

Thus, for scholars as well as for people in and from the former Yugoslavia, the question remains: How could this happen? Perhaps we will never know for sure.

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Banal Nationalism

By Michael Billig, London, New Delhi, and Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1995. 177 pp.

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It is probably not too reductive to say that the premise underlying Billig's book is that nationalism has traditionally been conceived of as an unattractive and extreme characteristic found on the periphery of society. It is not for, or of, *us* (*us* being the inhabitants of the *established* Western nations). This, however, would ignore the skill and subtlety with which Billig builds and presents his arguments with regard to what he terms *banal* nationalism.

Billig founds his argument on an analysis of nationalism, which is based on a concept of the nation as a modern construct, as in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*. From this theoretical base Billig asserts that nationalism can be seen as an ideology, one that holds together the world of nation-states by presupposing the naturalised inevitability of the nation. His examination of the historical development of the concept "nation" highlights the lack of any one identifiable indicator, such as language, geography, or religion, which could be used to theorise the concept of nation.

His analysis of the nation is followed by an analysis of nationalism. He argues that studies of nationalism are often flawed; on the one hand, historians have ignored much of the past in the creation of nations, while on the other hand, social scientists have adopted the conventional standpoint where nationalism is "typically seen as the force which creates nation-states or which threatens the stability of nation-states" (p. 43). As an example of this latter view, Billig challenges Giddens' assertion that nationalism develops when ordinary life is threatened or disrupted. This view, Billig maintains, comes from and solidifies the idea that the "established" nations do not participate in nationalistic behaviour; for "us" there is patriotism. Where the "nationalism" of *others* is "hot," irrational, and dangerous, "our patriotism" is controlled, dignified, and benign.

For Billig, the power of nationalism lies, somewhat counter-intuitively, in the fact that it is concealed in everyday life. Using the symbolism of the flag, Billig proposes that nationalism is “flagged” every day, in a multitude of ways, from postage stamps to currency. These “flaggings” do not take the traditional form of organized public displays, but rather are buried within daily routines and naturalized, thus gaining their ideological power. This is what Billig means by his term “banal nationalism.”

Billig takes his theoretical assertions and applies them to examples from American and (predominantly) British politics and political news coverage, specifically addressing the use of language in promoting national identity, language that is both inclusive and exclusionary. He identifies the unnoticed power of words such as “we” and “us” in the language of nationalism, their very banality concealing and simultaneously exemplifying their importance. The argument develops by addressing the role of (predominantly American) nationalism in light of a post-modern, globalising world, and even addresses the nationalism in professional wrestling – a nationalism that is commercially packaged and hidden within the caricatured morality of good and evil. In this examination, Billig problematises the notion of national identities in the postmodern world by arguing that they have “outlived their function” (p. 139).

Billig sums up his arguments, stating that “by noticing the flaggings of nationhood, we are noticing something about ourselves. We are noticing the depths and mechanisms of our identity, embedded in routines of social life” (p. 175). For Billig, this should lead to an assessment of what constitutes “us,” and consequently what constitutes how “others” are reflexively perceived. It is these identities, so deeply embedded in our consciousness and aided by the socialised, naturalised “flaggings” Billig identifies, that remain strong in these times of the supposed weakening of national boundaries.

Billig constructs his arguments well, drawing upon disciplines such as philosophy, social psychology, and others to produce a cohesive and persuasive argument. It forces us to re-examine our own identities as members of a nation by cutting away at what has been naturalised, and by questioning the concepts of nation and nationalism. In some ways *Banal Nationalism* runs parallel to Edward Said’s *Orientalism* since both texts expose a distinctive split in the way language is used when different parts of the world are compared. Indeed, it challenges the validity of the national identities that lie at the heart of Orientalist definitions. This book is thought provoking, accessible, and well constructed, offering an alternative way of examining everyday situations and questioning much that is taken for granted about nations and national identity.