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Who's afraid of banal nationalism?

Contribution to the round table « The Future of Nationalism » ASEN conference 2017. Tuesday the 28th of March 2017

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Good afternoon. I'm very grateful to the organizers of this great conference for having invited me to participate in this round-table; all the more that I did not have the honor to know Anthony Smith personally and I certainly don't consider myself as a specialist of nationalism. I'm a French political sociologist mainly interested in citizenship, reactions to European integration and social science methods. My interest in nationalism follows from that. It is thus quite contemporary, focused on Western European countries and on the way citizens experience it or feel about it. A set of interests, thus, that do not particularly match Anthony Smith's own interests according to the debate he had with Jon Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idriss about their "everyday nationhood agenda" (Fox et Miller-Idriss, 2008 ; Smith, 2008). Indeed, what I thought I could share with you today is a series of interrogations related to this debate and to the relationship between banal nationalism, Michael Billig's book (Billig, 1995), and nationalism studies. But I want to point out that I don't speak on behalf of Billig, whom I don't know personally either. Each time I'll refer to his work, it will be my interpretation.

The puzzle: the recurrent misunderstanding of Banal Nationalism (1995)

I've been reading recently the discussions that *Banal nationalism* generated since it was published more than 20 years ago. I am surprised to see how it has become considered as the founder work of "everyday nationalism" – that Eleanor Knott, on the *State of Nationalism website*, identifies as "a sub-field [that] refocuses attention on the 'masses' and human agency within nationalism studies". Then she adds: "The everyday nationalism approach builds on Billig's (1995) work on banal nationalism but diverts in its focus on human agency" (Knott, 2016). In my understanding of Billig's work, the everyday nationalism agenda does much more than divert from it: it denies, more or less implicitly, its thesis. Banal nationalism was written in order to reveal the constant reminder of national belonging in established democracies as well as its legitimizing effect on the international and violent order of a world divided into nations. To me, this denial of Billig's main line of argumentation might not have happened by chance and needs to be explained. I shall briefly summarize how it seems to have happened, according to what I read, and then I'll suggest explanation that will lead me to a few conclusions regarding the future of nationalism – or at least, the study of nationalism!

Banal nationalism was published in 1995. Michael Billig wrote it after *Talking of the Royal family* (Billig, 1992) where he analyzed a series of collective interviews with family members. He then

found an amazingly high level of national pride. In these discussions, the division of the world into nations and national belonging appeared natural features and were never debated. Billig reports how he thus went on reading major work on nationalism – Gellner, Anderson, Anthony Smith in particular... - and found their work fascinating. But if it made really clear how nations were built, it did not explain how the national imaginary continues to be so powerful. As you know, Billig then suggested that the reason why nationalism – i.e. the perceived naturalness of an international order based on the division of the world into nations - remains so powerful in countries such as the UK or the US, long after the years of mobilization and nation building, is because people are reminded of it all the time! They are constantly reminded that they are national by public actors, medias, marketing, architecture, art, etc. in such a way that they do not pay attention to it. But – and Billig makes it very clear, in the book - nationalism, be it banal or not, is (potentially) violent. Banal nationalism maintains a strong hierarchy between countries and people in societies that consider themselves based on human rights: nations are always first and all crimes against human beings are acceptable if they are perpetrated in the name of an acknowledged nation.

A quick tour in the reception of Michael Billig's book in nationalism studies

There is no doubt that Billig's message was clearly understood from the beginning – see Monserrat Guibernau's review in *Nations and nationalism* in 1997 for instance; but it seems that, as the constant reminder of the nation, it's then been forgotten.

Edensor (2002)

It seems that this begins with Tim Edensor's book *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (Edensor, 2002) written in defense of popular culture and cultural studies. Here Edensor singles out Billig as the only scholar interested in the everyday dimension of nationalism – which so far is correct – but also as someone who paved the way to a bottom-up approach of nationalism. Edensor analyses the way nations are experienced in everyday life, emphasizing individual experiences.

Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008)

This understanding of *Banal nationalism* was later comforted by Fox and Miller-Idriss in the already mentioned and programmatic article on everyday nationhood. They quote Edensor and Billig together, as evidences of a “recent increased interest in the ways in which nationhood is negotiated and reproduced (...) in everyday life”. As we know, Anthony Smith responded in a quite critical way to the every nationhood agenda: there is no question that his response contributed to the visibility of the article and at the same time, to the assimilation between Edensor and Billig's approaches.

Skey (2009; 2011)

In 2009, in a paper entitled “The national in everyday life: A critical engagement with Michael Billig’s thesis of Banal Nationalism” (Skey, 2009), Michael Skey did properly address Billig’s critical analysis of everyday nationalism and in particular. I will not get into the details of his criticisms, especially since Billig already replied to him (Billig, 2009). What I find interesting here is that in his book, published two years later (Skey, 2011), Skey actually confirms with the collective interviews he analyses, most of Billig’s points. He confirms in particular the omnipresence of the nation in discussions that were not directly related to it, as well as the general belief in the naturalness of national belonging. But, instead of following Billig’s worries about it, he then suggests that the omnipresence of the nation in everyday life may be of practical and psychological value as it gives people an ongoing sense of self, place and community.

McCrone & Bechhofer (2015)

This idea that national belonging fulfils human needs and has to be acknowledged and studied as such is a recurring argument for scholars like McCrone and Bechhofer (McCrone et Bechhofer, 2015), and more generally, Scottish, Welsh, Irish and now English academics whose work on national identity in the context of the devolution, whose work has been prolific. They do disagree with Billig but they rarely relate their disagreement directly to his denunciation of nationalism: they rather oppose the emphasis put on the State by the banal nationalism thesis which clearly shows that the author’s interest is focused on nationalism in nations-states (McCrone, 2006). Which does not mean, as it is also regularly commented, that Billig ever considered that banal nationalism was to be observed only in Western or settled nations. Billig only attracted our attention towards something we were inclined not to see, or to forget: the fact that nationalism is as omnipresent in countries like Britain, France or the United States that it is in separatist or newly established countries, which are thus overtly nationalist.

Possible explanations

Billig got plenty of occasions to clarify things and he actually did (Dodds et Billig, Michael, 2016 ; Haste et Billig, Michael, 1994 ; Wertsch, Chung-Woon et Billig, Michael, 1995). We could discuss my interpretation of his work but this not the reason why I took you into this very quick tour of Banal nationalism’s reception. The point I wanted to make, is that the recurrent understatement of Billig’s clear denunciation of nationalism in nationalism studies is something I think we should pay attention to, especially in the current context of increasing political and electoral success of nationalism. I feel this has to be underlined and explained. I shall now suggest a series of possible complementary explanations that have come to my mind while I was first realizing and then documenting this.

No time to read any more

We cannot totally dismiss the idea that if the book was not correctly understood and referred, it is the hazardous consequence of the current state of social research, where we are all so busy securing funding and publishing that we cannot afford to read entire books, not to mention someone's whole work. Reputations are this partly a matter of chance, of the way you've been quoted in the beginning.

The economy of a subfield in social sciences

Another explanation could be the economy of subfields in social sciences. Here, I see two processes that could explain what I consider to be a misunderstanding of Billig's work:

- *Loving one's object*

I tend to think that subfields are fields where scholars have much difficulty to dislike their object. As I said, I don't consider myself as been part of national studies, I come from European studies. And this is what I have experienced there: people in the field cannot but be Europhiles. If you are not involved in the future of the European Union, you're soon considered Eurosceptic and the best thing you can do is to run away - which I did eventually (Duchesne et al., 2013). I wonder if there is not something of the sort going on here: I think Billig made clear that he does not believe in national identity – not as an interior and universal human disposition. He wrote: "National identities are forms of social life, rather than internal psychological states; as such, they are ideological creations, caught up in the historical processes of nationhood". (Billig, 1995, p. 24) He feels uncomfortable when he realizes that he behaves as a nationalist – and he does, as we all do. He thus considers nationalism as the very powerful and dangerous ideology, heir to the worst ideologies humanity had to cope with in the XXth century . According to what I heard during these two days, I don't think that many of us in this conference share either his antipathy for nationalism or his skepticism regarding national identity.

- *Reduced disciplinary contribution – or the influence of cognitive social psychology*

Not only subfields might have a tendency to attract scholars who like their object; they also are necessarily interdisciplinary. And that also come with a price. Along the years, scholars in that area tend to lose touch with some of their disciplines in the sense that they do not keep aware of these discipline's internal debates. In this case, I observe in nationalism studies the same limited relationship with social psychology, which basically, tends to be reduced to Social Identity Theory. Billig was a student of Henry Tajfel, the father of Social identity theory, from which categorization and the in/out-group dynamic have been imported and are considered the alpha and omega of the

relationships between people and political identities. But Billig then took his distance, scientifically speaking, with Tajfel (Billig, Michael, 2002) and developed his own psycho sociological approach, which is explicitly anti scientist and anti cognitivist. I will not make a long presentation of Billig's rhetorical psychology – but I do recommend reading *Arguing and thinking* (Billig, 1996). My point here is that Banal nationalism cannot be interpreted properly without referring it to Billig's general social science approach. And this approach is quite foreign to the general position of nationalism studies regarding social psychology. This might also contribute to explaining how his work was imported in nationalism studies in an unappropriated way.

Living a life without illusion

I think a third line of explanation is plausible, which relates to the title of my contribution – which by the way is different from the one I sent Esther a couple of weeks ago: are we afraid of Banal nationalism? You might have heard of the “Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?”, or seen the film (with Elizabeth Taylor and Burt Lancaster). Its author, Edward Albee, explained that this meant to him: “who's afraid of living life without false illusions”?¹ I think that this is the same with banal nationalism. It is difficult, as a citizen, a human being, to give up the national imagination – someone yesterday talk of the national fantasy -, the idea that you belong to something that gives you its power and let you enter in eternity. All the more that the nationalist ideology, which is, one more time according to Billig still, the only international ideology, reminds you of it all the time.

Conclusion

But I do think that our role, as social scientists, is to confront this disillusion. To make everything we can to dispel the fantasy. We need for that to affront complicated methodological problems but this is what social sciences are made for: find the ways to ways to bring out what is concealed by power relationships and human fragility - in this case, the current omnipotence of nationalism. If we want it to end, we are first in line.

Thank you for your attention.

¹ <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4350/edward-albee-the-art-of-theater-no-4-edward-albee>

PS. As an academic abroad, at this country, I've been to the cinema quite frequently this year and I had to watch one of these videos from Army job before any film I came to see. It has become quite an obsession.



Screenshot from Army TV advert 2017 - This Is Belonging (Part 2), available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cqQvpPmfbhg> copyright Army Jobs.²

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