Nationalism by the back door: a review of Michael Billig’s ‘Banal Nationalism’

BY SIMON COLL · PUBLISHED JULY 27, 2015 · UPDATED JULY 27, 2015

It should be pointed out before anything else that this book is by no stretch a recent release. Banal Nationalism was first published in 1995, and the ideas that author Michael Billig raises have since been explored and built on by a variety of sociologists and historians. The following should therefore be taken in the spirit of all ‘retro’ reviews: it is an attempt to draw attention to the importance and influence of a classic for those who have not encountered it before. For a classic this text most certainly is, and it should be of great interest to anyone curious about national identity, western politics, the media, or indeed any aspect of the social world around them.

The book is not theoretically dense; it has a single, relatively simple idea at its core, which is given room to develop fully across its eight chapters. The idea, in essence, is a proposal for a new conceptual model for the way in which national identification operates: the titular ‘banal nationalism’. As its name suggests, this focuses on nationalism as an everyday phenomenon, embedded in and influencing the world around us, and thus far more commonplace than most inhabitants of developed Western states are normally aware. In his introduction, Billig defines the concept as a ‘stretching’ of the term ‘nationalism’ to encompass the ‘collection of ideological habits (including habits of practice and belief) which reproduce existing nations as nations’ in everyday life (p. 6). ‘Banal nationalism’, in other words, refers to the methods by which the idea of a particular nation is constructed and perpetuated, both in society as a whole and in the minds of individual citizens.

Billig goes on to outline the way in which political elites practice this construction, via what he terms the ‘continual “flagging”, or reminding, of nationhood’ (p. 8); that is, via frequent, numerous and inconspicuous references to the national collective. These references are incorporated into political and media discourses, as well as being woven into citizens’ physical environments—most obviously in the form of the national flag.

Despite their prevalence, these reminders of nationhood are generally so subtle, ‘so familiar, so continual’, that they are ‘not consciously registered’ by the population most of the time. This is encapsulated vividly in Billig’s description of the exemplary image of nationalism: ‘not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building’ (p. 8). Gradually, however, this flagging ingrains a sense of national loyalty and belonging in the majority of citizens that remains dormant, almost subconscious, until it is needed by political elites (pp. 8-10). At such moments of heightened nationalist salience, particularly during wartime, citizens may be required to lend their nation more explicit support, either vocally or, in the case of soldiers, bodily. These demands ought to seem excessive, but the processes of national flagging ensure that instead ‘the homeland is made to look […] beyond question and, should the occasion arise, worth the price of sacrifice’ (p. 175).
These more overt expressions of national belonging are described in the book as ‘hot’ nationalism, and Billig draws a clear distinction between this and his own ‘banal nationalism’ (pp. 43-46). As he points out, citizens of most developed nation-states (at least those in the West) are largely blind to the connection between the two, ascribing their own nationalistic feelings to a perfectly rational and healthy ‘patriotism’ in contrast to the ‘irrational force of nationalism’ (p. 56), which is always understood as belonging to somebody else. The British are arguably particularly vulnerable to this, as a lack of demonstrative nationalism is often one of the cornerstones of British national pride (Fenton, 2007).

Billig delivers a stern warning against this sort of fallacy, arguing that it encourages a complacency and willingness to overlook the potential for closed-mindedness and xenophobia inherent in our own supposedly benign ‘patriotism’. He is also critical of those social scientists who assert that the two attitudes are ‘psychologically distinct’, suggesting that such efforts ‘reveal, not so much an objective difference […] but the readiness to claim such a difference’ (p. 57). The widespread belief that such a difference exists, he continues, is another product of the ‘us versus them’ opposition fostered by the processes of ‘banal nationalism’ (pp. 55-59).

This book therefore offers more than a conceptual overview for the ways in which nationalism functions, though it is certainly invaluable for that. It also has a distinct political point to make: that the claims and actions of political elites should never be taken at face value. The point is hardly unique to this text, but Billig does offer the important reminder that the influence of those elites extends beyond the obvious, into the realm of implications and overlooked assumptions. Awareness of this influence allows us to approach nationalistic discourses, especially those close to home, with ‘watchful suspicion’, as Billig advises in his conclusion (p. 177).

Moreover, as Chapter 4 in particular makes clear, these processes do not operate only within individual states, but also in the international arena. Indeed, it is ‘banal nationalism’ that is largely responsible for maintaining the concept of a ‘world of nations’ in which we situate our own. Billig explains this as a natural extension of the idea of a nation-state: ‘if “our” nation is to be imagined in all its particularity, it must be imagined as a nation amongst other nations’ (p. 83). This international context, or ‘imagined universal code of nationhood’ (p. 83), is essential if any single nation-state is to have any meaning, and therefore if its inhabitants are to develop any emotional attachment to it. Billig analyses the ways in which national flags, anthems and sports teams serve as ‘symbols of peculiarity, which, because of their conventionality, are simultaneously symbols of the universality of nationhood’—while each is unique, they each represent shared membership of the ‘club of nations’ (pp. 85-86). This does not preclude the existence of xenophobia; competition among nations, notably through mutual stereotyping, is crucial for making the system work. It does, however, mean that nationalism can never be ‘completely inward-looking’, however extreme its manifestation (p. 85).

It would of course be impractical to attempt a thorough assessment here of this book’s influence on nationalism studies in the twenty years since its publication. Scholars such as Michael Skey (Skey, 2009) and Tim Edensor (Edensor, 2002) have provided decent overviews of the significance of the theoretical reorientation that the book represented, highlighting in particular Billig’s focus on the maintenance rather than the formation of national identities, as well as his use of everyday media
language and other ‘banal signifiers’ as a source base (Skey, 2009, 334). Both these advances addressed important deficiencies in the field, and have shaped the way most nationalism researchers have approached the topic ever since (Edensor, 2002, 11-12).

Naturally, critics have also identified various weaknesses in Billig’s central thesis. His discussion of the nationalizing effect of media discourses, for instance, assumes a ‘uniform, homogeneous national audience’, every member of which reacts to the nationalist flagging in the same way (Skey, 2009, 335), and he did not follow up these assertions with any empirical study (Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2014, 45). Scholars have also questioned the applicability of the ‘banal nationalism’ concept beyond the national level (Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2014, 47), an especially relevant concern in an age of globalization (Skey, 2009, 338-40).

However, as a methodological model for studying the cultivation of popular nationalist sentiment in a closely defined social and political context, ‘banal nationalism’ remains extremely useful—to sociologists and historians alike.

By this stage, readers will probably have thought of half a dozen examples of these techniques from their own lives and environs. The interesting (and slightly unnerving) thing is that these examples multiply the more closely we scrutinize our surroundings: the wording of newspaper articles or blog posts; the flag (or even the colour scheme) on signs, posters or advertisements; in short, anything that appeals to an implied ‘us versus them’ understanding of the world. In so doing, this flagging reinforces that understanding, reminding us of our own place in the national and international framework and ensuring that our national awareness remains primed, ready to be expressed or exploited whenever a display of ‘hot’ nationalism is required.

For those trying to make sense of (or guard against) these subtle mechanisms of national identity construction, Billig’s work offers an invaluable starting point. In that respect, it hasn’t aged a day.


Additional references


