

Rule, Britannia! Getting caught up in the web of language, customs, symbols and institutions that define us

Jul 6 2012

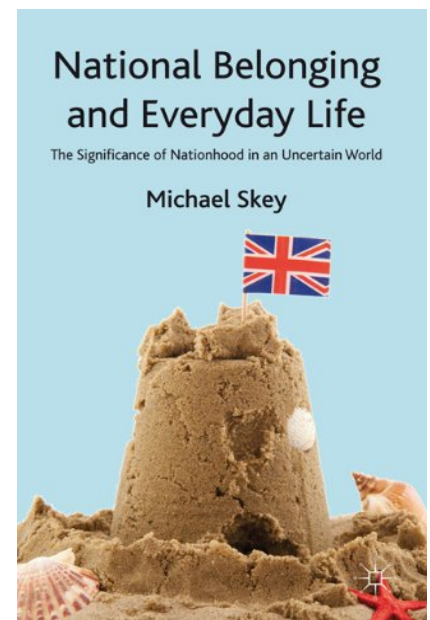
*This book analyses the current debates around national identity and multiculturalism by asking why so many people treat as common sense the idea that they live in and belong to nations. **Ross Bond** finds that through careful attention to the microsociological detail of everyday conversation, **Michael Skey** shows how people's perspectives are guided by national frames of reference, which in turn afford them a sense of security in reflecting upon the world around them.*

National Belonging and Everyday Life: The Significance of Nationhood in an Uncertain World. Michael Skey. Palgrave Macmillan. October 2011.

Coincidentally, my reading of this book encompassed the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and the start of the UEFA European Football Championship finals. Depending on one's perspective, these events might inspire reaction ranging from intense emotion to supreme indifference. In a mature democracy, why was such energy expended on celebrating hereditary (albeit largely symbolic) authority? Why do so many grown adults get so excited about the successes and failures of footballers with whom they have no direct connection?

While [Michael Skey](#), a sociologist at the University of East London, does discuss similar examples of what he terms 'ecstatic' nationalism, as the title of his book suggests, he is primarily interested in the way that nations and national identities (or, to use Skey's more cautious phrase, 'nationhood') are represented and reproduced in everyday life. This is important because, no matter how much indifference we might show to monarchical pageantry or international football, key to Skey's argument is that we are all to some extent caught up in the web of language, customs, symbols and institutions which '(re)produce the world as a world of nations'.

While many of the classic scholarly works on nationalism address its origins and development, perhaps the most celebrated text on 'everyday' nationalism is Michael Billig's [Banal](#)



Nationalism. Like Billig, Skey has a keen interest in the ways that 'diectic' terms (words such as 'we', 'our' etc.) are used to indicate, often implicitly, a national frame of reference. Such language also implies national homogeneity and conceals the contested and dynamic nature of nationhood. As Skey points out, defining precisely who 'we' are and what 'we' share is an impossible task.

Skey draws his evidence primarily from a series of group interviews carried out with 'ordinary' people across England. The specific focus, then, is English or British nationhood, although the arguments certainly have wider relevance. A further key feature of his research is that Skey has deliberately targeted those for whom, through a combination of birth, residence and ancestry, nationhood is very much taken for granted, and who thus have the capacity to make judgements about the national status of others. He emphasises the relative neglect of such people in similar previous research, which has often focused on those 'others': predominantly, minorities for whom national belonging is a less settled matter.

The approach and resulting data are probably most comparable to the work of social psychologist [Susan Condor](#), who has for many years explored Englishness through interviews with members of the public. It is to Skey's credit that he presents a great deal of his interview evidence and, notwithstanding what may be occasional overinterpretation, the discussion of this evidence is for the most part skilfully handled and integrated with wider academic and public debates.

Through careful attention to the microsociological detail of everyday conversation, Skey shows how the existence of nations as concrete 'things' is taken for granted and how people's perspectives are guided by national frames of reference which in turn afford them a sense of security in reflecting upon the world around them. He also shows how people respond when their understandings of nationhood are challenged. Significant here is Skey's interest in the real consequences such understandings and responses might have for those whose membership of the national community might be called into question, those who do not seem to share 'our' national heritage, practices and values.

Perhaps inevitably then, there is some discussion of the prominent and highly politicised topics of immigration and multiculturalism. While this perhaps dilutes the novelty of the book somewhat, it is admirable that Skey does try to think through the more practical and political implications of his findings. Nor does the book focus solely on what many would understand as the more negative xenophobic and exclusionary consequences of seeing the world through a national lens. Although sceptical about claims of growing 'cosmopolitanism', Skey also reports evidence of more positive engagement with cultural difference. However, he also stresses that this kind of engagement is often limited, conditional and temporary: national, rather than 'postnational' perspectives continue to predominate.

A weakness of the book is that, although we read a lot of their words, we are not told enough about the people who were interviewed. While research of this kind avowedly eschews any

attempt to make statistical generalizations, this does not mean that the process of selection and status of the research participants is unimportant. For a scholarly text there is a surprising lack of methodological detail, which could easily have been added in such a way as to avoid alienating readers who have little interest in such matters. Further, and notwithstanding the argument that many of the discourses highlighted in the book traverse social boundaries, some more systematic comparison on the basis of, e.g., the gender, social class and regional location of the interviewees would have been valuable. Similarly, although the argument is nicely located in a wider theoretical context, a more explicit introduction to the merits and limitations of studying nationhood in England as compared to other national contexts would have been interesting. Finally (and I concede that this is a common Scottish whinge, but important nonetheless), while Skey is clearly aware of the popular tendency to conflate English and British nationhood, I would have preferred a little more precision in his own argument and analysis in distinguishing between these two.

Overall, though, this is an engaging book which makes a significant contribution to knowledge and discussion of an area that is still rather underexplored. Although some of the terminology might be a little daunting to non-academic readers, Skey writes accessibly and does not hide behind jargon, so the book would certainly appeal to a wider audience beyond the important core of scholars and students in the social sciences, particularly those with an interest in nationalism, who will be its key constituency.

Ross Bond is a Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Edinburgh. His research interests are broadly concerned with nationalism and national identity. [Read more reviews by Ross.](#)

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