



# Dancing on the graves: Independence, hot/banal nationalism and the mobilization of memory



Anssi Paasi \*

Department of Geography, Linnanmaa, FIN-90014 University of Oulu, Finland

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Available online 29 July 2015

### Keywords:

Independence  
Banal/hot nationalism  
Finland  
War  
Resistance

## ABSTRACT

Nationalism is frequently considered as an extreme, 'hot' phenomenon related to often violent nation/state-building processes. Billig's *Banal Nationalism* turned the attention to how nationalism is also 'flagged' and routinely reproduced in existing states. This article studies the mobilization of these forms of nationalism and suggests that *independence* is a useful notion in bridging the hot/banal divide and for tracing the 'hot in the banal'. Whereas for separatist movements independence is primarily a goal aspired to, in existing states independence/sovereignty is used to bring together hot and banal forms of nationalism which are mobilized in reproducing the discourses/practices related to the purported national identity. This paper first outlines a heuristic framework for conceptualizing independence and its key dimensions in relation to hot and banal nationalism as well as state-territory building. Secondly, the paper will study empirically the merit of the notion of independence regarding nationalism research via four themes: (1) the role of independence in Finland's state/nation-building process, spatial socialization and in mixing hot and banal nationalism; (2) the use of the 'independence card' by (nationalist) parties; (3) the mobilization of nationalist practices/discourses in the performativity of Finnish Independence Day; and (4) the resistance that the independence celebrations have incited. This study shows that the idea of independence in this context is inward-looking, draws on Othering, and is flagged in media and spatial socialization (e.g. education) using particular iconographies, landscapes, events, and memories related above all to wars. Rather than expressing hot or banal nationalism these discourses/practices effectively merge the two, challenging any simple dichotomy between them. The performativity of Independence Day in particular displays this blending.

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## Introduction

It is a dark winter evening in Finland, the 6th of December. At 6 p.m. countless citizens light two candles in their windows – a traditional Finnish symbol for national independence. It is a national holiday and television has been broadcasting patriotic programming since the morning: a Lutheran service, military music and a parade, documentaries and movies related to historical events, wars and ordinary life. Now, over two million spectators, almost half of the nation, have gathered around televisions to watch an event that occurs in a festive Empire style house, the Presidential Residence in Helsinki. Suddenly a military band starts playing Jean Sibelius' Jaeger March and an

almost endless queue of people quietly files into the hall. Over the next few hours men dressed in festive tailcoats, women in colorful evening dresses, move slowly and silently through the decorated hall. Each person stops for a moment to wish the Presidential couple a happy Independence Day, thus contributing to "the world's longest hand-shaking TV program" (cf. Kivioja, 2012). Later reporters interview guests, who praise Finland's independence. Earlier the same day, volunteers have arranged an outdoor 'Independence Day Gala' for the poor and homeless, distributing free meals. During the evening party, protestors demonstrate outside of the Presidential Residence, resisting riot police. They demand equal rights for the poor, and oppose the elites' partying and the power of capital in the EU. For major populist political parties, EU membership in 1995 practically signified the end of Finland's existence as an independent state.

\* Department of Geography, Linnanmaa, FIN-90014 University of Oulu, Finland.  
Tel.: +358 294481703; Fax: +358 8 5531693.  
E-mail address: [anssi.paasi@oulu.fi](mailto:anssi.paasi@oulu.fi).

International law recognizes political independence as a condition where a sovereign state exercises territorial integrity over its bounded territory. Due to this fact, independence is often understood as inward-looking, territorial and set. However, as the dozens of independence movements around the world demonstrate, nation-statehood is not an unchanging given but evolves both inside and across existing territorial borders. Palestine and Kurdistan provide perhaps the most enduring examples but several political movements around Europe make – at times peacefully, at times violently – claims for independence (e.g. the Basque Country, ‘Padania’, Corsica, Veneto, Wales). In Scotland and Catalonia referendums on independence were organized in 2014. In the former, 44.7 percent of voters said yes, in the latter 80 percent (though the voter turnout in Catalonia was only 35 percent). In the UK, the political elite monitored the referendum with anxiety (Sharp, Cumbers, Painter, & Wood, 2014); in Spain the government declared the ballot illegal (unconstitutional), so the issue was effectively little more than an opinion survey. The idea of independence has also gained political significance in exclusionist political programs and even in the names of right wing parties that resist the EU and rely on anti-immigrant rhetoric and imagery (e.g. UK, Greece, Finland).

However, independence is much more than the legal aspects related to sovereignty, as the generalized vignette on the Finnish Independence Gala described above shows. It is also a social process and set of practices/discourses that bring together an actual (or aspired) sovereignty, the history of a territory, as well as a selection of routinized habits, events, memories and also narratives and iconographies related to the purported national identity. Independence thus also encompasses national symbols, meanings, collective memory and the everyday. It is a contestable and complex, emotionally laden idea/ideal that can be mobilized in contradictory ways.

The above examples allude to the fact that the nation is usually seen as a ‘natural’ unit and independence as its apex. The notion of independence is therefore closely related to nationalism. Michael Billig’s (1995) work has been particularly inspiring for reflecting on the multiple dimensions of nationalism and he also provides some preliminary ideas on the link between nationalism and independence. He argues that much of nationalism research has focused on extraordinary or ‘hot’ nationalism, the often violent struggle toward autonomy, unity and independence, and that researchers have tended to ignore how nationalism is maintained once independence has been achieved. He coined the term *banal nationalism* to illustrate the reproduction of nationalism in existing states, and noted how national identities become “a form of life which is daily lived in a world of nation-states” (p. 68).

Independence is typically celebrated (‘Independence Day’) in states that have ceased to be part of another entity as a result of empires or colonial dependence collapsing or military occupation ending. Since the 19th century many ‘successful’ nationalisms have effected the disintegration of existing states, that is, independence has emerged from separation or liberation nationalism (Taylor, 1993, pp. 204–205). Respectively, independence-related national days are common in the Americas, Africa, Asia and Eastern/Central Europe. Conversely, many old European core states celebrate national days that are associated with events or persons rather than independence. Some states like the UK do not have a formal national/independence day, though there have been recent proposals to initiate a British National Day. While independence and national days may provide temporary fuel for banal nationalism, Billig (1995) accentuates the greater importance of routinized ‘flagging’, in weather reports, sports journalism or in the words of politicians (‘we’/‘us’) for example, which continually reminds citizens of their nationhood.

Billig’s ideas have raised much discussion and political geographers, among others, have challenged the strict distinction between hot and banal nationalism. Jones and Merriman (2009), for example, studied the campaign in favor of bilingual road signs in Wales and proposed the notion of ‘everyday nationalism’ which sees banal and hot elements as merged rather than separate. Benwell (2014, cf. Benwell and Dodds, 2011), for his part, argued that scholars should look at more blatant expressions and contexts of nationalism, such as education in school classrooms. His observations from Argentina and the Falkland Islands showed that expressions of nationalism in education were far from banal: young people were deliberately inculcated with narratives essential to national identity.

This paper contributes to the ongoing debate on hot/banal nationalism by adjusting the focus onto the notion of independence. While Billig (1995) noted in passing that independence is important not only for hot nationalist struggles but also for banal nationalism, he did not develop this idea further but took independence largely for granted. This article argues that independence is a useful notion for understanding the interplay between hot and banal as well as for tracing the ‘hot in the banal’. My argument is that independence is – particularly in existing sovereign states – a crucial ideological medium that combines these nationalism forms (in politics, culture and media) in routinized and latent but also at times in very salient ways. Independence brings together material processes (e.g. construction and naturalization of national and military landscapes, symbols and maps) and events (e.g. independence/national days, flag days, commemorations of national ‘heroes’) that fuse various spatial and historical scales. It is thus a pivotal aspect of ‘national meta-narratives’ that define the key elements of the purported national identity (Morrissey, 2014) and conditions the subjectification and consent of citizens as reproducers of such narratives. Independence is hence a useful meta-level concept to expose the complexity and dynamism of nationalism and the institutional settings and events where nationalism occurs. From this angle, banal nationalism is not only something related to the daily flagging of the nation, and hot nationalism not just something extraordinary that predates this cooler stage. Rather, when entangled together – in certain national(ist) actions related to the everyday, memories, and ideologies and material landscapes related to war, loss and suffering, for example – these nationalisms become fused in such way that hot nationalism may be the critical catalyst for banal nationalism (cf. Benwell & Dodds, 2011). This confluence is mediated by institutions such as media and education but also by temporary but recurring performances in which the (meta-)theme of independence plays no small part.

Political historians and IR scholars have long seen independence as an important concept (Armitage, 2004; Dumbauld, 1976; Fromkin, 1981; Linklater, 1998; Schulze, 1994; Woolf, 1996). Political geographers have paid less – especially theoretical – attention to this notion and instead have theorized concepts such as sovereignty, state/nation, territory, border, national identity, and war (Agnew, 2009; Herb & Kaplan, 1999; Knight, 1982; Mellor, 1989; Murphy, 2013; Shaudys, 1962). Though absent from the key conceptual debates, independence has nevertheless inspired some political geographers since World War II, especially in the context of post-colonialism, border studies and sovereignty transfer (Kasperson & Minghi, 1970; Shaudys, 1962; Spykman, 1942). Political independence/sovereignty is inherent, for instance, in Hartshorne’s (1950) famous ‘state idea’ and his ‘centripetal forces’ that strive to maintain the coherence of a state. Recently, geographers have noted the role of independence/sovereignty when studying state-building processes (Jeffrey, 2006; Kuus, 2002; Mercer, Mohan, & Power, 2003), the power of cartography (Berg & Oras, 2000; Culcasi, 2006; Jones, 2009; Zeigler, 2002), national

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