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Political Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/polgeo

The 'everyday' of banal nationalism – Ordinary people's views on Italy and Italian

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online

Keywords:
Banal nationalism
Everyday nationhood
Italy
Second generation
Diversity

ABSTRACT

In 1995, *Banal Nationalism* set a new way to study nationhood. Away from the traditional concern with its historical origins ('when') and its substantialist features ('what'), *Banal Nationalism* offered a systematic analysis of its reproduction ('how'). Informed by social and discursive psychology, Billig pointed to the role played by familiar, unremarkable 'little words' (deixis) to explain the persistence and pervasiveness of the idea of a world divided into nations. The present article aims to expand Billig's seminal study on the reproduction of nationalism, by incorporating an 'everyday nationhood' perspective, which attends more closely to human agency and contextual interaction. To give empirical substance to this move, the article relies on photo-elicitation group discussions and written essays collected in a vocational school in Milan, Italy, among an ethno-culturally diverse sample. By bringing the voices of people in as active producers of national meanings, the article offers a more complex picture of a world banally divided into nations. Both a national 'we' and a national 'here' emerge in fact as socio-spatially differentiated, fragmented and articulated at a plurality of scales, thus defying the logical linearity of banal nationalism, which unwittingly reproduces nations as singular, internally homogenous discursive entities. The article concludes by arguing for the need to complement the banal with the everyday in order to more fully capture processes of national reproduction in contexts of increasing ethno-cultural diversity.

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Introduction

One of the major insights of *Banal Nationalism* (Billig, 1995) is a very simple metonymic image: a national flag hanging unnoticed on a public building. This highly cited image conveys two important ideas. First, the world in which we live is a world of nations. Nationality is a feature which identifies each of us and by which we identify others. As Gellner (1983, 6) famously put it: "a man must have a nationality as he must have a nose and two ears". In other words, nations are a fact of nature and so is national identity. Second, we are all reminded of our national place through the constant presence of familiar national symbols and ways of talking and writing. This pervasiveness makes us stop consciously registering this reminding, so that nationalism becomes a banal, unreflexive presence in our lives.

Since this argument was made, 'banal' has gained considerable momentum as an analytical category to map the numerous ways in which nations are reproduced. Among others, geographers have largely deployed this category, studying, for instance, the 'banal' role of coins, banknotes and stamps (Hammett, 2012; Penrose, 2011;

Raento & Brunn, 2005; Unwin & Hewitt, 2001), license plates (Airriess, Hawkins, & Vaughan, 2012; Leib, 2011), street names (Alderman, 2003; Azaryahu & Kook, 2002), and buildings' styles (Cusack, 2001; Lahoud, 2008). Interestingly, the focus here is on the materialization of the nation through these very ordinary artifacts – something actually largely absent in Billig's book, whose concern was mainly with the indexical reproduction of nationhood. This is to suggest that the fortune of 'banal' nationalism also resides in its being a potentially open and flexible notion that can be adjusted to a variety of contexts, at times rather distant from those originally discussed in Billig's book. This is also true for its scalar conceptualization, as banal nationalism has been re-worked to fit a plurality of other spatial dimensions: local (Alasuutari, 2013), European (Cram, 2001), transnational (Aksoy & Robins, 2003), cosmopolitan (Beck, 2004), and 'Occidental' (Bozatzi, 2014).

My argument is that both in its original formulation and in some attempts to read the mundanity of the nation in material artifacts, banal nationalism tends, unwittingly, to overlook human agency. To be true, Billig in the past had rebuffed a similar critique (Skey, 2009), stating that "there is nothing in the theoretical background of *Banal Nationalism* to deny that ordinary people will engage in sense-making" (Billig, 2009, 348). Elsewhere, Billig (1991) has indeed clearly theorized this active role of ordinary people. Yet, in *Banal Nationalism* human agency does not seem to fully come forward. One can argue that exactly because unreflexivity is so central to the

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functioning of the notion of 'banal', human agency fails to fully enter the picture. Building on Billig's seminal argument, my aim in this article is to attend more closely to the role ordinary people play in reproducing a sense of nationhood. To this end, I wish to engage with the notion of 'everyday nationhood' (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008), which I believe is a fruitful way to further expand Billig's thesis. Certainly, 'everyday' is no less an open, general and multidimensional category than 'banal' (Burkitt, 2004). Thus, in this article, I shall focus on the everyday as it has been deployed in other influential studies on nationalism (Brubaker, 2006; Edensor, 2002; Skey, 2011), namely as a site for investigation of discourses and practices through which people make sense of their social world (Fox & Jones, 2013, 395; Jones & Merriman, 2009, 166–167). From this perspective, the everyday is neither an analytical category nor an object of investigation per se, but a mere domain of enquiry into other phenomena (Fox & Jones, 2013, 396). It is "a place, not spatially or temporally circumscribed, but imperfectly delineated by the individuals who people it" (Fox & Jones, 2013, 396). I would argue that adding the 'everyday' to banal nationalism would not only allow overcoming the distinction between 'banal' and 'hot' nationalisms, which has indeed proven empirically questionable (Benwell, 2014; Closs Stephens, 2015; Jones & Merriman, 2009); but it would also better serve the purpose of exploring how nationhood can be activated 'from below'. Implicit in Billig's image of the unnoticed flag there is indeed the idea of a state-centered, symbolic nationalism. Billig's nationalism is the nationalism of the state, i.e. a top-down rhetorical strategy which conditions and constraints people's lifeworld. A focus on the everyday might allow nationhood to be viewed in complement with this focus on state-centrism (and its banally displayed official symbolism), attending to unremarkable sites, objects and practices (Edensor, 2002; Linde-Laursen, 1993; Löfgren, 1993). So activated, nationhood might work as a positive dimension in people's lifeworld (Calhoun, 2007), rather than as a mere source of a 'banal, but not benign' nationalism (Billig, 1995, 6).

Focusing more closely on ordinary people might also overcome the notion of an unencumbered national subject, which seems to implicitly inform Billig's banal nationalism. As noted by Skey (2009, 335), apart from a very short passage (Billig, 1995, 71), *Banal Nationalism* operates with an unrealistic notion of a uniform, homogenous national audience. It is instead plausible to suggest that, far from being uniformly distributed in time and space, carrying an equal, banal meaning to all the members of the nation, nationalism might be consumed, articulated and mobilized differently by the different subjects involved. What kind of nation is made banal by ordinary people in the everyday life? By analyzing views of an ethnically diversified sample, this article explores the multifarious ways in which nationhood is made meaningful by these diverse participants. In so doing, the aim is also to respond to Smith's (2008) criticism that 'everyday nationhood', not dissimilarly from banal nationalism, works with the notion of an undifferentiated 'ordinary people'.

Before delving into the empirical data, the article will further elaborate on the theoretical move of incorporating everyday nationhood in banal nationalism. It will then introduce the case study and the methodology adopted for the collection of data. These will be presented and discussed around three of the most commonly used deixis in *Banal Nationalism*: 'here', 'we', and 'the'. Although imperfect, this rhetorical move aims to explore the geographical and social complexity that lies behind these 'little words', thus illustrating empirically the importance of attending to the 'everyday' as a way to better understand the 'banal' of nationalism.

Banal nationalism and everyday nationhood

Billig's (1995) major concern in *Banal Nationalism* was to challenge the taken-for-granted idea of a world naturally divided into

separate nations – what scholars have labeled as 'methodological nationalism' (Chernilo, 2007). In order to explore the common-sensical character of this idea, Billig analyzes the indexical reproduction of nationhood. Besides being reproduced via celebratory events, aimed at instilling patriotic feelings among its members, nationhood is called into existence through the routine use of deixis ('we', 'them', 'here', 'the', etc.), which make nationhood appear like a natural presence in people's everyday life. The key point in this argument is that this constant indexical reference is a daily reminder of one's national place in the world which, exactly because of its pervasiveness, goes unnoticed. People fail to consciously register this familiar, routine language, which therefore enables nationhood to be continuously reproduced in very banal terms. As Billig (1995, 93) puts it: "banal nationalism operates with prosaic, routine words, which take nations for granted, and which, in so doing, inhabit [sic] them. Small words, rather than grand memorable phrases, offer constant, but barely conscious, reminders of the homeland, making 'our' national identity unforgettable."

Banal nationalism clearly speaks of the importance of the everyday as the locus where a world of nations is reproduced. Yet, as noted above, this is an everyday in which people's agency is not fully acknowledged. Banal nationalism, like other interpretations of nationalism, unwittingly overlooks the place of the individual in reproducing nationhood (Miller-Idriss & Rothenberg, 2012). As Rossetto (2015) observes, Billig's discursive-centered approach tends to treat people as being passively and unconsciously exposed to banal national 'flagging' orchestrated from above, failing to discuss how individuals daily, actively, and often deliberately 'make' nationhood.

A way to compensate for this accidental obliteration is to look at 'everyday nationhood' (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008). In this perspective the everyday becomes the locus where people creatively and self-consciously mobilize nationhood in their social interactions. As Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008, 539) write: "nationhood is not (only) lurking in the crevices of the unconscious, furtively informing talk without becoming the subject of talk; it is simultaneously the practical accomplishment of ordinary people giving concrete expression to their understandings of the nation. Nationhood does not only define their talk; it is defined by their talk."

A key contribution in this agency-centered approach to nationhood is Thompson (2001). In his sociological account of nation and nationalism, Thompson switches from the 'banal' to the 'local', by which he means the ways in which nationhood is made real to the individual by the individual in the course of their interactions. In this sense, 'local' comes to signify both the personal appropriation of nationhood as well as the local situatedness of this embodied perspective, since any understanding of nationhood is necessarily mediated by what an individual experiences locally (Thompson & Day, 1999, 29). This latter point clearly challenges those scholarly views which instead see the national and the local/urban as two distinct and opposite socio-spatial registers, privileging indeed the latter as a lived, open space and discarding the former as an abstract, fixed entity (Rossetto, 2015).

By attending to people's everyday nationhood, Thompson liberates nationalism from an exclusive top-down perspective which often characterizes traditional understandings of nationalism, and which *Banal Nationalism* partly reproduces – an objectified image of nationhood which seems to exist above and beyond the agency of the individual (Thompson, 2001, 20). Against treating people as 'cultural dopes', Thompson suggests looking at them for how they come to understand 'their' nationhood rather than for how a sense of nationhood is transmitted to them (Thompson & Day, 1999, 38).

Moving from a similar perspective, various scholars have engaged with the ways ordinary people make sense of their national place in the world of nations. Working in the same tradition of Billig's discursive analysis, people's narratives of national identity have been studied, for instance, by Condor and colleagues (Condor, 2000;

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