

Est.  
1841

YORK  
ST JOHN  
UNIVERSITY

Gibson, Stephen ORCID:

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5648-7669> (2015) Banal nationalism, postmodernism and capitalism: Revisiting Billig's critique of Rorty. In: Tileagă, Cristian and Stokoe, Elizabeth, (eds.) Discursive Psychology: Classic and Contemporary Issues. Abingdon, Routledge, pp. 289-302

Downloaded from: <http://ray.yorks.ac.uk/id/eprint/1205/>

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If you intend to cite from the work you are advised to consult the publisher's version:

<https://www.routledge.com/products/9780415721608>

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form. Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms governing individual outputs. [Institutional Repository Policy Statement](#)

# RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at [ray@yorks.ac.uk](mailto:ray@yorks.ac.uk)

*Banal nationalism, postmodernism and capitalism: Revisiting Billig's critique of Rorty.*

Stephen Gibson (York St John University)

## **Introduction**

Michael Billig's 'Nationalism and Richard Rorty: The text as a flag for *Pax Americana*', published in *New Left Review* in 1993, will be familiar to most readers as the final substantive chapter in *Banal Nationalism* (Billig 1995a), in which it was re-titled, 'Philosophy as a flag for the *Pax Americana*'. Indeed, the arguments presented in the *New Left Review* article are inseparable from the broader banal nationalism thesis, and their influence can only be understood in this context. In the present chapter, my focus will thus be on the version of the critical engagement with Rorty presented in *Banal Nationalism*, rather than in *New Left Review*. There is a further advantage to this focus, and one that will become apparent as my argument develops. The modifications that Billig made to the argument presented in *Banal nationalism* included a discussion of a then-recent *New York Times* article by Rorty (1994), published after Billig's (1993) article in *New Left Review*. Rorty's (1994) article is significant in marking a shift on his part towards a more explicit engagement with themes of patriotism and national pride than had previously been the case, and I will suggest that this can be seen as a precursor to his subsequent development of his ideas on these themes in his later volume *Achieving our Country* (Rorty 1998).

In what follows, I will begin by outlining the general thesis of *Banal Nationalism* and some critical reactions to it, before moving on to spend the majority of the chapter considering Billig's specific critique of Rorty, and Rorty's development of a more explicit set of arguments concerning national pride in *Achieving our Country*. It will be shown that Rorty's celebration of national pride is accompanied by an acceptance of capitalism as essentially inevitable, or at least as being something that is beyond 'realistic' challenge. In

this respect, Billig's argument concerning the banality of the world of nations can be extended to encompass the banal acceptance of the world of capital. I will subsequently link some of these ideas to Billig's (2012, 2013) more recent writing in which he has addressed what has been termed 'academic capitalism' – the acceptance of market values into the academy. More broadly, I will suggest that engagement with ideological themes such as these constitute an important current in an expanded discursive psychology. Billig's recent work has identified a trend towards a narrowing of focus in academia, and if there is a wider lesson for discursive psychology to be drawn from his critique of Rorty – as from so much of Billig's work – it is that it would benefit from a broadening of purview, rather than an increasing narrowness in its focus.

### ***Banal Nationalism***

Billig's (1995a) central contention in *Banal Nationalism* was that social scientists have concentrated on the periodic outbursts of nationalism ('hot' nationalism), and have neglected the more routine, taken-for-granted nationalism that reproduces extant nation-states and the broader world-of-nations as natural and inevitable ('banal' nationalism). Billig traced the operation of banal nationalism in a number of directions, identifying the way in which a distinction can be drawn between patriotism and nationalism such that 'our' national sentiment can be construed as a healthy patriotic spirit, whereas the national sentiment of others can be treated as dangerous nationalism. Billig notes how national flags hanging limply from public buildings are typically not consciously noticed by people going about their daily business, but that these flags nevertheless work as an implicit reminder of the nation. Billig uses the idea of 'flagging' as a metaphor for other occasions when banal reminders of nationhood are served in the course of everyday life. Because these reminders are not consciously noticed, however, the reminding is not experienced as a reminding. In

this respect, banal nationalism involves a complex dynamic of remembering and forgetting. The constant flagging ensures that we remember our status as nationals, and the place of ‘our’ nation in the world of nations, but this remembering is itself forgotten, leaving the impression that nations are natural and inevitable features of the world. A particularly important form of flagging is in the use of deixical referents – ‘little words’ such as *we, us, them, our, here* – which can be used to tacitly flag the nation as the relevant frame for discussion of some issue, event or phenomena. Billig demonstrated the presence of such deixical referents across a number of contexts, and notably undertook an exploratory ‘day survey’ of British ‘national’ newspapers to highlight the extent to which banal nationalist assumptions were built into their content and structure. For example, Billig noted how references to *the* weather or *the* economy typically assume a national frame without explicitly specifying it as such.

In outlining this thesis, Billig was concerned with the specificities of nationhood. In drawing attention to the shortcomings of general social psychological theories of identity, Billig stressed that ‘the historical particularities of nationalism, and its links with the world of nation-states, tend to be overlooked, if national ‘identity’ is considered as functionally equivalent with any other type of ‘identity’ (1995a: 65; see also Billig 1996). This echoed concerns raised some years previously by Tajfel (1970), who criticised the triviality of theories which seek only generality for its own sake. According to Tajfel, ‘[i]t is this triviality that presents perhaps the most intractable problem for the “universal” theories: when dealing with concrete cultural or social reality, they explain very little and predict nothing’ (1970: 122). Moreover, Tajfel (1960: 846), argued that a social psychology of nationalism needed to be able to account for why ‘[w]e do not expect a doctor to be ready to die for the British Medical Association; but we are not surprised if someone says: “I am willing to die for my country”.’ This concern to account for the extent to which nationalism has constituted the legitimating ideology behind countless deaths is clearly present from the outset of *Banal*

*Nationalism*, the opening line of which reads, ‘All societies that maintain armies maintain the belief that some things are more valuable than life itself’ (1995a: 1). For Billig, then, as for Tajfel before him, nationalism is a topic worthy of social psychological attention in its own right.

### **Critical reaction to *Banal Nationalism***

*Banal nationalism* has been hugely influential across the social sciences. As Skey (2009: 333) has noted, it ‘led the way in marking something of a shift in focus as research began to move away from the more macro-scale theorising on nationalism to more empirical-based studies, that focused on issues of representation, contestation and localised meaning-making as well as more contextualized case studies.’ It is in this respect that *Banal Nationalism* can be understood as applying the spirit of the social scientific ‘turn to language’ to the subject of nationalism.

There is insufficient space in a single chapter to review all the reactions to, and extensions of, Billig’s thesis, and as such my focus here will, of necessity, be highly selective. I will focus in particular on two criticisms: first, that Billig underestimated the role of contestation; and second, that Billig overstated the extent to which certain entities might be said to be ‘national’.

### *Contestation*

Reicher, Hopkins and Condor (1997) echoed Billig’s (1995a) call for a focus on the specificity of national categories, but suggested that taken-for-granted status is not something specific to nations. Other categories, such as ‘race’, can be understood in similar terms. If banality is therefore not a distinguishing feature of nationalism per se, then ‘it is necessary to consider when and why our everyday concerns are structured in national rather than other

terms' (Reicher et al. 1997: 77). Reicher et al. argued that this poses particular problems for Billig's approach:

His analysis concerns the way in which people are textually addressed in ways that presuppose a national dimension, but the question of how text relates to understanding and action is not spelt out. Is it that people are simply interpellated in an Althusserian sense? [footnote omitted] This would seem unlikely, since elsewhere (for instance in *Arguing and Thinking*) Billig is concerned to challenge the notion of human beings as automatons and to accord people agency. Nonetheless, in the absence of an explicit position to the contrary, Billig can be seen as eliding media texts with human consciousness.

(Reicher et al. 1997: 77-8)

This anticipates criticisms made elsewhere (e.g. Skey 2009; Reicher & Hopkins 2001), that Billig underestimated the role of contestation in relation to nationalism. As Reicher et al. note, this is all the more striking given Billig's (1987, 1991; Billig et al. 1988) development of a theoretical perspective which places rhetoric at the heart of social and psychological life. However, in a discussion of the contributions that might be made by rhetorical psychology to the study of social movements, Billig (1995b) did make it clear that the banal acceptance of the world of nations was not something that should be taken to imply that counter-argument was impossible. In drawing attention to the importance of exploring not only that which is the subject for explicit argumentation, he also drew attention to silencing, suggesting that despite nationhood presently being seen 'to be as natural as rivers and mountain ranges', alternatives are possible: 'As sleeping monsters within today's thoughts, they wait to be freshly awakened by a social movement of the future' (Billig 1995b: 80). More recently, Billig (2009) has responded to this criticism by developing more explicitly the extent to which *Banal Nationalism* should be understood in conjunction with his earlier work. Moreover, his

subsequent work – particularly his re-casting of Freudian repression as a fundamentally rhetorical act (Billig 1999) – addresses the issue of how, precisely, the same rhetorical perspective can be used to explore that which is left unsaid as much as it can be used to explore that which is the subject of overt argumentation.

*The status of the ‘national’*

Rather than being an end-point of analysis, Billig (1995a: 175) emphasised that ‘There is much systematic, empirical work to be done.’ Subsequent research has indeed begun to expand on Billig’s initial analysis, and in this respect one of the most striking modifications to the banal nationalism thesis concerns the status of those entities presumed to be ‘national’.

In a series of papers, Rosie, MacInnes, Petersoo, Condor and Kennedy (2004; MacInnes et al. 2007; Rosie et al. 2006; see also Skey 2009) have argued that Billig’s relatively straightforward assertion of the existence of a British ‘national’ press is problematic in the face of the variety of media within a state such as the United Kingdom. For example, most ‘national’ newspapers published in London have separate editions for Scotland featuring some modification in content. Similarly, some newspapers aimed at a Scottish readership position themselves specifically as Scottish national newspapers, and even apparently self-evidently regional newspapers can on occasion adopt the language of nationhood, such as the *Yorkshire Post*, which describes itself as ‘Yorkshire’s national newspaper’ (MacInnes et al. 2007). In a slightly different vein, the extent to which *readers* may conceive of their location in the world in purely national terms can be questioned: ‘We do not know how far they imagine themselves as members of a community of ‘English’. ‘Scottish’ or ‘British’ readers, nor whether they see the latter as national’ (Rosie et al. 2004: 454-5).

In responding to these critiques, Billig (2009) has acknowledged that his initial day survey oversimplified the ‘national’ dynamics of the UK. But this issue may extend beyond the ‘national’ press. The work of Condor and her colleagues (e.g. Abell, Condor & Stevenson 2006; Condor 1996, 2000, 2006, 2011; Condor & Abell 2006) on the ways in which ordinary people in England and Scotland understand themselves (or not) in ‘national’ terms has highlighted the utility of conceiving of both the banality of ‘national’ referents, and the very status of these referents as ‘national’, as being social accomplishments, ‘the outcome of a socially distributed process of meaning-construction’ (Condor 2000: 199-200). In this respect, Condor points to the importance of contextualising any study of banal nationalism in a close analysis of participant understandings of the entities to which they refer. Thus, analysts are enjoined to be cautious about imposing ‘nationalised’ readings of deictical referents just because these seem most appropriate *to the analyst*, and to be cautious about attributing ‘national’ status to an entity, such as ‘Britain’, when it is not immediately apparent that participants themselves share that understanding.

Condor’s work represents the most detailed and systematic attempt to study the ‘national’ commonsense of ordinary social actors, and in this respect the context of the UK has provided a particularly fruitful setting for the expansion of Billig’s original thesis. Yet Billig (2009) has recently noted that little further work has scrutinized the nationalism of the USA, which took such a central role in his initial formulation of banal nationalism. Arguably, it is in his critique of Rorty that Billig outlines the particular problems of US nationalism most fully. The next section of the present chapter will thus be concerned with re-visiting Billig’s critique of Rorty, and extending it in light of Rorty’s subsequent volume, *Achieving our Country*.



### Billig's critique of Rorty

Thus far, I have neglected one important aspect of the banal nationalism thesis. Billig (1995a) was not concerned simply to identify banal nationalism in the everyday lives of ordinary social actors, the speeches of political leaders and the pages of 'national' newspapers; at the heart of Billig's thesis was the banal nationalism of academic theories themselves. *Banal Nationalism* appeared at a time when many theorists were suggesting that nationalism was a declining force. Billig challenged such arguments, and showed how they often implicitly took for granted the world of nations. He drew attention to the ways in which banal nationalist assumptions can be identified in the work of several influential scholars, and took particular issue with postmodern approaches which pointed to the emergence of a more fluid 'identity politics' at the expense of national identities. Most notably in this respect, his critique of Rorty challenged one of the doyens of postmodern philosophy. The positioning of this critique as the final chapter of *Banal Nationalism* is thus significant. Placing *Pax* in the context of the broader thesis of banal nationalism enables an appreciation of its status as a culmination of the arguments developed in the book.

Billig (1995a: 157) cited Terry Eagleton's damning indictment of Rorty's philosophy as suggesting a world in which 'the intellectuals will be 'ironists', practising a suitably cavalier, laid-back attitude to their beliefs, while the masses ... will continue to salute the flag and take life seriously'. Billig took issue with this description, suggesting that flag-waving can be found in Rorty's work, and indeed he goes on to discuss a then recent article in the *New York Times* in which Rorty (1994) explicitly advocated the need for greater patriotism. Moreover, Billig subsequently traced the links between Rorty's call for (US) patriotism and his formal philosophical writings.

Billig noted that the first person plural (*we, us, our*) takes centre-stage in Rorty's philosophy. Rorty's rejection of universal conceptions of morality leads him to locate the

appropriate grounding for moral judgements in the somewhat vague notion of the community: “the core meaning of ‘immoral action’ is ‘the sort of thing that *we* don’t do”” (Rorty, cited in Billig, 1995a: 162; emphasis in [Rorty’s] original).

In outlining Rorty’s advocacy of a limited form of ethnocentrism, Billig draws attention to the implicit universality of Rorty’s claims – in effect, humans are inevitably ethnocentric, but we have a choice concerning the form that this ethnocentrism takes. Billig shows how Rorty’s ‘admitted ethnocentrism (which simultaneously is a subtly denied ethnocentrism) enables ‘us’ to praise ‘ourselves’, and to condemn ‘others’. Given that ‘we’ all have to be ethnocentric, then ‘we’ are the best of ethnocentrics’ (Billig 1995a: 164). As Billig puts it, Rorty’s position boils down to the assertion that, “‘We’ can be proud of ‘ourselves’, because ‘we’ are not the sort of people to be proud of ‘ourselves’” (165). But precisely who ‘we’ are in Rorty’s texts varies widely, and is sometimes left completely unspecified.

Drawing on ideas discussed in previous chapters of *Banal Nationalism*, Billig argues that attention to deixical referents can be particularly illuminating as they are frequently used for ‘presenting sectional interests as if they were universal ones’ (1995a: 166). Billig refers to this as the syntax of hegemony – the way in which the objectives of the powerful can be elided with those of collectives of which an individual speaker or writer claims membership. Often, Rorty construes the ‘we’ to whom ‘we’ should be loyal as ‘our’ society. However, Billig notes that – as is the case with many other philosophers and social scientists – Rorty tends to neglect the extent to which ‘society’ is typically used to mean nation-state. In doing so, Rorty advocates the virtues of a liberal or progressive view of ‘society’, and indeed in advocating the location of morality in ‘our society’ Rorty is thereby according the nation-state a particularly central role in his philosophy.

Crucially, however, the story does not end there. The tendency towards universalism in Rorty's writings means that the liberal view of 'society' is not simply conceived as one amongst many, but as a view that others are exhorted to share. The vaguely bounded 'we' gives way to broader 'we's as Rorty recommends this position to all, seeing 'the history of humanity ... as the gradual spread of certain virtues typical to the democratic West' (Rorty, cited in Billig 1995a: 172).

### **Achieving our country: From banal nationalism to enthusiastic flag-waving**

As Billig observes, 'There is one identity largely absent in Rorty's philosophical 'we's, but hugely foregrounded in his *New York Times* article: a national identity' (Billig 1995a: 167). It thus requires a detailed and scholarly analysis by Billig to draw out the banal assumptions of Rorty's texts. However, it appears that the *New York Times* article was not simply an anomaly, but was something of a foreshadowing of what was to come. Shortly after the publication of *Banal Nationalism*, Rorty (1998) expanded on his call for US patriotism in his brief volume *Achieving our Country*. Even a cursory examination of *Achieving our Country* suggests that by this point, Rorty had not only begun to notice the unwaved flags, but to wave them fervently himself. In contrast to the texts scrutinized by Billig, references to 'we Americans' (e.g. 1998: 13, 22, 28, 48, 91, 97, 106) are not infrequent, and there is a clear and unambiguous defence of the virtues of national pride from the outset. *Achieving our Country* does not, therefore, require the same forensic level of scholarly analysis to unpack the nationalist assumptions at its heart – these are now foregrounded. However, the particular arguments that Rorty advances are worthy of closer scrutiny for they reveal interesting further assumptions about the nature of nations, nationalism and national pride. Moreover, in this extended exposition of his views on national pride, Rorty engages in detailed critique of leftist intellectuals who he holds

responsible for a decline in the acceptability of US national pride. When we consider these arguments, the central place of capitalism in Rorty's injunction to national pride is unmistakable. This allows us to draw out one frequently neglected aspect of the banal nationalism thesis: the specifically US form of banal nationalism that so concerned Billig is inextricably bound up with a related set of banal assumptions about the inevitability of capitalism. Such assumptions can be identified in a range of settings, including – as Billig has himself pointed out recently – in academia.

### *Rorty and capitalism*

The anti-Marxist position articulated in the *New York Times* article analysed by Billig is extended in *Achieving our Country*. In developing the distinction between the reformist left and the new left, Rorty argues that:

‘For us Americans, it is important not to let Marxism influence the story we tell about our own Left. We should repudiate the Marxists’ insinuation that only those who are convinced capitalism must be overthrown can count as leftists, and that everybody else is a wimpy liberal, a self-deceiving bourgeois reformer’ (Rorty 1998: 42).

This is striking insofar as Rorty is not simply arguing against Marxism, or explaining that Marxism was wrong. He is arguing that it is important ‘for us Americans’ not to be influenced by Marxism. As ever with such formulations, it is possible to ask what this implies for those who are not ‘us’. Presumably, it is less important for an unspecified ‘them’ who are not ‘us’ to be influenced by Marxism. Quite simply, this echoes a long-standing political, academic and popular tradition which construes Marxism as ‘un-American’.

Rorty's national pride is, in an important sense, tied to his commitment to pragmatism – he acknowledges at the outset of *Achieving our Country* that the ultimate goal should indeed be a post-nation-state world, but suggests that such a world is simply not presently

feasible. Arguing for the necessity of emotional involvement in one's country, he suggests that:

The need for this sort of involvement remains even for those who, like myself, hope that the United States of America will someday yield up sovereignty to what Tennyson called "the Parliament of Man, the Federation of the World." For such a federation will never come into existence unless the governments of the individual nation-states cooperate in setting it up, and unless the citizens of those nation-states take a certain amount of pride (even rueful and hesitant pride) in their governments' efforts to do so.

(Rorty 1998: 3)

He nevertheless goes on to criticise those on what he terms 'the cultural Left' who have become deeply suspicious of American national pride, suggesting that 'The current leftist habit of taking the long view and looking beyond nationhood to a global polity is as useless as was faith in Marx's philosophy of history' (Rorty 1998: 98). Rorty is particularly critical of what he sees as a preoccupation with philosophizing and theorizing, suggesting that much of what passes for the intellectual left consists of debates so abstracted from everyday concerns as to be of no practical use in achieving political change. And yet when Rorty explains why, despite the myriad imperfections of America, the nation-state represents the best available option for political progress, things get even more curious:

We were supposed to love our country because it showed promise of being kinder and more generous than other countries. As the blacks and gays, among others, were well aware, this was a counsel of perfection rather than description of fact. But you cannot urge national political renewal on the basis of descriptions of fact. You have to describe the country in terms of what you passionately hope it will become, as well as in terms of what you know it to be now. You have to be loyal to a dream country

rather than to the one to which you wake up every morning. Unless such loyalty exists, the ideal has no chance of becoming actual.

(Rorty 1998: 101)

There is thus a distinction between the hopes of those who recognise the problems of America and hope to ‘achieve our country’, and those who recognise the same problems but hope to achieve a post-national world. The former – including Rorty – are to be commended for sensibly engaging in the realm of practical politics, while the latter are to be castigated for an idealistic refusal to live in the real world. But why? Rorty points to the present inability to imagine alternatives to the world of nation-states, and links this explicitly to an inability to imagine alternatives to capitalism. The cultural Left, according to Rorty (1998: 102), has adopted ‘ideals which nobody is yet able to imagine being actualized’, not least amongst which is ‘the end of capitalism’ (*ibid.*). Rorty is scathing of the inability of the cultural Left to offer concrete alternatives (‘what this new thing will be, nobody knows’; 1998: 103), arguing that the ‘insouciant use of terms like “late capitalism” suggests that we can just wait for capitalism to collapse, rather than figuring out what, in the absence of markets, will set prices and regulate distribution’ (103-4). In the absence of a proper alternative to capitalism, Rorty’s advice is that:

the Left should get back into the business of piecemeal reform within the framework of a market economy. ... Someday, perhaps, cumulative piecemeal reform will be found to have brought about revolutionary change. Such reforms might someday produce a presently unimaginable nonmarket economy, and much more widely distributed powers of decisionmaking. They might also, given similar reforms in other countries, bring about an international federation, a world government. ... But in the meantime, we should not let the abstractly described best be the enemy of the better. We should not let speculation about a totally changed system, and a totally different

way of thinking about human life and human affairs, replace step-by-step reform of the system we presently have.

(Rorty 1998: 105)

This is a classically pragmatist position, pointing to the dangers of grand theory and abstract philosophy, and arguing that we should work within the here and now. The appeal of such arguments can be understood in part as a function of their status as a rhetorical bottom-line: get real, says the pragmatist, we'd all like a better world, but we have to work with what we've got. In this respect, we have the arch anti-foundationalist resorting to a realist line of argument in order to argue for the Left to work within the status quo – a status quo which takes for granted American national pride and capitalism even as it maintains an abstract commitment to – at some unspecified point in the future – replacing them with something better. But this unspecified commitment – the vague hope that piecemeal reform might lead to a nonmarket economy in a post-national world – is no more clearly articulated than in the doctrines of the cultural Left dismissed by Rorty. And here's the rub: Rorty's pragmatic philosophy is essentially a philosophy of defeat – a philosophy (or perhaps that should be an anti-philosophy) which accepts that the hopes of a genuinely radical alternative to the capitalist doctrine enshrined in the contemporary USA are misplaced.

Such arguments begin to move us some distance from contemporary discursive psychology as typically understood. For many discursive psychologists, engagement with broad ideological themes takes second place to the close analysis of talk and text. Yet it is not to deny the value of the latter to suggest that the former should retain its place at the heart of any discursive psychology. At the present time, the dangers of neglecting ideology are particularly notable for critical scholars, and in this respect it is worth considering the links between banal nationalism, discursive psychology and the bizarre capitalistic logic currently to be found at the heart of academic life.

### **Academic capitalism and discursive psychology**

Rorty's exhortation to leftists to 'get real' and work within capitalism is in itself hardly novel – it is a familiar refrain these days as the business model and its associated creed of managerialism finds its way into more and more corners of social and economic life which might once have been seen as necessitating a quite different form of organization. As has been widely debated in recent times, one such area is academia itself. In some of his recent writings, Billig has drawn attention to the pernicious effects of academic capitalism, and in reflecting on the conditions which gave rise to his seminal *Arguing and thinking*, has discussed the political climate in which it was written:

*Arguing and thinking* was written when an ideologically driven, right-wing Conservative government was explicitly seeking to control British universities under its free-market economic policies, imposing its philosophy of academic capitalism on higher education. The government's message was that if the universities wished to compete for public funds then they would have to demonstrate their economic usefulness; if not, the weak would fall by the wayside. Learning was not to be valued for its own sake, but if anything had value it should be seen to be useful, especially economically useful. Usefulness could, in their philosophy, be economically computed. To reject computational models of the mind, which viewed humans as machines, and 'to make antiquarian play' was, according to the author, 'to show the old Protagorean "spirit of contradiction"' (Billig, 1987, p. 8). Thus, in wandering about the library reading all but forgotten texts from the past, the author was deliberately turning his back on the politically driven demands of the present.

(Billig 2012: 418)



For Rorty, no doubt such an approach would be foolish in the extreme. Rejecting academic convention in order to make a political point would beg the question, ‘but what has this rejection achieved?’ Despite Billig’s own modesty concerning his work, it would not be difficult to point to a number of ‘objective’ indicators of its success: citation counts, academic awards, keynote presentations, and indeed the selection of Billig’s work for comment and discussion in volumes such as the present one and Antaki and Condor’s (2014) recent *festschrift*. But to do this unthinkingly, as a matter of course, as the way that one demonstrates academic ‘impact’ these days, is to accept the rules of the game as defined within precisely those ideologies which we seek to challenge (Billig, 2013). Of course, the vast majority of academics have to play by these rules to a certain extent to remain in gainful employment – and it would be disingenuous of me to suggest that I didn’t engage in these language games myself when the occasion demanded<sup>1</sup> – but if we allow ourselves to come to believe that this is anything other than a game designed by those who would re-model academia according to the business approach, we are in danger of forgetting what academia should be. As Reicher (2011: 394) has argued, ‘The whole point of Universities is to encourage a long-term perspective. It is to do what private enterprise militates against, which is to look beyond the immediate future (where estimates of gain and loss can be made and reasonable investment risks can be entertained) and start on interesting paths without knowing where they might ultimately lead.’

As Billig (2012) notes, the pressures on academics in the present political climate are towards unthinking and uncritical action. In the United Kingdom, the requirement to demonstrate the ‘impact’ of one’s work beyond the academy has recently been elevated to a key position in decision making processes for the allocation of public funds for academic research. Such an approach encourages short-termism with research increasingly oriented towards producing small-scale ‘impact’ in the very near future, without challenging broader

systems, tending to take priority. This makes the production of genuinely original and path-breaking work much less likely. As Reicher (2011: 394) has argued, ‘Such achievements might be rare, but an academic culture that makes them impossible (or even harder) is ultimately self-defeating’. Moreover, ‘nationalist’<sup>ii</sup> assumptions lie at the heart of this issue. The UK’s Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) – responsible for distributing a large proportion of UK social science research funding – includes as part of its definition of impact the idea of ‘fostering global economic performance, and specifically the economic competitiveness of the United Kingdom’ (ESRC 2014). The prioritization of the UK is unmistakable, but so is the foregrounding of ‘economic competitiveness’ and ‘performance’. The world of bounded states is also a world of capitalist economics. This has specific implications for discursive psychology:

If I look towards the future, I do not dream of an expanded, technically improved discursive psychology, especially one that can prove its usefulness to a right-wing administration that is even more ideologically committed to making higher education entrepreneurial than was the Conservative administration of the late 1980s.

(Billig 2012: 422-3)

Billig’s contention is that some forms of discursive psychology have become conventionalized, and that where once there was radical critique, there is now a risk of political quietude. Rather than set up an academic island, separated from the social scientific mainland as experimental social psychology has done, Billig enjoins us to roam beyond the immediate confines of our increasingly small specialisms. Clearly, the conditions of present-day academia militate against this, and this is why those conditions must themselves be subject to our critical gaze. In engaging critically with major currents in social theory and philosophy, *Banal Nationalism* shows not only that it is *possible* to venture outside of the confines of one’s own immediate academic specialism, but that it is *vital* to do so. If *Banal*

*Nationalism* constitutes one of the most compelling analyses of nationalism in recent times, in the critique of Rorty it also points the way to an analysis of the capitalist assumptions underpinning much of contemporary life. Only a few years after the near collapse of the capitalist system that has formed a central component of ‘the gradual spread of certain virtues typical to the democratic West’ (Rorty, cited in Billig 1995a: 172), it may be worth asking the question why the embedding of market values across a wide spectrum of systems and activities continues apace, and how the assumptions underpinning this process have come to be built into the fabric of reality, ‘as natural as rivers and mountain ranges’ (Billig 1995b: 80).

*References*

- Abell, J. Condor, S., and Stevenson, C. (2006) “‘We are an island’”: Geographical imagery in accounts of citizenship, civil society, and national identity in Scotland and in England’, *Political Psychology*, 27: 207-226.
- Antaki, C. and Condor, S. (eds) (2014) *Rhetoric, Ideology and Social Psychology: Essays in Honour of Michael Billig*, Hove: Routledge.
- Billig, M. (1987) *Arguing and Thinking: A Rhetorical Approach to Social Psychology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Billig, M. (1991) *Ideology and Opinions*, London: Sage.
- Billig, M. (1993) ‘Nationalism and Richard Rorty: The text as a flag for *Pax Americana*’, *New Left Review*, 1/202: 69-83.
- Billig, M. (1995a) *Banal Nationalism*, London: Sage.
- Billig, M. (1995b) ‘Rhetorical psychology, ideological thinking, and imagining nationhood’, in B. Klandermans and H. Johnston (eds) *Social Movements and Culture*, London: UCL Press.
- Billig, M. (1996) ‘Remembering the particular background of social identity theory’, in W. P. Robinson (ed.) *Social Groups and Identities: Developing the Legacy of Henri Tajfel*, Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Billig, M. (1999) *Freudian Repression: Conversation Creating the Unconscious*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Billig, M. (2009) ‘Reflecting on a critical engagement with banal nationalism – reply to Skey’, *The Sociological Review*, 57: 347-352.
- Billig, M. (2012) ‘Undisciplined beginnings, academic success, and discursive psychology’, *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 51: 413-424.

- Billig, M. (2013) *Learn to Write Badly: How to Succeed in the Social Sciences*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Billig, M., Condor, S., Edwards, D., Gane, M., Middleton, D. and Radley, A. (1988) *Ideological Dilemmas: A Social Psychology of Everyday Thinking*, London: Sage.
- Condor, S. (1996) 'Unimagined community? Some social psychological issues concerning English national identity', in G. Breakwell and E. Lyons (eds), *Changing European Identities*, London: Butterworth Heinemann.
- Condor, S. (2000) 'Pride and prejudice: Identity management in English people's talk about 'this country'', *Discourse & Society*, 11: 175-205.
- Condor, S. (2006) 'Temporality and collectivity: Diversity, history and the rhetorical construction of national entitativity', *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 45: 657–682.
- Condor, S. (2011) 'Sense and sensibility: The conversational etiquette of English national self-identification', in A. Aughey and C. Berberich (eds) *These Englands: A Conversation on Identity*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Condor, S. and Abell, J. (2006) 'Vernacular accounts of 'national identity' in post-devolution Scotland and England', in J. Wilson and K. Stapleton (eds) *Devolution and Identity*, Aldershot: Ashgate.
- ESRC (2014) *What is Impact?* Available HTTP <<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/impact-toolkit/what-how-and-why/what-is-research-impact.aspx>> (accessed 5 June 2014).
- MacInnes, J., Rosie, M., Petersoo, P., Condor, S. and Kennedy, J. (2007) 'Where is the British national press?', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 58: 187-206.
- Reicher, S. (2011) 'Promoting a culture of innovation: BJSP and the emergence of new paradigms in social psychology', *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 50: 391-398.

- Reicher, S. and Hopkins, N. (2001) *Self and Nation*, London: Sage.
- Reicher, S., Hopkins, N. and Condor, S. (1997) 'The lost nation of psychology', in C. C. Barfoot (ed.) *Beyond Pug's Tour: National and Ethnic Stereotyping in Theory and Literary Practice*, Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Rorty, R. (1994) The unpatriotic academy. *The New York Times*, 13 February. Available HTTP: <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/02/13/opinion/the-unpatriotic-academy.html> (accessed 6 June 2014).
- Rorty, R. (1998) *Achieving our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rosie, M., MacInnes, J., Petersoo, P., Condor, S. and Kennedy, J. (2004) 'Nation speaking unto nation? Newspapers and national identity in the devolved UK', *The Sociological Review*, 52: 437-458.
- Rosie, M., Petersoo, P., MacInnes, J., Condor, S. and Kennedy, J. (2006) 'Mediating which nation? Citizenship and national identities in the British press', *Social Semiotics*, 16: 327-344.
- Skey, M. (2009) 'The national in everyday life: A critical engagement with Michael Billig's thesis of *Banal Nationalism*', *The Sociological Review*, 57: 331-346.
- Tajfel, H. (1960) 'Nationalism in the modern world: The nation and the individual', *The Listener*, 63, no. 1624: 846-847.
- Tajfel, H. (1970) 'Aspects of national and ethnic loyalty', *Social Science Information*, 9: 119-144.

---

<sup>i</sup> To paraphrase Billig (2013: 155-6), we are all knob heads now.

<sup>ii</sup> The scare quotes here are in acknowledgement of the problematically 'national' status of the UK (see the discussion of Condor's work above).