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Narratives of Legitimacy: Making Nationalism Banal

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5 In this chapter, I address some of the critiques of Michael Billig's (1995)
6 concept of banal nationalism. I focus on the communicative power
7 of banal nationalism: the strategic narratives by which national inter-
8 ests and values are successfully maintained among various populations
9 amid shifting scales of membership, rights, and obligations. By direct-
10 ing attention to the "narratives of legitimacy" (Price 2015) by which
11 infrastructures of national power are reinforced, I examine the futures of
12 banal nationalism as a political and cultural resource in the globalizing
13 environment of the twenty-first century.

14 One entry point into the discussion is the meaning of "banality" in
15 Billig's formulation. Adherents of the banal nationalism thesis tend to
16 rely on an interpretation of "banal" as semiconscious, ordinary, or eve-
17 ryday, and of banal nationalism itself as a latent condition rather than
18 (indeed in opposition to) an eventful or "hot" explosion of fervor. This
19 obscures the extent to which extreme manifestations of nationalism also

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20 rely on the reproduction of banality. Hannah Arendt uses the term in
21 this latter sense in her searing report on the post-World War II trial of
22 Adolf Eichmann in 1961:

23 If a crime against humanity had become in some sense “banal” it was
24 precisely because it was committed in a daily way, systematically, with-
25 out being adequately named and opposed. In a sense, by calling a crime
26 against humanity “banal,” [Arendt] was trying to point to the way in
27 which the crime had become for the criminals accepted, routinised, and
28 implemented without moral revulsion and political indignation and
29 resistance (Butler 2011).

30 In this understanding, it is not simply the routinization or systematicity that
31 renders the abhorrence of the Nazi regime banal, it is equally a conscious
32 and reflexive desire *not to name* that legitimizes such acts and deflates resist-
33 ance to them. It is the dissimulation of unconscionable behavior under a
34 pretense of conscience; of what Arendt calls “thoughtlessness”: the diffusion
35 of moral responsibility through a structural determinism in which “nobody”
36 rules and “nobody” is to blame (Arendt 1963, p. 288).

37 The point is not only that banal nationalism has its malign as well
38 as its benign versions, it is also that narratives of national legitimacy
39 can derive their power by deliberately suppressing or dissimulating
40 their ultimate objective. In this light, the researcher’s task becomes not
41 only to surface evidence of collective national orientations submerged
42 in ordinary habits, but also to identify strategic national narratives that
43 actively refuse the label of national origin as part of the legitimation
44 strategy. Turning our attention from the mundane and passive forms of
45 national knowledge to the active, strategic enforcement of the national
46 order via deliberate dissimulation can reveal both the power and the
47 problems that banality brings.

48 Strategic Banality

49 In a response to criticism of his work, Billig (2009) reminds us of a
50 key feature of banal nationalism that has been largely overlooked by
51 both critics and adherents of the concept. Scholarly attention to the



52 mundane and everyday manifestations of nationalism around the world
53 has obscured one of the primary arguments Billig sought to make: that
54 “the world’s most powerful nationalism,” that of the United States,
55 continues to be ignored by social science research.

56 This is a consequential observation. It means that in the decades
57 since the publication of *Banal Nationalism*, the interpretations, exten-
58 sions and revisions of Billig’s thesis have at least partly missed the point,
59 which is that the insidious power of banality, the ultimate psychological
60 impact of the unnoticed, is to leave intact the notion that some places
61 have *no* nationalism (cf. Skey 2009, p. 332). The USA is a “special place
62 of placelessness” (Billig 1995, p. 145) and for this reason deserves spe-
63 cial attention. This is true in two contexts: when the USA is the case
64 under investigation and when the scholarly “investigators” are themselves
65 American (or based at American institutions). A proof of this thesis in
66 the American case is found in the multiple scholarly works by American
67 authors that, since the World War II, have examined the conditions
68 of American identity through the lens of patriotism rather than nation-
69 alism (e.g., Bodnar 1992, 1999; Curti 1946; Hansen 2003; Nathanson
70 1993; Rorty 1998). The choice of terms is not merely semantic. These
71 texts appear to hold up Maurizio Viroli’s (1995) distinction between the
72 “organic” nationalism of Germanic romanticism and the “civic” patri-
73 otism of liberal citizenship: “While nationalism is an attachment to the eth-
74 nic, cultural and spiritual homogeneity of a nation, patriotism refers to the
75 love of the republic and the political institutions that sustain it.”

76 This kind of banal nationalism has not been given its due. What
77 many social scientists have done with Billig’s thesis is to excavate mani-
78 festations of the national lurking in the crevices of everyday life, mainly
79 in places that are already coded as “hotly” national (e.g., First and Sheffi
80 2015; Militz and Schurr 2016; Nieswand 2012; Penrose 2011; Szulc
81 2015; White 2015). The primary objective of that work seems to show
82 how nationalism persists in the face of incursions at conceptual, infra-
83 structural, or other spatial scales (global, cosmopolitan, regional, metro-
84 politan). By looking at the small but symbolic features of nationalism’s
85 face and the ways it is sustained and transformed over time, they have
86 sought to bring tangible evidence to the surface and make it available
87 for analysis.



88 But this is not exactly what Billig meant; or at least, it is only one
89 dimension of what Billig meant. As Craig Calhoun (2014) has pointed
90 out, banal nationalism is less relevant as an observable phenomenon
91 than as a resource for the broader concept. “Billig is less simply inter-
92 ested in explaining nationalism than in saying that we fail to see a lot
93 of it.” Along these lines of reflection lie resources for expanding our
94 conception. Can we undertake a study of banal nationalism that does
95 not only bring ordinary practices to the surface, but examines instances
96 where nationalism is subsumed under other names? What if our meth-
97 odological aim were not to make taken-for-granted ideologies obvious
98 but to investigate the normative power of these ideologies to systemati-
99 cally limit alternative forms of expression (Habermas 1975)?

100 In the following two sections, I offer two ways that nationalism can
101 be subsumed into discourses at other spatial scales: “from above,” in
102 discourses of the global; and “from below,” in local interactions. I then
103 describe the role of strategic narratives in the maintenance of legitimacy.
104 Finally, I turn to the curious case of Cuban “Twitter” to illustrate my
105 claims.

106 Justificatory Logics

107 It has been said that a paradox of the globalization process is that it gives
108 rise to claims for national difference (Rodrik 2011; Tomlinson 2003).
109 This retains an understanding of the global and the national as oppos-
110 ing forces. I think it is more accurate to say that discourses of globaliza-
111 tion are often used to justify decisions that reinforce the national order of
112 things. It is not just that national institutions and laws steer the articula-
113 tion of the global, though this is clearly part of the story (Sassen 2006).
114 It is also that we tend to see globalization as progressive and necessary
115 improvement over a putatively “older,” less rational state of national
116 adherence. Social science research unwittingly reproduces this banal
117 nationalism through its justificatory logics. Despite considerable evidence
118 that nation-states and nationalism coexist with processes of globaliza-
119 tion, for instance, many researchers persist in the tendency to frame their
120 research in terms of a logic of substitution (e.g., banal cosmopolitanism



121 replaces or “hollows out” banal nationalism) rather than a logic of accu-
122 mulation (e.g., banal cosmopolitanism contributes to or expands the
123 forms and content of banal nationalism) (see Krause and Guggenheim
124 2012). Part of the problem is surely the academic paradigm itself, which
125 requires that social scientists justify their work through the identification
126 of a research “gap” they intend to bridge or fill. Identifying a research gap
127 often involves pointing to the shortcomings of prior research, blind spots,
128 unexamined perspectives, and/or neglect.

129 A second reason for the persistence of a logic of substitution is the
130 misrecognition of transnational phenomena such as border-crossing
131 information and financial flows, issue-centered social movements, and
132 global health pandemics (to name only a few examples) as evidence of
133 the overcoming of national space. There is no question that twenty-first
134 century national jurisdictions share powers and problems with authori-
135 ties at sub-, supra-, and transnational levels. Yet, there remain impor-
136 tant ways in which nations “matter” in both domestic and international
137 affairs, and crucial contexts in which national states work to reinforce
138 this (Calhoun 2007). In many cases, regional, transnational, or inter-
139 national institutions and organizations are initiated and enabled by the
140 regulatory mechanisms of the nation-state (e.g., Flew and Waisbord
141 2015; Sassen 2003).

142 Such regulatory mechanisms are sometimes accompanied by mythic
143 narratives that also quash the appearance of national interests. In dis-
144 courses of Internet governance, for instance, the popular conception
145 of the Internet as borderless, placeless, and apolitical forms a mythical
146 backdrop to international negotiations over who ought to be in charge
147 of its policies. Yet, the technical infrastructures and institutions of the
148 so-called global Internet belie its fundamentally national orientations
149 (Aronczyk and Budnitsky 2017; DeNardis 2014).

150 The framing of global processes as endemic, inevitable, and amelio-
151 rating gives rise to a form of banal nationalism. Global discourse can
152 cause national motivations to descend beneath the surface of our con-
153 sciousness. This has lasting effects precisely because these motivations
154 appear no longer to exist despite evidence to the contrary. The mythol-
155 ogy of the Internet as a post-national realm, for instance, persists despite
156 the realities of ongoing Internet governance debates.



157 One effect of this rationalization is to reproduce a distorted picture
158 of the real world. Conceptual transformations at the level of entire soci-
159 eties (national or not) are colored by inconsistencies, unevenness, and
160 both synchronic and diachronic variations that a logic of substitution
161 does not capture (see Chernilo 2006). Our failure to incorporate the
162 possibility of variation hampers our ability to recognize that globaliz-
163 ing processes are not necessarily automatic or progressive improve-
164 ments over those of nationalization. It also leads us to ignore the ways
165 that national and global practices coexist and mutually reinforce one
166 another. Recognizing this might lead us to look at global discourses for
167 evidence of banal nationalism rather than an exclusive focus on national
168 forms of conversation or habit.

169 **Categorical Treachery**

170 Another way to consider how national narratives are rendered banal
171 is through what Arjun Appadurai (1996) calls categorical treachery.
172 Appadurai uses the phrase to refer to “the distorted relationship between
173 daily, face-to-face relations and the large-scale identities produced by
174 modern nation-states” (p. 154) as well as by other modern institutions
175 such as media systems, political parties, and religious groups. Appadurai
176 searches for an explanation of internecine conflict, particularly ethnic
177 violence in close communities, places such as Rwanda and Bosnia. He
178 suggests that one motivation for the otherwise inexplicable levels of vio-
179 lence in these conflicts is the official sanctioning of a large-scale identity
180 (i.e., the national identity), which casts a shadow on the legitimacy of
181 other forms of identification or allegiance. Face-to-face, everyday inter-
182 actions with neighbors, colleagues, or friends thought of as co-nationals
183 can turn ugly if these peers reveal ethnic, racial, or religious allegiances
184 that complicate their adherence to their national identity:

185 When the neighborhood merchant is revealed to be, in his heart, a Croat,
186 when the schoolteacher turns out to be sympathetic to the Hutu, when
187 your best friend turns out to be a Muslim rather than a Serb, when your
188 uncle’s neighbor turns out to be a hated landlord – what seems to follow
189 is a sense of deep categorical treachery... (Appadurai 1996, p. 154)



190 Appadurai's argument is that violence breaks out because these people
191 appear as impostors: pretending to be national kin while under the sur-
192 face they are beholden to a different group. The treachery lies not only
193 in the sense of betrayal Appadurai's characters feel; it is in the way that
194 banal nationalism is reproduced in these instances. I thought my neigh-
195 bor shared my common identity; now that I realize he does not, this
196 justifies my anger and violence toward him. "When these [large-scale]
197 identities are convincingly portrayed as primary (indeed as primordial)
198 loyalties by politicians, religious leaders, and the media, then ordinary
199 people self-fulfillingly seem to act as if only this kind of identity mat-
200 tered and as if they were surrounded by a world of pretenders" (p. 155).

201 Charles Taylor (2015) has recently offered a valuable perspective on
202 the idea of categorical treachery. Taylor explains that the nature of our
203 modern Western democracies is to uphold certain principles, or require-
204 ments, of legitimacy: human rights, equality or non-discrimination, and
205 the rule of democracy itself. Upholding these principles is the basis of
206 our membership in a common society and contributes to a shared sense
207 of purpose. These principles contribute to what Taylor calls a political
208 identity. To make this political identity meaningful, people tend to
209 understand it in terms of the specific achievement of our own particular
210 historical project. We want to understand democratic principles as they
211 are enacted within our own society and its particular path of evolution.

212 The problem that arises, Taylor says, is that the way we define this
213 political identity can lead us to use large-scale identities, such as national
214 identity, to turn against certain members of society. Nationalism is predi-
215 cated on a strong notion of what is common to its members. The alle-
216 giance to a common identity involves boundary work to draw up what
217 ethics, values, behaviors, etc. should be included in this identity, and what
218 in turn should be excluded. While this boundary work is inherent to iden-
219 tity formation, it can take a bad turn, such as when we judge individuals
220 or groups based on their perceived fit with these inclusive ethics, and in
221 turn justify our exclusion of them based on their perceived lack of fit with
222 those ethics; as Taylor (2015) puts it, "the definitions of this common
223 identity can mark others as not living up to this identity." In some cases,
224 we may use moral arguments about upholding democracy to deny ethnic
225 or religious or other types of groups their membership in the nation.



226 What is common to Appadurai's and Billig's and Taylor's insights is
227 the injunction to be mindful of the ways that nationalism is made to
228 seem invisible. In the making invisible lies a wide range of motives and
229 justifications, of deeds done that are never labeled nationalist but that
230 are in fact inspired by a particular interpretation of the role of national
231 boundaries. While, in some cases, banal nationalism may be relatively
232 innocuous, in others, it may lead to the most serious and shocking
233 forms of control. This is the treachery of which Appadurai and the
234 others speak.

235 Narratives and Networks of Legitimacy

236 Monroe Price's (2015) interpretation of "narratives of legitimacy" offers
237 a conceptual and methodological agenda for banal nationalism. His
238 approach is one among many related works that place communications,
239 technology, and media at the center of the creation and circulation of
240 group legitimacy (e.g., Anderson 1991; Deutsch 1966; Gellner 1983;
241 Innis 2007). I rely on Price to align my argument with his efforts to link
242 technological change, strategic communication, speech regulation, and
243 information control with the ongoing power of the nation-state in the
244 twenty-first century.

245 I also rely on this concept because it seems to me that focusing on
246 narrative, as opposed to category, can help to overcome the inevitable
247 dualisms, oppositions, and progressivist substitutions that seem to char-
248 acterize categorical assessments. While categories are rational efforts
249 to create boundaries around what are essentially messy, contradictory,
250 and ever-changing processes, narratives are recognized for their subjec-
251 tive, audience-oriented, and deliberately structured yet contingent char-
252 acteristics. Narratives can produce multiple versions of the same set of
253 events; the analytical task is not to establish which one is more "true"
254 than any other, but rather which is more credible at a given moment
255 and place, and why this should be.¹

256 Put simply, narratives of legitimacy are "the collection of ideas and
257 narratives employed by a dominant group or coalition to maintain
258 power" (Price 2015, p. 13). Price's primary focus is on the national



259 narratives wielded by the state. Re-interpreting Weber's classic formula-
260 tion of the state as a group that holds a monopoly over the legitimate
261 use of force within a territory, Price suggests that in the twenty-first cen-
262 tury, state legitimacy is asserted by a monopoly over information. Since
263 contemporary information infrastructures (among other factors) admit
264 constant challenges to dominance, giving rise to multiple competing
265 narratives, the "winner" of the right to legitimacy is not the militarily
266 strongest or most autocratic state but the one whose narrative is most
267 compelling. As such, the strategic crafting of narratives—and of materi-
268 al supports to circulate these narratives—becomes a central aspect of
269 contests for power by large-scale institutions.

270 While the *content* of the narrative may interest researchers as a means of
271 assessing articulations of the nation across space or time [e.g., "narratives
272 of divine right, narratives of electoral or democratic affirmation, narratives
273 of conquest, narratives of historical entitlement" (Price 2015, p. 42)], the
274 fundamental value to researchers of a focus on strategic narratives lies in
275 assessing the *networks* of legitimacy that narratives produce and reproduce
276 over time. Which actors, which publics, which sites, which communica-
277 tions platforms, are engaged; and which narratives, actors, publics, sites,
278 or platforms are denied legitimacy in the process (Price 2015, chaps. 3
279 and 6)? A network of legitimacy is better understood as process than as
280 structure: dynamic and continuously contested, the architecture of power
281 must include attention to the reactions (in support and in opposition),
282 responses, and unintended consequences elicited by the narrative.

283 Conceptualizing a network of legitimacy reminds us that soft power
284 is wielded not only by the state. This is partly because "the context
285 in which contemporary international relations takes place...is not
286 characterized by the interaction among states only" (Price 2015,
287 p. 46), but it is also because corporations, non-governmental organi-
288 zations, social movements, and insurgent groups all vie for legitimacy
289 amid multiple markets for loyalties, and use strategic narratives—some-
290 times invoking the nation, sometimes not—to achieve their objectives
291 (Manheim 2011).

292 A second advantage of a networks-of-legitimacy approach is that
293 varied intensities of legitimacy can be assessed. Mark Suchman (1995)
294 formulates three types of legitimacy that are interconnected insofar as



295 they indicate a progressive deepening from surface to embeddedness.
296 The first type is *pragmatic*, and this is the one most closely connected to
297 both Price's and Manheim's formulations. Pragmatic legitimacy, or what
298 Suchman calls "influence" or "exchange" legitimacy, involves the exer-
299 cise of self-interested communicative action to get what you want.

300 The second type of legitimacy Suchman describes is *moral*. Moral
301 legitimacy moves us from interests to evaluation, and is therefore more
302 centered on prosocial benefits. Such legitimacy can be procedural, con-
303 sequential, structural/categorical, or personal. The third, most deeply
304 embedded type of legitimacy is *cognitive*, or taken for granted. In order
305 for cognitive legitimacy to obtain, there must be ways to make "the
306 meaning of the act...part of the intersubjective common sense world"
307 (Suchman 1995, p. 592).

308 Although Suchman places these three types of legitimacy along a sort
309 of continuum from surface to embeddedness, this does not mean that
310 they cannot operate simultaneously. Different tactics might be deployed
311 by a single actor or group of actors, either deliberately or unconsciously,
312 to activate different types of legitimacy. As Suchman explains, there are
313 tactics that involve working with existing audiences, and others that
314 involve seeking new environments in which audiences will be supportive.

315 In addition to seeking evidence of banal nationalism as the "endemic
316 condition" (Billig 1995, p. 6) of everyday life, the task is to examine
317 how and by what means nationalism is rendered banal in the first place.
318 Approaching this task via "stages" of legitimacy might allow us to see
319 how repertoires of national power are made to appear banal through
320 time and space. We need resources for seeing *how* cultural congruence is
321 achieved, among *which* audiences, and in *which* settings. Looking at the
322 narrative rather than the category of nation, and seeing how a network
323 of legitimacy is created and maintained, offers an entry point.

324 "Cuban Twitter" and Banal Nationalism

325 We can observe one instance of networks of legitimacy in a recent
326 initiative by the United States Agency for International Development
327 (USAID) to foster civil society activities in Cuba.



328 In 2008, USAID initiated a text message service (SMS) in Cuba. The
329 ostensible aim was to forge a social network of (mainly young, politi-
330 cally open) Cuban citizens who could send and receive uncensored
331 information via the service. In an environment where the Internet is
332 highly regulated by the authoritarian Castro government and basic
333 access is prohibitively expensive, the service, known as ZunZuneo
334 (“hummingbird’s song” in Spanish, an obvious allusion to Twitter), was
335 immediately popular.

336 Initially, after signing up for free, ZunZuneo subscribers received
337 messages from the service, mainly sports scores, trivia, and news about
338 the tech industry. Over time, the communications platform expanded
339 to allow Cubans to communicate with one another and to form inter-
340 est groups. Forty thousand Cubans eventually signed onto the service,
341 thrilled at the ability to connect with friends and gain followers.

342 As part of USAID’s Cuban Civil Society Support Program,
343 ZunZuneo was understood by its American instigators to promote initi-
344 atives “that expand the reach and impact of independent civil society in
345 Cuba” (Review 2015, p. 1). US policy on Cuba explicitly advocates the
346 promotion of democracy in the country, including “foreign assistance...
347 to generate a sustainable means by which Cuban civil society can call
348 attention to the human rights situation in Cuba; break the information
349 blockade by disseminating information; and coordinate strategies to
350 plan, organize and implement peaceful civil society initiatives, including
351 democratic reforms” (Review 2015, p. 55).

352 The success of the project was contingent, USAID officials believed,
353 on suppressing all evidence of ZunZuneo’s American origins. Using a
354 complex network of shell companies, offshore bank accounts, and
355 employee aliases, USAID’s contractors sought to mask the traces of
356 US funding and ownership from the Cuban government and from
357 ZunZuneo’s users.

358 When an investigation by the Associated Press (Arce et al. 2014)
359 brought the origins of ZunZuneo to light in 2014, it was discovered
360 that the SMS service was being used for more than the promotion of
361 uncensored communication among Cuban citizens. Contractors work-
362 ing with USAID monitored ZunZuneo messages sent and received,
363 collected data on users’ political tendencies, and hoped eventually



364 to use the critical mass of subscribers to foment a “Cuban Spring”
365 in the country. It would be an uprising led by young, dissatisfied
366 Cubans empowered to bring about social and political change. But
367 the change would have been underwritten and orchestrated by the US
368 Government; and the style of change would bear all the hallmarks of
369 American values and interests. Media reports likened USAID to the
370 CIA in its covert attempts at surveillance, regime change, and data min-
371 ing (Kornbluh 2013; Democracy Now 2014).

372 To fully understand the role of the “Cuban Twitter” project in per-
373 petuating the banal nationalism of the USA, it is necessary to situate it
374 within broader social and historical contexts. At one level, ZunZuneo is
375 merely the latest instantiation of a series of initiatives since the 1940s by
376 the US Government to develop media and communications infrastruc-
377 tures abroad. Voice of America, founded in 1942, is the most extensive,
378 broadcast in dozens of languages worldwide. The American broad-
379 caster Radio y Televisión Martí has supplied news and programming
380 to Cuba since 1985. The difference between these broadcasting efforts
381 and the Web 2.0 version is the (attempted) dissimulation of American
382 involvement and the notion that Cubans can empower *themselves* via
383 the technological capacity of multicast media. In this way, the nation-
384 alist intentions of the USA are rendered banal by the capacities of the
385 medium, and by the apparent displacement of the authors of the narra-
386 tive of national legitimacy from Americans to Cubans.

387 This initiative in Cuba should also be set against the background of
388 the USAID organization and US foreign policy goals since World War
389 II. Built on the notion of creating markets abroad for American prod-
390 ucts and production, USAID has for decades seen its mission in terms
391 of a national moral obligation. American self-understanding, especially
392 in the context of foreign affairs, follows John F. Kennedy’s assertion of
393 the nation as a “wise leader and good neighbor in the interdependent
394 community of free nations” (USAID n.d.).

395 In the contemporary context, ZunZuneo can be seen as part of what
396 former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has called “our national
397 brand”: the principles of Internet freedom. In a programmatic speech in
398 Washington, D.C. in 2010, Clinton laid out the tenets of this national
399 mission:



400 We are...supporting the development of new tools that enable citizens to
401 exercise their rights of free expression by circumventing politically moti-
402 vated censorship. We are providing funds to groups around the world
403 to make sure that those tools get to the people who need them in local
404 languages, and with the training they need to access the internet safely.
405 The United States has been assisting in these efforts for some time, with
406 a focus on implementing these programs as efficiently and effectively as
407 possible. Both the American people and nations that censor the internet
408 should understand that our government is committed to helping promote
409 internet freedom.

410 We want to put these tools in the hands of people who will use them to
411 advance democracy and human rights, to fight climate change and epi-
412 demics, to build global support for President Obama's goal of a world
413 without nuclear weapons, to encourage sustainable economic develop-
414 ment that lifts the people at the bottom up (Clinton 2010).

415 By focusing on online technology as "tools," and by advocating the use of
416 such tools to "circumvent politically motivated censorship," US leaders
417 use pragmatic legitimacy to couch Internet freedom in an apolitical, anti-
418 nationalist cloak. By "put[ting] these tools in the hands of people" outside
419 the United States, US leaders use moral legitimacy to further mask the
420 imposition of their national values and interests. Efforts such as ZunZuneo
421 thus reinforce in no uncertain terms the banal nationalism of the USA.

422 At the same time, such narratives of legitimacy reinforce the logic of a
423 world of nations. American nationalism of this sort is never understood
424 as a regression to an outmoded modernity, but rather as recognition of
425 the continued power of the national form in the twenty-first century.
426 This is the achievement of the stage of cognitive legitimacy that allows
427 such power to be part of our common-sense world.

428 **Nationalism's Character**

429 In light of the efforts at normalization between the USA and Cuba
430 since 2014, the "Cuban Twitter" project appears less as a subver-
431 sive act than as a clever early effort by the USA to foster a network of
432 legitimacy for its future actions. As embassies reopen in Havana and



433 Washington, D.C.; as leaders from each country meet for the first time
434 in 50 years, and as airlines restore direct commercial flights between the
435 countries, Americans can justify ZunZuneo as a reasonable preparation
436 of the terrain. By fostering participation, introducing Cubans to cheap
437 text messaging, conveying lighthearted messages about sports and trivia,
438 American leaders encouraged the benefits of twenty-first-century public
439 engagement.

440 But this engagement is of a particularly American style; and
441 ZunZuneo has a distinctly American character. More importantly, the
442 kind of regime change seeded by ZunZuneo is one that corresponds
443 directly to American notions of a just, liberal society. Although the
444 notion of democratization resounds globally, the American “aesthetic
445 of interpretation” (Price 2015, p. 51)—that is, the country’s ability to
446 promote democracy abroad in its own image—is one way the USA pre-
447 serves its ongoing national cohesion.

448 Another dimension of inquiry is opened up here. Nationalism is not
449 only a homegrown phenomenon, made effective for a national popula-
450 tion on its home territory. Applying the concept of networks of legiti-
451 macy allows us to turn our lens to the ways that so-called globalizing
452 processes, and their reverberating mediations and cultural meanings,
453 serve to reinforce the social imaginary of a world of nations. Observing
454 the reproduction of nationalism as a social form requires a focus not only
455 on the form but also on the reproductions: the ways that “national” ver-
456 sions of nationalism are reproduced outside their home territory, and
457 function to narrow or altogether suppress alternative visions.

458 We have other names for this type of phenomenon: cultural imperial-
459 ism, soft power, and protectionism. At their core, these terms partici-
460 pate in reinforcing the banality of nationalism in our time, allowing the
461 national imaginary to be reproduced by those who never invoke it by
462 name.

463 **Note**

- 464 1. To be clear, I do not mean to privilege the content over the form
465 of nationalist rhetoric, nor do I advocate a turn toward content
466 analysis as a methodology. I am thinking rather of Calhoun’s (1997)



467 discussion of the three ‘dimensions’ of nationalism, as discourse, pro-
468 ject, and evaluation (p. 5); and of the ways that national narratives,
469 that is, claims made in the name of the nation, can be deliberately
470 structured by powerful actors to fit one or the other of these dimen-
471 sions. These dimensions operate whether the nation is explicitly
472 named or not, as in the reproduction of the USA in both domestic
473 and international spheres.

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