

Fusing Aesthetics with Ideology: Some Observations on Place Branding as a Historical Practice

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Abstract

Tobias Rupprecht examines nation and place branding as historical practices through which states and political entities have shaped international perceptions and domestic identities. Drawing on the contributions to this special issue, which cover the Soviet Union, Turkey, Japan, Europe, North Korea, and Catalonia, he argues that branding extends beyond commercial marketing to constitute a mechanism of political legitimacy, soft power, and collective self-representation. Across liberal and authoritarian regimes, political actors have fused aesthetics with ideology, using architecture, music, technology, sport, and spectacle to associate themselves with modernity, progress, and civilization. Such practices operated simultaneously outwardly and inwardly: they sought international recognition while encouraging citizens to internalize particular narratives of national identity and political order. The cases also expose contradictions between projected ideals and political realities, including colonialism, repression, and exclusion. Viewed historically, nation branding thus illuminates how political communities construct legitimacy by translating abstract ideological claims into recognizable, emotionally resonant images and experiences.

Keywords: Branding, nationalism, national identity, cultural diplomacy, soft power

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The concept of branding has its origins in a literal mark of ownership: the branding iron used to identify cattle or enslaved people as property. Over time, it evolved into a means of establishing trust and familiarity in commercial goods, a symbolic guarantee of quality and consistency. In modern capitalist economies, brands also became cultural signifiers, projecting not only product reliability but also lifestyle, aspiration, and belonging. Recently, ‘branding’ has also become an analytical term to assess politics of states and regions seeking to shape global perceptions and domestic cohesion through strategic image-making. Nation branding, in this sense, leaves behind its associations with property and commerce, describes such efforts to manage the ways in which a country is seen both abroad and at home.

Examples abound of how countries have become brands, although most commonly this still refers to commercial uses of national identity tropes. Swiss producers adorn their goods with their red-and-white flag, which evokes precision and reliability. ‘Made in Germany’, once a warning label for cheap imports into free-trade Britain, has become a label of industrial excellence. Even the imitation of national brands – faux-Italian food labels and restaurants, pseudo-French and German products in Russian supermarkets, or, lately, Dubai chocolate and Palestine Coke produced around the world – demonstrates the power of nationhood as a marketable identity.

The contributors to the discussion in this issue move beyond such commercialised uses of national symbols. Their concern lies with how ‘branding’ can also be applied as an analytical category to discuss political practices of shaping both international legitimacy and domestic self-understanding. They see nation and place branding as the strategic production of meaning through which states or other political entities project curated images of themselves. Like a consumer brand, a nation’s image must inspire recognition, trust, and emotional investment. But rather than driving profit, it seeks to secure political authority, international influence, and internal unity. The practice operates in two arenas: the international, where states compete for prestige, investment, and soft power; and the domestic, where citizens internalise the nation’s projected image as part of their own identity.

Externally, nation or place branding functions as a diplomacy of appearance. It associates the nation with the values of modernity, progress, and legitimacy through cultural and technological display. For such branding to succeed, it must resonate authentically with both global audiences and the domestic self-image. It requires not only persuasive communication but also consistent policies and credible symbols that align perception with political purpose. Internally, branding works as a mirror of belonging, teaching citizens to view themselves through the imagined eyes of the world. It forges collective identity by narrating shared histories and aspirations.

This duality of outward projection and inward reflection reveals the profound sociocultural

nature of nation and place branding. It is not merely a tool of marketing but a mechanism of governance and imagination. As the contributions show, both liberal and illiberal regimes of the twentieth century have used branding to reconcile political authority with the moral language of progress.

Across the modern era, states have sought to control the international gaze by projecting themselves as modern, rational, and civilised. The Soviet Union, as Rósa Magnúsdóttir shows, offers an early and striking example. From the 1930s onward, it used cultural diplomacy and choreographed spectacles to present socialism as a humane and technologically advanced alternative to capitalism. Guided tours of model farms, factories, and cities exposed visitors to idealised visions of equality and industrial achievement. These performances created a moral dichotomy, pitching socialist virtue against capitalist decadence, while asserting the USSR's claim to global leadership. The branding of Soviet modernity blurred the line between propaganda and diplomacy, relying on emotion, experience, and aesthetics rather than persuasion alone.

A similar strategy informed Turkey's diplomatic branding under Atatürk. Lesar Yurtsever reminds us of the fascinating story of how, in Washington, during the 1930s and 1940s, the Ertegun brothers hosted African American jazz musicians at the Turkish Embassy, transforming it into a symbol of cultural freedom and cosmopolitanism in a segregated America. Jazz, a music of improvisation and liberty, became an instrument through which Turkey projected liberal values abroad, even as the regime enforced strict cultural homogeneity at home. The embassy's performances thus served as both a critique of Western hypocrisy and a declaration of Turkey's modern, Western identity.

Japan likewise used spectacle and infrastructure to reshape its international image. After its 1933 withdrawal from the League of Nations, it sought to counter its pariah status through the Society for International Cultural Relations and events such as the planned 1940 Tokyo Olympics. These initiatives, discussed here by Jessamyn R. Abel, depicted Japan as a cultured, cooperative, and technologically advanced empire. The luxurious Asia Express train in the puppet state of Manchukuo was advertised as evidence of benevolent modernisation under Japanese leadership. After the war, these techniques persisted under democratic conditions: the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and the launch of the Shinkansen train presented Japan as a peaceful, innovative, and globally integrated state. In both periods, branding reconciled conflicting identities. Both imperial ambition and postwar pacifism were embedded in the universal language of progress.

Marlene Ritter shows how, at the 1958 Brussels World Fair, this logic extended to the supranational scale. The new European institutions branded Europe as a liberal and cooperative civilisation amid Cold War rivalries. Through futuristic architecture and technological display, the fair projected unity and prosperity. Yet this branding was marked by contradiction:

alongside the City of International Cooperation stood the colonial Congo Pavilion, a reminder that Europe's self-image of peace and progress rested on the persistence of hierarchy. The Expo thus revealed the paradox of liberal nation branding: its dependence on narratives of superiority even while proclaiming universality.

Seung Hwan Ryu's article examines North Korea's use of its state ideology Juche as a tool of nation branding during and after the Cold War, particularly in its diplomatic outreach to Africa. Challenging the image of North Korea as an isolated hermit kingdom, Ryu shows how Pyongyang strategically reframed Juche into an anti-imperialist brand that appealed to newly decolonised African nations seeking models of postcolonial sovereignty. Through institutions such as friendship associations and Juche study centres, North Korea projected itself as a revolutionary, independent state and a leader of global anti-imperialist struggle. These initiatives were designed to enhance Pyongyang's legitimacy and forge solidarity with Africa amid Cold War rivalries and competition with South Korea.

These examples show that international nation branding is a form of soft power that fuses aesthetics with ideology. It relies on symbols, architecture, music, and sport to translate abstract ideals into tangible experiences. Whether liberal or authoritarian, each regime used branding to claim its place within the moral geography of modernity. But the inward dimension of nation branding is equally significant. External image-making shapes how citizens imagine themselves as part of a coherent national story. The Soviet Union's international spectacles also functioned as domestic pedagogy: the glorification of the ostensibly new Soviet woman and achievements such as Sputnik cultivated collective pride and ideological discipline. The performance of modernity abroad mirrored the unity demanded within, turning self-representation into an instrument of governance.

In Catalonia, as we learn from Tobias Klee's intervention, early twentieth-century intellectuals constructed a brand of industrious rationality and masculinity that defined the region against a feminised and irrational Spain. This self-branding fostered both domestic moral order and political mobilisation, establishing reason and civic virtue as core values of Catalan identity. The projection of Catalonia as European and liberal not only sought international recognition but also taught citizens how to embody these ideals. The enduring contrast between 'liberal Catalonia' and 'backward Spain' demonstrates how branding can fix hierarchies within a national or regional community while legitimising its autonomy.

Similarly, Turkey's jazz diplomacy had a powerful domestic echo. For some Turkish elites, Jazz symbolised modernity and secularism and thus aligned with Atatürk's Westernising visions. Yet the exclusion of non-Western music and minority cultures revealed how internal repression can accompany outward liberalism. Branding thus exposes the tension between inclusivity as image and exclusion as practice. Japan's branding also operated domestically.

Wartime campaigns to present Tokyo as a hygienic, cosmopolitan city and Manchukuo as a model colony aimed to instill civic discipline and pride among Japanese citizens. In the postwar period, the same branding logic redefined Japan's self-image: technological innovation replaced militarism as the basis of national identity. The Shinkansen and Olympic spectacle embodied a collective sense of rebirth and unity through progress. Even Europe's self-presentation at Expo 58 had a domestic function: teaching its own citizens to imagine themselves as part of a peaceful and integrated civilisation.

Across these cases, domestic nation image-making aligns citizens with state narratives and moral values, binding them to the national project. While 'self-representation' is probably a more fitting term for these processes, good marketing is also important to stimulate academic debate. The catchier and less clunky 'branding' thus might just be the better brand.

Liberal democracy itself once functioned as a global brand associated with freedom, prosperity, and rational governance. Today, that brand appears tarnished. The erosion of trust in liberal institutions and the rise of populist alternatives suggest that the symbolic capital of liberalism has weakened. I am not so sure whether this crisis stems primarily from a failure of branding, an inability to communicate liberalism's value. Yet the tools of nation branding may also point towards a possible solution. Just as consumers seek brands they can trust and identify with, citizens crave political systems that offer credibility and belonging. Reinvigorating the liberal project may therefore require rebuilding trust in the product.

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