



Banal Nationalism, National Anthems, and Peace

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The most recent report of the Global Peace Index (GPI) notes that global peace has remained relatively stable since the last report, but has declined over the past eight years, indicating that the world has become less peaceful. This index is produced by the Institute for Economics and Peace. It is the single most comprehensive index on the level of peace by country. Data on the peacefulness of countries has been collected since 2007. It uses 23 indicators to compose its country by country score. The higher the peace score the less peaceful a country is considered, the lower the peace score the more peaceful.

Some findings offer in-depth explanations about the GPI scores given to countries. One such study by Joshua Hall and Robert Lawson found a linkage between economic freedom and the GPI score, with higher economic freedom leading to lower GPI scores, signifying that they are more peaceful. Another study by Ronald Fischer and Katja Hanke found a linkage between three explanations using societal values as a measure of the peace score. The variables that were considered explanatory of the score both positively and negatively were: harmony with nature, that is, a lack of willingness to change the environment around them; an endorsement of hierarchy as it relates to authority and power; and an acceptance of diverse opinions (intellectual autonomy). These studies provide interesting insights into those values and systemic arrangements that contribute to national peacefulness, but the importance of national symbols in encouraging peacefulness is one understudied contributing factor.

It has rarely been discussed in the literature that national symbols could actually encourage a less peaceful society. The modern-day nation-state has replaced other forms of identity as an increasingly important avenue of self-identification. The national narratives of these states inspire and inform those that consider themselves members of that state. A glorification of conflict and violence by these states through their symbols could be an important signal of ethos for those who strongly identify with the nation.

For example, some have considered the connections between warlike symbols and warlike behavior to be very real, such as the United States Peace Memorial Foundation. This foundation is working to build a U.S. Peace Memorial in Washington, D.C. and to publish a U.S. Peace Registry to try to emphasize the importance of peace. This non-profit is concerned with the over-emphasis of war in U.S. symbols, particularly in memorials found in the capital. In an effort to celebrate peace, the non-profit hopes to send clear symbolic messages to the American citizenry that peace is an acceptable alternative to war and should be equally glorified.

The banal nationalism theory, first theorized by Michael Billig, helps to explain the phenomenon of the non-conscious impact of these symbols on individuals and society as a whole. The theory suggests that national symbols represent group membership, and have a unique influence on both an individual's psychological and a society's social processes. The impact of these national symbols may be a tighter conceptualization of insiders and outsiders. As explained by David Butz, "The consideration that national symbols impact individuals' psychological responses in a variety of ways—by increasing some forms of national identification, satisfying fundamental social belongingness needs, and promoting unified responses—suggests that the nation itself may be transformed through widespread exposure to national symbols."

Although the theory does rely on a top-down impact of symbols, it does not conceptualize the individual as entirely passive in how s/he receives and interprets the symbol. The symbol is taken as one of several impacting institutions on individuals. Although these symbols might be transmitted by the state or the elites, the acceptance of these symbols and their intended meaning is still dependent on the populace as a whole. This would indicate a reciprocal relationship between symbol production and symbol acceptance.

Banal nationalism is juxtaposed to "hot nationalism" because it involves national symbols of the state being displayed or presented in a fashion that allows a more passive comprehension of the symbol and its impact. Hot nationalism is apparent during times of nationalist fervor particularly when there is war and social upheaval in which national identity is actively maintained in response to a threat. The centrality of symbols in the political realm, whether banal or hot, are a hallmark of modern countries. The concern over national symbols and the nation has been undertaken by such intellectual heavy weights as Émile Durkheim. The uses of those symbols have a heavy impact on the society.

One national symbol that is highly salient is the national anthem. In many countries the national anthem is sung at important events necessitating homage to the state. For example, in the United States it necessitates standing, removing the hat, facing the flag, and putting one's hand over the heart.

Many people cry when it is sung at events because it symbolizes internalized national identities that have deep emotional meaning.

National anthems are meant to unify a people under one banner. They use patriotic language in a way that invokes emotions and ties to a nation through references to a national narrative including, for example, national symbols and a founding event. The nation's identity and character are represented by the anthem, which transcends the citizens of the country. According to Igor Cusack they "are also known as national hymns, praise-songs not necessarily to God but to the nation, often treated as some kind of lesser god, certainly a sacred entity."

When the audience at a sporting event stands for the national anthem, for example, they are part of a much larger process than simply paying their respect to the nation. They are forging communal bonds with those around them. The past, present, and future are suddenly laid out before the attendees, and a renewed vigor of nationalism is ignited. N.A. Soboleva adds that, "its words are, as a rule, glorifying the state and reflecting the philosophical and spiritual attitudes of that state's society."

Countries may have stumbled upon anthems as a result of history in a rather naturalistic fashion. They may have also spent a significant amount of time forging an anthem. The amount of thought that has poured into the construction of a national anthem can be seen in the history of Russia, which has changed its anthem more than any other country in the world.

The importance of those anthems has not been lost since the adoption of the anthem by countries since the early nineteenth century. The value of these anthems have even prompted some countries such as the Philippines to pass laws that punish citizens for misusing the national anthem. Although in Western countries there is no real punishment for misusing the anthem, there is public ostracism.

Despite these sentiments, not everyone feels the same way about the national anthem. For example, Avi Gilboa and Ehud Bodner found that minorities/out-groups either experience negative attitudes, or they are indifferent to the anthem. Similarly, one college in northern Indiana, Goshen College, has refused for years to play the national anthem at sporting events due to the anthem's references to war.

The power of national anthems to unite or divide a nation means that they are a part of a powerful societal force. For instance, West Germany struggled for years to define a new anthem because of its inability to use the former anthem due to its association with Nazi Germany. The Qing dynasty of China, the last Confucian dynasty, attempted to release an anthem that did not resonate with the Chinese people, and caused further dismay with traditional Chinese rule.

Banal nationalism theory suggests that the language of the national anthem can impact attitudes on peace. For instance, if a country's anthem glorifies war, then people in that country may be more inclined to approve of war. It could be stated that subconscious symbolization impacts citizen sentiments toward war and violence. There is also a counterargument that these symbols were produced by people in this society and are complementary to their individual ideas and inspirations. This is the reciprocal relationship of these symbols that Billig recognizes, which is a challenge in determining whether these symbols impact individuals in a society, or if they are simply illustrations of the ethos in this society.

Also unknown is the level of indoctrination found in each country due to its particular anthem. For instance, in the United States two-thirds of Americans do not know the national anthem according to a Harris poll. The national anthem is only sung at sporting events or other high profile events. This is different in other countries where school children sing it every week and at multiple occasions. In some countries, such as Columbia, it is even played regularly on the radio.

Butz provides some future directions on research in this area by asking: what are the roles of these symbols in conflict? As reported earlier, national symbols can define more tightly who are insiders and who are outsiders. They can also determine a general ethic of a country where socially acceptable attitudes and behaviors are formed. These can help determine what is right or wrong and could influence public attitudes toward certain options.

National anthems are diverse in their approaches to war and peace. For example, Albania's national anthem stresses the need to struggle and to die a martyr, while Senegal's national anthem stresses the need to put away the sword and to seek peace. Albania's national anthem states, "With weapons in our hands a-brandished, we will defend our fatherland," while Senegal's national anthem states, "We will be stern without hatred, and with open arms."

National anthems around the world have more references to war/conflict than to peace. Twenty-eight national anthems have some sort of violent reference within their text somewhere. The dominance of national anthems with violent/aggressive wordage within their text is indicative of the form that characterizes these types of national symbols and the focus on struggle and fighting as an embodiment of the national character.

Billig notes the importance of recognizing U.S. expenditures on war and the "sociological and psychological bases" of it. This would apply to any nation. The sociological/psychological base of it could be the impact of national symbols on individual conceptions of the nation. These conceptions are not necessarily linear, but as Butz found, banal nationalism has a very real impact on individuals.

It might be advisable for the nations of the world to revisit these symbols and rewrite them to emphasize peace over conflict. Even if the empirical connection is tenuous and difficult to prove, the symbolic importance of a state that emphasizes peace over conflict is an important move and signal to citizens of the country as well as out-groups. This is not an erasure of the history of the nation, but it is a rewriting of those values that the nation cherishes of which one of these values for global harmony should be peaceful coexistence.

There are regular complaints that the world's religions have verses within their holy texts that encourage conflict; however, there are also emphases within those same texts to encourage peace. Many of the national anthems, for example, exclusively praise and encourage conflict without a single mention of peace. This could delegitimize those citizens who encourage peace within those contexts, especially among those citizens who heavily identify with the state, that is, with nationalists. The power of the national symbols on citizen consciousness could encourage people to praise conflict over peace.

The importance of national symbols in creating social cohesion cannot be overlooked. N. Clark Capshaw noted that there are three sources of social cohesion. The first is the government institutions themselves. The second is the actual actions taken by the government in a society. The third is the use of government symbols. It might be advisable to create this social cohesion through symbols of peace and coexistence. For example, the anthem in Senegal states, "The Bantu is our brother, the Arab, and the White man too." This is a good example of an anthem that is celebrating diversity within its country and creating social cohesion. Senegal is in the top 50 countries for peacefulness as of 2015 according to the GPI.

There are a lot of causal factors that lead to more or less peacefulness in the nations of the world. For example, Colombia, which has had one of the highest GPI scores, has a weak central state that has allowed autonomy throughout the country to cause havoc. Another cause is the creation and sale of drugs. The drug trade in Colombia and the attempts at ending it both domestically by the Colombian government and internationally by the United States has led to much violence. There are also problems of deep divides between classes there. Many might scoff at an enterprise to encourage peace in Colombia through national symbols such as the national anthem when problems of inequalities, weak government control, and the drug trade can be blamed for most of the violence. Even if the effort appears marginal based on the banal nationalism theory, it cannot hurt in helping to heal the nation along with other initiatives to promote peace.

Further research in peace studies needs to explore how national symbols impact attitudes toward peace. This is an understudied area in the field that needs more development. A conclusive body of research can encourage nations to adopt peaceful national symbols as an aspect of concerted policy

moves toward a peaceful society. A before and after study of a nation that changes its symbols to encourage more peaceful attitudes would also aid in understanding this potential dynamic. At this moment these ideas remain largely theoretical.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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