



'Mindless Markers of the Nation': The Routine Flagging of Nationhood Across the Visual Environment

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Abstract

The visual environment has increasingly been used as a lens with which to understand wider processes of social and economic change, with studies employing in-depth qualitative approaches to focus on, for example, gentrification or trans-national networks. This exploratory article offers an alternative perspective by using a novel method, quantitative photo mapping, to examine the extent to which a particular socio-cultural marker, the nation, is 'flagged' across three contrasting sites in Britain. As a multi-national state with an increasingly diverse population, Britain offers a particularly fruitful case study, drawing in debates around devolution, European integration and Commonwealth migration. In contributing to wider debates around banal nationalism, the article notes the extent to which nations are increasingly articulated through commerce, consumption and market exchange, and the overall significance of everyday markers (signs, objects, infrastructure) in naturalising a national view of the world.

Keywords

banal nationalism, Britain, everyday nationhood, nationalism, photographic surveys, visual studies

Introduction

Across the social sciences, there has been a growing interest in the role of the visual environment in signalling wider processes of social and economic change. For instance, in his landmark study of gentrification in a local suburb of Chicago, Charles Suchar (1997) studied the material changes people made to their properties as well as the range of stores that supplied these activities through photographic fieldwork. More recently,

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scholars looking to understand how 'cultural and ethnic diversity is manifested in the spaces of the city' (Hall and Datta, 2010: 69) have carried out detailed 'photographic surveys' (Hall, 2010) of individual streets and marketplaces, paying particular attention to the range of commercial signs that identify the owner's social-cultural background and/or signal to customers the types of products that can be purchased in a given outlet (Rhys-Taylor, 2013). As for most ethnographic approaches, these studies are able to capture the lived realities of diverse populations in highly localised settings. Complementary approaches that map notable features of the visual environment across a range of sites, thereby providing an important comparative element, have been far less noticeable and it is this lacuna that this article addresses. Such an approach, which is akin to conducting a content analysis of the visual environment, can be used to provide an overview of the density and range of key visual markers in different locales and then identify wider patterns and the possible reasons for them.

More specifically, this article seeks to quantify the extent to which different types of national markers are routinely displayed across the visual environment as a means of engaging with wider debates around the ongoing significance of national frameworks in an era of intensifying global flows. To this end, it first looks to engage with Michael Billig's (1995) argument, in his seminal study of *Banal Nationalism*, that more sociological attention should be focused on the everyday flagging of nationhood in Western countries, perhaps best represented by a national flag hanging limply on a public building. Noting that flags waved at ceremonial occasions have been the subject of ongoing academic interest (see, for example, Durkheim and Mauss, 1963; Eriksen and Jenkins, 2007), Billig was interested in the discursive work that such 'mindless markers' do in recreating the world as a world of nations. He wrote:

One can ask what are all these unwaved flags doing, not just in the USA but around the world? In an obvious sense, they are providing banal reminders of nationhood: they are flagging it 'unflaggingly'. The reminding, involved in the routine business of flagging is not a conscious activity; it differs from the collective remembering of commemoration. (1995: 41)

While, however, Billig's ideas have influenced a wide range of scholars, and the significance of the visual environment has been noted in general terms (Edensor, 2002; Foster, 2002; Palmer, 1998) and in relation to particular, often contested, features (Jones and Merriman, 2009; Pinchevski and Torgovnik, 2002), there have been few, if any, systematic, empirical studies of the phenomenon.

Furthermore, while the un-waved flag was used by Billig to signify the importance of banal markers per se, we should be aware that this particular feature may not be equally relevant across all national settings. For instance, Orvar Lofgren in noting the extent to which 'the blue-and-yellow flag of Sweden flies in suburban gardens, outside summer cottages, and in allotment gardens, and miniature versions decorate dinner tables, birthday cakes and Christmas trees', also observes that such displays are not found in 'a French or German context' (1993: 189). In other words, if the visual environment is a key element in flagging nationhood as Billig suggests, what might be the primary markers where national flags are not displayed in such a way?

Finally, given current debates about the impact of globalisation on more local and national settings, notably how cultural and ethnic diversity is manifested through a range

of visual cues, this article will examine the degree to which the size and diversity of the population in three different locales may influence the type and range of national markers that are present.

This first part of the article will outline some of the main concerns of the recent literature on everyday nationhood, including the findings of studies that have addressed the significance of the visual environment in materialising the nation. Subsequently, it also makes reference to contemporary studies that have observed the importance of trans-national networks and supra-national forms of governance in adding to the complexity of these environments. The second part discusses the parameters of the research that forms the basis for this article, before the final sections examine the findings and how they might be used to inform future research.

Contemporary Studies of Nationhood

While research into nations and nationalism has grown exponentially over the past 30 years, the past decade has seen a greater interest in studying the 'maintenance and re-enhancement of national identity in established nations' (Yoshino, 2001: 7).

In seeking to map the routine ways in which nationhood is flagged, empirical studies have pointed, in particular, to the role of the cultural industries in representing social relations, symbolic systems and organisational structures in national terms (Mihelj, 2011). Elsewhere, research into 'everyday talk about and with the nation' (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008) has been crucial in demonstrating the extent to which ideas around nationhood have become 'absorbed into a common sense view about the way the world is' (Edensor, 2002: 11).

Although studies of talk and text have tended to dominate this literature, some scholars have also paid attention to the importance of visual and material forms in materialising the nation. For instance, the Swedish ethnographer Orvar Lofgren (1989, 1993) demonstrated how the design, construction and naming of physical structures – housing, hospitals, schools, post offices and shops – alongside the provision of common products and services, created a relatively stable 'cognitive frame of reference and association' (Edensor, 2002) for disparate, and often distant, populations in the USA and Sweden.

Lofgren's macro-historical perspective has been complemented by more recent work by Palmer (1998), Edensor (2002) and Foster (1999, 2002). Examining national settings as diverse as Britain, India and Papua New Guinea, these authors have argued that the distribution and organisation of visual and material markers across the spaces of the nation forms 'an unquestioned backdrop to daily tasks, pleasures and routine movements' (Edensor, 2002: 54). The presence of these recurring features, ranging from street furniture to road signs, sporting facilities to public utilities, arranged in consistent and familiar spatial patterns, is viewed as a key element in making such a large, abstract, idealised 'entity', as the nation, feel 'homely' (Edensor, 2002: 108–113).

Foster's ethnographic work in Papua New Guinea shows how such arguments can also be applied beyond the established, democratic nations of the West. In this case, he observes the crucial role that common patterns of commodity marketing and mass consumption play in constituting culturally diverse – and physically distant – groups as part of a 'shared' collectivity (1999: 275). Echoing Lofgren, Foster notes how public signs,

consumer adverts and commodities come to signify the nation as a familiar 'frame of reference' for staging identity (1999: 275).

Drawing on the work of Tim Edensor, we can see how these disparate elements, located in a range of settings and at different scales, might combine to form part of a vast, inter-locking 'national-cultural matrix' (2002: 35), which not only facilitates everyday activities but is one of the key elements in constituting the nation as an 'objective reality'. However, while the extant literature has discussed the importance of these features in general terms and in relation to individual symbols and objects, it is my contention that more attention should be paid to two key issues. First, mapping empirically the range and type of national markers across different sites and, second, the possible significance of these *cumulative* features. This is a particularly important objective in an era when intensifying global flows are seen to be reshaping everyday social settings, and these debates will be the subject of the following section.

Global Challenges?

An increasingly common argument in the social science literature is that the growing mobility of people, products and symbolic systems offers sustained challenges to previously established social formations, including those associated with the nation (Giddens, 2002). On a macro-economic level, neo-liberal forces, combined with technological advances in transport and communications, are undermining economic and political barriers, generating trans-national corporations whose commercial interests often extend beyond the local or national (Hopper, 2007: 93–96).

The growing circulation of goods and services is matched by the increasing mobility of people, meaning that 'foreign' tastes, habits and preferences are being imported into new environments. For instance, Beth Notar (2008) has shown how some of the most remote parts of China are now populated with 'Western' objects (food, images, magazines, etc.) in order to make 'Lonely Planetters' feel at 'home' in local hostels, restaurants and internet cafes. Likewise, qualitative studies in global cities, such as London, have charted the range of visual markers on commercial premises serving areas of super-diversity. As Suzanne Hall observes: 'the proprietor(s) use visual and spatial displays to articulate their shop spaces: imagination and acumen are employed in attracting a customer base; and personal identity is asserted in the place of work' (2010: 8). Beyond these more mobile groups, it is often through visual and material markers that the most sedentary of populations experience 'other' cultures from around the world.

Elsewhere, the case of the European Union is another example of how national frameworks are being opened up to scrutiny, this time through the emergence of a supra-national political organisation. Here, again, the ways in which symbolic and material elements are beginning to concretise this political project into a felt reality have been noted. As Laura Cram has argued, it is the increasingly taken-for-granted nature of visual markers (flags, street signs, advertising, shop fronts) which suggest a 'degree of banal Europeanism has already begun to emerge within the EU' (2001: 235).

However, these are not, of course, zero-sum processes. The emergence of 'global' or trans-national markers or objects, in a given area, does not mean that previously entrenched, or un-noticed, local or national ones simply become defunct or obscured (de

Saint Georges and Morris, 2000). Moreover, while the growing presence of 'foreign' goods, symbols or enterprises in a given environment is significant, we should remind ourselves that many of these features continue to be defined and marketed in national terms. Consequently, far from undermining national frameworks, their presence may actually serve to reiterate the distinction between 'them' and 'us', not to mention the taken-for-granted idea that we live in a world of nations. Put simply, 'our' nation – with all its complex social, cultural and political divisions – often becomes objectified when compared with 'their' flags, styles, diet and cultural artefacts.

Therefore, it is the dialectical relationship between the particular and the universal that makes the nation such a powerful force in the modern era. This is a key argument that often gets lost in some of the more hyperbolic debates around global flows. Indeed, one of the aims of this study will be to examine empirically the routine flagging of *nationhood* across three different research sites. To this end, the next section addresses how the data were collected and presents some of the justifications for, and limitations of, the choices that were made in terms of sampling, method and analysis.

Data Collection

With a primary interest in providing a comparative analysis of the type and density of visual markers of nationhood across three different sites, there was a concomitant need to identify, and classify, as many of these different features as possible. Here, the emphasis was on studying 'the seen and observable' by incorporating two types of visual data: two-dimensional (images, signs and representations) and three-dimensional (settings and objects) (Emmison and Smith, 2000).

However, in order to make this pilot project as manageable as possible, I decided to limit myself to 'objective' references to *any* nation, meaning: any national flag (whether actual, virtual or incorporated as part of a physical object), any written reference to a nation/national group (for instance, the word India, Chinese or Britain), and any depiction of a national territory in symbolic form (as for a map). While this strategy cannot address the significance of other, less overt features in flagging the nation to different constituencies, approaching the subject in such a way facilitates comparative research within different national settings but also across nations.

The second key point to make is that while the location of these markers was also noted, no attempt has been made to try and analyse or interpret them, beyond placing them in broad analytical categories (more of which later). In other words, no in-depth semiotic analysis of the data has been carried out. Instead, this project is viewed as being akin to a basic content analysis of the visual environment in three locations.¹

Research Sites

When thinking about the significance of carrying out such a study in Britain, a number of issues are briefly worth addressing. For those unfamiliar with the British context, Britain comprises three nations: England, Scotland and Wales. Legislated into existence in 1707 through an Act of Union between England (and Wales) and Scotland, allegiance to Britain was largely secured in relation to empire, the monarchy and other powerful

institutions rather than any putative national community (Wellings, 2012). It's also worth noting that overt displays of nationality have generally been treated with suspicion in Britain, notably by the majority English. For instance, the display and waving of British flags outside a narrow range of carefully managed mass rituals (royal weddings, military parades, sporting events) was seen to be anathema or the preserve of extremist groups. Paradoxically, this has meant that British 'superiority' has long been defined by an apparent 'agnosticism towards nationalism' (Kumar, 2000: 577), which has been favourably contrasted with the uncontrollable passions of 'other' groups.

More recently, the union between the constituent nations of Britain has come under increasing stress, leading to varying forms of political devolution in order to meet nationalist aspirations in Scotland and Wales and the emergence of some limited displays of English nationalism, generally associated with sporting events. Likewise, there is some evidence that the growing ethnic diversity of the population in Britain, and concomitant debates around multiculturalism and community cohesion, is producing a response among the ethnic majority, which has sometimes manifested itself in more aggressive displays of national markers (Skey, 2010) – similar processes have also been observed in Australia (Fozdar et al., 2015) and the USA (Collins, 2004).

Given the complexity of the British socio-political landscape and the earlier comments about the visibility of flags in different national settings, Britain, as a multi-national state with an increasingly diverse population and an ambivalent relationship with overt displays of nationalism (compared with say the USA or Sweden) would seem to be a particularly interesting case study for a project such as this.

Bearing this in mind, the three research sites were chosen because of the differences in their national setting (two English, one Welsh), location (two urban, one semi-rural), population size and demographics and, hence, the range and type of government, corporate and other organisations they support. The first, Saffron Walden, is a market town in Essex (about 50 miles north-east of London) with a population of around 31,000 and a relatively homogenous population in terms of ethnicity (95% white British) and class (59% are ABC1/2). The second site used in this project, East Ham, is one of the most demographically diverse places in Britain. Given that over 65 per cent of the total population (around 39,000) are from an ethnic minority and substantial numbers are 'foreign born', this location offered a good opportunity to examine whether, and in what ways, human diversity is echoed across the visual environment. It is also located within one of the poorest boroughs in the country (Newham) with a poverty rate over 40 per cent. The last site is Cardiff, the capital of Wales, which has a total population of 340,000, around 10 per cent of whom come from an ethnic minority background. It also provided a useful contrast with the other two sites, not only in terms of its size but also being located in a different national setting, Wales, with its own official language, albeit within the same state.²

The research was centred in the main commercial centre of each location and a designated path through each area was identified, using online and physical maps, in order to address the issue of replicability (Figure 1A–C, available online only).³ It should be noted at this point that the areas chosen are not viewed as being representative of the city or area but instead were selected as they contained the widest range of shops and public and other institutions, and hence were likely to have the richest visual signscapes. In this way, a form of 'opportunistic sampling' (Sorenson and Jablonko, 1975) was used,

designed to record features ‘that attract the researcher’s attention or that can only be collected on an ad hoc – “when it occurs” or “comes into view” – basis’ (Pauwels, 2010: 561).

On the subject of timing, while no day can be considered ‘ordinary’, it was ensured that each site was visited at a time when no major event – local or national – was planned or advertised (elections, festivals, commemorations, etc.). Having outlined a number of issues with regard to the design of the project, two final points are worth making. First, there is very little extant research in this area. While photo elicitation/diaries, participation observation and the study of particular buildings or locations have all informed research into the wider visual environment, the advantages, and problems, associated with a more systematic analysis of this kind have yet to be addressed in any detail. Therefore, while this study most closely resembles Suzanne Hall’s use of ‘visual photographic surveys’ (2010: 11) in ethnically mixed streets in inner London, its emphasis is slightly different as it looks to provide comparative analysis of streets in various locales, identifying broader patterns and the underlying reasons for them. Second, despite these obvious limitations, a considerable amount of data were collected, in the form of photographs of the markers and accompanying information about their location. Therefore, it is my contention that these findings can be used as a starting point for an ongoing analysis of whether, and in what ways, the nation continues to be flagged across different social settings and time periods.

Data Analysis

Having collated the data (photographs of each feature), I first examined them as a whole, looking for similarities and differences between the sites, and then began constructing a coding frame for classifying them into broad categories. The categories were developed by shifting between the data and the wider literature on everyday nationhood, and then testing them out on smaller data-sets to ensure they were viable.

Individual features were initially classified in terms of: the site, level of data (two/three-dimensional), the location (on the street, in or on commercial, public or private buildings), type and the nation(s) flagged. This use of this type of matrix for the analyses of visual materials was pioneered by Richard Chalfen (1987) two decades ago. Although Chalfen studied a very different topic, family photographs, his systematic approach and interest in how individuals contribute to a wider ‘Kodak culture’ that ‘provides a structured and patterned way of looking at the world’ (1987: 10) offers a useful template for this work.

It’s worth briefly noting that the majority of the data (81%) were two-dimensional (images, signs and representations), which was a direct result of limiting the study to ‘objective’ features of the visual environment. In relation to type, I was initially struck by the contrast between commercial and public markers and initially categorised the data using these broad codes. Such an approach ties in with two arguments from the literature on nationalism. The first notes the importance of public institutions in ‘representing’ the nation, in both senses of the term (Billig, 1995; Edensor, 2002; Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008). The second suggests that in an era of neo-liberal economic regimes, nations are increasingly articulated through commerce, consumption and market exchange (Mihelj, 2011: 83).

Having made this distinction, the photographs were then coded again in relation to where they were located and the types of services/goods/institutions they were being used to sell, promote or identify. This process generated the following categories: public sign, commercial sign (including the sub-categories of food and travel), clothing, other consumer goods and flags. The results were then inputted into SPSS, version 19 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA) in order to produce a set of descriptive statistics.

Flagging the Nation

In the three sites, 189 markers of nationhood were noted, which were divided thus: Cardiff, 80; Saffron Walden, 55; and East Ham, 54. Given that Cardiff is the capital of Wales, and, as a result, a focus for both institutional and tourist activity, this result is probably not particularly surprising. Geographers and urban planners have long noted the importance of constructing a 'capital complex' for the purposes of nation-building (Gordon and Osborne, 2004). Whether the capital is purpose built or a long-standing urban centre, it generally becomes a focus for a whole host of administrative and ritual functions, associated with government, commerce and culture, which are used to designate the power of the state to both its citizens and those who normally reside beyond the boundaries of the national territory. In the latter case, the capital city forms part of the 'tool kit' of nationhood, and it is through the marketing of key material and symbolic features – parliament and other historic buildings, monuments, museums and so on – that the nation's traditions and cultural characteristics can be 'discovered', learnt about and, perhaps, contrasted with 'other' places. In this respect, it should be noted that language was another feature that set Cardiff apart, as 24 per cent of the signs featured both Welsh and English words and/or phrases.⁴ Interestingly, these signs were evenly split among public (53%) and commercial (47%) markers, with the latter primarily found on consumer products aimed at tourists. In this way, government support for the language through 'official' public signage, enshrined in law, is now complemented by commercial interests, whose use of the language further distinguishes their products.

Aside from this general 'role' of the capital in symbolising the nation, we should also acknowledge the possible impact of devolution in Britain on the flagging of nationhood in Wales. In relation to this study, it might be argued that devolution, not to mention further calls for political independence, *may* have led to more concerted activity from public organisations and individuals alike. Obviously, this is a speculative argument given that we don't have any longitudinal data, but it seems likely that supporters of devolution, notably high-profile political and economic institutions, would attempt to flag the nation more overtly, thereby lending 'material' weight to their own political programme. Such an argument ties in with other research, which has examined the changing prominence, and status, of national symbols in relation to wider political and economic shifts (Kolstø, 2006). In broader theoretical terms, it encourages us to focus on processes of heating and cooling in relation to nationhood, rather than the more static concepts of hot and banal (Skey, 2009).

Beyond the significance of the capital city as a primary focus for displays of nationhood, this study was also able to lend support to a recent argument from Sabina Mihelj (2011) concerning the growing importance of commercial institutions in representing

and objectifying nations. Across the three sites, over 71 per cent (135) of the features studied were linked to commercial enterprises, whether as commercial signs or consumer goods, and 67 per cent (127) were to be found on or in commercial premises. In the case of public buildings, over 18 (67%) of the markers were located in Cardiff, which again seems to indicate the disproportionate role of public institutions in flagging the nation in major urban centres.

Conversely, East Ham featured the largest number of commercial signs (49%) compared with Cardiff (29%) and Saffron Walden (22%). The fact that Cardiff supports a far greater population, and range of commercial establishments, is what makes the figure for East Ham all the more striking. I would suggest that these figures reflect the diversity of the population in each locale and the need for commercial enterprises to attract particular customers with their specialist goods and services. This ties in with more qualitative studies in areas of ethnic super-diversity in other parts of London. As Rhys-Taylor, discussing an inner-London market, observes, 'the diversity of the area's demography means that traders often have to develop a familiarity with the cuisines and sensibilities of the market's evolving roster of cultures if they are to make a profit' (2013: 400), and this is generally communicated through the use of visual markers in what is a fast-moving and fiercely competitive commercial environment. The fact that nations continue to be used to signify the range of goods and services on offer is also significant and a point I will return to later.

Consuming the Nation

Of these commercial goods and services flagged in national terms, food was the most prominent (27%), again reflecting the findings of other related studies (Hall, 2010: 10). This finding also echoes a long-standing interest in the role of food in both the 'commercial construction of ... nations' (Foster, 1999) and, more recently, in the everyday practices of nationhood. In the latter case, it is through purchasing, preparing and eating particular foodstuffs that people often come to represent, experience and imagine the world in national terms (Cusack, 2000; O'Connor, 2006). For instance, taking part in Swedish traditions means (for many) eating herring and black pudding in summer and Christmas dinners with ham and meatballs (Lofgren, 1989: 20). In terms of the visual, the labelling of specific meals and foodstuffs in national terms (Thai cuisine, French fries, Italian wine) provides a convenient shorthand for making sense of a world in national rather than other ways and the cumulative impact of these features across different sites and locales helps to objectify this notion (Figure 1, online only).

Beyond food, consumer goods bearing national symbols comprised around 18 per cent of the total. This included everything from clothing and shoes to books, detailing national history, recipes, music and organisations, and greetings cards and calendars. Perhaps the most noticeable example of this phenomenon was to be found in Cardiff with a number of shops, presumably aimed at tourists, which sold a veritable cornucopia of clothes, books, utensils and nick-nacks marked as Welsh (Figure 2, online only).

The location of these enterprises, near some of the main tourist attractions in the capital city, demonstrates the manner in which particular spaces and goods become hyper-representations of the nation, distilling the complexities of history, culture and

territory into accessible and affordable objects. While much of the academic debate has focused on these symbols as contested ‘texts’ or narratives, we should also note that this process of commodification also ‘supplies ordinary people with ... products whose consumption can engender and reinforce a national view of the world’ (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008: 536). In other words, Welsh slate, cakes, spoons and singing becomes incorporated as part of the wider *grammar of nationhood* that makes ‘even the remotest country appear somehow familiar and “knowable”’ (Mihelj, 2011: 28).

Although the actual numbers of items on sale in Cardiff were far greater than for the other two sites, primarily as a result of the tourist shops, the number of places where such goods were found on display was remarkably similar. Therefore, the findings do seem to indicate that the sale of goods that feature ‘objective’ markers of the nation is not only limited to major tourist centres (Figures 3 and 4, online only). Tellingly, this means that such goods are not only directed at, and enjoyed by, tourists but have become part of the normal ‘currency’ of everyday life, in the process providing an important link between the local context of the home, where they are often consumed and/or utilised, and the wider world of the nation. This is not to say that such products are bought or, indeed, cherished simply because they feature a national marker, they may be seen as disposable as the next (mass-produced) artefact. However, to paraphrase Marcia Pointon, the fact that people may not pay special attention to these items, and simply accept them as part of the way the world is, may be a token of their power (1998: 227).

In the next section, I want to shift focus slightly and examine the type, and frequency, of nations flagged across the visual environment. This discussion will highlight key differences between both institutional and vernacular markers across the three research sites.

Flagging Which Nation?

For this study, it’s perhaps not surprising to learn that Britain was the nation-state flagged most frequently, as Table 1 shows.

However, the fact that Britain featured in only a third of cases indicates, once again, the complexity of the British social and political landscape. As well as the relative paucity of British markers, what is also noticeable is the degree to which public signs (83%) and buildings (92%) were dominated by British and Welsh markers compared to commercial signs (52%) and buildings (42%). This finding indicates that while commercial enterprises have often moved to address a range of national groups in response to internal (devolution) and external (migration) shifts, public institutions are still largely framed, and underpinned, by the power of the state (Figure 5, online only). For instance, my data showed that everything from food hygiene to the regulation of charities, hotels and public houses continued to be articulated in relation to Britain, while, in Cardiff, the Welsh Government was represented in relation to civic amenities such as transport provision (Figure 6, online only). Furthermore, these recurring features may become important because they create a ‘standardised pattern’ which enables the different spaces of the nation to feel familiar and, as a result, homely (Lofgren, 1993: 188).

While the role of public institutions in both promoting the activities of the state and legitimating and propagating ‘a national view of the world’ (Fox and Miller-Idriss,

Table 1. Countries flagged.

Country/ies	Percentage
Britain	30%
Multiple nations	24%
Wales	22%
Western European nation	9%
England	8%
Asian nation	7%

2008: 550) should not be underestimated, the number of different nations, from around the world, that were flagged in each of the sites indicates that the visual environment is becoming increasingly complex and, perhaps, contested.

Global Connections, National Flags

The presence of markers from both Western European and Asian nations tells us about the importance of proximity and historical processes, respectively. In other words, Britain is both part of Western Europe and has relatively strong political and economic links (in the form of goods and services) with proximal countries (e.g. Italy, France, Germany) and, at the same time, has generated strong ties with those more distant nations (e.g. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh) that formed part of her colonial empire.

In terms of the individual sites, the relatively high number of Welsh markers is linked to Cardiff's status as the capital of Wales. One other useful indicator of Cardiff's distinctiveness as a capital city can be found in the data on the display of flags. As we noted earlier, Michael Billig used the unwaved flag hanging outside a public building as a primary example of banal nationalism, focusing on the USA. In my study, only 13 per cent of the total markers were flags, indicating their relative unimportance as a visual marker of nationhood in the British context. However, of this number, over 76 per cent were to be found in Cardiff, demonstrating the relative importance of marking the capital city with the classic symbol of national authority. The significance of Welsh (54%), as opposed to British (24%), markers is also very evident, although, again, it's impossible to say (without any historical data) what impact devolution might be having on these figures.

Interestingly, my data also show that in the two sites in England, one semi-rural, one urban, British markers (38%) were well over double those of English (15%), though perhaps for different reasons. In the case of Saffron Walden, British markers form the largest category (48%), followed by English (18%). The relative lack of English, as opposed to British, markers might seem odd given we are dealing with an English market town. However, as Tom Nairn (1977) has argued, the English, as the dominant group within Britain, have tended to downplay their position, neglecting English symbols, institutions and cultural organisations in favour of a British framework.⁵

Alternatively, the striking figures for East Ham show that the largest category is multiple nations (30%), followed by British (27%). Again, this seems to point to the diversity

of the population in this part of East London and the extent to which commercial enterprises, in particular, have to address multiple constituencies from around the world (Figure 7, online only). As Hall and Datta note, these markers 'give value and meanings to the products sold in these particular shops' (2010: 71) and, of course, point to the trans-national connections that link owners and their clients to other parts of the world. However, we should also reiterate that it is *still* national symbols and categories that are being utilised by these entrepreneurs to entice customers into their establishments. Intensifying global flows have undoubtedly led to a staggering range of these goods and services being offered in places such as East Ham. In the process, this creates a very distinct visual environment, which is particularly noticeable to, and often attracts, visitors to the area. At the same time, the marketing and display of these products continues, by and large, to recreate a 'common sense' world of *national* types and specialities.

Conclusions

Overall, this piece of exploratory research has lent weight to Billig's argument concerning the routine flagging of nationhood in everyday settings, although his emphasis on the role of public symbols and institutions has been somewhat challenged, at least in the British context. Using data gathered from three contrasting research sites, this study has shown how public and, in particular, commercial enterprises utilise national markers in order to communicate their authority and/or advertise their goods and services. Indeed, we saw across the sites that it was commercial signs and goods that were far more significant in this process, supporting recent arguments that in an era of neo-liberalism, people are increasingly being addressed as (national) consumers rather than citizens (Mihelj, 2011).

As well as identifying this broader trend, there were also some key differences between the sites. Cardiff, the capital city of Wales, featured far more national markers, a large proportion of which were, unsurprisingly, Welsh. This points to its role as a hyper-nationalised locale, standing in for the nation as a whole, and as the primary site for government, administrative and commercial functions. The two other sites, located in England, were also much smaller than Cardiff, both in actual and population size, and differed dramatically in terms of demography. Crucially, these differences were reflected in the range of national markers identified across the visual environment. East Ham, a site of super-diversity in East London, featured a complex range of national markers that reflected the heterogeneity of the local population, while in Saffron Walden, a relatively homogenous market town, around two-thirds of the markers were related to Britain or England.

These differences usefully point to the ways in which the visual environment, and, in this case, the national markers that populate it, can be used to explore, and evidence, wider socio-economic and political processes, whether devolution (Welsh versus British markers in Cardiff), colonisation (South Asian markers across the sites) and European integration (the range of East European goods in East Ham).

Although the presence of these multiple groups, services and products provides a good indicator of broader social mobility across national borders, we should be wary of making too many unbridled claims about the end of the nation-state. For, if anything, this research has demonstrated that these goods and services, not to mention the public

institutions that regulate them and social space in general, continue to be articulated in national terms. As a result, what we increasingly find in the more diverse cities and regions is that banal reminders of nationhood, rather than a specific nation, have become a recurrent feature of the visible environment, forming a backdrop to daily activities.

I'd like to make two final points in relation to this work. The first cautions us against drawing concrete conclusions about the possible significance of these markers to the different groups who come in contact with them. As Jones and Merriman observe:

Different 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. It is impossible to make a priori judgements concerning the impact of everyday discourses of nationalism. All that can be said with confidence is that these are experienced ... every day. (2009: 165)

Therefore, understanding the value, or otherwise, of a particular marker or indeed the visual environment as a whole would require a very different research project. Having said that, I have argued elsewhere that the sheer range of these everyday features may be of practical and psychological value in underpinning everyday interactions and providing an ongoing sense of self, place and community (Skey, 2011, 2013). Indeed, there is a growing body of evidence that the significance of such symbols, objects and infrastructure really come to the fore when they are scrutinised or replaced by 'foreign' alternatives (Blokland, 2003; Wise, 2010).

Beyond this idea, which demands a related investigation into how people perceive the settings they move through, I would like to make one broader theoretical point. Recent research has argued against theorising nations as objective entities or 'things' and has instead focused on the ways in which the world is defined, imagined, organised and experienced in national terms so that it comes to be viewed as natural or 'common sense' (Calhoun, 1997; Ozkirimli, 2000). In supporting such a view (Skey, 2011), I think we need to acknowledge more fully the crucial role that the visual environment and material objects have to play in these processes of reification.

Such an approach finds an interesting echo in the writing of those, such as Bruno Latour, who caution us against talking in terms of social forces when trying to understand the micro-level of everyday interactions. Critiquing the popular view that tries to explain 'the durability of social ties' through appeals to 'society, social norms, laws, customs, structures and so on', Latour instead points to the importance of 'non-human things' and the manner in which 'they lend their steely quality to the hapless society' (2005: 68). It is these everyday features (signs, objects, infrastructure) that not only shape human interactions in predictable ways but also naturalise the idea(l) of society, or, in this case, the nation. Paraphrasing LiPuma, it is primarily through these everyday settings and features that 'the nation appears to be "objective" rather than socially constructed; it appears as primordial rather than historical; it appears as "necessary" rather than contingent; and it appears as a unified, autonomous reality' (quoted in Foster, 2002: 84).

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Notes

1. My approach might also be seen as akin to Billig's Day Survey of the press (1995: 109–125), which was itself based on a convenience sample.
2. These figures come from a range of sources, including: the 2001 British census (http://formerly.cardiff.gov.uk/content.asp?nav=2872,3257,6571,6572&parent_directory_id=2865&id=13190), Newham Council (<http://www.newham.info/research/CFProfiles/EastHam.pdf> / <http://www.newham.info/Custom/LEA/Demographics.pdf>) and Uttlesford District Council (<http://www.uttlesford.gov.uk/article/1872/District-Statistics>).
3. Figures 1A–C and Figures 1–7 are available as online-only appendices with this article.
4. Welsh and English are the official languages of Wales. In 2010, around 25 per cent of the population of Wales claimed they could speak Welsh, with the figure for Cardiff slightly lower at 18 per cent.
5. Aside from this general point, it's worth noting that, in a post-devolution era, debates around Englishness are beginning to emerge and that the display of distinctly English symbols are appearing more regularly, often in relation to the activities of English sports teams (Skey, 2011, 2012). Therefore, in any future research, it would be worth tracking the extent to which English, as opposed to British, markers are being increasingly displayed in England.

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