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# Place branding as urban policy: the (im)political place branding

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## ABSTRACT

The present paper argues for more conceptually-laden research on the constitution of place branding as a hybrid form of urban policy. By both drawing from empirical examples and problematizing the extensive research on place branding, this paper offers the view of place branding as an impolitical form of urban policy that emerges as a biopolitical apparatus in an ecology of complex political practices which can materialize both negatively and positively. Ultimately, this paper outlines a novel alternative approach for conducting research and analyse the politics of place branding. Such an approach has the potential to more clearly analyse and theorize the political dimensions of place branding.

## 1. Introduction

The widespread connection between practices of branding on one hand and regionalization on the other as pointed out by [Tait and Jensen \(2007\)](#) is not only the product of a more entrepreneurial attitude of cities and regions ([Harvey, 2012, 1989a, 1989b](#)), but it can also be seen as the end result of a type of urban policy (see [Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Isin, 1998](#)) emerging as a hybrid materialization representing the process of creating new spatial settings ([Berg, Linde-Laursen, & Löfgren, 2000; Hospers, 2006, 2008; Lucarelli & Hallin, 2015; Metzger, 2013](#)). (See [Fig. 1](#).)

The intersection of branding and regionalization, especially in regard to spatiality, has recently been a topic of increased attention (see [Zenker & Jacobsen, 2015](#)). Such research is helpful in pointing out various categorizations and reflections on the way in which different processes of nonstandard regionalization create new spatial layouts that emerge as different forms of place brands (see [Boisen, 2015; Boisen, Terlouw, & van Gorp, 2011; Witte & Braun, 2015](#)) as well as those which are founded on networks of both market-driven and political visions of territorial cooperative strategies (see [Pasquinelli, 2015](#)). This intersection, as this paper will further argue, is being shaped as urban policy which is the result of the co-evolution of branding and regionalization discourse (i.e. in both theory and practices); this does not merely emerge as a purely determinist modern capitalist, market-led policy ([Leys, 2003](#)), but rather as a processual hybrid policy ([Sheller & Urry, 2003](#)) in which for example the public and the private, economics and politics, and the market and the polis are blurred and co-emerge (i.e. as a process) in a relational and interactive manner (see [Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015](#)).

The emergence of place branding as specific form of urban policy

and its hybrid nature is the main issue the present paper attempts to unpack. In so doing, the present paper first offers an empirical illustration of the co-evolution of branding and regionalization discourse by using the example of Greater Stockholm. Secondly, by moving from practices to theory, the present paper briefly unpacks and critically assesses the theoretical condition in which place branding is considered to be a form of urban policy. Third, the paper moves on towards offering an understanding of urban policy which could be endorsed in order to more clearly analyse and theorize the political dimension of place branding. All this has the final aim to complement previous research with a more complex view on the type of politics around which place branding is constructed (e.g. [Anttiroiko, 2014; Lucarelli & Giovanardi, 2014; Ooi, 2008; Vanolo, 2014, 2017](#)).

## 2. Place branding as hybrid materialization of urban policy

In the 1980s, the branding of Greater Stockholm became a policy issue. Such a development, similar to those in other European cities, is characterized by peculiar mix of regionalization and branding ([Boisen, 2015](#)), in which the development of branding evolved in tandem with practices and discourses on regionalization and more specifically regional development. Additional to a mixture of place branding regionalization as shown in the case of Copenhagen ([Boisen, 2015](#)) or in Greater Stockholm as pointed out by [Metzger \(2013\)](#) and [Ågren \(2011\)](#), one can easily see the entangling of those two discourses – branding and regional development – which feed each other into the creation of place branding as form of urban policy. Whereas Greater Stockholm along the years has been promoted in different manners with a more specific focus on branding, starting with the campaign at the end of the 1980s in which Stockholm and its surroundings were marketed as “Beauty on

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# Das Kapital of Scandinavia



## Stockholm

Das Kapital of Scandinavia

*"Här har ni staden med flest multinationella företag, den största aktiebörsen, bredaste motorvägarna, flest lyxyachter, de flottaste hotellen, största gallerierna och en egen flygplats. Något av det finaste tillvaron har att erbjuda."*

### Vad är Das Kapital of Scandinavia?

Vi har inlett kampanjen "Stockholm Das Kapital of Scandinavia" för att sticka hål på alliansen mellan stockholm stad och näringslivet som samlats under den svulstiga parollen "Stockholm the Capital of Scandinavia". Med vår kampanj vill vi sätta fokus på stadspolitikerna och vad den egentligen borde handla om. Vi slåss för att bevara allmänningarna, mot monokulturen och för en fri stad! Hjälp oss att ta politiken tillbaka till gatan, parken, torget och ditt kvarter för det är där och inte på aktiebörsen eller i slutna rum på stadsbyggnadskontoret de hör hemma!

Kampanjen är fri för alla att använda. Gör motstånd! Ta den tillbaka!

Vill du veta mer om bakgrunden och tankegångarna kring lanseringen av kampanjen läs vår text [Welcome to Das Kapital of Scandinavia](#).

Water", a similar phenomenon emerged during this time in the regional area around Stockholm, yet with different aspirations. The Mälardalsgruppen, a small group of politicians representing cross-block party affiliations, formed a regional assembly in order to discuss new regional policies based on a "common political will". This resulted in the establishment of a functional region, the Mälarenregion, a region endowed with a vision and a mission (see Metzger, 2013). What is apparently two distinct trajectories (see Tait & Jensen, 2007) can instead be seen through a more in-depth analysis (see Lucarelli & Hallin, 2015) as simultaneously constitutive and constituent of place branding policy which is materializing in different spatio-temporal forms. By analysing the archival research conducted in several empirical studies (Ågren, 2011; Lucarelli & Hallin, 2015; Metzger, 2013) it can be recognized that several pamphlets, promotional materials and also policy documents retrieved from the archive of the Stockholm-Mälaren region are not only representing the "vision" for the Mälarenregion as framed by the report drafted for the yearly meeting of 2010, but inside those materials one can also retrace similar visual and textual elements that are found, five years later, in pamphlets, promotional materials and policy documents referring to the new brand for the city of Stockholm: "Stockholm the Capital of Scandinavia".

As shown by Lucarelli and Hallin (2015), by comparing the official and promotional documents representing the Mälarenregion vision with the branding activities for "Stockholm the Capital of Scandinavia", one can observe a series of significant connections. First, the new brand "Stockholm the Capital of Scandinavia" replaces the prior brand "Beauty on Water" as formal branding for both the Mälarenregion and Greater Stockholm. Also, second, by analysing the visual and textual elements composing the brand "offering" as presented in the "Stockholm the Capital of Scandinavia" brand-book issued in 2005, one can moreover observe that there is a substantial change in the primacy and order of textual elements. To specify, the prior brand for the city of Stockholm "Beauty on Water" presented only a secondary element composing the three main pillars in the image representing the Mälarenregion vision as shown in the documents from 2000. However, in the images of the 2005 brand-book, the brand elements representing the new brand "Stockholm the Capital of Scandinavia" (i.e. Central, Business, Culture) became the main textual element. This shifting in

order, in addition to a regrouping of older textual elements such as "Nobel", "IT", and "Openness" under different headings in a subsequently subordinate order, signals thusly that, without embarking in a full semiotic analysis, the two intertwined discourses – one on regionalization and one on branding – are emerging as constituting and constituent of each other in the case of Greater Stockholm. This in turn creates a new spatial layout (i.e. brand region) which is not recognized legally by the legislator, yet it functions and is structured as a new geographical entity (Metzger, 2013). What is peculiar here, especially regarding the way in which branding in different forms of regionalization create different branding process (Boisen, 2015; Witte & Braun, 2015), is that contrary to local network branding (Pasquinelli, 2015) the new spatial entity is created as a result of other areas that have aligned themselves with the brand "Stockholm the Capital of Scandinavia". Here the co-development of two discourses (i.e. regional development and branding) is emerging in a way that one discourse takes temporal and spatial primacy over the other in a rotational manner. This dialogical relationship, I argue here, allows a recognition of how so-called "place branding" could not only be understood as a managerial philosophy and practice applied to places, but also as the hybrid expression of a peculiar form of urban policy which is affecting spatial layout and settings.

### 3. Place branding as urban policy: when practice meets theory

The aforementioned example has helped to solidify in more concrete terms the way place branding indeed expresses a peculiar form of urban policy. This present section briefly unpacks and critically assesses the theoretical condition in which place branding is considered to be urban policy. The main argument here is that the literature on place branding, not only the empirical materials, has also helped to further recognize, if not consolidate, a regime of knowledge production in which place branding is presented as a peculiar type of urban policy. More precisely what emerges from a critical assessment of theory is an understanding of place branding as a political instrument for urban policy which is characterized by a specific typology of "politics", in which its essence is emerging as form of hybrid policy. (See also the next section for a more detailed description.)

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