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**Jessica Gienow-Hecht. "Nation Branding: A Useful Category for International History."** *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 30:4 (Winter 2019): 755-779. DOI: <https://10.1080/09592296.2019.1671000>.

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This article provides an excellent one-stop-shop for international and diplomatic historians who are seeking to get their teeth into one of the ubiquitous practices of contemporary statecraft -- nation branding -- and challenges them to consider its implications for their own work. Its author, Jessica Gienow-Hecht, is an acclaimed scholar of transnational cultural history. This article stands as a challenge for scholars to actively consider the history of the whole process by which nation states have sought to enhance their position in the world by managing or developing international perceptions of themselves.

This article is significant not merely in its content but simply in its existence in print. While the term 'nation branding' is widely used by governments, it has had a rough ride in intellectual circles beyond scholars of marketing and communication. Historians and international relations scholars have thus far applied it only in context, as a way into talking about the preoccupations of the neo-liberal state post-Cold War. Gienow-Hecht herself notes that Simon Anholt, who coined the term in the 1990s, has distanced himself from the concept and now looks on it rather as Victor Frankenstein looked on his monster.<sup>1</sup> The dominant reaction of scholars is even less subtle. Scholars in critical cultural studies see the reduction of the nation state to a set of slogans and logos as an excess of post-modern spin. Melissa Aronczyk's study *Branding the Nation* is a sustained attack on a class of image makers for hire.<sup>2</sup> The repulsion at the idea of applying a vulgar commercial concept like branding to something as nuanced and valued as national image may be deduced from the trajectory of this piece. That a think piece like this should appear some years after the anthology of essays by scholars taking a first swipe at the task of historicizing nation branding in her co-edited volume *Nation Branding in Modern History* suggests a rough ride road to publication.<sup>3</sup> With this in mind, I not only welcome the publication of this insightful piece and applaud the editors and peer reviewers of *Diplomacy and Statecraft* but wholeheartedly align myself with its proposed course of action: a program of scholarship to better understand how nations have sought to project their national identities to the rest of the world in the full sweep of international history.

Gienow-Hecht begins with core definitions and a potted history of the emergence of nation brands as a unit of analysis and of nation branding as practice in the post-Cold War era. She points to the post-Margaret Thatcher UK as the point of emergence, and to the post-Communist states, which were eager to re-introduce themselves to the world, as the key market in which the practice developed. Her core contention is that nation branding actually describes an older practice and in the

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Anholt discusses his relationship with the idea at length in Simon Anholt, *The Good Country Equation: How We Can Repair the World in One Generation*. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Melissa Aronczyk, *Branding the Nation: The Global Business of National Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Carolin Viktorin, Jessica Gienow-Hecht, Annika Estner, and Marcel Will, eds., *Nation Branding in Modern History* (New York: Berghan, 2018).

body of her essay she considers a number of excellent examples. Her cases include early modern Prussia ostentatiously welcoming Protestant refugees in the 1740s and the young American Republic sending Benjamin Franklin to Paris. Gienow-Hecht notes that Franklin played up some frontier aspects of American life in order to draw the French eye, dressing in the kind of hat now associated with frontiersman Davy Crockett to contrast himself with the elegant Parisians. She also discusses the role of Jan Paderewski – the great pianist – in developing an image for Poland at a time when the country was divided between German and Russian Empires. It was an exercise which helped to make Polish independence a success at the end of the Great War. This history has a bearing on the best-known case of national image management, that of the Cold War United States. Gienow-Hecht points out that the U.S. Cold War case is, actually, a late entrant rather than a point of origin of the branded state.

Perhaps the most significant historical analysis in this piece is the portion dealing with the development of the German image. Gienow-Hecht pays particular attention to the role of universities in the process and the German government's cultivation – to use another term in vogue in policy circles – of its soft power. This should come as a moment of 'Oedipal' self-recognition of the part of North American scholars in the story. We exist in institutions profoundly shaped by this German outreach. Gienow-Hecht has a special authority on these issues, and the article may be seen as an outgrowth of her book *Sound Diplomacy* – but the history of the German brand is significant above all because the German brand is presently acknowledged in polling to be the world's strongest.

Yet the existence of a strong brand does not necessarily indicate a strong nation-branding campaign. Germany is again an important case in point. It is successful because of a sustained reality rather than a campaign of claims. For much of the last half of the twentieth century Germany was shy of even the most innocuous branding work and invested only in the politically buffered activities of its Goethe Institute, Deutsche Welle radio and academic exchange. The key point in the emergence of Germany's strong brand seems to trace back to the moment around 1900 when a small group of influential Germans who dubbed themselves the *Werkbund* decided to present the country in terms of excellence in design and manufacture. In doing so they were able to appeal to an ancient image of German technical skill rooted in memories of the Mediaeval guilds and also to deliver a reality in the terms of sustained innovative and high-quality output from manufacturers whose work became legendary – Bosch, Benz and so forth – through to today. What is especially interesting in the German case is the way in which, once established, the positive stereotype of German efficiency could provide a level of insulation from the reputational damage of World War Two. The Third Reich was a sin, but the west understood it as sin committed with dreadful efficiency, well-designed weapons, and a fiendish logic that was foiled only through extraordinary efforts. No serious historian would endorse a notion of Nazi efficiency – quite the opposite – but what is that compared to the judgement of received wisdom?

Welcome and comprehensive as this piece is, there are necessarily omissions, and it is the role of a review to tease these out. Gienow-Hecht herself notes that her focus on the eighteenth century and after (and rhetorically on the last century) does a disservice to even deeper historical roots. She nods to the characters that I myself have argued were pioneers of the practice – Erik the Red, naming Greenland and William the Silent writing his multi-lingual Apologia to the outside world, justifying the revolt of the Netherlands against the rule of Spain. To me, one fascinating element in William's campaign to establish an image for the Netherlands is the happy coincidence that his noble house – Orange – sounded like the name of the fruit and the associated vivid color and that hence a basket of abstract political positions associated with him – Protestant, bourgeois, entrepreneurial – were linked simultaneously with a piece of real estate – the Netherlands – and a color. The Chinese Communists may sing that the East is Red but Holland was Orange first.<sup>4</sup> I agree with Gienow-Hecht that it would be fascinating to know what detailed precedents Mediaeval and Classical scholars see, beyond the vignette that pops up in most textbooks on propaganda before the authors launch into the propaganda-rich twentieth century. I only hope some such scholars get a look at *Diplomacy and Statecraft* or H-Diplo.

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<sup>4</sup> My own treatment of Nation Brands may be found in Nicholas J. Cull, *Public Diplomacy: Foundations for Global Engagement in the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), chapter 7.

A further limit in this piece is that it focuses on the development and management of reputation at a national level. Gienow-Hecht opens the issue of branding at the imperial or regional bloc level, but what of the local? The practice is now widely described in the marketplace as ‘place and nation branding.’ This is done for commercial reasons, as there are less than 200 possible clients to hire consultants at the national level but many more opportunities among places: cities, regions, provinces, alliances, and even transnational regions which are being recognized as entities. A good example of the latter is the area now called ‘Great Copenhagen’ which incorporates Malmö in Sweden. But more than this, cities and regions are plainly important presences in the imaginations of audiences around the world and, moreover, when examined across the scope of time proposed by Gienow-Hecht, are important building blocks of a composite national identity, as is the case with Paris as a component of the brand of France. One task for the proposed field should be to consider whether the strength of city or regional identities can play out as an inhibitor on the national brand. Italy at the time of the Risorgimento would be an interesting case in point. In a similar vein it is interesting to consider whether the actors – like the People’s Republic of China – who have encouraged very little regional or civic distinctiveness within their favored external national image may be missing an opportunity. As strength is not necessarily admired, nations which are understood as an assemblage of many interesting places within a loose national structure do better in the Anholt Nation Brands Index than the places that emphasize national coherence and strength externally.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps this is just another luxury of the old, stable Great Powers.

Gienow-Hecht emphasizes that national brands are connected to the emotions of audiences. It is important to remember that emotions can be negative as well as positive. Part of an understanding of how branding has worked across time would need to include an examination of the demonization of particular nations, or the tarring of states as the ‘sick men’ of their region. Both China and Turkey are currently engaged in massive efforts of external image management seeking to counter the damage of weakness a century ago, which included weakness of reputation as well as reality. Today’s recent contributions to the field include the coining of the term ‘brandjacking’ by the Israeli communications and international relations scholar Eytan Gilboa, who notes that an unlucky nation state can find its image-making in the hands of hostile parties who are bent on accentuating the negative for their own ends. He offers Israel as a case in point.<sup>6</sup>

My final response to Gienow-Hecht’s proposal is to further extend it by challenging scholars to consider what the promulgation of a historical brand added to the nation. Does a known and relevant brand augment the security of a nation? What is important is not simply what is presented as an external image, why it is presented, or even the process by which aspects of an identity that are incorporated as an international actor develop. Such things are fascinating, revealing, and worthy of study, but in the last analysis we need to understand the extent to which a good reputation enhances the security of a nation, and the degree to which a damaged or under-developed reputation is a tangible liability. To this end I have argued that beyond soft power and nation branding, states and scholars need to consider Reputational Security, that category of security that comes from a good reputation.<sup>7</sup> To turn to specific examples: the failure of interwar Czechoslovakia or post-Cold War Ukraine to develop good reputations (or to exist as brands) in the imagination of potential protectors and those protector’s societies is part of the reason that they were vulnerable to their neighbors. Exploring these moments of the failure and the moments of strength and survival is an essential part of any systematic intellectual project. Similarly, taking Gilboa’s notion of ‘brandjacking,’ it would be interesting to know of previous examples of this kind of loss of narrative control; its consequences and any previous remedies. I believe that the greatest degree of reputational security for a nation is found in a ‘brand’ that is not merely self-serving (the distinctive state that looks after its own) but which emphasizes cooperation with others and collaboration for a collective good. In our current era of global pandemics it would be a fine way forward. Perhaps there are historical lessons that point in this same direction.

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<sup>5</sup> For a summary of the most recent Anholt index see <https://www.ipsos.com/en/nation-brand-index-2020>.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Snow and Nicholas J. Cull, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2020), 331-341.

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas J. Cull, “Tightrope to Tomorrow: Reputational Security, Collective Vision and the Future of Public Diplomacy,” *Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 14:1-2 (2019): 21-35.

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