# The national in everyday life: A critical engagement with Michael Billig's thesis of *Banal Nationalism*

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### Abstract

This paper is designed to provide a critical engagement with Michael Billig's seminal thesis of *Banal Nationalism* (1995), perhaps the most influential study of everyday forms of nationhood. With an increasing number now focusing on the (re) production, dissemination and negotiation of the national through routine texts and practices (cf Foster, 2002; Edensor, 2002; Madianou, 2005; Brubaker *et al.*, 2006; Bratsis, 2006) and others employing the concept of banality in relation to non-national (Gorringe, 2006) and post-national identities (Aksoy and Robins, 2002; Szerszynski and Urry, 2002; Beck, 2006; Cram, 2001), it would seem like an opportune moment to assess Billig's contribution and also the limits of his approach.

In the first instance, a brief overview of Billig's work will be provided, including definitions and the main thrust of his argument. The significance of the study to both theories of nationalism and the social sciences in general will be then assessed. In the second part of the paper, I want to adopt a more critical approach by drawing on the work of those who have attempted to 'test' empirically or interrogate Billig's thesis, by focusing on its lack of complexity. Finally I will draw attention to Billig's failure to address effectively the place of the nation in a globalising world and the relationship between hot and banal forms of nationalism. Here, a more dynamic model for the study of the nation at the level of the everyday is offered, one that specifically attends to wider socio-economic and political shifts.

## Banal nationalism: a brief overview

Broadly speaking, Michael Billig's study of *Banal Nationalism* (1995) seeks to draw attention to and problematise what he labels as a 'double neglect' in how the contemporary era is understood and theorised (Billig, 1995: 49). First, he notes that much of the writing about nationalism is generally discussed in

relation to (often violent) attempts to strive for, or secure, national independence, so that in both popular representations and the social sciences it becomes conceptualised as 'extraordinary, politically charged and emotionally driven' (Billig, 1995: 44).

Moreover, those involved in these 'outbreaks of "hot" nationalist passion' (ibid) are generally to be found in remote or exotic areas of the globe or, when closer to home, portrayed as members of extreme 'political' movements. For example, it was the republican movement and not the British government that were described as nationalist during the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland (Billig, 1995: 48). In this way, nationalism disappears as an issue for the developed nations of the 'West' both in the spheres of politics and academia.

In critiquing this apparent dichotomy between 'their' hot nationalism and 'our' invisible brand, Billig makes his second important point; why is it that 'we' in the 'settled nations' (Billig, 1995: 47) who are not labelled nationalist, do not forget our national identity outside of, for example, state coronations or major sporting events, when flags are waved and national triumphs celebrated by millions? In part this question is meant to challenge those who posit equivalence between different group identities. Billig argues that national identity must be seen as more than just 'an inner psychological state' (Billig, 1995: 69) defined in terms of the self (see also Calhoun, 1997: 46).

Instead, and this is the crux of his thesis, national identity needs to be conceptualised as a 'form of life which is daily lived in a world of nation-states' (Billig, 1995: 68). Moreover, it is a form of life so entrenched and taken-for-granted in many parts of the world that it is rarely commented upon. It is not then that national identity is no longer relevant in countries such as Britain and the United States, merely that the symbols that 'flag' the nation on a daily basis no longer register as significant. As a result, they are largely ignored or, to use Billig's phrase, 'mindlessly remembered' (Billig, 1995: 144). He writes:

> The ideological habits, by which our nations are reproduced as nations, are unnamed and therefore unnoticed. The national flag hanging outside a public building in the United States attracts no special attention. It belongs to no special, sociological genus. Having no name, it cannot be identified as a problem. Nor, by implication, is the daily reproduction of the United States a problem (Billig, 1995: 6).

As well as flags hanging unnoticed on public buildings, Billig also draws attention to the ways in which both political speeches and mass media routinely reproduce a taken-for-granted world composed of sovereign, discrete nations. In the latter instance, individual reports are often classified as 'home' and 'foreign' news and then flagged in terms of their relevance to 'us', while a wide range of media texts constitute and address a national audience by using deictic language such as 'we', 'our', 'us' and 'here' to signify the nation (Billig, 1995: 105).

There is one final aspect of Billig's study that is worth referencing at this point, albeit very briefly, and that concerns his writing on globalisation. At present, it will be noted that, to a great extent, Billig rejects those arguments that herald the decline of the nation-state in a new era of global flows and post-modern identities. Instead, and I will return to this issue below, he largely equates globalisation with Americanisation (Billig, 1995: 149–53).

This argument is backed up with reference to the dominance of American cultural industries including Hollywood films and their stars and the 'multi-million dollar business of American wrestling' (Billig, 1995: 151) where global audiences are seen chanting for 'Yoo-ass-ey' and the 'heroic bearers of the US flag . . . a semantic sign of goodness itself' (Billig, 1995: 152).

Having provided a concise overview of some of the major arguments, the following section will first examine the significance of the *Banal Nationalism* thesis to those studying nations and nationalism and the social sciences in general.

## Contribution to the field

I think it is fair to say that, while writing on nationalism *per se* has increased exponentially over the past three decades (Ozkirimli, 2000: 2–3), Billig's study led the way in marking something of a shift in focus as research began to move away from the more macro-scale theorising on nationalism to more empirical-based studies, that focused on issues of representation, contestation and localised meaning-making as well as more contextualized case studies.[1] While acknowledging the undoubted contribution that the classic debates between modernists and perennialists have made in theorizing nations and nationalism (cf Gellner, 1983; Smith, 1998), I think it is also fair to say that these approaches have often placed an undue emphasis on the questions of 'when and what is the nation?' (Ichijo and Uzelac, 2005). This has tended to neglect (however, unintentionally) analyses of how the nation is sustained and maintained once established as 'the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time' (Anderson, 1991: 3).[2]

Moving beyond general theories of nationalism, Billig's critique of the apparent orthodoxy, both in political and academic spheres, which broadly places contemporary nationalism outside the experience of civilised (that is, Western) societies has contributed to the increased scrutiny of 'methodological nationalism' (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002; Chernilo, 2006). This is the idea, which has underpinned the social sciences for well over a century, that, 'nationally bounded societies are . . . the naturally given entities to study' (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002: 304).

Billig has noted, for instance, that in much sociological writing the concept of society is unquestioningly associated with the nation-state (1995: 51–5) and other scholars have drawn attention to this phenomenon across a range of disciplines (cf Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002; Helleiner and Pickel, 2005).

Consequently, what Billig and others have shown is that un-problematically adopting the tenets of methodological nationalism, whether in the academic sphere or elsewhere, is part of a wider – and largely entrenched – set of processes that legitimises and naturalizes discourses of the nation.

Drawing attention to the manifold ways in which the nation continues to be flagged in places such as Britain and the United States, both overtly during times of conflict and, in particular, mindlessly on a daily basis, not only challenges the supposed dichotomy between 'our' civilised societies and 'their' violent ones.[3] It also focuses our attention on the *ongoing production* of a hegemonic discourse whose power comes from being seen as natural, taken-for-granted, common sense (Sutherland, 2005: 196). As Jan Penrose writes, 'Our acceptance of nations as *natural* divisions of the global territory and population is essential to the maintenance of the existing geopolitical order' (Penrose, 1994: 161–81).

Billig's major contribution is, paraphrasing his earlier quote, to identify the problem – a tendency to treat the nation as a given both in everyday life and social theory – and point towards its possible contours. Moreover, by exploring the everyday (re)production of national identity through banal signifiers, our attention is focused on the fact that it is generally the daily forms of life, lived in and understood in relation to a world of nations, that underpins the more visible (and sometimes virulent) aspects of nationalism. As David Chaney has observed 'the everyday is generally the bedrock of social reality, what can be taken-for-granted' (2002: 4) and it is at this level that we must try and understand how and why identities are lived and made meaningful.

Therefore, while the impassioned speeches and actions of political leaders and nationalist ideologues are important in articulating a wider sense of who 'we' are (or at least, should be) (cf Reicher and Hopkins, 2001) it is through everyday language and practices that identities gain credence. As Sinisa Malesevic observes, the former is 'the domain of the normative . . . articulated in ideal typical terms' (2006: 7). However, this 'world of abstract principles, complex and distant ideas, and grand vistas has to be transformed and concretized into accessible images, familiar personality traits, stark metaphors and the general language of everyday life' (Malesevic, 2006: 17). Indeed, this shift in emphasis towards the routine and 'taken-for-granted' is what makes Billig's work so relevant to contemporary studies that attempt to explore how the nation frames, 'the ways in which people understand who they are, the nature of the world they live, how they relate to others and what counts as important to them' (Reicher and Hopkins, 2001: 3).

In the next section, I want to examine a number of studies that have engaged with Billig's work. These have not only attempted to flesh his thesis out empirically but have also identified a number of significant theoretical weaknesses. Broadly, speaking such critiques are concerned with the lack of complexity and dynamism in Billig's thesis. In the former case, we can cite those who have focused on the role of the media in nation-building and maintenance (Schlesinger, 2000; Aksoy and Robins, 2002; Higgins, 2004;

Madianou, 2005), the presumed homogeneity of 'established nations' such as Britain (Crameri, 2000; Rosie *et al*., 2006; Condor and Abell, 2006) and the emphasis on studying institutional discourses rather than "ordinary" people's expressions and practices (cf Condor: 2000). In the latter, I will draw attention to Billig's failure effectively to address the place of the nation in a globalising world (Basch *et al*., 1996; Giddens, 2002; Beck, 2000) and the relationship between hot and banal forms of nationalism (Hutchinson, 2006; Chernilo, 2006).

## Problematising the banal nationalism thesis

### Media, state and nation

In terms of the role of the media, it is perhaps Philip Schlesinger who has most consistently highlighted (and problematised) the 'functional relation between the nation and modes of social communication' (2000: 99) that has been adopted by many scholars of nationalism, including Billig (Billig, 1995: 100–106). This model assumes that a national media addresses and constitutes a coherent national public and through this process disparate individuals are, to paraphrase Anderson, able to imagine themselves as belonging to the same community (1991: 33–5). We can expose the shortcomings of relying on such an assumption by looking first at the complexity of media *output* and then by questioning the very notion of a uniform, homogeneous national *audience*.

In Britain, the focus for Billig's original Day Survey of the press[4] (1995: 109–11), a number of empirical studies have questioned the concept of the British press (Law, 2001; Higgins, 2004; Rosie *et al*., 2004, 2006) arguing that 'the distribution of titles and their spatial editions and the different patterns of flags [and deixis] found in them make [it] . . . of limited analytical or theoretical use' (Rosie *et al*., 2004: 454). Put simply, so-called British newspapers often carry distinct English and Scottish editions, while Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish audiences are all served by their own dedicated press which through the use of deixis, location markers etc 'flag' their stories accordingly. A similar argument might be applied to Belgium (van den Bulck, 2001; Dhoest, 2004), Spain (Crameri, 2000), Switzerland (van den Bulck and van Poecke, 1996) and Canada (Raboy, 1986), to name but four examples. In these instances, particular organizations are designed to serve distinct sections of the population who are (often) constituted on the basis of different, sometime conflicting, (national) identities, which may or may not be aligned with a state. It should be noted that such criticisms do not necessarily challenge Billig's thesis *per se*, given that, in many cases, we are still talking about English, Flemish or Quebecois 'media' in the wider context of Britain, Belgium and Canada. However, they do importantly point to the complexity of the media landscape in places such as Britain, and perhaps encourage us to move beyond 'official' or state-

run institutions to focus on the different levels – national, sub-national, supra-national or indeed non-national – that may operate in any given locale or context.

Moreover, many of these discussions relate to television and the press. It should be noted that the in an era of new media technologies that often transcend national boundaries, the relationship between the media and the nation is being made ever more complex through the widespread use of the internet (Eriksen, 2007), satellite broadcasting (Madianou, 2005), mobile phones etc.

The need for a more complex model can be further evidenced by problematising the assumed homogeneity of the national audience. This idea can be critically scrutinized with reference to media theory and the argument that national identity should *also* be conceptualized as a 'member's phenomenon' (Hester and Housley, 2002: 3).

## National 'audiences': A bottom up approach

One empirical study that looked to 'critically evaluat[e]' (Yumul and Ozkirimli, 2000: 788) the *Banal Nationalism* thesis by shifting the analysis beyond a 'Western' setting and carrying out a Day Survey of the press in Turkey, largely replicated Billig's findings by concluding that 'the discourse used by the Turkish press is crammed with the constituent elements of the nationalist ideology' (Billig, 1995: 801). Now, this is obviously quite an interesting conclusion, in and of itself, but what limits such a study is that it does not even acknowledge the complexity of the national audience in question beyond a brief nod to 'secular-Islamist conflict' (Billig, 1995: 802). In the Turkish case, this is perhaps best illustrated by the presence of a significant Kurdish community, substantial numbers of whom have been involved in a long and often bloody conflict in the east of the country (Icduygu *et al.*, 1999).

Therefore, although such studies do, at least, add something to our understanding of the relationship between nation and media by focusing attention on media content,[5] they do not, as Mirca Madianou (2005) has observed, take account of media theory which has long argued that audiences cannot simply be seen as either coherent or 'empty vessels' that uncritically absorb the media messages that they encounter (cf Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998; Gillespie, 2005). Instead, she argues we need to challenge this 'transmission model' of the media and unpack the concept of the audience by asking 'what role – if any – the media play in the articulation of identities' (Madianou, 2005: 7).

Investigating the role of the media (or indeed any other institution), rather than simply assuming its significance in reproducing national identity, requires an active engagement with the different constituencies that are seen (or not, as the case may be) to belong to the national community. Therefore, we need to draw attention not to only the complexity of the cultural landscape in places such as Spain, Britain and Canada but also, far more importantly, the problems

of assuming a settled and largely benign socio-political landscape even in what Billig has labelled as 'established, democratic nations' (1995: 93). As Jackie Abell and her colleagues have argued 'the idea that any modern states are stable in the sense of being unchallenged over time, or lacking in internal tensions or external challenges is highly questionable' and as such should be critically evaluated in terms of its ideological function (Abell *et al.*, 2006: 208).

One of the weaknesses of the *Banal Nationalism*[6] thesis is that does not address how different constituencies might respond to the particular media texts or political speeches used as examples of the nation being flagged in a routine or taken-for-granted manner (Billig, 1995: 93; see Rosie *et al.*, 2004, 2006 for a critique). In other words, the privileging of a top-down approach neglects the idea that 'national identities depend critically on the claims which people themselves make in different contexts and at different times' (Bechhofer *et al.*, quoted in Hester and Housley, 2002: 3).

However, it is not merely Billig who does not attend to 'the ways in which ordinary social actors construct themselves as nationalised subjects' (Condor and Abell, 2006: 158) but many of the 'classic' studies of nationalism and national identity. Yet as Reicher and Hopkins argue:

> To analyse the cultural battles over national identity without understanding how people come to assume and inhabit such identities, and how the identity then shapes what they do . . . does not get us very far in understanding nationalism (2001: 3).

The advantages of engaging with different publics are that it allows us to test empirically the significance of often taken-for-granted concepts associated with, say, identity or belonging among the (often) diverse groups who are presumed to utilize (or perhaps reject) them in their everyday lives. As Hester and Housley observe, if we 'fail to ascertain the [identity] categories that are relevant for members . . . and instead presume the relevance of particular categories' then we privilege sociological concepts over people's everyday realities (2002: 6).

In relation to the *Banal Nationalism* thesis, it might be unfairly assumed, given the limits of his empirical data, that Billig believes nationalism is banal for everyone who happens to live in Britain at the current time. Given the complexity of a population of 60 million individuals containing four 'national' groups, first, second and third generation migrant 'communities', distinct regional and class identities and so on, making such an assumption closes down our analysis where it should begin. Therefore, we need to actually ask who takes their identity for granted, who is passionate and mobilised by a sense of national identification and when (Mavratsas, 1999; Brubaker *et al.*, 2006), who rejects such a framework (Fenton, 2007) and then try and understand broader general patterns in order to address the complex question of why.

Having presented a number of studies that might be used to problematise or, perhaps, unpack the *Banal Nationalism* thesis so as to take into account the complexity of particular socio-political contexts, the differing levels of identification and categorization that might operate therein (national or otherwise) and the degree to which such forms are made meaningful through everyday expressions by both elites and 'ordinary' people, I would now like to focus on a second weakness of Billig's model. Although, as we have noted above, a number of interesting observations about hot and banal forms of nationalism are made, the thesis does not incorporate any real sense of dynamism, notably when dealing with the arguments of those who have posited a new 'globalising era' (Featherstone, 1990) driven by ever increasing global flows in people, products, ideas and images.

### The global and the national

While Billig is prepared to acknowledge that 'the internationalisation of capital' (Billig, 1995: 130) may have potential ramifications for the 'national imagination' in late-modernity, his analyses seem to be fairly limited in scope. He pays little attention to the historical causes of contemporary globalisation and dismisses much of what has been written about the post-modern condition as largely overstated.[7]

Instead, as we have seen, globalisation is largely viewed as 'the global transmission of American culture' (1995: 149), with the ubiquity of Levis, Coca Cola, American films and music across the world cited as evidence. Billig writes, 'the "global culture" which supposedly is threatening traditional national cultures, is not itself disconnected from all sense of national place . . . [it] is predominately American presenting what is essentially an American conception of the world' (Billig, 1995). Even leaving aside the complex and heated debates over theories of cultural imperialism (Schlesinger, 1991; Tomlinson 1999) this is a fairly limited thesis of globalisation.

Addressing the range of studies that have investigated both 'the increasing pace and intensity of global flows' (Basch *et al.*, 1996: 24) and their impact on group (and notably national) identities is far beyond the scope of this paper. It is worth noting, however, that the most sophisticated of these tend to argue that increasing global inter-connectivity is critical in offering individuals new meanings, values and ways of imagining the world (cf Appadurai, 2003). As a result, largely un-reflexive, taken-for-granted and everyday discourses of the nation *may* become subject to increasing scrutiny and challenges. This does not mean, however, that national identity ceases to be relevant for those who experience these new 'potentialities' (Moore, 2004).[8] Instead, as Edensor argues:

> Globalisation and nation identity should not be conceived of in binary terms but as two inextricably linked processes. . . . As global cultural flows become more extensive, they [may] facilitate the expansion of national

identities and also provide cultural resources which can be domesticated, enfolded within popular and everyday national cultures . . . *[Therefore] global processes may diminish a sense of national identity or reinforce it*' (my emphasis, Edensor, 2002: 29).

In order to illustrate this important point, I would like to make reference to two empirical studies that offer contrasting views of how processes of globalization may impact on forms of (national) identification. In the first, Robert Saunders (2006) focuses on how ethnic minority Russians living in the 'new' nations of Eastern Europe use the internet to 'satisf[y] .. their ambitions outside of national frameworks' (Billig, 1995: 61). Rather than orientating themselves towards the Russian Federation, these (often) well educated, English speaking, computer literate individuals tend to position themselves as (potentially) operating in a global context where one's worth comes from possessing certain skills and knowledge and adhering to a consumerist ideology rather than a given communal (ethnic/national) identity.

In a contrasting study, Lily Kong (1999) engaged with Singaporean transmigrants working in China to argue that the 'transnational location enhances their sense of national identity rather than its demise, leading to assertions of Singaporeaness and rootnedness' (Billig, 1995: 563). She focuses on the ways in which individuals living in Beijing '(re)invented[ed] traditions to maintain and recreate "Little Singapore" ' (Billig, 1995: 576) through both everyday practices (eating habits, media consumption, engaging in social activities and support networks) and participating in the celebration of festivals linked to Singapore (national days, religious holidays etc.).

What these two examples illustrate is the need to investigate these complex processes empirically, rather than conceptualizing the national and the global as opposing elements involved in a zero sum process of occlusion. This point leads me on to an important argument made by Daniel Chernilo (2006) who has critiqued the tendency in much recent social scientific theorizing to 'operate . . . through [a] dichotom[y]' that contrasts the national (modernity) and the global (post-modernity) (Chernilo, 2006: 11). In this formulation, the era of modernity, defined in terms of the primacy of the nation-state, is largely viewed as stable, marked by linear progression, rational, fixed, bounded and internally homogeneous. This point can be illustrated with reference to one or two recent examples from the social science literature:

> the deterritorialization of culture refers to the way that a national or even regional culture *can no longer* be conceived as reflecting a coherent and distinct identity (emphasis added, Papastergiadis, 2000: 72).

> There are no simple answers. The purely national has been broken, and it is not being replaced by the purely global, but by a combination of both. What is important is that there is no way of going back to *the era of the pure national*, that has been changed profoundly (emphasis added, Rantanen, 2002: 139).

In direct contrast, the current post-modern era is conceptualized in terms of fluidity, flux, mobilities (Szerszynski and Urry, 2002), hybridity (Papastergiadis, 2000), rhizomes (Appadurai, 2003), fractals and so on. Yet as Chernilo powerfully argues, 'the nation-state has always been historically opaque, sociologically uncertain and normatively ambivalent' (ibid: 15) so that those who posit a new era of global or cosmopolitan realities end up simply reifying the myth of a stable, coherent nation-state in modernity.

Rather, it must be acknowledged that nations are not, and never have been, stable, solid, coherent, fixed entities etc, but are subject to 'permanent crises' (ibid: 15) that are legitimated and managed (or not) through a process of ongoing struggle. In this way, it is possible to draw attention to (and evaluate the success of) the symbolic forms, ritual processes and economic frameworks that are used to try and generate 'closure', as well as the agents and institutions responsible (De Cilla *et al*., 1999: 160–1).

There are, then, two things I particularly want to draw from this discussion. The first is that nationalism and globalization 'need to be reconstructed as co-original and in co-evolution rather than two opposing forces' (Chernilo, 2006: 16). The second is to conceptualize, 'nation-formation as a dynamic and potentially reversible process' (Hutchinson, 2006: 295) that in particular periods and places may become stabilized and naturalized. In these latter cases, as Michael Billig has observed, this national framework informs everyday ways of thinking, imagining and acting, in the process generating 'essentialist conception[s] of both society and social agency' (Laclau, 1990: 89). However, what Billig does not address is the dynamic nature of this process and, therefore, the question of what underlies these periods of relative stabilization and sedimentation (cf Cohen, 1994: 199–200).

### Cooling and heating nationalism?

Having developed a theory for 'established, democratic nations' (Billig, 1995: 93), little attempt is made to theorise how 'hot' nationalism may cool over time (or, indeed, vice versa) and the possible conditions that might make this possible. If we leave aside the problem of actually defining established, democratic nations, we might suggest that they are characterised by relatively high levels of economic prosperity, wealth distribution and political stability.

It might then seem reasonable to assess the degree to which it is these economic and political factors which underpin any processes of 'cooling' over time (cf Tishkov, 2000: 644; Calhoun, 1994: 59–64). For instance, Orvar Lofgren's study of America indicates that banal symbols emerged after a period of sustained 'nationalization' by the state and as levels of affluence began to rise for an increasing majority of the population (Lofgren, 1993: 183–6). Elsewhere, Andreas Wimmer (2006) has argued that the provision of social welfare helped nationalise many of the working classes in Europe, who then fought strongly against those (such as migrants) who were perceived to threaten or dilute their new economic and political rights.

This might seem obvious and perhaps even unimportant, but if economic factors are central to this process then we might ask what implications this has both for those theories of the nation in general as well as those that stress the importance of social communication (Schlesinger, 2000). In other words, it may be necessary to incoporate wider socio-economic factors (which have been sometimes neglected in theories of the nation) into any framework used to analyse the emergence of banal forms of nationhood. This is particularly relevant for those countries that might be labelled as both multi-national and relatively stable, including Britain, Spain, Switzerland, Canada, Belgium etc.

Conversely, as John Hutchinson has argued (2004, 2006), we cannot presume that nationalism, once established and largely routinized, continues to exist, un-remarked upon, in perpetuity. Instead, he writes, 'the nation is a process, and a non-linear one, that is reversible' (2006: 300) and identifies a number of factors, war, 'natural' disasters, migration and ideological threat, that may cause hot outbursts of nationalist fervour (riots, civil conflict or war) or (to stretch our analogy a little further) the gradual heating of (largely) taken-for-granted national identities.

In both these cases, it is perhaps worth referencing a few brief examples for illustrative purposes. In the first instance, Jared Diamond has examined the impact of environmental devastation caused by overpopulation and the growing disparities in land ownership in Rwanda as possible factors in the 1994 genocide. He also notes the important (and self serving) role of political elites whipping up 'ethnic hatred' and the history of Hutu and Tutsi relations, notably under colonial rule, but suggests that these commonly accepted 'explanations' for the slaughter need to be contextualised in relation to wider and underlying economic and environmental considerations (2005: 311–28).

In the second, Pal Kolsto (2006), in his study of how national symbols are utilized in varying contexts, focuses on the case of Norway in the 1920s and links ideological struggles over the meaning of national symbols, including the flag and Constitution Day, with wider social unrest between political classes (ibid: 690). Furthermore, he suggests that the meaning of such symbols only became (more or less) routinized again in the 1930s, once the Labour Party, which broadly represented working-class interests, had come to power. Here, he argues that we must pay attention to the underlying causes of such episodes as well as the ways in which they produce critical conflicts over the meaning of popular (national) symbols. In other words, 'the closing of ranks on the level of symbols came about only after the social split had been healed. It was not so much a cause as an effect of greater political harmony' (Kolsto, 2006: 692).

In a similar vein, one might point in contemporary times to the increasingly fractious debates over immigration, multi-culturalism and the position of minorities (and in particular Muslims) in countries across Europe (Kundnani, 2001; Blokland, 2003; Verkuyten, 2004) as one possible indication that the increasing intensity of global flows, alongside changing economic circumstances, may be opening up previously entrenched, 'common sense' notions of (national) identity and belonging to further scrutiny. However, whether (and

why) these habits or ways of life are rejected or tenaciously embraced (Frykman and Lofgren, 1996) cannot be a subject for theorizing alone and requires a movement into the field (Condor and Abell, 2006).

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have assessed the contribution and limitations of Michael Billig's thesis of *Banal Nationalism* (1995), perhaps the most influential study of how national identities are, for significant numbers, 'embedded in routines of social life' (1995: 175). In some respects, the value of Billig's work can be partly seen in the growing number of empirical studies that are now shifting attention to focus on forms of nationalism and identification at the level of the everyday.

His major contribution has been to identify a significant lacuna in much sociological thought (and theorizing), which has largely taken the nation for granted as a unit of analysis, and then point to some of the possible ways in which the national becomes embedded in social life.

However, as we have seen, the major weaknesses of the *Banal Nationalism* thesis are that it often overlooks the complexity of 'national life', in a place such as Britain, and largely eschews any sense of dynamism. I do not want to retrace these arguments again here but will use them instead to propose a possible (albeit tentative) framework for theorizing everyday forms of nationhood.

In the first instance, as theorists, we cannot assume that particular representations of the nation are resonant or relevant for all (and at all times) who happen to live within a particular political territory, just because they are associated with powerful institutional actors or agencies. In this respect, as Rogers Brubaker and his colleagues (2006) have argued we must try and understand whether and when a national framework is utilized in order to make sense of a particular issue. This type of approach does not, of course, mean ignoring institutional discourses or the degree to which they may dominate a particular social environment, but should make us acutely aware of the manifold ways in which different groups are addressed (or ignored) and respond to, challenge or ignore such discourses.

Secondly, it is vitally important that we pay heed to Susan Condor's call to view 'banality as a social achievement' (2000: 199) so that we focus on processes of becoming and relation of power rather than treating nations and/or identities as 'things' that people either belong to or possess (Malesevic, 2006). Here, I suggest that Ernesto Laclau's writing on the concept of sedimentation might be fruitfully employed in relation to Billig's work. Simply put, Laclau argues that, although some meanings or concepts become sedimented over time (Laclau, 1990: 34), this does not make them any more real or, indeed, any less contingent. It is simply that they have become naturalized

for a particular group so that 'the system of possible alternatives tends to vanish and the traces of the original contingency fade' (Laclau, 1990).

Applying this idea to studies of nationalism, there is a growing body of work that has begun to trace the manifold ways in which national forms of imagination and organisation have become largely taken-for-granted and, in the process, naturalised. However, in acknowledging this we must always be aware of the contingent (and contested) nature of such processes, even as they continue to inform the daily lives of so many, including ourselves. This argument not only applies to the contemporary era, where processes of globalization are increasingly seen to threaten national sentiments, but also the past where there has been a tendency to write about nations as if they were homogeneous, stable, and unified, despite the wide range of historical evidence to the contrary (cf Tilly, 1975; Mann, 1986).

## Notes

1  It is also worth noting the contribution of Orvar Lofgren (1989, 1993), Jonas Frykman (1993) and Anders Linde-Laursen (1993) who all produced ground-breaking studies examining how 'the nation . . . is often hidden in trivial forms or everyday routines, which we may overlook, blind to the familiarities and peculiarities of our own present setting' (Lofgren, 1993: 161).
2  The questions of what and when is the nation also, as Rogers Brubaker observes (1994), underpin the idea that the nation can be defined in terms of objective features, which are then seen to be more or less relevant over both space and time (See, for example, Smith, 1991: 14). Unfortunately, these types of approaches generally raise more questions than they can hope to answer (Calhoun, 1997; Tishkov, 2000).
3  However, Robert Foster has argued (2002: 16) that Billig himself actually reproduces the dichotomy between the West and the rest by firmly locating banal nationalism in the 'established, democratic nations' (1995: 93). This oversight may be linked to the fact that Billig's model fails to incorporate any potential for change.
4  It should be noted that Billig does acknowledge the complex nature of the British press by writing 'technically the British press is not national in the sense that the same editions cover the whole of the United Kingdom' (1995: 111). However, he then goes on to adopt the 'conventional hegemonic semantics of British nationalism' by allowing English editions to represent Britain (ibid)!
5  Contrast this with Ernest Gellner's assertion that 'it matters precious little what has been fed into [the media]; it is the media themselves. . . . which automatically engenders the core idea of nationalism quite irrespective of . . . the specific messages transmitted' (Gellner, 1983: 127).
6  Billig's study of everyday talk about the royal family (1992) was expressly concerned with how different groups of people debated particular issues and generated a shared sense of understanding with regard to the British monarchy. It is my contention that we may use this approach to critically engage with his subsequent work on *Banal Nationalism* (1995).
7  For instance, Billig critiques Joshua Meyrowitz's (1985) *No Sense of Place* writing, 'Meyrowitz claims that there is no sense of place, and he specifies the place where this absence of place is taking place. This place is a nation – America. His text signals his own sense of belonging to this place' (1995: 144).

8 One of the most renowned scholars of globalization, Ulrich Beck, has gone as far as to argue that, 'the imagining of possible lives can no longer be conceived as national or ethnic' (2000: 66).

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