

Book Review: Branding the Nation: The Global Business of National Identity by Melissa Aronczyk

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National governments around the world are turning to branding consultants, public relations advisers and strategic communications experts to help them “brand” their jurisdiction. Using the tools, techniques and expertise of commercial branding is believed to help nations articulate more coherent and cohesive identities, attract foreign capital, and maintain citizen loyalty. **Branding the Nation** examines case studies in twelve countries and has in-depth interviews with nation branding experts and their national clients. **César Jiménez-Martínez** believes this book offers an exhaustive critique of the phenomenon of nation branding in regards to national identity, globalisation and neoliberalism.

Branding the Nation: The Global Business of National Identity.
Melissa Aronczyk. Oxford University Press. October 2013.

Find this book:

Since the term ‘nation branding’ was coined in the late 1990s, an increasing number of governments from all over the world have relied on this practice, seeking the help of specialists in advertising and public relations to develop brands for the nations these governments claim to represent. According to some of its [practitioners](#), in an interconnected world with global markets and new communication technologies, brands would not be mere cosmetics, but rather a compulsory feature for nations to become successful, competitive and influential in the international arena.

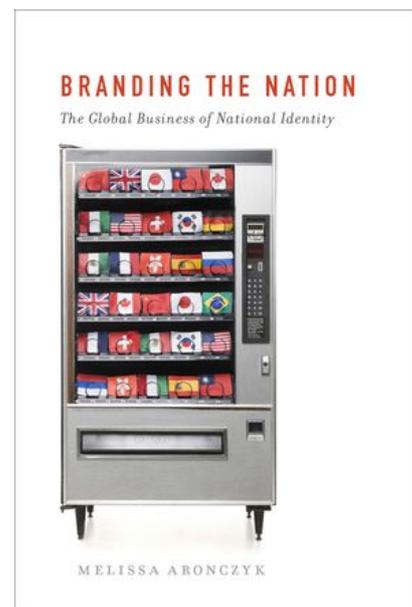
Although there is a growing literature on this topic, it seems to be primarily dominated by administrative approaches coming from areas such as marketing or public relations. Conversely, the latest book by [Melissa Aronczyk](#), Assistant Professor in the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers University, is among the few works that provide a much-needed critical approach to a practice that in recent years has become increasingly influential among politicians, businessmen and academics alike.

In *Branding the Nation*, Aronczyk examines the political, economic and cultural paths that have facilitated the legitimization of nation branding, as well as the impact that this practice has had on both the *idea* and *purposes* attributed to the nation in current times. Aronczyk argues that nation branding is at the intersection of contemporary ideas about national identity and globalisation, with the former seen as a competitive resource that can potentially be used to emphasize differentiation in a globalised world. According to the author, although nation branding contributes to perpetuate the relevance of the national form, it does so at the cost of flattening the plurality of voices constitutive of the nation. That is to say, the type of differentiation encouraged by nation branding is quite limited, given that, as Aronczyk assesses, ‘[B]randing’s work is to erase the prominence of those attributes which might compromise the legitimacy of the nation-state in a market democracy’

The book also examines the strategies and knowledge guiding the work of nation branding specialists, who belong to what she calls the ‘transnational promotional class’. Aronczyk observes that, although nation branding strategies have been followed by governments all over the world, most of the consultants are actually based in the United Kingdom, resulting in a certain paternalism towards their clients. Additionally, these consultants tend to see themselves as mere ‘facilitators’ of these practices, thus delegating most of the responsibility –and potential failures- of their application to both national governments and citizens who, in view of the consultants, should be the ones ‘living the brand’.

Drawing on twelve case studies from five continents, *Branding the Nation* explores how these ideas have been put in to practice in a diversity of national settings, including Germany, Chile, Botswana, Georgia and Sweden. Two chapters, however, focus in detail on Canada and Poland. The former examines the problems and contradictions that arise when attempting to use the idea of diversity – a staple in the national self-definition of Canada – for nation branding purposes, and how this diversity has been ‘taken up, managed and manipulated for the purposes of global visibility’, resulting in a rethought of Canadian identity and a narrowing on its forms of expression, privileging the ones that are most useful to satisfy capitalist global demand.

Perhaps the most interesting chapter is the one focusing on Poland. It convincingly illustrates how nation branding consultants attempt to shape the idea of the nation to fit one specific type of neoliberal globalisation, filtering out history and culture, as well as how alternative national imaginaries are eliminated. For instance, at the beginning of this century, the



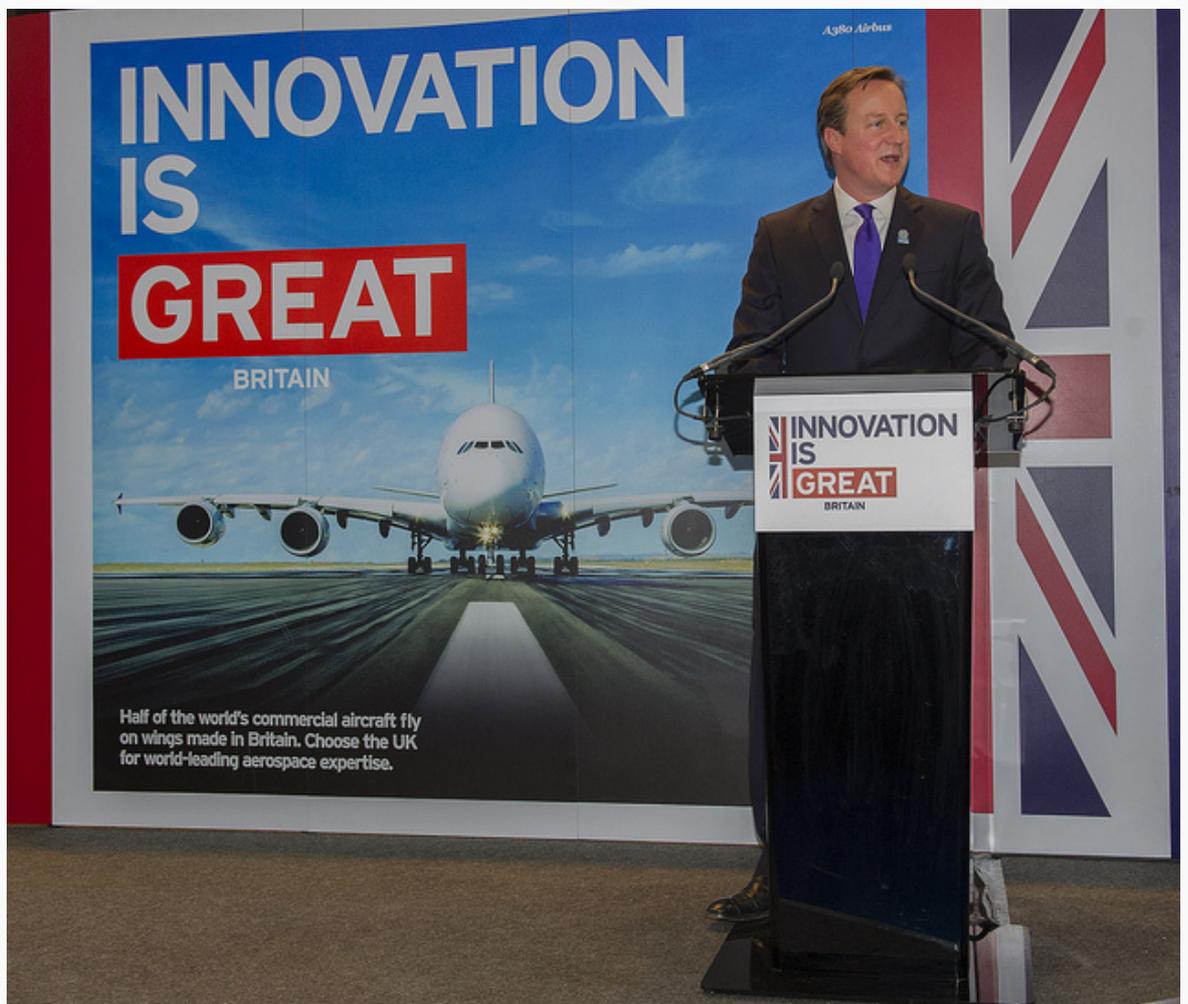
Polish government attempted to develop a new image drawing on the logo of the trade union Solidarity. However, it received several criticisms from both foreign consultants and national citizens, who at the time thought that it 'was not the right image for a future-looking nation', especially one which was validating its role as one of the new members of the European Union.

Branding the Nation offers an exhaustive critique of the phenomenon of nation branding in regards to national identity, globalisation and neoliberalism. However, it could also have offered a more thorough examination of this practice in relation to diplomacy and international relations. As Aronczyk observes, nation branding can also be used as a tool to gain authority and legitimacy in the diplomatic field, repairing national reputations or managing the consequences of unexpected or unfavourable events. This inevitably brings to mind the idea of soft power, which is mentioned only a few times in the book. Soft power has been used as a justification for both nation branding and public diplomacy – two practices with blurred borders and which seem to [overlap in many ways](#) - but it has also been criticized as a potential expression of [hegemony](#).

Perhaps, some of the criticisms towards nation branding discussed earlier, particularly the fact that it either flattens contestations about national identity or uses them insofar they are useful to foster particular political or economic outcomes, could have been applied to some extent to soft power as well.

Still, this book is an outstanding, highly relevant book about an increasingly influential phenomenon

that has spread across the world. It contributes to fill an important gap in the literature and will definitely be of interest for both students and scholars from areas such as media and communications, international relations and governance. As Aronczyk observes, due to the impossibility of fulfilling its own promises, nation branding may disappear in the near future. However, it can be a productive space to initiate a discussion about the purpose of the nation in the current globalised and hyper-mediated world.



Prime Minister David Cameron, advertising UK manufacturing. From [Downing St](#) (Creative Commons BY NC)

César Jiménez-Martínez is a PhD candidate in Media and Communications at the London School of Economics. He is researching how competitive meanings of the nation struggle in the media. Previously, he worked for several years as a journalist for newspapers and television in Chile, and he holds an MSc in Global Media and Communications from the London School of Economics and the University of Southern California. [Reviews by César](#).