

This essay examines the concept of nation branding which has gained popularity in business, policy and intellectual circles in the last fifteen years. Under the pressures of globalisation numerous countries have invested in branding efforts in the hopes of producing images of the country that will attract more trade, tourism and investment. To begin with this article will consider the concept of nation branding as propagated by its advocates such as Olins and Anholt. Having unpicked what is at stake here the essay will take a critical approach and unpack the implications that nation branding holds for democracy, and using the publication *Understanding our Brand* will show that nation branding reduces national identity to stereotypes and myths suitable for consumption by a globalised market.

Wally Olins calls nation branding one of the most contentious political concepts of our time. In a globalised world Olins holds that national branding is very important for a nation's positions in the world. In his article *Branding the Nation* he proposes that there is nothing new about branding a nation and assigns the 'brand' of a nation a similar meaning to national image, identity, and reputation. The autocratic and pompous rule of Louis XIV, the subsequent French revolution and the transformation from a monarchy to a republic, the establishment of the French empire and the whimsical changes which that entailed under Napoleon, the re-establishment of the monarchy upon his death, the third republic, the shameful Vichy period all are examples of a nation being rebranded. The engineering of a feeling of national identity through military service and a primary education based on reinvented myths, folklore and traditions in the first and second reich in Germany are also examples of nation branding. Hitler, Ataturk, Lenin, Stalin all reimagined their countries national identities and hence their brand. The end of Colonialism with its ensuing independence for many countries, the fall of the Berlin wall and subsequent emergence of many new nations saw these countries striving to find new identities, inventing and reinventing national myths.¹ However the "tragic paradox" according to Olins is that while these new nations feel their own new identities very strongly, for the rest of the world they are an "undifferentiated, alien, grey, porridge."² To compete in a globalised world they should all hire some PR consultants and re-brand.

¹ Wallie Olins, *Wallie Olins on brand*, (London, Thames and Hudson:2004) 150-156

² Ibid 157

Olins himself in the nation branding business holds that in a globalised world having a good national brand is now more important than ever as countries now compete with each other for inward investment, tourism and exports. In this world each nation now seeks to promote its individual personality, culture, history and values, projecting an idealized and recognisable idea of itself for economic and commercial as well as political purposes. Thus nations should adopt branding techniques as used successfully by so many global companies for a long time.³ It's about presenting a nation in a powerful, attractive, or differentiating way. So in this neo-liberal age rather than by being rebranded according to the whims of autocrats and dictators nowadays countries need to be rebranded according to the needs of the markets. In order to succeed governments should create the mood and lead and co-ordinate the programme which would involve efforts within every department-culture, arts, sport, industry, education, transport, environment and foreign affairs.⁴ Of course it will require a lot of funding and the help of experts. Multi-national public relations and advertising firms are now routinely commissioned by client states to brand national images or identities.⁵

Proponents of nation branding most of whom are in the business advise smaller nations in particular to set themselves apart from other brands, and establish unique identities that can be encapsulated in a slogan.⁶ Anholt and Olins and other proponents of nation branding share three assumptions about the current state of nationhood. First they assume the hegemony of global markets and global competition. Second national wellbeing is defined primarily in terms of securing an economic competitive advantage, and nation branding is expected to contribute to this by attracting investments, tourists, human capital etc. Third based on the above assumptions this approach asserts that a parallel between nations and brands is warranted and necessary.⁷ Some of its advocates claim that nation branding presents an alternative discourse of collectivity identity construction that is less dangerous than modern nationalism.⁸ Anholt takes this claim further by claiming that the market based view of the world, on which the theory of

³ Olins, *Olins on Brand*, 159

⁴ Ibid 167

⁵ Sue Curry Jansen, "Designer Nations: Neo-liberal nation branding- Brand Estonia", in *Social Identities*, Vol 14, Jan 2008, 124

⁶ Ibid, 131

⁷ Ibid, 122

⁸ Peter Van Ham, "The rise of the brand state: The post modern politics of image and reputation", in *Foreign Affairs*, 8(5), 3

branding is based is a peaceful model for relationships between nations This view of the world which is based on competition, consumer choice and consumer power, which in turn is linked to freedom, is far more likely to result in lasting world peace than statecraft based on territory, economic power, ideologies, politics or religion.⁹ A more critically informed view would have one read the financial times to find the real reason for most wars and conflicts.

While acknowledging that nations are more complex than products, Olins argues that when it comes to national identity, people can be motivated and inspired and manipulated with the use of the same techniques that companies use to brand products.¹⁰ Olins outlines a seven step approach:

1. Create a working group with representatives of government, industry, the arts, education and the media to implement the initiative.
2. Using qualitative and quantitative methods, find out how the nation is viewed both domestically and abroad.
3. Consult with opinion-leaders regarding the nation's strengths and weakness and compare results with findings of the internal and external studies.
4. Identify the core strategy of the campaign, and create the central idea on which the strategy is based; basically this boils down to a slogan, around which the rest of the campaign is framed.
5. Develop a visual design and attach it to everything that represents the nation abroad.
6. Correlate and adjust the message to target audiences: tourism, internal and external investors.
7. Create a public-private liaison group to launch the program and keep it active in government, commerce, industry, the arts, and media, etc.¹¹

There concept of nation branding is problematic in many ways. It amounts to an instrumentalist approach which espouses a form of social engineering that allows elites to manage national identities. It ignores relations of power and neglects the

⁹ Simon Anholt, Is place branding a capitalist tool?, in *Place Branding*, 2(1), 2

¹⁰ Wallie Olins, "Branding the Nation-the historical context", in *The Journal of Brand Management*, April 2002, Vol.9

¹¹ Wallie Olins, *Trading Identities: Why countries and companies are taking on each other's roles*, (London, Foreign Policy Centre: 1999),23-24

implications of nation branding for democracy.¹² Literature on nation branding reveals an increasing tendency for technical-economic perspectives to be integrated into discussions of international relations and the political actions of nation states. This incorporation of marketing and branding principles into national governance and international relations has very profound political implications.¹³ The process of nation branding has two main features: an identification of key issues, or an assembly of particular rituals, images, and symbols that situate the nation somewhere from traditional to radical; and an integration policy that communicates this structure in a cohesive and efficient way. Questions arise such as: what does it mean to have the authoritative forces of national identity located in private enterprise? If allegiance to the flag presumes an acknowledgement of government as the locus of authority, does the nation brand suggest a shift in allegiance to the authority of private enterprise and expertise in the maintenance of the nation?¹⁴

Melissa Aronczyk proposes understanding some characteristics of nation branding through David Harvey's concept of monopoly rent. Monopoly rent is the modelling of difference, authenticity, and uniqueness of a tradable item in the interest of acquiring surplus value and profit. This concept can be applied to geographical locations not by trading in them, but by trading upon them through marketing. This is what nation branding is all about; it is a process which seeks methods to make a region more attractive than that of its neighbours. However monopoly rent contains a contradiction in that although uniqueness and individuality are crucial to the rate of monopoly rent, the commodity cannot be so unique as to be outside the realm of tradability. This results in the number of categories in which to display uniqueness being restricted to accommodate the perceived desires of those wishing to visit or invest.¹⁵ To quote David Harvey "the more easily marketable such items become, the less unique and special they

¹² Nadia Kavena, "Nation Branding: Toward an Agenda for Critical Research", in *International Journal of Communication* 5, 2011,

¹³ Ibid 126

¹⁴ Ibid 113

¹⁵ Melissa Aronczyk, "New and improved nations Branding national identity", in *Practicing Culture*, edited by C. Calhoun & R. Sennett, (New York, Routledge: 2007), 118

become.”¹⁶ Branding applies the logic of best practices in business- efficiency, consistency, and coherence- to keep competition operating on a restricted scale. It flattens the social, cultural, and physical topography that make a place inherently unique, and then remoulds it until it fits into preordained market categories.¹⁷

Tourism Ireland- Understanding our brand

Look at the covers of the brochures in any travel agency and you will see various ways in which countries present themselves on the world’s mental map. Singapore has a smiling beautiful face offering us tasty appetiser on an airplane whereas Ireland is a windy island full of freckled red-haired girls. In this way Ireland and Singapore are no longer merely countries one finds in an atlas. They have become ‘brand states’ with geographical and political settings that seem trivial compared to their emotional resonance among an increasingly global audience of consumers.¹⁸

If Ireland is now a brand based nation it is now useful to look at a brochure called Understanding Our Brand which was published by Tourism Ireland in 2006. The brochure spells out the characteristics of Tourism Brand Ireland. Brand Ireland is warm, charming, witty and inspiring. The physical experience of holidaying on the island of Ireland provides is the content of the brand. The three physical characteristics of people, place and culture are the key touchstones. They help to create a distinctive image in the minds of potential visitors. It is important to remember that while our near neighbours have quite a clear image of Ireland some markets might need to have this image created for them. The people of Ireland are friendly, charming and witty. They are attentive but relaxed and welcoming. Visitors can interact easily with local people and connect with the island on a human level. Irish culture reflects the character of its people and the beauty of its landscape and historic sites. A rich tapestry of breath-taking landscapes and seascapes steeped in history creates a varied experience for the visitor, all within easy reach. It is an experience that fills the senses – an energising journey of discovery and enrichment. It is an escape from the business of the modern world.¹⁹(Fig. 1)

¹⁶ David Harvey, “The Art of Rent: Globalisation and the Commodification of Culture”, in *Spaces of Capital: Toward a Critical Geography*, (New York, Routledge: 2001), 118

¹⁷ Aronczyk, “New and Improved Nations”, 120

¹⁸ Peter Van Hamm, “The rise of the brand state”, in *Foreign Affairs*, Sept/Oct 2001, 2

¹⁹ Tourism Ireland, *Understanding our Brand*, (Dublin, Tourism Ireland: 2006)

Ireland is portrayed in this brochure as a place of friendly and quaint people, a place steeped in past traditions and ways of life, poetry and the craic. They are shown as having special skills for enjoying themselves: they are constantly portrayed talking, laughing, drinking, dancing, and playing music (see Fig. 2). Leisure is represented as tourists having the craic. Just as landscape, work and leisure have been commodified in tourism, so also are we, the people. Ireland shares with other peasant societies the setting up of the peasant as the tourist attraction. The ads appeal to a traditional version of Irish community and solidarity which depict Irish people as an objectified other who exhibits characteristics such as friendliness, naïve charm, honesty, and who is deeply embedded with a pre-modern, peasant world view (see Fig. 3). Irish people are an essential ingredient in Irish tourist marketing because they appear to personify the retreat from modernity that is objective of many tourist encounters.²⁰ Prichard and Morgan compared the dominant images in marketing brochures for Ireland, Scotland and Wales in material targeting the North American market. Looking at brochure covers and images inside it found that images of people constituted just 2 and 10 per cent within Welsh brochures and 0 and 7 per cent in promoting Scotland. However 25 per cent of the images on Irish Brochure covers and 20 per cent of those within the brochures depict people.²¹ In this particular a staggering 17 out of 25 photographs are images of people.

This brochure fails to include any version of Irishness that acknowledges the recent influx of the new Irish, and that is not based on ancestry, and thus like so many other aspects of Irish society they promote a very specific version of authenticity, but one that is not acknowledged. Such representations render certain aspects of Irish society (such as the recent increase in ethnic diversity and the influx of visible minorities) invisible while nostalgically celebrating a homogenous version of Irishness rooted in the past.²² This is going to be confusing for tourists when they arrive in Ireland and find that more

²⁰ David Slattery, "Fear and Loathing in lost ages: journeys through postmodern Dublin", in *The end of Irish history? : critical reflections on the Celtic Tiger*, edited by Colin Coulter and Steve Coleman, (Manchester, Manchester University Press: 2003), 141

²¹ Tom Baum, Niamh Hearn, and Frances Devine, "Place branding and the representation of people at work: Exploring issues of tourism imagery and migrant labour in the Republic of Ireland", in *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, Volume 4, 2007, 47

²² Carmen Kuhling and Kieran Keohane, *Collective Representations of Irishness in the Guinness and Jameson Drink Ads: 'Liquidity' as Irish identity.*, paper for the 'Consuming Identities' Workshop, DCU, Oct 17th, 2007

than 22 per cent²³ of the staff who serve them in the hospitality industry will be migrants.

In film, literature and popular culture, pubs in Ireland have long been identified as an important resource for the constitution of Irish collective identity community, solidarity, and sociability. The pub is portrayed as being central to Irish society and 'irishness' is packaged and sold in the global pub industry through images of familiarity, sociability, and through the use of Irish holidays (St. Patrick's day), images (pints of Guinness) and rhetoric.²⁴ This ad implicitly links Irish living culture with the pub (see Fig. 4).

Brand Ireland pitches Ireland as a metaphysical other to modernity, as an idealised, pre-modern rural utopia. Within the brochure the dominant themes of place are relaxing, authentic, unspoilt, rural striking. Within the shots of historic culture the key features are castles, round towers and the overall impression is Celtic, romantic and mythical. There is only one urban photograph which is strange considering that Dublin as economic, political and cultural capital and draws over one third of the population. Perhaps this brochure which goes out of its way to represent Ireland as authentic is related to what Jameson calls the postmodern condition which is characterised by cultural deathlessness, spiritual exhaustion, fragmentation and scepticism toward utopias.²⁵ Come to Ireland for a real authentic experience it cries out (see Fig. 5). It seems that Tourism Ireland have a target of middle aged middle class European or American tourist and have branded Ireland accordingly to fit in with the image that those potential tourists have of Ireland. There are no signs of urban edginess, new communities, no conflict of any kind as conflict is incongruous with the craic.

Conclusion

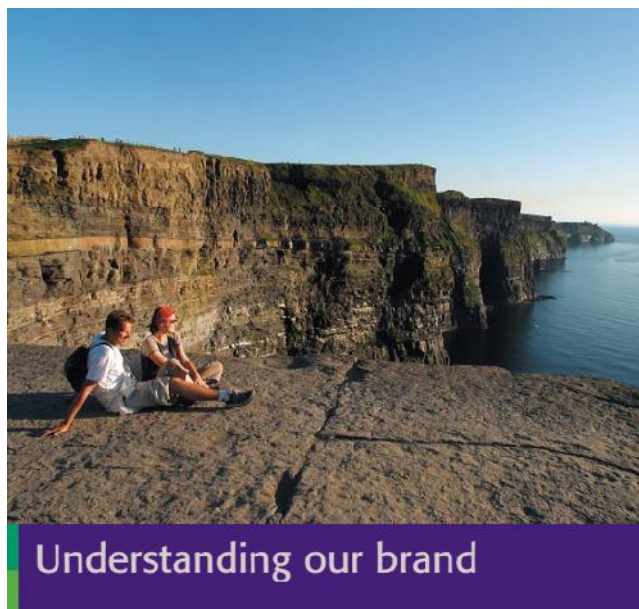
This essay has involved an interrogation of the concept of nation branding as propagated by Olins and Anholt. Nation branding is a symptom of the political and social reality of our times, not necessarily the most desired reality, a reality in which economic

²³ Baum, Hearn, and Devine, "Place branding and the representation of people at work", 49

²⁴ Kuhling and Keohane, *Collective Representations of Irishness*

²⁵ Jameson

power is valued above all. In this reality the nation is viewed as a unit of economic exchange and the nation brand serves as a handy symbol of economic vitality. What makes nations distinct things such as multiplicity of identities, different ethno histories, different interpretations of the past, changing social and political realities can never be encapsulated in a brand reductively dictated by the market. In nation branding national identity is appropriated for the purpose of neoliberal globalization and made suitable for global consumption. The national identity portrayed by nation branding is usually reductive and it is useful to look not at what the brand says about a nation but rather at what it obscures. Kavena and Popescu say that this appropriation via commodification constrains national identity within an ahistorical, decontextualized, depoliticized frame and results in a form of “national identity lite.”²⁶ Putting the power to articulate national identity into the hands of experts such as Olins and Anholt is undemocratic and does not involve participants from wide sectors of society. National identity is not a commodity like ice cream which can be displayed among similar items in a supermarket, differentiated only through a process of design and artificial flavouring.



²⁶ Nadia Kavena and Delia Popescu, “National identity lite” Nation branding in post-Communist Romania and Bulgaria” in *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Volume 14(2), 2011

Fig 1 “Understanding Our Brand” from Tourism Ireland, *Understanding our Brand*, (Dublin, Tourism Ireland: 2006)

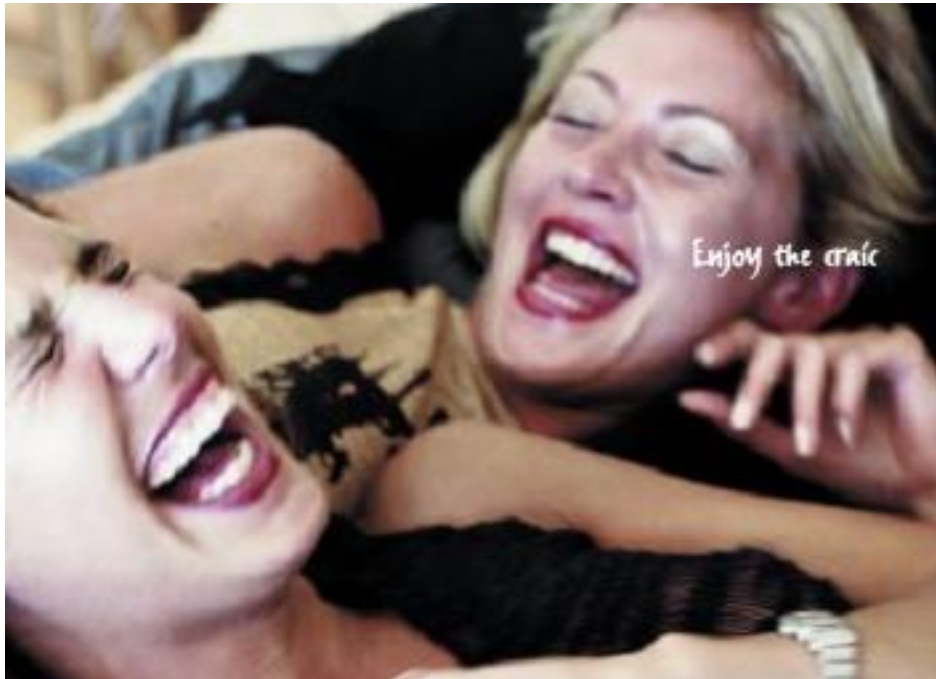


Fig. 2 “Having the Craic” from Tourism Ireland, *Understanding our Brand*, (Dublin, Tourism Ireland: 2006)

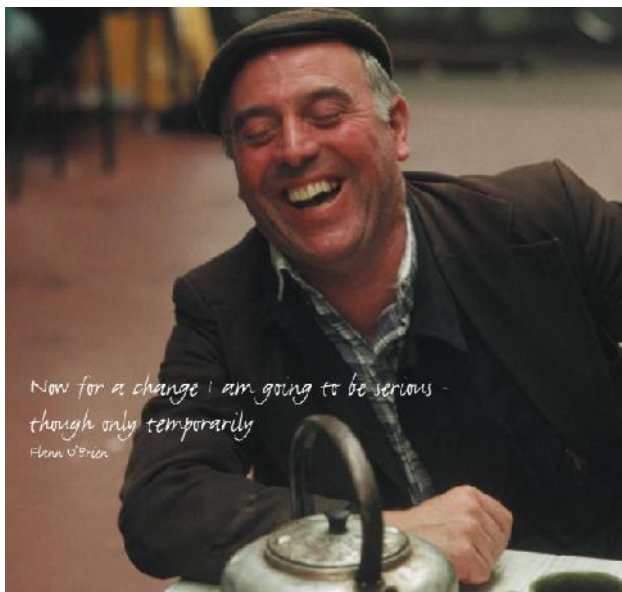


Fig. 3 “Peasant as Tourist Attraction” from Tourism Ireland, *Understanding our Brand*, (Dublin, Tourism Ireland: 2006)



Fig. 4 “Living Culture in the pub” from Tourism Ireland, *Understanding our Brand*, (Dublin, Tourism Ireland: 2006)



Fig. 5 “Ireland an authentic experience” from Tourism Ireland, *Understanding our Brand*, (Dublin, Tourism Ireland: 2006)

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