canada, Croatia, Finland, Germany, India, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, and New Zealand: they are just some of the nations that have embraced the postmodern and post-liberal approach to the development or redevelopment of national identity. As branders see it,

The new concept of the Brand-state, with its stress upon image and reputation, is becoming an essential element of the strategically well-managed government or community. Like a well-branded product or service such as Coca-Cola or American Express, the top leadership of state and civic entities is now challenged to think in imaginative ways about the brand of their realm, and the particulars of brand

management, such as brand positioning, brand strategy, brand quality (quality of life), brand satisfaction (citizen satisfaction), and overall brand loyalty . . . Smart states are building powerful social brands around carefully crafted identities that are reflective of both what they stand for and who they wish to become (KLM, Inc. Management Consultation, 2003).

Estonia, like other nations of Central and Eastern Europe that emerged from the shadows of the Soviet Union after the collapse of communism in 1991, faced historic challenges in transforming its economy, reaffirming its national identity, and establishing a position within the global community. Fortunately, from the perspective of branding advocates, the newly minted approach to nation branding was there to help shepherd the nations of the former Soviet Union into the capitalist future.

Estonia, a small country of only 1.4 million people, was the first former Soviet state to launch a comprehensive branding campaign. An independent country from 1918 until the Soviet takeover in 1940, Estonia was better prepared in some ways for the transition than most other former Soviet states. During the Soviet era, its oppressed scribbling class and vocal champions abroad characterized the country as 'a captive nation' with Western orientation and values. Possessing an extensive westward Baltic Sea coastline, Estonia's language, culture, and traditions bear close affinities to those of Scandinavia, especially its close neighbor, Finland. Moreover, during the Soviet era, Estonia had access to Finnish broadcasting so that modern Western values, democracy, capitalism, and consumerism were familiar, at least to ethnic Estonians in the urban West.

Estonia also faced major challenges. During the Soviet occupation, a program to forcefully Russify Estonia was undertaken with large scale Russian immigration to Estonia and the deportation of ethnic Estonians, so that by 1989 ethnic Estonians comprised only 61.5% of the population while the Russian population had risen to 30.3%.⁵ When Estonia regained its independence in 1991, the Russians went from being the politically dominant group to a minority without rights of citizenship, creating a situation ripe for conflict. They faced the choice of returning to Russia, becoming naturalized citizens, or remaining a stateless minority. By 2000, the Russian population had declined to 25.5% due to migration and higher mortality rates among Russians (Leinsalu, Vagero & Kunst, 2004), although most Russians who remained in Estonia were subsequently re-enfranchised as rigid naturalization rules were liberalized. With independence, Estonia lost its primary market (92% of its trade was with Russia); and state industries collapsed. In 1992, the inflation rate was over 1000% a year, GDP fell by 30%, and unemployment (unknown in the Soviet period) approached 30% (Laar, 1996).

Estonia undertook radical political and economic reforms under the leadership of its young Prime Minister Mart Laar, popularly known as 'Margaret Thatcher's grandson', for his commitments to market fundamentalism or, as he calls it, 'shock therapy' for socialism (Laar, 1996, p. 98). Specifically, under Laar, Estonia created and ratified a new constitution and legal system, which reduced the role of the state in the economy; the government streamlined privatization, introducing a stable national currency that was soon made an equivalent of the Deutschmark, eliminating price controls, selling off state properties, underwriting business loans in lieu of unemployment benefits, offering retraining programs especially in the

information technology sector, introducing a flat tax with no corporate tax, and eliminating tariffs. The government looked to the West for capital, political and military support, including membership in the European Union and NATO.

The economic 'shock therapy' produced the desired neo-liberal outcomes. Estonia's economy recovered more quickly than other post-Soviet economies and continues to grow rapidly, moving from a negative GDP in 1994 to a 10.5% growth rate in 2005 (Bank of Estonia, 2006). Estonia now has the most developed real estate market in the Baltics, with housing prices rising 28%, the highest in Europe, in 2006. The human costs of neo-liberal shock therapy, which included growing social inequalities, a sense of disenfranchisement by ordinary citizens, especially rural populations, were painful enough to bring about the defeat of Laar and his economic reformers at the polls in 1995. He was, however, returned to a second term as prime minister during a fiscal crisis in 1999. He responded to that crisis by further cutting welfare programs, business taxes, and trade barriers. Laar, winner of the 2006 Cato Institute Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty, claims Friedman's *Free to Choose* provided the playbook for his reforms (Cato Institute, 2006). Now out of office, he serves as an economic reform consultant for other countries as well as for those who have aspirations for the future of other countries including Cuban-Americans in Miami.

The Brand Estonia initiative was part of Estonia's effort to project a new vision of itself to potential investment partners, tourists, and its own population. Brand Estonia was commissioned by Enterprise Estonia, an agency founded by the Ministry of Economic Affairs in 2000 to promote economic development. Brand Estonia was designed by Interbrand Corporation Global Brand Consultancy and Emor, an Estonian marketing firm. The challenge was to put Estonia on the map internationally for specific target audiences: tourists, foreign investors, and export markets.

In the case of Estonia, that challenge was a literal one because Interbrand's research showed that foreigners do not know where Estonia is located and frequently confuse it with its neighbors. After internal and external research, using focus groups and interviews, Interbrand developed a set of national design elements, a brand style book, which included the logo 'Welcome to Estonia', photographic style, color palette and graphic devices. With a budget of 13.31 million kroon (850,000 Euros), Interbrand developed promotional materials including short video documentaries, a power-point presentation, pamphlets, and CD-ROM as well as an outdoor display campaign and press events (Welcome to Estonia, no date; Petrone, 2003). The Estonian national airline, airports, shipping docks, tourist industry, and many businesses adopted the Brand Estonia campaign (Interbrand, no date b, ii; Emor Marketing, 2002). The core message was that Estonia had been successfully transformed; and that the world was now 'welcome' to visit and invest.

Variouly describing itself as 'a Nordic country with a twist', 'a nation that is as progressive and hip as it is history-filled', 'the new Scandinavia', and an 'IT-nation', Brand Estonia aggressively sought foreign investment, lobbied for admission into the European Union, and promoted its nascent tourist industry. The branding initiative coincided with Estonia's hosting of the Eurovision Song Contest in 2002, which attracted 166 million television viewers in Europe (Gardner & Standaert, 2003).

Interbrand (no date, b, p. 1) attributes positive reactions to the campaign to the fact that the national identity valorized by Brand Estonia 'depicts the true nature of

the country rather than imposing one that feels artificial'. Moreover Interbrand contends that the campaign was a domestic as well as an international success because Brand Estonia built national self-confidence and solidarity; and it promoted national cohesion with the Russian speaking segment of the population, which responded favorably to the campaign. Supporters of the campaign maintain that the branding initiative helped the Estonian government and business leaders to focus and channel a national discussion of the country's future into narratives of globalization.

Not all Estonians shared Interbrand's rosy view. The 'Estonian Human Development Report' (2001, section 4.6) noted, 'it is not possible for the integration propaganda to bridge the chasm of segregation of Russian and Estonian communities which had only deepened through the decades'.⁶ Social scientists caused a stir, and were rebuked in 2002 by Prime Minister Siim Kallas and former PM Laar for proposing a research program on the 'Two Estonias' (*Estonian Review*, April 22, 2002). Specifically they were referring to how economic reform

divided the nation into winners and losers: those whose yearly income is measured in millions and those who have lost hope of ever getting out of unemployment and poverty. ('Estonian Human Development Report', 2001, section 4.6)

The winners are urban, well-educated, young, individual-centered, predominately male, ethnic Estonians living in the Western part of the country, especially Tallinn; the losers are those with farming or heavy industry skills from the Soviet era, the elderly, those without access to elite schools, community-centered traditionalists, Russian speakers and Russians who speak Estonian but are not integrated into Estonian culture, and those living in the rural Eastern part of the country. Prostitution, alcoholism, drug addiction and HIV plague the second Estonia, with young girls preyed upon by international sex traffickers.

Nevertheless Brand Estonia does appear to represent a successful – that is, a visibility enhancing – case of nation branding. Estonia is, however, a special case. Indeed, all of the countries of the former Soviet Union are special cases since they virtually disappeared from international visibility for a half century. As we have seen, however, Estonia was especially ripe for promotion, and had already undergone Freidmanesque free-market reforms before the branding campaign began. What it needed was international visibility, not psycho-sociological reengineering; and that is what Interbrand and Emor provided. Indeed Karsten Bruggermann (2003) argues that the Estonian government undertook the branding initiative to affirm and promote the idea that it had been transformed into a Western market economy.

In sum, Brand Estonia is not an exemplar of postmodern branding at all. Rather it is a hybrid case in which modern, reality based promotion (of Estonia's Baltic seacoast, ties to Finland, economic reforms, and government investments in information technology) combined with neo-liberal blurring of public and private interests to massage and transform an existing, if long repressed, national identity into an international marketing asset and a domestic propaganda tool. Brand Estonia did, however, project a future-oriented vision of itself – a postmodern, aspirational element – as 'progressive and hip', which was presumably intended to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Whether Estonia has realized its postmodern aspirations remains an open question; according to Anholt's 2006 *Nations Brand*

Index (www.nationbrandindex.com), when presented with a list of 35 counties as possible vacation destinations, Americans ranked Estonia, along with Poland, as the 'most boring'. The branding campaign's emphasis on the 'E' in Estonia (the country's paperless government) has, however, been validated by an unanticipated, if dubious, distinction; during May 2007, Estonia was the setting of what some are calling 'the first war in cyberspace' as Russia and/or Russian Estonians retaliated when the government removed a statue of a World War II era Russian soldier from a park in Tallinn. The attackers launched a data siege that nearly shut down the government (Landler & Markoff, 2007).

In the early branding literature, the story of Brand Estonia, the Baltic Tiger, is presented as a paradigmatic case for nation branding (Gardner & Standaert, 2003). The Estonian branding initiative was actually a short-term undertaking within the much larger economic development program of Enterprise Estonia; and there is no hard evidence that it significantly contributed to Estonia's economic expansion. Hard evidence is, however, elusive in the branding business, but suggestion, implication, and hype are plentiful. When directly queried, Interbrand executives describe their achievements in modest terms (Lewis, 2002), but as the story gets retold within the industry, the impression is created that Brand Estonia produced the Baltic Tiger rather than merely benefited from and perhaps marginally advanced it (Gardner & Standaert, 2003).

Mechanics of nation branding

Despite the self-promoting hype of branders, the actual mechanics of nation-branding are quite simple. Olins (1999, pp. 23–24) outlines a seven-step process, paraphrased and abridged as follows:

1. Create a working group with representatives of government, industry, the arts, education and the media to implement the initiative.
2. Using qualitative and quantitative methods, find out how the nation is viewed both domestically and abroad.
3. Consult with opinion-leaders regarding the nation's strengths and weakness and compare results with findings of the internal and external studies.
4. Identify the core strategy of the campaign, and create the central idea on which the strategy is based; basically this boils down to a slogan, around which the rest of the campaign is framed.
5. Develop a visual design and attach it to everything that represents the nation abroad.
6. Correlate and adjust the message to target audiences: tourism, internal and external investors.
7. Create a public-private liaison group to launch the program and keep it active in government, commerce, industry, the arts, and media, etc.

Simple mechanics, designed for a sound bite world, but Olins cautions that managing an identity program for a nation demands considerable political, business, and technical skill because poorly designed or implemented nation branding programs can backfire, e.g. the US 'Shared Values' campaign.

The apparent simplicity and superficiality of place branding could account for its relative neglect by academic researchers. There may appear to be ‘no there there’: no significant substance to excavate. Who, for example, can work up a semiotic sweat over ‘I love New York’ bumper stickers? Yet, if for no other reason, the sheer scale of the transfers of public funds into private hands, which nation branding facilitates, should alert critics to the fact that something more is involved than small windfalls for manufacturers and retailers of tee-shirts and tote bags. State and nation branding is a powerful catalyst for instantiating, advancing, normalizing, and putting a positive face on market fundamentalism. That is, it makes economic development a nation’s paramount responsibility, one that virtually overrides all other considerations, with the exception of national security (which is a precondition to economic development). To be sure, economic development can contribute to the common good of cities, states, and nations; and place branding can be a tool for mobilizing economic development. Too often, however, joint public-private ventures benefit the private sector at the expense of the public.

The totalizing logic of branding: What else could Estonia do?

Once market fundamentalism establishes itself as the ruling cosmology and globalization becomes the controlling metaphor of geo-politics, nations like Estonia are pressured to participate or face futures of economic and political marginality and cultural invisibility. As Olins (1999, p. 23) puts it, ‘Once it [nation branding] takes off it will become unstoppable’. And nation branding has taken off; in late 2006, Anholt claimed that ‘a country a week’ was seeking his services (quoted in *Economist*, 2006, p. 1). Low income nations in Africa are currently (2007) a hot market for nation branders. Indeed, public relations and marketing have become so deeply embedded in economic development and public diplomacy that some researchers (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992; van Ham, 2002) maintain that the fields of public relations and international relations are converging.

Branders attribute the take off of nation branding to the increasing homogenization-cum-Westernization/Americanization, of the world produced by globalization. As places increasingly look the same, branders argue, they must find ways to distinguish themselves. Nations must also compete for visibility in an already crowded market, dominated by what Anholt and Hildreth (2005) call ‘the mother of all brands’: the US. According to branding advocates, small nations, in particular, need to set themselves apart from other brands (nations), and establish unique identities that can be encapsulated in a slogan. That is, they must cultivate niche markets for themselves.

Nation branders speak virtually with one voice when they claim that the cost/benefit ratio strongly favors client states; however, figures are seldom revealed. To my knowledge, no data or even speculative figures have been publicly disclosed estimating how much cities, states, regions and nations have spent comparatively or collectively on place branding. This may be because, as Olins (no date, p. 1), contends, ‘It’s an issue a lot of countries find very sensitive and don’t like talking about, because they feel people may think it’s a waste of public money’. For this reason, he confesses some of the work he has done for countries has had to be ‘very confidential’.

An assessment of the global economic impact of public relations recently prepared for the Institute for Public Relations (Falconi, 2006) estimates that the annual impact is in the range of \$130 to \$230 billion dollars; and that the largest public relations investors in the world today are nations and other public entities like the European Union or the World Bank rather than Exxon, Shell, General Electric or other corporations. There is, of course, no way to determine what portion of public sector spending on public relations goes into nation branding; it is, however, reasonable to assume that it is a growing amount since nation branding is one of the fastest growing public relations specialties (*Economist*, 2006).

The cost of commissioning a brand for a billion dollar corporation can be over a million dollars (Cassedy, 2001). The US budgeted \$15 million for its aborted 2002 'Shared Values' public diplomacy campaign. Even the 'I love New York' campaign had a steep price tag, \$4 million in its first year (1977), which was increased to \$10 million the next year and sustained at that level until the 1990s when it was cut dramatically (Cassedy, 2001, p. 8). Nigeria's 'Heart of Africa' initiative has reportedly involved an initial \$3 million government investment, with the expectation that it will be supplemented by private donations (Nworah, 2006); the initial cost of Uganda's branding effort was \$650,000 followed by a \$1 million advertising campaign on CNN (Kahn, 2006).

By comparison, Brand Estonia was clearly a bargain. As the first former Soviet state to commission a branding campaign, Estonia may have been treated as a 'loss leader' by Interbrand in its eagerness to acquire the business of other client states in the region.

Because too many variables are at play, there is no way to accurately measure the effects of branding on either tourism or international investment. What can be measured with some reasonable statistical reliability is a brand's visibility within its target market and the attributes that those familiar with the brand attribute to it. Because branders are, by definition, promoters, they tend to exaggerate their powers. Critics as well as clients can be seduced by their hyperbolic rhetoric. Olins (2004), himself a master of promotional rhetoric, chastises Klein's *No Logo* for falling into this trap. He claims Klein dramatically overestimates the success of branders by confusing their ambitions with their achievements. Although, given the source, the criticism is disingenuous, Olins does score a valid point here; branders' claims should be viewed with *profound* skepticism.

The focus of this article is not, however, on whether branders deliver on their claims or even whether nation branding works; but rather to advance the claims that (1) place branding has been a successful mechanism for transferring public funds and authority into private hands; (2) it has thereby contributed to advancing and naturalizing market fundamentalism; and (3) the feel-good illusions of community participation and solidarity that nation branding can cultivate function ideologically to position nation branding as a pro-social force enhancing the public sphere rather than depleting and superseding it. Indeed, its apparent triviality and innocence, even the fact that it may appear to be a waste of money (Olin, no date, p. 1), may actually enhance nation branding's effectiveness as an agent of neo-liberalism.

Branding advocates claim that nation branding provides benefits beyond tourist and investor dollars, including building internal solidarity, pride, and a sense of patriotism within a nation (or to put it directly, domestic propaganda). Successful efforts may well do these things for branded nations and their 'consumers'. Some

analysts also see nation branding exercising a beneficial effect on international relations. Peter van Ham (2002) recognizes several problematic aspects of nation branding, but concludes that market-based forms of national identity are far less dangerous than the nationalistic identity formations which fueled brutal wars and genocide throughout the twentieth century. Van Ham positions himself on the right side of history here, but he sets up a false Manichean dichotomy; the choice, as he presents it, is either market fundamentalism or bloody nationalism with no intermediate spaces between. Yet, it is precisely in those intermediate spaces – perhaps always against steep odds – that the struggles of and for broadening participatory democracy take place. Jurgen Habermas (1992) proposes a more democratic alternative that avoids van Ham's reductive dichotomy by promoting 'constitutional patriotism' as a basis for community solidarity; a form of solidarity that is secured by principles of justice, not in blood or money.

Van Ham's assumption that nation branding and nationalism are mutually exclusive also requires interrogation. Drawing extensively on the literature of nationalism as well as empirical evidence, including interviews with leading nation branders and country case studies, Melissa Aronczyk (2007b) maintains that nation branding is really an updated form of nationalism. Mosco (2001) also argues that nationalism remains an active force in the globalization of capitalism. There is little reason to believe that repackaging national narratives for the global marketplace rids them of nationalistic elements. While nation branders may use rational, evidence-based arguments in addressing potential investors, they use emotional appeals to attract tourists and to evoke a sense of solidarity (patriotism) among domestic populations. Moreover, to resonate locally, the new national narratives must have some links to history and a heroic origin story.

Nonetheless nation brander Simon Anholt (2003) shares van Ham's conviction that nation branding can repress the belligerent tendencies of nations; however, he also maintains that nation branding can actually be an agent for global social justice. Characterizing nation branding as 'the quintessential modern exemplar of soft power' (p. 13), Anholt contends that branding is the only power available to many small nations, and he claims that 'second world transition economies' (p. 40) are in the best position to benefit from it. In his words, 'Having strong and well-known export brands enables both companies and countries to punch above their weight' (p. 40).

Embracing the language and assumptions of modernization theory, Anholt maintains that branding can provide emerging nations with a version of a 'technology leap' because brands create wealth (2003, p. 42). Describing himself as 'a reformed capitalist' (p. 169) and his book, *Brand New Justice* (2003) as a work of 'realpolitik' (p. 171), Anholt sees nation branding as a great leveler. Anholt's realpolitik does not, however, challenge either market fundamentalism or, despite claims to the contrary, global cultural stereotyping. Rather, Anholt seeks to extract and purify positive elements from national stereotypes, and capitalize on them by targeting Western consumers who are searching for 'exoticism' (p. 152). An example of this kind of exoticism is Interbrand's (no date, b) branding of Guatemala as the 'Soul of the Earth' (my example, not Anholt's).

In effect, Anholt recommends creating boutique nations (my term, not his). For example, he suggests that Estonia, a cold country, can develop a niche market in hockey sticks. Boutique nations can, in turn, serve collectively as bulwarks against

the loss of cultural diversity; 'if they fail to do this', Anholt warns, 'then we all run the risk of ending up with a lopsided, impoverished and etiolated form of global knowledge' (p. 145).

Anholt appears to be committed to an ethic of justice in branding: one that will narrow the disparities between 'have' and 'have not' nations. It is clearly not his intention to, for example, build upon Thailand's reputation as the global brand leader in the child sex trade; yet, there is nothing in the logic of his *realpolitik* that precludes it. Anholt accepts and valorizes the inevitability of a world in which brands rule; brands will 'gradually become the dominant channel of communication for national identity' (2003, p. 139). He sees this as 'an immutable law of global capitalism' (p. 145), and articulates his 'capitalism plus humanism' reform agenda for advancing poor nations within this law. Within Anholt's cosmos, Estonia made all the right moves. It punched way above its weight.

The totalizing logic of branding, which forecloses the options of small nations also forces its more reflective advocates, like Olins, van Ham and Anholt, to think within very narrow parameters.

A smile and a wink: Neo-liberalism's solution to the problem of democracy

Neo-liberalism conflates democracy and capitalism; it equates *laissez faire* economics with political freedom. The terms are not, of course, interchangeable; they have different origins and denote different practices. Democracy and capitalism have co-existed in uneasy tension since the eighteenth century in a kind of *yin* and *yang* struggle for balance (under liberal pluralism) or dominance (under neo-liberalism). The basis for this tension is deeply rooted. Democracy and capitalism each embody very different solutions to the problem of social order. Democracy opposes arbitrary, hierarchical, decision making by elites; whereas capitalism generally requires it (Bowles & Gintis, 1986). Democratic decision making requires public 'legibility and visibility' (Sennett, 1980); corporate decision making normally requires illegibility and invisibility to protect trade secrets and secure a competitive edge.

Nation branding is a monologic, hierarchical, reductive form of communication that is intended to privilege one message, require all voices of authority to speak in unison, and marginalize and silence dissenting voices. The message itself is, by design, hyper-visible, but the decision making involved in arriving at it and the multiple agendas incorporated within it are neither legible nor visible in the classic liberal sense.

The primary impetus for branding products, companies and nations, like cattle and slaves, is control. Every branding consultancy emphasizes the imperatives of 'brand protection'. As Scott Bedbury (quoted by Jacks, 2003, p. 2), who played a major role in the creation of two super brands, Nike and Starbucks, puts it, in deceptively folksy terms: 'All brands need good parents' because brands are designed to soak up content, images, and feelings, marketers must 'chaperone' them everywhere they go. These chaperones must, of course, include lawyers who are ever ready to seek injunctions and restraining orders to silence any negativity that reaches the highly sensitive ears of the brands' parents.

Anholt (2003) is more direct and, in my judgment, more honest about both the importance and the mechanics of brand protection. He endorses tight, hierarchal, even totalitarian, control in implementing a nation's branding efforts: 'making sure

that every single message that comes out of a country ... plays unerringly on the same basic themes' (p. 135). He draws an analogy to the 'despotic management styles' involved in corporate branding, and warns that unless nations can develop 'the same single-minded sense of purpose and control', their branding programs are 'doomed to fail' (p. 135).

Nevertheless branders have far less control over places than products (Frost, 2004). Geography and weather are fixed. Collective memory and history books cannot be completely erased. If the press is free, consistency of message cannot be enforced; and in the era of the internet and satellite technologies, even totalitarian regimes cannot fully control information flows. In democracies, top-down, 'despotic management styles' will presumably meet resistance if they become visible. External events can also affect national images. Even representation in popular culture can have devastating effects on national images as Kazakhstan discovered when the mockumentary film, *Borat*, was released in 2006. Russia was able to exercise the prerogative of a 'good brand parent' by banning *Borat* domestically, but the film was an international box office hit.

Brand consistency may be a desirable objective from a marketing point of view; from a democratic perspective, it is not a desirable national goal. It is telling that *Anholt's Nation Brand Index* shows that on measures of brand consistency, the US ranks last, while Singapore is at the top of the list (*Business Wire*, 2006).

On the surface, the content that nation branders promote, New York as loveable, Britain as cool, Estonia as even cooler, do appear innocuous, trivial, even fun. When, however, the methodology of branding is used to assert control over perceptions of and communications about the space nostalgically referred to as the public sphere, there is nothing innocuous about it. The methodology, *qua* methodology, is fascist or, to use Umberto Eco's more elastic term, 'ur-fascist' (Eco, 1995, p. 12), not liberal or even neo-liberal.

The nation branding literature acknowledges many of these criticisms. With his usual disarming candor, for example, Olins says, in an interview posted on his company's website Saffron Consultants.Com, 'branding is propaganda ... what it boils down to is manipulation and seduction. That's the business we're in. That's the business of life' (quoted in Cook, 2007, p. 2).

A smile and a wink may disarm and seduce, but there are indications that some branders, including Olins, are taking criticism seriously and learning from it. In branding Poland, for example, Olins' company resisted the easy essentialism of early nation branding efforts; Saffron's research showed that Poles were deeply divided over their identity. Instead of trying to camouflage these differences, the defining idea for Brand Poland is 'creative tension', which provides a broad umbrella that is intended to accommodate internal differences while conveying a dynamic entrepreneurial spirit externally (www.Saffron-consultants.com).

Like Olins, most nation branders do talk the talk of cultural sensitivity and difference, but there are no formal procedures within their approach to ensure they walk the walk. The seven-step process is a one-size-fits-all approach. Nation branders use conventional marketing methods (see Holt, 1997 for a compelling critique of these methods). Nation branders do not recruit teams of sociologists, anthropologists, historians, literary scholars, street poets, graffiti artists, or others who might be able to excavate multiple layers of local knowledge, and identify the national Zeitgeist. To my knowledge, nation branders do not even use newer forms

of cultural marketing (Holt, 2004). Like the creators of iconic commercial brands, studied by Holt (2004, p. xii), nation branders succeed or fail to produce compelling myths (stories and straplines) about nations based upon their 'gut feelings', their practical experience, and individual visual and semantic fluency; as a result, nation brands, like iconic brands, are 'the hodgepodge result of the cultural intuition' of creative people who informally 'sneak' cultural content into the branding process. The resonance of this fugitive cultural content (local knowledge picked up informally and processed intuitively) is what makes or breaks a campaign; yet, this content is, at best, a function of the tacit knowledge of a small number of creative individuals. This leaves 'many of the social and cultural issues embedded in the branding campaign unexamined' (Ooi, 2004, p. 107). Nation branding is, in short, a risky business that can backfire financially, politically, and culturally. Moreover, its calculative approach and reductive logic impoverishes (dumbs down) public discourse.

What then is a citizen to do? Naomi Klein's (2002, p. xx) pre-September 11, 2001 prediction that collective outrage at the excesses of global branders would 'fuel the next big political movement, a vast wave of opposition targeting transnational corporations' – a 'no logo' movement – was always unduly optimistic. Those who seek to renew participatory democracy, restore integrity to articulations of national identity, and promote broad based participation in public communications may have to settle for more modest agendas. That does not mean that nothing can be done. Unlike Estonia, we still have options.

First, as researchers, we can begin by taking place branding seriously, recognizing that it involves much more than slogans, bumper stickers, and vacation fun. We can also probe, evaluate, and bring greater transparency to recent shifts in the strategies of international development organizations, which encourage and support nation branding. For example, questions can be raised about the sustainability of adventure and eco-tourism, which are designed to bring affluent tourists and their hard currencies to remote regions of poor countries; however, even advocates of this approach acknowledge that if this strategy succeeds, it will eventually destroy the natural environments that are the tourist attractions (Goldstone, 2001). Second, as educators, we can extend the mission of media literacy to include public relations, marketing and propaganda. Third, as citizens and activists, we can demand that our respective governments follow the UK's lead and require that public relations firms and brand consultancies publicly disclose their client lists. Similar disclosures should also be required of government agencies when they hire public relations firms and 'communication' companies. Fourth, disclosure should be required when private funding is used to advance public policy initiatives. Fifth, all efforts to restore the ideal of and struggles for participatory democracy depend upon the existence of a robust, free and independent media. The media reform movement, unlike the 'no logo' movement, is gaining modest global traction. As a venue where neo-liberal excesses are being contested by ideologically diverse constituencies, it may provide a platform for resisting the movement to turn national identity into intellectual property. Finally, creativity is not confined to corporate suites. Eco (1986, p. 135) recommends 'semiotic guerrilla warfare' as a means of resisting ur-fascism. Citizens, poets, artists, performers, web designers, filmmakers, independent journalists, bloggers and scholars can mount their own campaigns to resist branding of the world. *Borat*, *Adbusters* and cultural jamming groups like the Yes Men (www.theyesmen.org/) provide some models. Satire and irony are not enough.

Comic relief is only that. And ‘creatives’ resisting branding, like those promoting it, also project individual visions, which require cultural grounding and collective accountability. Combined with knowledge, political organization and vision, however, a spirit of carnival may be able to interrupt, expose and redirect some of the momentum and resources dedicated to facile forms of nation branding. Rethinking a nation’s mission and identity, in light of changing global circumstances, could provide opportunities for cultural enrichment and democratic development if both ends (national objectives) as well as means were open to full and free negotiation, and if those negotiations were conducted under rules that provided all interested parties with fair hearings and real opportunities to participate in decision-making processes.

The liberal vision of a government ‘of, for, and by the people’ may seem hopelessly naïve, idealistic and anachronistic in a world where governments are brands and corporations make public policy. Courage, tenacity, and creative ingenuity are needed to resist the seductions and manipulation of neo-liberalism’s image makers. It requires citizens to reject postmodern cool and re-imagine possibilities of full democratic accountability. This resistance may not be able to reverse the tragedy of the commons, but it could allow critics and activists to periodically ‘punch above their weight’.

Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the comments and suggestions of readers of earlier versions of this article, including Marsha Siefert, Jefferson Pooley, John Downing, John L. Sullivan, Susan Ross, students in the Muhlenberg College Media and Communication Honors Seminar, and especially Neal O’Boyle of the University of Dublin.

Notes

1. The United States’ ill-fated 2002 ‘Shared Values’ public diplomacy campaign to rebrand itself in the Middle East has received much recent attention (for example, Brown, 2003; Snow, 2004; Jansen, 2004). Ireland and the rise of the Celtic Tiger has also received considerable attention by scholars in many fields; see, for example, Kirby, Gibbon & Cronin (2002), Coulter & Coleman (2003). The Irish Tourist Board can be seen as pioneering the marketing of nations (Fanning, no date), however, it ‘branded’ itself before nation branding emerged as an identifiable public relations and marketing specialty. As such, Eire functions as a precursor to and successful model for the development of commercial nation branding. The following works, representing disciplines other than tourism and marketing, directly analyze nation branding. The ‘state manufacture of culture’ through the promotion of tourism in Singapore has been examined through the lens of the political economy of communication (Leong, 1989, p. 75). Dzenovska (2005) analyzes branding in Latvia from an anthropological perspective. Ooi (2004) explores the unexamined politics and poetics of Denmark’s branding effort. Vainik and Orav (2005) examine the essentializing processes of nation branding from the perspective of folklore. van Ham (2002) considers branding through the lens of international relations. To my knowledge, however, Aronczyk (2007a; 2007b) and her forthcoming dissertation (New York University) represent the only comprehensive attempt to contextualize nation branding in relation to theories of the nation-state and nationalism as well as to undertake comparative case studies of nation branding as an applied communication practice. Finally, a recent work (Roy, 2007) uses nation branding in its title, and cites and briefly discusses

Anholt, but the title is misleading, and Anholt's work is, in my judgment, unfairly represented. The actual subject of the article is an analysis of a 2003 'reality' television program, *Worlds Apart*, produced by Rupert Murdoch's commercial cable channel, National Geographic. At best, nation branding functions loosely as a metaphor in this work.

2. Both Anholt and Olins are on the speaker circuits of international policy forums. For example Olins contributed to the 2002 World Export development Forum in Hong Kong, sponsored by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development of the World Trade Organization, and Anholt was keynote speaker at the 2005 Asia Cultural Cooperation Forum. For a comprehensive list of Anholt's many addresses to international policy groups, see his web-site, <http://www.earthspeak.com>. For an extensive analysis of the role of international agencies in promoting adventure, cultural, and eco-tourism as a development strategy, see Goldstone (2001); her book is based on interviews with international policymakers. Gumbel (2005, p. 2) reports that the World Intellectual Property Organization, a UN agency, is 'actively helping countries around the world to brand themselves'.
3. The term 'market fundamentalism' was coined by financier George Soros. He first used it in interviews and newspaper articles in which he warned of the inherent instability of global markets, from whence he had made his own fortune. He developed this idea further in *The Crisis of Capitalism* (1998). I use it here to describe a constituent of the ideology (or post-ideology) of globalization, which positions the 'free-market' as the arbiter of all things.
4. Advertising and marketing have long exploited alienation; however, postmodern approaches tend to be playfully provocative in flaunting their capacity to create faux communities of brand loyalists as compensation for the lonely individualism consumerism promotes.
5. The ethnic Estonian population was 88.1% in 1934 while the Estonian Russian population was only 8.2%. For a complete profile of Estonian ethnicities, see Estonia Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2006).
6. Vainik and Orav (2005) probe Estonian anger, which they claim is the repressed underside of the character trait, diligence, emphasized by Brand Estonia promoters. Kuus (2002) also examines the complexity of identity narratives in Estonia, which cannot be captured by branding.

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