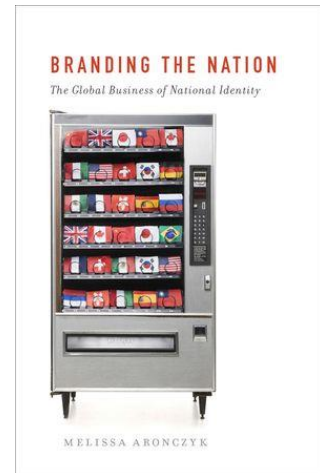


Melissa Aronczyk, **Branding the Nation: The Global Business of National Identity**, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, 256 pp., \$21.01 (paperback), \$89.10 (hardcover).

Reviewed by  
James Pamment  
University of Texas at Austin, USA &  
Karlstad University, Sweden

Melissa Aronczyk's **Branding the Nation** is a watershed moment for the field of nation brands research. Published by the highly respected Oxford University Press, it is the first critical monograph on the topic to achieve mainstream recognition, as evidenced by a review in the *Times Higher Education* supplement. Drawing on over a decade of research and advertising industry experience, 100 interviews with practitioners, and the analysis of thousands of pages of documents from 12 countries, Aronczyk promises a comprehensive deconstruction of the phenomenon of nation brands in the context of nationalism, neoliberalism, and 21st-century nationhood. This promise is only partly realized however, with the initial theory-building sections providing the main contributions to the field.



According to Kaneva (2011), nation brands research is broadly divided into three areas: practical “how to” handbooks; research into strategies, institutions, and political machinations; and cultural approaches that seek to critique the politics of identity proposed by branding activities. *Branding the Nation* may be placed in the latter group, with the particular goal of demonstrating the “consequences” of nation brands “for both our concept of the nation and our ideals of national citizenship” (p. 4). Aronczyk claims to have been one of the first to work on nation brands from a cultural-critical perspective, which makes it all the more perplexing that she largely ignores the literature from all three branches of nation branding research. This leads to significant oversights in the interpretations proposed by the author, contributing to a missed opportunity to shape the future of the field. There is still much to recommend here, however.

The first half of the book outlines the theory of nation brands within the context of theories of nationalism. Charting the rise of corporate branding and the gradual adoption of such approaches by countries, these chapters are among the most interesting and insightful, although portions of these discussions will be familiar to those acquainted with Aronczyk’s earlier work. These chapters have a strong theoretical grounding and are littered with revealing anecdotes and literary references that help bring the evolution of the field to light. It is no exaggeration to state that, through the systematic analysis of the emergence of early corporate and country branding indices, the author has constructed a series of arguments and theoretical positions that should be considered required reading.

There are lots of other interesting points made throughout the first half that could have been equally significant but are unfortunately undeveloped. For example, a discussion around the fact that

many nation branding practitioners are based in London is summarized simply as “a distinct, historically imperialistic tendency” (p. 81) in which all practitioners are apparently complicit. The author slips into the kind of nationalistic essentialism that is elsewhere decried, rather than carefully exploring —out of the material from those 100 interviews—the practitioners’ personal understandings of national identity and how it informs their work. Perhaps a more important gloss comes at the very end, where the author expresses the belief that there can be a good or proper way to do nation branding but doesn’t offer more than a few lines explaining how this would be possible, or indeed why it is desirable. I can certainly see this book being used as a teaching aid, and there are perhaps a dozen underdeveloped critical issues such as these that could profitably be taken forward as points of discussion in a classroom setting.

One of the unique selling points behind this book is the promise to bring the self-styled “gurus” of nation branding down a peg or two. In her analysis of their rhetoric of self-validation, Aronczyk attempts to provide an exposé of sorts, and there is undoubtedly an audience eager to hear this. At the same time, she paints a contradictory picture of a small group of experts (many with PhDs) who are generous with their time and contacts, willing to engage with academic questions, often paying for lunch or drinks, and generally open to explaining their thought processes and sharing their trade secrets—hardly the actions of the charlatans Aronczyk seems determined to describe. This comes across as particularly jarring against the relatively few revealing quotes included here, which simply fail to support the guiding argument. Out of 100 interviews, the incriminating quotes are few and far between, and come across as tortuously out of context. The outcome is a sense that the author began with the exposé and struggled to force the data to fit, and the practitioners themselves seem more like straw men than the Bond villains she seems determined to portray.

There are bigger issues, however. A problem that comes to the fore in the opening pages is Aronczyk’s (in her own words) “stubborn” insistence that nation brands are best understood in terms of the nation rather than the state. While this helps narrow the book’s focus, it ignores an extremely important interpretation of branding practices as the extension of state services to corporations and SMEs in support of inward investment, tourism, and exports. The tendency to abstract branding strategies from their domestic political contexts—and the broader apparatus of trade and diplomatic promotion—frequently undermines the quality of interpretation throughout the book. Furthermore, the fact that the theory sections fail to establish the salience of closely associated terms like *public diplomacy*, *soft power*, and *economic diplomacy* to this agenda creates a recurrent obstacle to the viability of many of Aronczyk’s core arguments. Those arguments are still sufficiently interesting to hold the reader’s attention, but their persuasiveness is dented by a lack of investment in the broader literature.

The second half of the book consists of 2 chapter-length case studies and 10 brief case studies squeezed into a single chapter. Many of the cases have been treated in detail elsewhere, and the lack of engagement with existing literature is again a missed opportunity to drive the field forward. For example, Evan Potter’s monograph *Branding Canada* (2009) barely receives a mention in the chapter on Canada, and many of the shorter case studies have been dealt with in greater detail and with greater purpose elsewhere. There are some gems here, but the overall standard of the case studies isn’t nearly as comprehensive or insightful as one may have hoped. Nonetheless, newcomers to the field may find parts of the empirical section a useful overview.

Nationhood and nationalism are the main focus of the book, and the discussions on this theme are based on a persuasive theoretical characterization of the modern nation-state articulated within the “logic” of globalization. A consequence of the aforementioned limitations, however, is a tendency to treat the branding texts as though they have agency—to infer what they “do” from what they claim to do. For example, an early research question asks “what actually *happens* to the nation when it is reconfigured as a brand?” (p. 17). My initial response, inked in the margin, is “nothing.” It takes more than a branding document to change a nation. Representations do matter, but they need to be placed in their proper context. *Branding the Nation* all too often takes the words of practitioners without the proverbial pinch of salt—and the words of the branding documents without the necessary truckload.

Nation brands certainly use the rhetoric of nationhood, and they certainly make claims about their ubiquity and significance for national identities. The author credits the strategies with the ability to bring about instant and meaningful changes to the national character, but at the same time she frequently dismisses branding practitioners as quacks and their efforts as fruitless. In reality, the book’s limited research design often displaces the branding strategy from the machinery of policy and delivery, as well as from the citizens for whom national identity actually has meaning. This leaves only the texts and their internal significations—essentially case studies of textual representations of national identity in a handful of bombastic documents. *Branding the Nation* begins with such bold claims of comprehensiveness and personal insight—and, indeed, such a strong opening theoretical discussion—that it’s hard not to be disappointed.

All this is locked within the assumption that nation branding professionals are the root cause of the problem. According to the author, these tailors of the Emperor’s new clothes, these sellers of magic beans, extort excessive fees from naïve politicians who have been tricked into their supererogatory services. Yet there is a fundamental lack of appreciation for the domestic political reasons why branding expertise is deemed desirable and a distinct lack of empirical data into this aspect of the branding industry. The argument that a particularly neoliberal “version” of nation identity is derived from branding professionals who (to paraphrase the words of the author) transpose authority from elected officials is simply not supported by the evidence presented in the case studies (pp. 64–65). Aronczyk could perhaps have sustained some of her most critical arguments with more effectively utilized and interpreted empirical material—such as the notorious corruption and kickbacks associated with certain branding contracts, or the ways in which politicians routinely attempt to use national image to disguise national behavior despite being advised not to—but the cases are too shallow, the analysis too limited, and the empirical data often absent.

*Branding the Nation* is still one of the more theoretically rigorous interventions in a field notorious for its (shall we say) mixed standards of scholarship. It is clear, readable, and well-structured. As such, it is required reading for anybody seriously interested in nation brands, when taken alongside a number of other contributions to the field. In many respects, it is a victim of its own hype: a good book that doesn’t live up to its own branding. It provides a solid introduction to some of the core issues, with case studies that successfully represent the tone and character of many branding texts, even if they don’t always manage to dig more deeply into the hows and whys. Although there are significant weaknesses in interpretation throughout the volume, it nonetheless offers a good basis for further investigation of critical

issues in the nation branding field in the classroom. In sum, *Branding the Nation* provides some useful contributions to debates surrounding the deployment of nationalist tropes in nation brands, but it is not the definitive volume we were promised—and that we hoped for.

### References

Kaneva, N. (2011). Nation branding: Toward an agenda for critical research. *International Journal of Communication*, 5(2011), 117–141.

Potter, E. (2008). *Branding Canada: Projecting Canada's soft power through public diplomacy*. Montreal and Kingston, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press