



From the banal to the blatant: Expressions of nationalism in secondary schools in Argentina and the Falkland Islands[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Geographers interested in nationalism have been increasingly drawn to the banal; to representations, things and practices which serve as subtle reminders of nationhood. The research in this paper suggests that this interest in banality has led to more blatant and creative expressions of nationalism being overlooked. One environment in which nationalism is necessarily and overtly signposted is the school classroom, where teachers, text books and other teaching aids are influential in shaping how nationhood is learnt. Curiously, there has been scant attention placed on manifestations of nationalism in these institutional spaces by scholars engaging with Political Geography and Critical Geopolitics. Using teaching materials and extensive interviews with secondary school teaching staff, politicians and educational officials in Argentina and the Falkland Islands this paper shows that expressions of nationalism were far from banal; rather young people were explicitly reminded of issues central to national identity (i.e. the Falklands/Malvinas sovereignty dispute) in classroom settings. Moreover, the paper suggests that nationalism in the classroom must be understood in localised contexts, while remaining aware of connections with predominant discourses operating at other spatial scales (i.e. national, regional), and by engaging with those responsible for its delivery. The research presented in this paper shows how teaching staff in the Falkland Islands and Argentina made an effort to frame national history, geography and citizenship locally, in ways which complemented and/or contested prevailing curriculums and discourses (from the UK and the Argentine government respectively).

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1. Introduction

The concept of banal nationalism, first coined by Billig (1995), was influential in drawing attention to expressions of nationhood which had hitherto gone unnoticed or unremarked upon in what he terms “established nations”. Interest in nationalism had previously been limited to ‘hotter’ or exceptional forms of nationalist expression occurring elsewhere, apparent in, for instance, the struggles of separatist movements to form new nations. Billig’s (1995: 38) work showed that “national identity in established nations is remembered because it is embedded in the routines of life, which constantly remind, or ‘flag’, nationhood”. While several shortfalls with Billig’s thesis have been identified and debated (Billig, 2009; Jones and Fowler, 2007; Jones and Merriman, 2009), there has been less critical discussion of what its influential theo-

risation has meant for the focus of subsequent research into daily reproductions of nationalism. This paper is critical of the overwhelming attention placed on so-called banal manifestations of nationalism, at the expense of examining more blatant expressions, but is equally conscious of the dangers inherent to such a critique. In order to move beyond the banal-blatant binary, I draw inspiration from the work of Jones and Merriman (2009) on everyday nationalism which instead frames nationalism as something that unfolds in everyday contexts (i.e. a fluid approach which encompasses an interest in both banal and blatant forms of nationalism and their reception). In this way, “nationhood is not (only) lurking in the crevices of the unconscious, furtively informing talk without becoming the subject of talk”, but can also be very deliberately ‘flagged’ (or marginalised, subverted, re-interpreted and so on) by a range of different actors (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008: 539).

This paper looks specifically at expressions of nationalism within teaching materials in secondary schools in Argentina and the Falkland Islands to show that in these contexts, markers, symbols and references to what constitutes the nation-state often need to be made mindful to young people (Billig, 1995: 38; Scourfield et al., 2006). In other words, these are not mindless ‘flaggings’ of the nation but deliberate, creative and original representations and reproductions of nationalism (Pinkerton and Benwell, 2014),

[☆] The definitions Malvinas and Falklands are used interchangeably in this paper depending on whether the Islands are being referred to from an Argentine or Falkland Islands-UK perspective. Occasionally, Falklands/Malvinas is used when making general reference to the Islands across contexts. Although geopolitically charged, this naming is not intended to demonstrate support for the respective sovereignty claims of Argentina or the UK.

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which co-exist alongside more ‘unremarkable’ or unconscious expressions. Curiously, educational spaces receive very little attention in Billig’s (1995) seminal text on banal nationalism, aside from a short caveat about the visibility of the national flag in US classrooms. This is all the more puzzling when one considers the central role of education in reminding young citizens about their national identity and issues of importance to the nation-state (e.g. Collins and Coleman, 2008; Gruffud, 1996; Korostelina, 2013; Scourfield et al., 2006). This may be symptomatic of the general invisibility of childhood and associated spaces in social science research on nationalism and political geographies, particularly acute in the latter years of the last century (Kallio and Häkli, 2013; Skelton, 2010, 2013). The dearth could also be attributed to the fact that the conscious ‘flagging’ of citizenship and nationalism in the classroom does not conveniently fit in with Billig’s (1995: 38) claim that, “reminders of nationhood hardly register in the flow of daily attention”. This is clearly not the case in school classrooms where young citizens overtly learn about important historical and contemporary events that hold relevance for the nation-state in which they are growing up. Thus, this paper uses teaching materials and practices in secondary school classrooms in the Falkland Islands and Argentina to suggest there is very little that is banal about some of these representations. In particular, the history, geography and geopolitics of the Falklands/Malvinas sovereignty dispute are seen as critical themes in school classrooms which need to be explicitly signposted in order to make young citizens aware of this national issue.

Secondly, the paper identifies the significance of localised, place-based understandings of nationalism for teachers and educational officials in Argentina and the Falkland Islands. This section develops existing work which has cautioned against the reification of the national-scale in studies exploring nationalism (Jones and Fowler, 2007: 333; Sabhlok, 2010). A more sensitive approach to localised interpretations of nationalism enables an exploration of how such national discourses might be reproduced, complemented and/or contested in different ways in diverse places depending on, for instance, local histories as well as the interests, backgrounds, experiences and politics of teaching staff (Korostelina, 2013; vom Hau, 2009). In the Falkland Islands there was concern with the implications of having an educational curriculum defined predominantly in the UK, in terms of what that meant for children and young people’s understandings of, and identification with, the place where they grew up. This led to the introduction of what were considered more locally-relevant classes in History, Geography and Citizenship, albeit with enduring concerns that these were being delivered by teaching staff who were not from the Falkland Islands. Although the Malvinas question is often framed by Argentine Presidents and politicians as a ‘national cause’ encouraging analyses at the national scale (see Dougherty et al., 1992; Escudé, 1987, 1988), the issue has distinctive meanings for different regions within the nation-state (Benwell and Dodds, 2011). The research for this paper was undertaken in Río Gallegos, the capital of Santa Cruz province in the austral region of Argentina, which has its own specific history of connection to the Islands stretching back many years (Mulhall, 1878; Pierini and Beecher, 2011). Educational officials and teaching staff alike were keen to make sense of the Malvinas in the classroom through these local histories (sometimes alongside nationally-produced teaching materials). There was, then, a conscious effort to ensure that understandings of national history, geography and citizenship were locally-defined in both the Falkland Islands and Argentina, albeit in distinct ways. Rather than relying exclusively on a curriculum defined from elsewhere (either the UK or the Argentine Ministry of Education respectively), there was an effort to frame nationalism in the classroom through a local lens, which was perceived to make the topic more tangible and pertinent for young people.

2. Nationalism: looking beyond the little things

The fusion of a piece of land with the symbolic and mythified history of the nation is what gives nationalism such symbolic power immediately related to the sites and circumstances of everyday life (Agnew, 2004: 227).

The popularity of Billig’s (1995) notion of banal nationalism has had a range of implications for understandings of national identity and its reproduction in what might be termed the Euro-American world. It has undeniably encouraged scholars to focus attention inwards, broadening understandings of how and where nationalistic expression can be manifest by highlighting the little things, acts or words which serve to remind ‘us’ of ‘our’ national identity (Flint, 2011; Thrift, 2000). The text has been extremely useful for those interested in expressions of nationalism and has wide appeal illustrated by the body of work which has emanated from Billig’s ideas (e.g. Airriess et al., 2012; Batuman, 2010; Brunn, 2011; Child, 2005, 2008; Ozkirimli and Yumul, 2000; Penrose, 2011; Raento, 2006; Raento and Brunn, 2005; Webster, 2011). Yet the bulk of this research has explored a limited form of nationalistic symbolism that, while subscribing to Billig’s thesis, perhaps unwittingly marginalises other more overt representations and practices which also reproduce nationalism in daily life. Billig (1995: 38) is specifically interested in reminders of nationhood which “operate mindlessly, rather than mindfully” and subsequent research has tended to look at/for representations of nationalism which might typically have been considered insignificant and unremarkable (Jones and Merriman, 2009). These studies have analysed how (usually adult) citizens are reminded of nationalism in banal ways through bodily practices (Haldrup et al., 2006) and representations depicted on licence plates, currency, postage stamps, maps or the national flag which hangs innocently from public and private buildings. The use of the word banal to classify such expressions of nationalism has received a cogent critique through research on bilingual road signs in Wales. Jones and Merriman (2009: 167) state that “symbols of the nation are interpreted in different ways by different people: some in banal and unconscious ways; others in a more conscious and overt manner”. This work shows that far from being mindless and mundane, the reception of everyday nationalism through objects such as road signs can instil a sense of oppression and contention among citizens (also see Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008). This paper is not concerned with the appropriateness of the terminology used to frame expressions of nationalism in relation to their reception *per se*. Rather it seeks to highlight some of the problematic consequences for understandings of nationalism, which are, in part, a result of an overwhelming interest in what has become commonly understood as the banal. The attention directed towards these banal reminders has meant that more blatant or deliberate expressions of nationalism have been neglected, which in turn has left certain spaces and citizens on the margins of research into nationalism (Flint, 2011).

It is clear that not all expressions of nationalism in “established nations” can be categorised as banal, a point that Billig would readily concede. Indeed, his work should not be read as an all-encompassing definition of how nationalism is represented in such societies, but instead as a call to researchers to illuminate that which “is so familiar and habitual that it passes unnoticed” (Billig, 2009: 349). The challenge has been readily embraced by sociologists, as well as political geographers who have sought the most obscure and unremarkable exemplars of banal nationalism in order to underline their significance in the reproduction of nationhood. This work has been valuable in shedding light on previously overlooked displays of nationalism but has, it is suggested here, come at the expense of considering spaces and times where representations and reproductions of nationhood are more explicit (Mitchell

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