

Book Review: Everyday Nationhood: Theorising Culture, Identity and Belonging after Banal Nationalism edited by Michael Skey and Marco Antonsich

In Everyday Nationhood: Theorising Culture, Identity and Belonging after Banal Nationalism, edited by Michael Skey and Marco Antonsich, a range of contributors consider, rethink and supplement the concept of 'banal nationalism', originally introduced by Michael Billig. Featuring a response from Billig, this timely and engaging book underscores the importance of understanding everyday, taken-for-granted expressions of nationhood as they are reproduced in different national and transnational contexts, finds Sanja Vico.

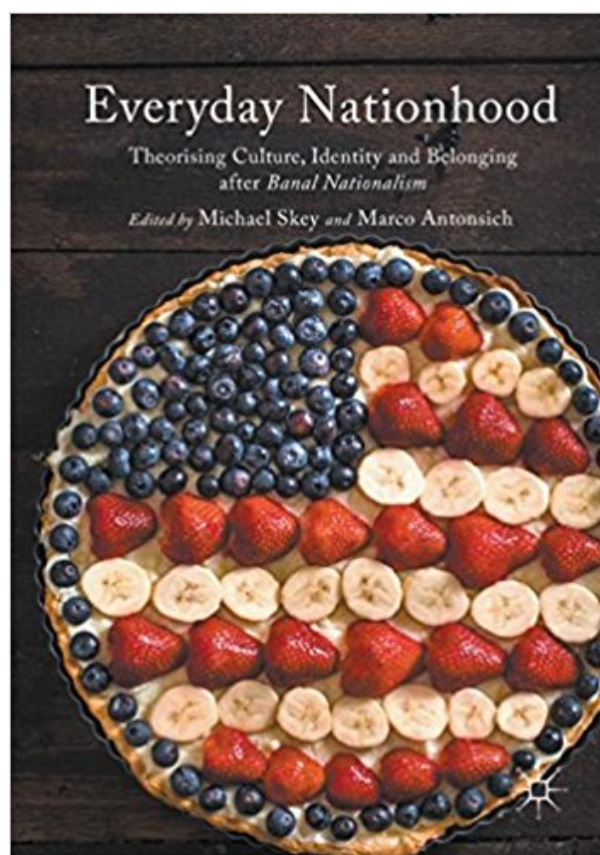
Everyday Nationhood: Theorising Culture, Identity and Belonging after Banal Nationalism. Michael Skey and Marco Antonsich (eds). Palgrave. 2017.

Find this book: [amazon](#)

Everyday Nationhood is a timely and engaging book, offering a collection of different empirical studies and theoretical discussions that aim to revitalise, rethink, supplement and also pay tribute to the concept of banal nationalism, [originally introduced by Michael Billig in 1995](#). In contrast to predictions that the world was heading into a post-national future at the time when Billig's book was written, today we are witnessing a resurgence of nationalism. It is clear that globalisation did not diminish the importance of nations, and this is because of the international character of nationalism, as contributors Craig Calhoun and Atsuko Ichijo particularly demonstrate within the volume.

Billig coined the concept of banal nationalism to refer to the unnoticed, taken-for-granted, ordinary signs of nationalism – including flags on public buildings and the use of deictic words in the media such as 'ours' or 'us' – that reproduce the nation on a daily basis. These quotidian and seemingly mundane reproductions of the nation are precisely what, according to Billig, enable the mobilisation of national sentiments in moments of crisis and encourage support for governments' actions and interventions at home and abroad. Hence, 'banal' does not mean naïve.

In *Banal Nationalism* (1995), Billig drew on the insights of a one-day survey of national newspapers in England to demonstrate that well-established Western democratic countries rely heavily on national symbols and signs, and pointed out that these banal forms of nationalism had been largely overlooked. Instead, nationalism had mainly been analysed and studied in its overt 'hot' manifestations, such as in regions that sought secession or that were engulfed in war.



Everyday Nationhood therefore offers critical reflections on the concept today that interrogate whether nationalism can also be benign given that it is a crucial element of democracy (Calhoun); whether and how the concept may be applied to different national contexts (see essays by Ivana Spasić; Lukasz Szulc; Gesine Wallem; J. Paul Goode; and Manolis Pratsinakis); and other less explored domains, such as the role of affect (Elizabeth Millitz; Shanti Sumartojo; and Tim McCreanor et al). The book also considers how banal nationalism has been reproduced on the international stage through the support of international institutions and digital media (Ichijo; Eleftheria J. Lekakis; and Melissa Aronczyk), which reaffirms the conclusion of this book – that nation states are still the main international players. To close the volume, Billig provides his response to the contributors.

In her chapter, Spasić argues that banal nationalism is not applicable to the Serbian context due to this country's turbulent recent history (including communism, the resurgence of nationalism followed by the civil war and the break-up of Yugoslavia) and its position on the semi-periphery between the developed West and the East. For this reason, the question of identity in Serbia has always been deeply divisive and contentious, which is why expressions of nationalism can hardly be 'banal'. In his response, Billig criticises Spasić for misunderstanding his argument because she draws on the idea that banal nationalism is only possible in developed countries with stable democratic regimes. He notes that Western countries are not immune to hot outbursts of nationalism either, seen, for instance, in the wake of Brexit, and that a division between banal versus hot nationalism as well as between the West versus the rest creates an inaccurate and dangerous dichotomy of 'us' and 'them'. In this respect, Billig is right; however, I would argue that the main point of Spasić's argument is that nationalism in Serbia is always self-conscious and hardly unnoticed due to its complex historical context.



Image Credit: ([Sarah Joy CC BY SA 2.0](#))

Here, I would particularly like to focus attention on the idea of the 'unnoticed' or the 'subconscious' as one of the main attributes of banal nationalism. There are a number of empirical studies in this book that provide evidence of conscious or even strategic, yet nonetheless banal, reproductions of nationalism (such as contributions from Szulc; Wallem; Goode; Sumartojo; and Millitz), but no scholar actually explicitly challenges the idea of banal nationalism being 'unnoticed'. For instance, Antonsich and Skey distinguish between banal nationalism and everyday nationalism, whereby the latter is employed to refer to conscious manifestations of nationalism in quotidian settings, such as when students discuss national symbols in a classroom.

A number of media audience studies have demonstrated that every symbol is polyvalent. People do not always interpret television programmes or newspaper articles according to their intended, preferred or dominant codes – that is, in the ways journalists and media professionals want them to do. In his contribution, Bart Bonikowski also emphasises that nations are not a coherent whole that possess core values shared by most citizens; instead, there are differences in terms of the repertoires of dispositions that members share towards the nation. This means that 'being British' will not have the same meaning for UKIP members and supporters as for Liberal Democrats, for instance.

Such endeavours in this book therefore imply that the distinction between ‘banal’ (subconscious) and ‘everyday’ (conscious) nationalism is fragile and subject to constant oscillations between different members of the public. For instance, Wallem writes about how ethnic German migrants from the former Soviet Russia overwhelmingly adopt the practice of changing their ‘foreign’-sounding names in order to blend in. Even though this practice is institutionalised, it reveals how something that for most people belongs to the ordinary – and therefore is perhaps ‘unnoticed’ – becomes a criterion of exclusion for others and provokes strategic attempts to cope with difference.

It is also hard to claim that manifestations are noticed or unnoticed without ethnographic inquiry or interviews. Drawing on the findings of 60 in-depth interviews and 4 focus groups in two Russian regions on the topic of patriotism undertaken in 2014-15, Goode reveals the difference between publicly expressed views (as given in focus groups) and privately held views (as provided in interviews). In the former, people showed they endorsed government-led patriotic rhetoric, whereas in the latter these were seen as inauthentic and unconvincing. Hence, Goode concludes, somewhat similarly to Spasić, people are aware of the constant flagging of the nation in their daily lives and some are also critical of the government’s pervasive strategies of boosting patriotic sentiments. By this, Goode implicitly challenges Billig’s definition of banal nationalism as the ‘subconscious’ and ‘unnoticed’ flagging of nations, instead showing how in some contexts and for some people, these ostensibly banal national symbols do not go under radar and become questioned.

Goode not only makes a significant argument regarding the ‘conscious/ subconscious’ aspect of nationalism, but also with regards to methodology. He exposes the advantages and disadvantages of focus groups and in-depth interviews, and when and why researchers should use each. However, the author does not fully consider [the concept of the ‘spiral of silence’ by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann \(1984\)](#). This would be useful to explain what he observes – that people do not express their critical views publicly because they think they are isolated and that the majority endorses the dominant patriotic rhetoric.

Nonetheless, Billig’s contribution is unequivocal. He showed that the Western nations relied heavily on national symbols and rhetoric on a daily basis that were often hidden in mundane words such as ‘ours’ or flags on public buildings. The ordinariness of these manifestations of nationalism has led some social scientists to overlook their actual character and to label them positively as ‘patriotism’ opposed to the violent ‘nationalism’ of others, as Billig points out in his closing remarks to this volume. The familiarity of banal symbols of nationalism has also often meant they have remained unquestioned. However, there are several contributions to this book that have demonstrated when, how and why the banal manifestations of nationalism can also be recognised, challenged and transformed into a matter of strategic efforts.

Everyday Nationhood has provided a fresh look at Billig’s concept of banal nationalism, rethinking the concept and showing a number of different ways in which nations are reproduced on a daily basis in different national and transnational contexts. In so doing, the book shows how the central theme of Billig’s 1995 work remains undoubtedly relevant.

Sanja Vico is a PhD Candidate and Associate Lecturer at the Department of Media and Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London, having previously graduated from the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her PhD thesis looks at ordinary expressions of nationalism and cosmopolitanism of Serbian Londoners in the digital media, and for this she conducted ethnography, online ethnography and in-depth interviews. Her research interests include social and mobile media, migration, identities (particularly national, cosmopolitan, class and gender) and media audiences. She tweets at [@sanja_vico](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.