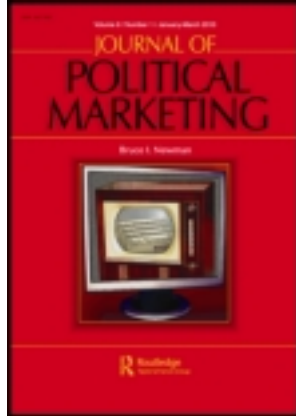


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The Branding of States: The Uneasy Marriage of Marketing to Politics

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This article reviews the growing literature on state branding and argues that any attempt to understand the impact of advertising and marketing on politics cannot be divorced from the larger phenomenon of privatization of the state. The article examines the way in which states have marketed themselves drawing on examples from Canada, the US, the UK, and other nations. It argues that the practice of state marketing is a pernicious one, and the ability of states to change their public perception through branding exercises is called into question.

KEYWORDS *government advertising, political communication, political marketing, state branding*

One would not normally think of nations as diverse as Jordan, Poland, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada as having much in common. Among them are advanced liberal democracies, a former communist country, and a quasi-democratic monarchy. Despite the breadth of ideological opinion among them and the significant difference in things such as fundamental freedoms, equality, and degree of industrialization, these five nations are alike in at least one significant way. Each of them has used advertising and public relations companies to market themselves both internally as a way of shoring up domestic public opinion for the regime and, more fundamentally, externally as a way of projecting a “brand” image to businesses, leaders, and the public in other nations. If some are to be believed, the rise of the branded state has taken nation-states down paths they have not traveled. Does state branding represent a shift in what states have always done, or has the intrusion of marketing and public relations companies forever altered traditional functions of nation-states? This article argues that while the

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integration of public relations officials into statecraft is a new development, state branding cannot be separated from the larger phenomenon of the privatization of the state in all sectors. Moreover, the success of state branding is called into question. Any state that use branding exercises as a way of changing public opinion misunderstands the tremendous power of the media to shape and mold public perceptions and the inability of the state to separate its manufactured image from our existing preconceptions.

THE CONTEXT FOR BRANDING

The development of state branding is consistent with the broader trends of privatization of traditional state functions. It was Max Weber who argued that the state maintains a monopoly of coercive power (Weber, 1964, p. 154), but with privatization that locus of decision making and authority has shifted from the state to private capital. When examining the phenomenon of state branding, it is important to recall that branding—which on one level is simply the privatization of one element of state communications—is part of a larger trend. It is the most visible tip of this communications iceberg where the worlds of advertising and marketing have become inextricably tied to the world of politics or, to use Daniel Boorstin's words, "advertising is the characteristic rhetoric of democracy" (quoted in Romanow, de Repentigny, Cunningham, Soderlund, and Hildebrandt, 1999, p. 24). Increasingly there has been a subtle but profound shift in the way the media discuss politics. Advertising has subsumed so much of our public consciousness that the way we talk about politics is through the language of advertising. Concepts such as selling and brand loyalty, not to mention market reach and logo visibility, are no longer confined to Madison Avenue boardrooms but are central elements to the communication plans of corporations, political parties, and nation-states. If we are to believe Grant McCracken, they are central to who we are. In his book *Culture and Consumption*, McCracken argues that our identity, meaning, and how our culture is formed are all shaped by advertising. He writes that "through advertising, old and new goods are constantly giving up old meanings and taking on new ones. . . . To this extent, advertising serves us as a lexicon of current cultural meanings" (1988, p. 79). The nation-state and the meanings it connotes, both old and new, are shaped by the received images, words, and arguments of advertising.

Politicians are clearly aware that the nation-state needs to create an image that leads to favorable connotations. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the former president of France, suggested that Europe needs to rebrand itself, perhaps even changing its name to the United States of Europe. "We need a name which gets across our brand," he said (Rotzoll and Haefner, 1996, p. 2). Nelson Mandela's branding of South Africa as a "rainbow nation" also speaks to the effort of leaders to change perceptions. A rainbow, with its

mixture of different colors, is a perfect metaphor for post-apartheid South Africa and was embraced by Opposition leaders and the media as an appropriate symbol of the new nation. Even small nations have felt the need to market themselves. The kingdom of Jordan embarked on a path of state marketing. King Abdullah himself chaired the organization called “Jordan First,” which is the slogan of the “new” Jordan. According to the king, the goal is to “implant Jordan in the hearts of Jordanians” (Sawalha, 2002). Belgium too has joined the fray. Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt hired a company to change its public reputation after scandals involving child pornography, corruption, and tainted chicken. Peter Van Ham writes that “in an attempt to clear the air, Belgium has decided to introduce a new logo and hip colors and will sport the cool Internet suffix ‘.be’ as its international symbol” (Van Ham, 2003, p. 2). As its model, the country has used Virgin as an example of a small company that “isn’t big but you see it everywhere you look” (Van Ham, 2003, p. 2). Elsewhere, tiny Estonia has changed its label to “pre-EU” or even “Scandinavian” instead of a “Baltic” state or a “Post-Soviet state.” Just how did such a situation arise, and what are the implications of national governments marketing themselves in the same way as companies market soap or hamburgers?

States have used marketing to create positive impressions, but the roots of marketing to create negative impressions run deep. Ying Fan argues that the tendency to portray other nations less favorably is a much more common technique than the positive marketing we are seeing today:

In political marketing, manipulating the images of one’s own country against those of enemy countries has long been used as a powerful weapon in propaganda, from the evil Soviet Empire in the Cold War to the recent labelling of three countries as the ‘axis of evil.’ A name could also be coined to brand a region: for example, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, and Singapore were widely referred to as the Four Dragons in the 1980s (Fan, 2005, p. 7).

The roots of state branding can be found long ago in the early 20th century. It was then when the historical and deep connections among governments, political parties, and advertising firms were formed. In Canada, Reginald Whitaker writes that the link between ad agencies and the Liberal party were forged after World War I. Whitaker writes that if “experts could package and sell a war, presumably they could package and sell the Liberal party” (1977, p. 222), and in foreshadowing the Gomery Inquiry of 2005 that examined links between the governing Liberal party and advertising agencies, Whitaker goes on to suggest that “In Canada, government and political advertising are inextricably linked” (1977, p. 219). Like many developments in modern political communications, the United States was one of the early advocates of using public relations and spin to change public opinion about

private as well as public goods. In the 1930s and 1940s, George Gallup urged the government to extol the power of opinion polling to counter the effect of entrenched interests and to provide it guidance. Gallup thought polling was a democratizing trend and a tool of accountability (see Robinson 1999, pp. 40–41) and, in doing so, established the dependency of modern governments on private polling firms. In addition to establishing the link between public relations officials and government, the US was also one of the first to embrace eagerly the connection between political parties and advertising. This shouldn't be a surprise. At present, the United States spends more money on advertising than 66 other nations combined, including all of the other members of the G-7 economies (Rotzoll and Haefner, 1996, p. 2). In the political realm, advertising is almost the sole currency. For example, the cost of mounting a senatorial seat, much of which is spent on advertising, can average more than \$5 million (Newman, 1999, p. 14). In the 2008 presidential election, Democratic Party candidate Barack Obama spent over \$42 million in one week in October on TV ads.

The blurring of the political and commercial is not just confined to the United States. In Britain, political parties do not broadcast advertisements during elections but instead major parties are granted five party election broadcasts (PEBs). According to Scammell and Semetko, as the audience share of the PEBs have dwindled, the trends and tactics associated with marketing have increased (1995, pp. 8–19). Political parties increase the media coverage the PEB gets by holding press conferences to announce the hiring of a Hollywood director or using a tactic called “the Benetton strategy,” described by Scammell and Semetko as “the deliberate injection of close-to-the-bone emotive material in the hopes of providing hostile reaction from rival politicians and thereby creating a news story” (1995, p. 21). The Labour government of Tony Blair has moved with great vigor in embracing the commercial aspects of politics, whether that is increasing press officers, relying to a greater extent on pollsters, or being the country's largest spender on advertising, as it was in 2001 (Scammell, 2003, p. 133). The reliance of political parties on marketing may provide one clue as to why states are relying on the same advertising and public relations firms when they form governments.

The intersection between political party marketing and state branding suggests at least two things about the discourse of politics. First, a study of modern politics cannot be divorced from an understanding of the role of symbolic handlers who routinely organize, plan, and manage the communications of political actors. Increasingly, there is a divorce between the thoughts of a leader and his or her words. This further perpetuates cynicism among a public weary of seeing politicians as empty vessels for prepackaged messages. A famously leaked memo from the Philip Gould, Tony Blair's strategy and polling advisor, admits that the public sees the Labour Party as “spin, no substance” (Scammell, 2003). Ronald Reagan's speech writer,

Peggy Noonan, argues that this cynicism is a result of speech writers who are paid to write sound bites and wrap speeches around them (Noonan, 1990, p. 73). Roderick Hart (1987) argues that the tremendous increase in the number of speeches that leaders must give necessarily means that we know less about the leaders than we did before the advent of electronic media. All of this creates not only a devaluation of politics but, in fact, an abdication of governing, according to Newman (1999).

The disconnect between the true thoughts and words of political leaders versus those orchestrated by their public relations consultants and its intended effect of obfuscating the nature of this relationship has been observed by others also: "Many countries make considerable efforts to cultivate their images abroad, especially in the US and Europe. As a rule, no precise linkage between commissioned [public relations] activities and what appears in the mass media can be traced. Typically, one can do little more than guess at what suggestions were made, which were excepted, and how they were implemented. The precise nature of intervention remains somewhat of a mystery" (Kunczik, 2003, p. 121). Western leaders mouth platitudes about transparency and accountability intended for consumption by domestic audiences while simultaneously condemning their developing-world counterparts for the absence of the same qualities. The reality is that political accountability, transparency, and public input in the policy formulation process is at its most camouflaged in precisely those nations most able to afford, and most experienced at using, the marketing strategies of the public relations firms they employ.

Metaphor has been a central element in creating brand segregation between the developing world and the US in particular. According to Ivie, metaphor has been a powerful rhetorical technique of American foreign policy in particular. He argues that:

Democracy, as a motivating term in US political culture, is readily identified with war through the ubiquitous trope of disease and related metaphorical vehicles that participate in a wider rhetorical universe of decivilizing imagery. This convergence of the language of democracy and war translates the barbarism of a distempered domestic demos into the savagery of a threatening external 'Other,' exacerbating perceptions of peril that sustain an improbable quest for national security through global domination (Ivie, in Beer and Landtsheer, 2004, pp. 75–78).

The type of public relations employed by a nation-state, according to Kunczik, is dependent on whether the goals of the public relations are virtuous. He writes that:

[One] form of [public relations] for states, meant primarily to compensate for structural communication deficits, aims mainly to adapt the image to

news values by trying to influence mass media reporting. *Structural* international [public relations] aims at correcting the 'false' images previously created by the mass media. *Manipulative* [public relations], on the other hand, tries to create a positive image that, in most cases, does not reflect reality, including lying and disinformation. . . . The AIDS campaign of the KGB and the disinformation campaign of the Reagan administration against Muammar Qaddafi are good examples of this (Kunczik, 2003, pp. 123–124).

The state branding literature argues that public relations is used by all states to serve different purposes, but always as a tool of enhancing state legitimacy. While there is a well-developed literature on political party advertising, those scholars who study state branding remind us that the advertising of states' behavior between elections is as noteworthy as party advertising during elections. In both cases, the logic of advertising is the same in that it invites a certain associative logic that is both powerful and easy to communicate via television. Kathleen Hall Jamieson argues forcefully that the visual grammar of television is associative and that "a person adept at visualizing claims in dramatic capsules will be able to use television to short-circuit the audience's demand that those claims be dignified with evidence" (Hall Jamieson, 1988, p. 13). In other words, visual claims are more effective than verbal claims at making arguments without evidence. The branded state, with its emphasis on the aesthetic and the politics of the emotion, represents the extension of the triumph of the visual over verbal. Fan notes that: "As there is no tangible offer in a nation brand, its attributes are difficult to define or describe. The only benefits a nation brand could create for its audience are emotional rather than functional" (2005, p. 8).

Advertising may be the most common form of mass persuasion that we come across in our lives. Arguably, it rivals almost all other institutions in terms of influence and pervasiveness. It infuses our habits, customs, and language. It shapes our mores and reinforces class, gender, and racial distinctions. It is one of the first forms of literacy learned by children. Given all this, it is not a surprise that among American children one of the most easily recognized and familiar icons is Joe Camel, a cartoon character designed to sell cigarettes (see *Mangini v. R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Co.*). Gillian Dyer suggests that "it could be argued that advertising nowadays fulfils a function traditionally met by art or religion" (Dyer, 1986, p. 2). For states that want to reach out to disaffected youth, advertising provides a vehicle that is perfect in terms of audience reach but quite imperfect in terms of democratic dialogue. Scammell notes that this exact tactic was used by the government of Margaret Thatcher in trying to "sell" her social policies to the British public. Great effort and a huge amount of public funds were spent by her administration trying to convince voters that her radical policies were having their desired effect; however, the objective facts contradicted the government's public

relations efforts. In this case, advertising arguably became a substitute for policy. Scammell comments that:

Employment expenditure, through the Department of Employment, Manpower Services Commission, and other training agencies, increased as a proportion of the Central Office of Information home spending from about 2 percent in the years 1978–1986 to 26 percent in 1986–1987.... There is no clear correlation between the expenditure and unemployment levels. The 1979–1983 Thatcher government inherited unemployment of some 1.5 million and the number doubled by 1982. The official jobless total stayed at more than 3 million until 1987.... The peaks in employment advertising, the timing of general elections (and the involvement of Saatchi & Saatchi) seem more than mere coincidence, a fact not lost on critics of the government...expenditure before legislation became almost the norm rather than the exception, and the use of costly publicity, especially television and advertising, far more common.... [It became] the “megaphone solution (1995, pp. 208, 230–231).

When applied to the marketing of states, the effect of advertising may be harder to discern but more invidious than the marketing of consumer products. It is harder to discern because there is no “product” to purchase, no way of determining the effectiveness of an advertisement. Our perception of nation-states also prefigures our encounter with any marketing of that nation-state, compounding the difficulty of measuring the effect of the advertising. Indeed, one of the fundamental problems of the effects literature is that it is difficult to disaggregate one’s perception of the product from one’s own preconceptions. Do we think more positively of the British image because of the marketing of “Cool Britannia” or as result of the media coverage of the subject or perhaps as a result of the our own ideas we had about the UK? Kunczik (2003, p. 121) argues that “as a rule, no precise linkage between commissioned [public relations] activities and what appears in the mass media can be traced. Typically, one can do little more than guess at what suggestions were made, which were expected, and how they were implemented. The precise nature of the intervention remains somewhat of a mystery” (2003, p. 121).

BUT DOES IT WORK?

This raises one of the most intractable problems to those researching in this area: How can we assess the effectiveness of marketing and advertising campaigns? While asking whether marketing works might be a reasonable question, answering it is plagued with difficulties. As a form of communication, advertising shapes our sense of values, even if it does not change or affect

buying habits. As Stephen Kline writes, we should see “advertising not as manipulation but as a vehicle for situating...brands within established cultural patterns and ideas” (1993, p. 27). In addition, the grammar of advertising invites a certain way of looking at the world. It does not encourage reflection or deliberation, but rather encourages the application of marketing principles, such as the famous four Ps: product, pricing, promotion, and placement. Paul Rutherford argues that it shouldn’t be a surprise then “that a writer in *Advertising Age* (November 28, 1988) would describe the launch of George Bush as a ‘line extension’ of the presidency of the renowned Ronald Reagan” (2000, p. 6). Moreover, his son George W. Bush has taken state branding to new heights or depressing depths. Bush Jr.’s landing on the deck of the aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln* was not just political theatre. It symbolized the replacement of political leaders for props: the president as a product placed in artfully chosen backgrounds. After September 11, 2001, Bush spoke on Ellis Island in New York, the Statue of Liberty lit up by three barges of giant lights, the kind used to illuminate sports stadiums. While it was he who was speaking, the real subject was the Statue of Liberty and the values that it came to symbolize.

Despite the best effort of public relations and marketing professionals to “spin” their preferred image of a particular nation, such attempts will be undermined if they are not congruent with its target audience’s preexisting impressions, which may have been decades or centuries in the making. The efforts of marketing professionals overemphasize the power of marketing and underestimate the grievances deeply embedded in culture, institutions, and historical memory. To assume that the quick fix of a marketing campaign can change these is just folly.

Fan provides an example of the power of historical memory and the difficult task of changing perceptions about a given nation:

A nation has multiple images. China, for example, could conjure up the images of being the largest country with 1.3 billion people, the Great Wall, giant pandas, kung fu, Made in China, etc. Time seems to be an important factor here in determining people’s perceptions. In spring 2003, China was associated with the SARS epidemic, while in 1989 it was the Tiananmen massacres, but in 2008 it will be the Olympic Games. What image is retrieved depends on the audience and the context. To mention Germany may still bring painful memories to some European countries about the Nazi atrocities. To the Chinese, it is Japan that is associated with the war crimes committed 60 years ago” (Fan, 2005, p. 8).

The impact of years of socialization and the reinforcement of a dominant frame will profoundly affect the symbols that we recall when we think about a state. Repositioning something as complex and, often, contradictory as the image of a nation-state is made even more difficult because of the resistance individuals have to changing long-held perceptions amidst the

cacophony of messages of persuasion coming at them in today's media environment. Kunczik contends that we select those events that reinforce our preconceptions. He provides an example that "in September 1947, a 6-month propaganda campaign to promote the United Nations was begun in Cincinnati (its slogan was 'Peace begins with the United Nations—the United Nations begins with you'). It was largely unsuccessful because those who paid attention to the message were primarily individuals already interested in and informed about the United Nations (2003, p. 119).

THE POWER OF THE LOGO

One of the central features of branding campaigns is to identify the product with a logo. Logos are a pivotal way to reinforce the values of the advertising campaign in one discrete sign. Much of advertising and promotion are attempts to link a symbol to a core value. The Statue of Liberty to freedom, the Mounties to order, and the Berlin Wall to liberation are all examples of iconic symbols standing for political values. The logo then becomes an essential way of tying that value to the symbol. Moreover, in a landscape cluttered with the debris of advertising signs, logos are an important cultural artifact in providing differentiation from other competing modes of identification.

Writing in 1899, Thorstein Veblen in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* coined the phrase "conspicuous consumption" to illustrate how individual worth was measured by our ability to possess or consume. Our involvement in the wider world is through the possessions we own. As a result, we retreat from the public sphere into our own private world where possessions instead of community are what link us to others. Building on the work of C. B. Macpherson, William Leiss in his book *Limits of Satisfaction* suggests that marketing in late capitalism is noteworthy for its fusion of the symbolic and material benefits of goods sold through advertising. As embodied in logos, the symbolic value of SUVs or Nike is far greater than its intrinsic value. Peter Van Ham writes that "British management consultant Peter York has even argued that Nike's 'swooshffitick [*sic*] logo means precisely what the crucifix meant to an earlier generation in ghettos—it promises redemption, vindication, and a way out'" (Van Ham, 2001, p. 2). Of course, those wearing Nike swooshes may not be consciously aware of their deep ideological meanings, but it may nonetheless guide their behavior. Logos thus not only are an economic vehicle but are also important in creating culture. They are an important semiological sign that links the attributes of the product to a value system, creating a shared meaning or code among those who are able to decode the sign.

The logos of nation-states serve the dual purposes of acting as a commercial vehicle to compete in the marketplace of nation-states and also create culture by acting as a condensation symbol for the nation. As such,

logos present themselves as a tool for product differentiation as well as a creator of political culture. It is easy to recognize that states should market tourism, economic development, or lower taxes to lure capital or people. Of the marketing function of the state's logo, Van Ham writes that "branded states depend on trust and customer satisfaction. We talk about a state's personality in the same way we discuss the products we consume, describing it as 'friendly' (i.e., Western-oriented) and 'credible' (ally), or 'aggressive' (expansionist) and 'unreliable' (rogue)" (2001, p. 2). As a vehicle of product differentiation, logos of nation states or any government might be an important part of the state's strategic economic advantage and as a way to market itself to international audiences. An obvious example of this is the French government's strong protection of the champagne trademark. It's not just confined to nation-states. The city of Toronto developed a \$4 million branding strategy designed to "trumpet Toronto's ethnic diversity, imminent expansion of cultural institutions, and trendy new entertainment areas." The rebranding exercise was seen an important way to differentiate it from Vancouver's "spectacular urban setting" and Montreal's "European flavor and year-round festivals" (Lewington, 2004, p. A13).

When logos serve to create culture by acting as a condensation symbol for a nation, city, or state, it should give us reason to pause. Writing of the branding of cities in the Netherlands, Hans Mommaas argues that logos provide "identification, recognition, continuity, and collectivity" (Mommaas, 2002, p. 34). The marketplace for automobiles or fast food is crowded, so the Mercedes logo or golden arches are attempts to sear the brand in the minds of consumers. This is also true of the logos of nation-states. It is almost a cliché to say that globalization has two conflicting tensions, one toward homogenization and the other toward tribalism. Branding fits in perfectly to the era of globalization, which simultaneously favors unrestricted trade as well as differentiation of mass-produced products by branding. What was once a self-evident relationship among place, group, and culture is now fraught with tension. Through the "magic system" of advertising, as Raymond Williams called it, states are attempting to distill the conflicting images and ideas we have of a nation-state into a simple logo.

The problem is that, if successful, the image created by a logo is in some sense a mere simulacrum: a copy of a nonexistent original. Our own ideas about the logo are projected on to it and replace the "product." The product then becomes an adjunct of the logo. Naomi Klein reminds us that this is what happened in the case of Absolut vodka ads, where "its brand was nothing but a blank bottle-shaped space that could be filled with whatever content a particular audience most wanted from its brands" (Klein, 2000). To this, we can add Benetton ads, which feature images of burning cars, refugees, or cargo ships: rhetorical signs far removed from what they signify. Because of laws governing alcohol promotion, beer ads never show anyone drinking beer and often do not even show the product. Rather, the viewer is

invited to make inferences between the images and the logo. The ramifications for vodka, clothing, or beer are one thing, but they are quite another for nation-states. Fan also expresses concern that political leaders are placing greater emphasis on the value of branding their nations than is warranted by the evidence of its success. He states that:

Nation branding has been vaunted as a panacea—something equivalent to a grand national economic development strategy—desperately needed by developing countries. . . . Nation branding is believed to be able to work miracles and solve many of the world's problems, for example, the poverty gap between the North and the South. It is undeniable that branding is an extremely powerful tool, but it is equally important to realize that branding is only one part of a marketing strategy [that] itself is a part of the whole business strategy. Branding will not work if other components of the strategy (finance, R&D, production, distribution) fail to deliver what the customers want. Nation branding is no exception" (Fan, 2005, p. 11).

Nation-states have recently realized this semiotic truth. It's easier to change perceptions than the material conditions of citizens. In Canada, recent efforts at rebranding the Canadian Forces were met by resistance by focus groups who could not reconcile the some recent scandals of the Canadian Forces with their apparently new inclusivity (Aubry, 2003, p. 1). Governments persist in believing that if they are successful in changing public opinion based on a revamped logo, they need not change behavior. A new Hollywood film, produced in association with the White House, is an attempt to show President Bush as a determined and principled leader. Using a medium that has such strong currency among Americans represents the formal merger of Washington's ambitions with the Hollywood entertainment industry (Saunders, 2003, p. 1). While it is now formalized, the link has existed for years. Arnold Schwarzenegger's candidacy for governor of California blurred the line between politics and entertainment. Ronald Reagan's governorship as well as his presidency did the same. Both make politics and show business inseparable by trading on-screen characters to advance political aspirations.

Like the Nike swoosh that transformed a second-tier athletic clothing company to a global colossus, nations are adopting marketing techniques to erase impressions of colonialism, military conquests, even bad food and weather. Great Britain and Poland are two such examples. In what has been described as a "post-political" logo, Poland hired the advertising giant DDB Corporate Profiles to create a new logo for its country. The design is described as

a red-and-white kite whose tail is held by a dancing stick figure that doubles as the K in the word 'Polska.' The Polska lettering is thick,

red, and curvaceous, a nod to the emblem of the Solidarity movement. The red-and-white design on the kite is a four-squared checkered pattern reminiscent of the emblem on Polish warplanes (Boxer, 2002, p. 1).

The logo was an attempt to reposition the Polish brand in the ever-crowded European marketplace. Its traditional emblem, a white eagle, was deemed as too common (Germany, Russia, and the United States all have eagles as their national emblems). The kite logo tried to break the connotation of Poland from its military past and rebrand the nation as a peaceful, cosmopolitan, and modern. According to the focus groups conducted by DDB Corporate Profiles, among the negative connotations of Poland were words such as gray, cold, vodka, poor, white, unsmiling, friendly, sad, boring, hard-living, fast-driving, car stealing, argumentative, chauvinistic, chaotic, and anti-Semitic (Boxer, 2002).

While the jury is still out on the verdict over the success of Poland's rebranding, the British excursion into the world of branding suggests that it might work in the short term, but our perceptions persist long after the campaign is over. Wolff Olins, a British marketing company, was hired by Tony Blair's government in 1998 to rebrand the UK. Focus groups had reported that the "product" of the UK was associated with "imperialism in many parts of the world" (Wolff Olins Web site, 2004). While the logo of the Union Jack was widely known, it too was seen as quaint and strongly associated with the brand's other adjuncts: the royal family, rain, and bad food. Wolff Olins suggested that Great Britain "could seem like a more hip and happening place if it erased the "Great" from its name and ditched the Union Jack" (Boxer, 2002, p. 1). The British think tank Demos, in an important document that influenced the Blair government's thinking on branding, argued that the UK brand had six core values: institutions, empire, industry and language, culture, religion, and sport (Leonard, 1997, pp. 21–26). These ought to form the core of any newly branded Britain. The result was the "Cool Britannia" campaign that included a radically changed British Airways livery, a pop version of "God Save the Queen," and a campaign that targeted international media. The latter yielded a *Newsweek* cover story that declared London as "the coolest city on the planet." The attention this overt campaign received in the press might suggest some immediate success, but public opinion polls tell a different story. A survey conducted in 1999 and 2000 of young opinion-leaders in 28 countries found little change in the perception of Britain as a result of the branding effort. Their description of Britain as "weak on creativity and innovation, not to mention class-ridden, racist, and cold" (*Economist*, 2002, p. 31) suggests that a failure of the Cool Britannia campaign to change any core values. Further studies by the UK polling firm MORI and the British Council have echoed this, finding that "attempts to change Britain's image have not so far succeeded" and "there is a general ignorance and vagueness about Britain and what it is like" (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2000, p. 63).

The failure of the Cool Britannia campaign offers an important lesson for all branding exercises. Branding, like advertising, cannot work in opposition to strongly felt preexisting beliefs. The campaign failed because it did not represent the reality of modern Britain and seemed implausible to outsiders looking in. More troubling is that this branding exercise offered little to those who wish to change the material conditions that underlie Britain. The *Economist* had this blunt assessment: “So unless the government can concoct a new image that accurately reflects the best of modern Britain, its rebranding campaign will achieve little more than lining the pockets of the advertising and public relations industry” (*Economist*, 1997, p. 43).

The reluctance of political leaders to tackle structural problems in the economic and social spheres and, instead, to opt for superficial, cosmetic, and symbolic “changes” via branding has been observed by other authors. Fan (2005, p. 11) cites the apparent success and the necessary underlying factors that were already in place of the Spanish government’s attempt to change its nation’s brand image, as evidence of the need to view economic/social reform and the branding of a nation as two inextricably linked processes. He argues that:

To the proponents of nation branding, Spain has provided a most successful example of rebranding a nation. However, this is a kind of misunderstanding. The change in the national image of Spain is the result of fundamental changes in its political, economic, and social systems [that] have taken place over the past 20 years or so, not the result of some wishful campaigns in nation branding. Branding might have played a role in the transformation, but its importance should not be exaggerated. In contrast, Zimbabwe is a country with rich tourist resources, but under the tyranny of the current regime the country is unable to exploit these market opportunities. Before political reform takes place there is no role for nation branding.

BRANDING THE UNITED STATES: THE FACE OF NEW PROPAGANDA

The gap between public opinion attitudes toward the state and the manufactured image of the state can often be too large to be closed by any state branding exercise. Perhaps nowhere was this more clear than in recent rebranding efforts of the United States, where a Sisyphean marketing challenge was given to Charlotte Beers, the first U.S. undersecretary of state for public diplomacy, whose job was to “shape effective messages explaining US policies in new and ongoing issues” (U.S. Department of State Web site, 2003). She was hired just days after the US invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001 and given an unprecedented amount of money—over half a billion dollars in 2002—for selling America and its values to the Muslim world in

particular (Beers, 2002). She has described the United State as a “beautiful brand” and television as a “fast delivery system” for the American government’s message (McKenna, 2003, p. 2). Examining its failure might provide some insight into why state branding is likely to be not successful.

Many of the techniques used are not more evolved than the propaganda attempts of 60 years ago. Efforts in Afghanistan such as dropping pamphlets that show women being beaten by the Taliban or distributing radios that are only able to receive Voice of America have failed miserably (see Leonard, 2002, p. 48). Crude tag lines on the pamphlets such as “Is this the future you want for your women and your children?” did not resonate with an audience whose primary concerns lay elsewhere. Others—such as the \$15 million Shared Values campaign, featuring Muslims talking in glowing terms about their life in the United States—were quietly and quickly scrapped by the State Department (McKenna, 2003, p. 2). The goal of the Shared Values campaign was to use advertising to make the argument that the US was a misunderstood place. The radio, print, and television ads showed Muslims of all ages extolling the virtues of living in the United States. One ad showed a young Lebanese-born woman with her three smiling children at a school softball game saying, “I didn’t see any prejudice anywhere in my neighborhood after September 11” (Perlez, 2002, p. A1). Designed to be broadcast in a number of Islamic countries, the US government found them rejected by nations that would not accept paid programming from a foreign country. The campaign was decried as being “Muslim as apple pie” by some who thought it did not respond to the perceived problems in US policies but merely papered them over with ads. In Indonesia, an ally in the “war on terror” and one of the few Islamic nations that has shown support of US policies, the ads were seen as not “relevant to Muslim’s concerns” (Murphy, 2003). While perhaps not directly attributable to the ad campaign, the percentage of Muslims there who view the US favorably has fallen from 75 percent in 1999 to 61 percent in 2002, according to a US Department of State/PEW poll (Murphy, 2003).

Some of this failure might be a result of attempting to reach the wrong audience with the wrong vehicle. As the Cool Britannia campaign showed, one cannot radically transform impressions of nation-states through branding exercises. In the case of the US branding exercise, the target audience is the “non-elite” 15- to 59-year-olds (Perlez, 2002, p. A1) rather than elite opinion leaders, and the vehicle was advertisements, something with which Charlotte Beers, a former ad executive, had some familiarity. The range of opinion among this group, it is fair to say, must be quite broad, and any single advertisement will not resonate with the entire cohort. The diversity of beliefs among target audiences is captured by John and Nicholas O’Shaughnessy, who write that “it is not easy for a nation, as opposed to a brand of product, to have a consistent persona because a nation is such a constellation of different images” (O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy, 2000, p. 60). There are few comparisons in commercial marketing where the audience is as

amorphous and heterogeneous, as in state branding. Advertising requires a knowledge of the target demographic as well as repetition of a plausible message. The early efforts from the Office of Public Diplomacy did not seem to pay heed to either of these basic rules.

A further reason to explain the failure of US efforts might be attributed to the difficulty of creating new ideas rather than managing existing ones. Peter Van Ham writes that

Brand management involves the process of cautious, often measured supervision of existing perceptions. In this sense the USA is considered a 'corporate brand,' since the USA (or 'America') is not *itself* the primary brand, but the manager of a series of related subbrands (its art, sports, media and technology, as well as its foreign policy) (2003, p. 433, emphasis in original).

What this suggests is that the branding campaign of the US government failed because it did not manage existing perceptions but attempted to change them by changing the perceptions of the state. As Van Ham notes, one's perception of 'Brand USA' is inextricably linked to what he calls the subbrands: the things around which we form our opinions. Nation-states wish to change the corporate brand, but our affective orientation to nation-states is linked as much to the substantive manifestations of that brand: its cultural products like film, media, art, and sport. To put it in the marketing parlance of John and Nicholas O'Shaughnessy, "It is too difficult to put across a positive image of a nation that emotionally resonates with the consumer sufficiently to affect behavior over the whole range of a nation's products" (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2000, p. 63). In Australia, a branding campaign failed because of the inability of any one marketing exercise to reconcile the diverse and competing images of that country. One study of this campaign found that for it "to make sense, there must be some agreement among the people of Australian as to an Australian identity. One can question whether such an agreement exists" (Fischer and Byron, 1997, p. 95).

Another reason to explain the failure of branding exercises has to do with the role of the mass media. The literature on branding has yet to take into account the influence of the mass media to shape and condition the effectiveness of branding campaigns. Like other aspects of political communication such as advertising or political debates, we need to understand the influence of the mass media to filter and interpret the messages of government. The meaning of political ads, electoral debates, and even branding cannot be separated from the way in which the media frame them. For example, viewers' perception of debates changes after the mass media have interpreted the debate. While citizens may not dramatically shift their beliefs as a result of the media after a debate, the media can play an important role among those whose support is soft or whose opinions are wavering (see Lanoue and

Schrott, 1991). The power of the media to frame the issue is well-known to those who study political ads and campaign communication. It is the reason that political parties employ spin doctors post-debate or as advertising campaigns roll out. The same logic holds true for branding exercises: The success or failure of a branding campaign is in part dependent on the way in which the mass media have framed it. Cynicism among the media about the motive of government seems to be sufficiently high that it is difficult to find a laudatory news story of any branding campaign. This cynicism seems to be warranted if one looks at the behavior of the president of the Czechoslovakian National Council, who issued his country's declaration of independence on a Sunday for public relations reasons: Sunday was a slow news day, so it would get more space in the world's newspapers (Kunczik, 2003, p. 120).

Branding is not always about using government-sponsored advertising or public relations. Often branding uses the tools of culture to persuade. While dropping leaflets may prove to be ineffective, one of the most successful humanitarian operations in Afghanistan was UNICEF's inoculation program, which relied on using popular culture. Disseminating the importance of inoculations through an Afghan soap opera on the BBC's Pashtun service allowed 7 million children to be treated in 3 weeks (Teicholz, 2002). Less successful was the American internal branding exercise. The US Army's "Taking It to the Streets" is an attempt to market the US army as a cool consumer choice. Unlike the American government's external marketing campaign, which was more like old-fashioned propaganda, "Taking It to the Streets" was more of an attempt to use youth culture as moral suasion. Its hip-hop-flavored campaign complete with brightly painted Hummers and contests that test potential recruits' ability to climb up rock walls and shoot baskets markets the army as an adjunct to lifestyle choices. Roving recruitment vehicles that make customized dog tags connect hip-hop and urban culture to the Army's recruitment goal of 100,000 enlistees (Joiner, 2003). Competing with the blizzard of images and messages that the average young person will see in a day demands that a variety of communication channels be employed. Interactive Web sites, video games, and music and clothing all help create a connection so that, in the words of the Army's ad agency, "they're able to see the brand in a different light, as cool" (Joiner, 2003). These efforts may have only reinforced the notion that poor, black inner-city kids are the labor source for American Army's interventions abroad and draw attention to larger problems that plague the Army. The different results in the US government's Afghanistan campaign and its Army recruitment campaign might be explained by the different motivations of the audiences. Perhaps using culture for branding exercises will work more effectively if audiences have a reason to heed the message and if the appeal is to the motivations of the audience instead of trying to win them over through arguments.

The US Army's efforts suggest that state marketing is so pervasive that in some cases they cannot be distinguished from the culture of which they are

part. The result is a commodification of citizenship and a reinforcement of a shallow nationalism. It is difficult in some cases to see the line between commercial advertising and state marketing. The \$5 million Canadian government ad campaign for the 1992 Winter Olympics had the tag line "Our athletes, the pride of a nation," which was not too different from Roots, the clothing company that outfitted the Canadian Olympic team that year. Roots used pride to sell clothing. The government used Canadian pride to sell its version of nationalism.

OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLES?

Is state branding a new innovation or does it represent an evolution of what states have always done? One could argue that the marketing of states merely represents the application of new technologies to the very old function of public diplomacy. States have always sought comparative advantage, and the marketplace of capitalism is the latest venue for this to occur. If this is the case, we need not fear the effect of branding. On the other hand are observers who are critical of the penetration of marketing and politics. They argue that while states have always marketed themselves in some ways, the pervasiveness of the marketing suggests a new partnership between government and economic interests embodied by advertising firms and public relations professionals. The relationship has altered not only *how* states communicate but *what* they communicate (see Rose and Kiss, 2005).

Peter Van Ham argues that the branding of states is a development to be embraced. He suggests that "states that lack the relevant brand equity will not survive" (2001, p. 5). It is precisely because the consumer marketplace is so crowded that states must adopt the language of advertising and promotion in order to engage the public in the dominant language of the day. Moreover, Van Ham suggests that state branding enables nations to create a benign campaign that lacks the virulence of deeply rooted nationalism and that marketing campaigns will gradually supplant nationalism. Going further, he argues that "by marginalizing nationalist chauvinism, the brand state is contributing to the further pacification of Europe."

Pippa Norris (2000) is more sanguine about the novelty of the increased presence of image consultants in the political process. About election campaigns, she contends that they "have been transformed by these [technological] changes in the news industry and also by the widespread adoption of professional marketing. As with developments in the media, new forms of electioneering essentially supplement, rather than replace, older techniques" (Norris, 2000, p. 312).

Van Ham's benign view of marketing (not to mention nationalism) needs be examined closely. One need only see the ferocity of consumer marketing campaigns to realize that, like nationalism, they too can have virulent

strains. Moreover, Van Ham's claims miss two fundamental problems of marketing states like soda. First, governments that engage in marketing are saying that they are more interested in changing public opinion than the foundation on which that opinion rests. Why change the economic conditions of citizens if you need only change their perceptions of economic conditions? Branding campaigns, such as the US marketing campaign in Afghanistan, respond to public opinion instead of seeking to understand the basis of those opinions. To put it another way, Americans are not changing their beliefs and attitudes in response to low public levels of public support by Muslims. Rather, they are attempting to shift the frame by which Muslims see Americans. In this sense, it can be seen as a conservative development, one that sees exhortation replace action.

The futility of such an attempt to substitute branding and repositioning as substitutes for effective policy making is echoed by Fan, who reminds us that "no matter how clever and appealing a marketing campaign is, major policy changes (actions not sound bites) are needed to change people's perceptions, and this may take many years" (Fan, 2005, p. 12).

A second, more significant reason to be cautious of Van Ham's embrace of state marketing can be found in the writings of Jurgen Habermas. Habermas, in his influential work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, suggested that a democratic polity required a vibrant public space, and without it the state was not accountable. State branding contributes to this erosion of the public sphere. Habermas writes that the

public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules (Habermas, 1989, p. 27).

The medium of this public debate was reason. Habermas had unwavering faith in the need and ability of the public to engage in reason. "Rational faculty was to be realized in rational communication," he argued. State "publicity," as Habermas called it, was antithetical to reason as it relied on "the secret chanceries of the prince" (1989, p. 35).

For Habermas, the marketing of states further contributes to the collapse of the public sphere and the demise of rationality in public discourse. The transformation of the public sphere into a medium of advertising was aided by the commercialization of the press (1989, p. 189). "Private enterprises evoke in their customers the idea that in their consumption decisions they act in their capacity as citizens, the state has to 'address' its citizens like consumers." This is at odds with some authors like Dick Pels, who argues that this trend creates "greater information density that that has enhanced the capacity for judgment of the average citizen" (2003, p. 60).

The branding of nation-states may not be a new development of statecraft, but it is troubling for a number of reasons. First, the sophisticated techniques of states create inferences and deductions based on the power of the visual. As with political party ads, associative logic may be at odds with the verbal logic of the ad. By using the techniques of commercial advertising, states are appropriating the grammar of commercial ads and applying them to objects that are public. Second, the fact that opinion management lends itself to speaking at citizens rather than engaging them in dialogue means that the critical rationalism so revered by Habermas is marginalized.

This latter point has the most implications for a vibrant democracy. Meaningful public participation is dependent on the free flow of information that creates an informed and deliberative engagement. Bennett and Manheim (2001) discuss the contrary impulse of our modern democratic dialogue:

Information is typically publicized to mobilize and demobilize segments of the public to serve narrow strategic objectives, often masking the identity or intent of the communicator in the process. . . . Indeed, the very transformation of publics into exclusive target audiences is a blow to the democratic ideal of publics as inclusive deliberative bodies (Bennett and Manheim, 2001, p. 280).

Third, state branding may be a proxy for public policy as exhortation replacing or obviating substantive public policy. The state becomes less about the welfare of its citizens and more about the management of the brand. Finally, this development furthers the perception that politics is about posturing and hype: a development that can only harden cynicism toward politics. Why participate if the government is not listening and if the stakes do not matter? The persistence and growth of this new development may help explain why levels of public trust have fallen and, more ominously, may further the perception of citizen as consumer and government as conduits for consumption.

Historically, the categories of citizen and consumer have been seen as opposites. To be a consumer was to engage in private choice and individualism dictated by markets. Citizenship, however, has been about the provision of collective goods and individuals engaged in the *res publica* working toward a collective effort. Recently, these two terms have become conflated. The ascendance of state branding represents one consequence of that. In this sense, branding is seen as the tip of that very large iceberg that sees a “consumer citizen” (Scammell, 2003, p. 131) as a replacement for citizens. This article has tried to demonstrate that state branding is not confined to governments either on the right or left but are endemic to a broad ideological range of governments. It is doubtful whether state branding is effective, but its recent pervasiveness suggests a new way of doing politics.

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