

Banal Nationalism 20 years on: Re-thinking, re-formulating and re-contextualizing the concept

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Abstract. This introduction considers the significance of Michael Billig's (1995) *Banal Nationalism* to geographers, and how this fits into broader trends of nationalism research in the social sciences. Through an analysis of Web of Science citation trends for the book, we illustrate its spatial and temporal reach in terms of the countries where it has been cited and how its impact has developed since 1995. We also briefly examine how political geographers have engaged the concept of banal nationalism in their research, and what sort of questions it has raised for those conducting research on nationalist discourses and territorial identity narratives more broadly. Considering how political geographers might creatively advance this scholarship, we introduce the individual papers included in this special issue and conclude with a brief gesture to future directions for research beyond *Banal Nationalism*.

Keywords: nationalism; banal nationalism; identity; territory; political geography

Introduction

The articles published in this special issue have all been stimulated by Michael Billig's celebrated book, *Banal Nationalism* (1995) and its long-lasting, and in fact still growing, influence on nationalism studies. Much academic research associates nationalism with separatist struggles to create new autonomous territories/states, or with extreme right-wing politics. Billig's book was significant in turning the attention of nationalism scholars to the everyday and the mundane routines and discourses where nationalism is reproduced. Billig proposed that as far as nationality is concerned, researchers need to look at the reasons that people in the modern world do not forget their nationality and respectively, how the continual flagging, or reminding, of nationhood occurs in existing states. The articles published in this collection critically evaluate, rethink, and reformulate the idea of banal nationalism, and its many dimensions, as well as re-contextualizing this notion by providing case studies that draw on rich empirical materials. Respectively, each author aims to push forward the political geographic studies of nationalism by examining carefully the contextual nature of (banal) nationalism, how this complex phenomenon is embedded in the everyday lives of nations, national institutions and citizens, and how it is reproduced. This special issue also includes an interview of Michael Billig in which he assesses the biographical and wider intellectual roots of this renowned book and positions it as part of his long academic career, which has been characterized by constantly shifting to new research themes – both before and after writing *Banal Nationalism*.

Nationalism studies and “banal nationalism”

In spite of the many comments in the 1990s and 2000s declaring the retreat or weakening of the power of national states in the international system (Strange, 1996) or viewpoints predicting the rise of a new, transnational and cosmopolitan “borderless world” to arise as a consequence of globalization of

business life and the spread of this model to other areas of social life (Ohmae, 1995), the state, nation, nationality and citizenship have stubbornly remained as almost axiomatic structural and ideological features of contemporary societal and everyday life practices and discourses. The mediation and reproduction of such features takes place through nationalism, a contextual phenomenon that exists in plentiful forms.

Nationalism and its various institutional and ideological forms mobilized in nation-building and national integration “projects” are not fixed features but rather relational processes that are constitutive of state territoriality. In states that have already gained independence, such ideological arrangements are often practically taken-for-granted constituents of the societal structuration that silently contribute to “national flagging” and the reproduction the nation. While there are major differences in the intensity of how the “nation” is performed and mobilized, in practically all national contexts, people read national newspapers, watch national TV-news and their weather forecast maps, and adapt to the peculiarities of national curricula in schools. Respectively, individuals learn about national territories and their borders, national identities, wars, and noteworthy “national heroes” from national history and geography books and courses that are often framed in firmly nationalized territorial frameworks. Politicians continue to use this state-as-an-actor rhetoric in their public performances and such rhetoric tends to harden when states drift into conflicts and wars with each other. Then “patriotic” claims regarding the need to sacrifice on behalf of the nation come into play.

In all national contexts, the annual rhythms of celebrations index the nation, its values, and its history, and in so doing, remind people of their own place in a world of nations. Similarly, “we” are taught to support, often with high emotions, “our” national sports heroes in international competitions and spectacles, champions that are in many ways nationalized in publicity. National success stories are often personified by using anthropomorphic language in everyday communication so that we are used to think almost self-evidently how this or that “country” was successful in beating another one (cf. Koch, 2013; Paasi, 1996a). These kind of banal nationalist activities are characteristically so naturalized that they are seldom questioned. Indeed, nationalist ideology, Michael Billig (1995, p. 37) has argued, “operates to make people forget that their world has been historically constructed. Thus, nationalism is the ideology by which the world of nations has come to seem the natural world – as if there could not possibly be a world without nations.” But as Billig (1995) has masterfully shown in *Banal Nationalism*, this “collective amnesia” (Renan, 1994) requires that the nation be “flagged” in countless ways, permeating both built and symbolic landscapes and people’s daily lives.

Yet, social scientists, one after the other, often note how poorly understood nationalism as a phenomenon is and how it tends to escape exhaustive definitions. While it has become a globally significant idea and is an important societal and destructive power, national elites, nationalists and academic scholars – each equipped with different methodological tools – have interpreted nationalism in various ways. Such interpretations have often been contradictory, evincing highly varied perspectives on the history, present and future of this perplexing phenomenon. For some nationalists (but for few scholars) nationalism is a sort of primordial idea: one’s nationality is seen as a crucial and eternal part of human life. For others, especially so-called modernists, the history of nationalism is not at all “timeless,” but rather has a comparatively short history that is closely related to the modernization tendencies of social life and the processes of state-building – whether these are cultural, political and/or economic. For modernists, nationalism is therefore often associated with nation-building, wars, and (post)colonial conflicts. For so-called ethno-symbolists, early ethnic bonds and feelings provide a crucial background for nation-building. Respectively nations cannot be “invented from nothing” since

nations typically lean on previous mythical structures, historical memories, values and symbols (cf. Hutchinson and Smith, 1994; Pakkasvirta and Saukkonen, 2005).

In spite of increasingly significant tendencies of the transnationalization of economic and business life and immigration, nationalism – however it is understood or defined – is still the dominant territorial ideology in the contemporary world and in many states it has turned ever more significant, often very rapidly (Martin and Paasi, 2016). Such thinking implies that an essentialist and an internalist way of thinking about a place and its character still dominate much of socio-spatial life. As the late Doreen Massey (2005) insistently reminded us, places are not territorially fixed entities but are rather always constructed *relationally* out of articulations of contested social relations. The ostensible “uniqueness,” or identity of places at various spatial scales (local, regional, national, supra-national) is always already a product of wider connections across time-space scales and always part of wider global forces. Places also resonate with the past and diverging actors modify the roles of the past and “traditions” in justifying and legitimating the present. And yet, despite a growing effort – on the part of academics and non-academics alike – to advance more progressive, transnational conceptions of space, territorial thinking persists and territory continues to allure (Murphy, 2013). As we discuss in the remainder of this short introduction, Michael Billig’s (1995) work on the taken-for-granted and often mundane nature of nationalism has been crucial in helping political geographers to understand and explain the tenacious appeal of the nation(al territory) all around the world.

Banal Nationalism’s influence in political geography and beyond

Banal Nationalism has been a landmark text for the subdiscipline of political geography, but it also quickly became a key text in the field of nationalism studies and has influenced scholars across the social sciences. Since its publication in 1995, the book has had an exciting lifecycle that seems to depart largely from the wider career of its author both before and after this book came out. Michael Billig is a social psychologist who has written extensively on social issues, such as the crucial roles of ideology and opinions in social life. In his view, ideologies are about following rules, making arguments and counter-arguments; they cannot be reduced to manipulation and the creation of consensus. Growing out of this work, *Banal Nationalism* was a unique effort to make sense of the complexities of nationalism *as an ideology*, which he had confronted when doing research on how British families talk about the Royal Family. After reading classical literature on nationalism (e.g. Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm), he recognized that it tended to associate nationalism with social movements of change, for example in newly-independent countries, rather than looking at how it works in longer-established states. This observation prompted him to consider nationalism differently, by asking how nationalism is reproduced in everyday life in “established nations,” i.e. “those states that have confidence in their own continuity, and that, particularly, are part of what is conventionally called ‘the West’” (Billig, 1995, p. 8).

As the interview with Billig at the end of this special issue shows, *Banal Nationalism* turned out to be quite a unique accomplishment in his long research career. It was unique in the sense that he had not studied the issue of nationalism before and has not returned to it since writing the book – even if the issues of social/national identity and ideology have been recurring themes in his work (e.g. Billig, 1991, 2001). While Billig went on with new research themes after *Banal Nationalism* was published, this book itself became gradually a highflier in nationalism research. It rapidly turned out to be a major source of inspiration for interdisciplinary research; it is continually widely cited in research literature and this standing appears to have persisted and even strengthened over time. Notwithstanding Billig’s critical stance towards contemporary neoliberal tendencies to measure citations and all kinds of metrics

(Billig, 2013), we take the right to illustrate the global influence and persistent position of this rather unique book in nationalism research through considering the cited reference data from the Web of Science (WoS). Using this data certainly has its limits. First, the data is somewhat narrow insofar as it only shows the citations in journals that WoS has classified in its database and, second, we understand very well that state-based maps are themselves examples of banal nationalism when the data is presented in a territorial(ly trapped) framework. Lastly, it is critical to recognize the gradually expanding “brain circulation” between states that partly challenges the “methodological nationalism” implied by the WoS data: scholars increasingly change not only universities but also the states where they work and publish their work (cf. Paasi, 2015). Recognizing these limits, the WoS data nonetheless offers some important insights about the influence of *Banal Nationalism* to date.

Figures 1 and 2 show the international significance of *Banal Nationalism* in the academic community, both in time and space. Figure 1 demonstrates that Billig’s book has been a significant source of inspiration for Anglophone authors in particular, with scholarship coming from England and the US clearly dominating the citation counts. After these countries at the top of the list of citations, Spain is next. It is followed by several smaller states – Israel, Sweden, and Finland – which we believe shows the importance of nationalism and national identity issues in these contexts. According to this data, researchers from altogether 64 states have referenced *Banal Nationalism* in their articles. In addition to this wide spatial impact, the book’s reach has been temporally extensive. While many academic texts have a large influence immediately after publication that quickly evaporates, *Banal Nationalism* displays a much more enduring impact that is typical for works that might be classified as “classics” (Figure 2). And Billig’s text continues to inspire: the number of citations has been steadily growing until today.

With this broader perspective in mind, what impact has *Banal Nationalism* had for the field of political geography? Looking again at citation data, we see that political geographers were immediately inspired by the book. The first citations were in national identity studies (Paasi, 1997), border research (Paasi, 1996b, 1998; Newman and Paasi, 1998; Radcliffe, 1998), and in research on the political dimensions of planning (Yiftachel, 1998). Billig’s interest in the everyday aspects of nation-building is paralleled in Paasi’s (1996b, see also 1999) *Territories, Boundaries, and Consciousness*, which aimed to theorize and empirically examine nation-building through a focus on “spatial socialization” – the processes whereby territories become institutionalized at various spatial scales and people come to view themselves as members of such territories. Such socialization brings territories and territorially-based identity narratives into everyday life via institutions such as the media, education, sport, etc. Like Paasi’s (1996b) book, *Banal Nationalism* came at an important moment for scholars of the “state” and the “nation,” catalyzing and cementing within political geography a new analytical focus on ostensibly “banal” or everyday practices through which people come to imagine spaces as bounded places, and themselves as members of some such unit.

On the pages of *Political Geography*, authors have taken this methodological imperative to study the everyday and the mundane to heart. A number of studies in the journal have directly picked up the concept of banal nationalism to examine nationalist iconography, for example on stamps and bank notes (Raento et al., 2004; Penrose, 2011), road signs (Jones and Merriman, 2009), maps (Batuman, 2010), and in relation to sports (Koch, 2013). Others have more indirectly engaged Billig’s arguments, such as in Joe Painter’s (2006) well-cited article on the “prosaic geographies of stateness.” Although Painter focuses on the “state” rather than the “nation,” he positions his discussion of the “prosaic” as part of a broader body of work on the mundane and often hidden aspects of state-making that directly

Figure 1. Citation pattern of *Banal Nationalism* in various states, determined by the location of the citing article's corresponding author affiliation. Source: Web of Science, 2016.

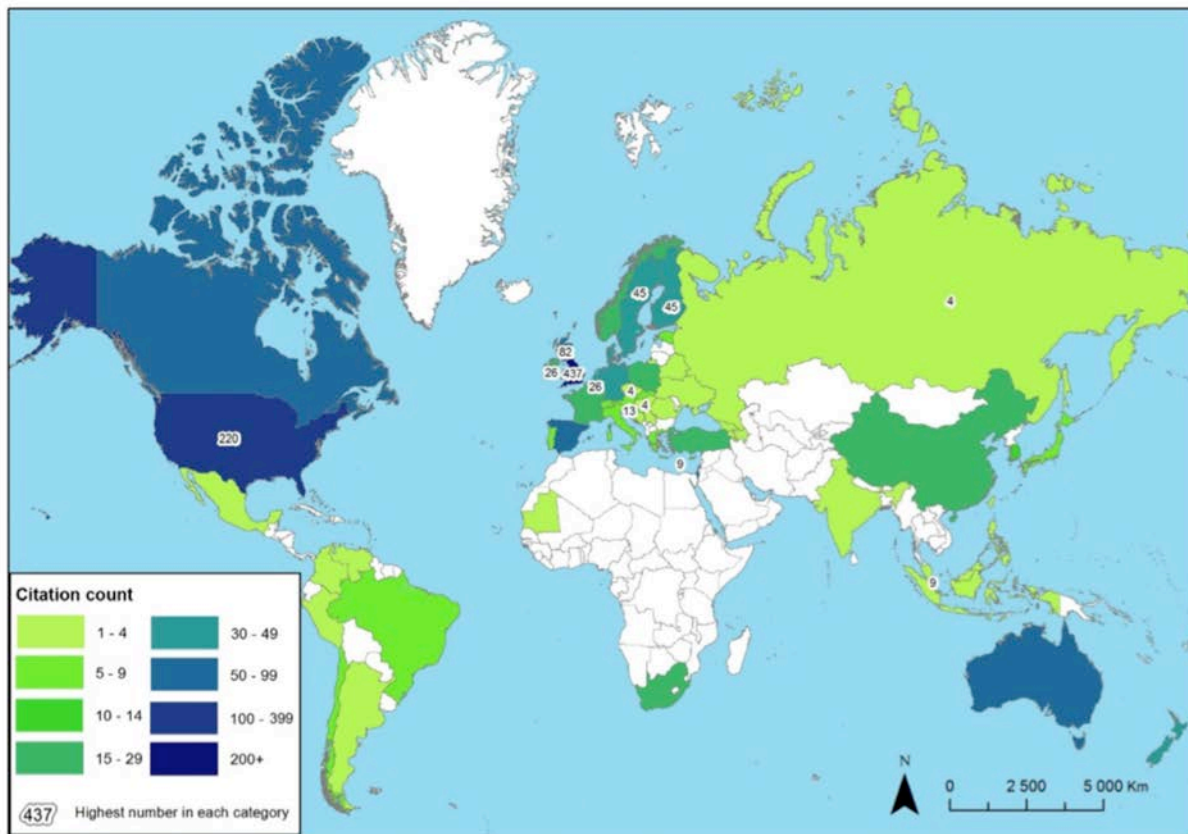
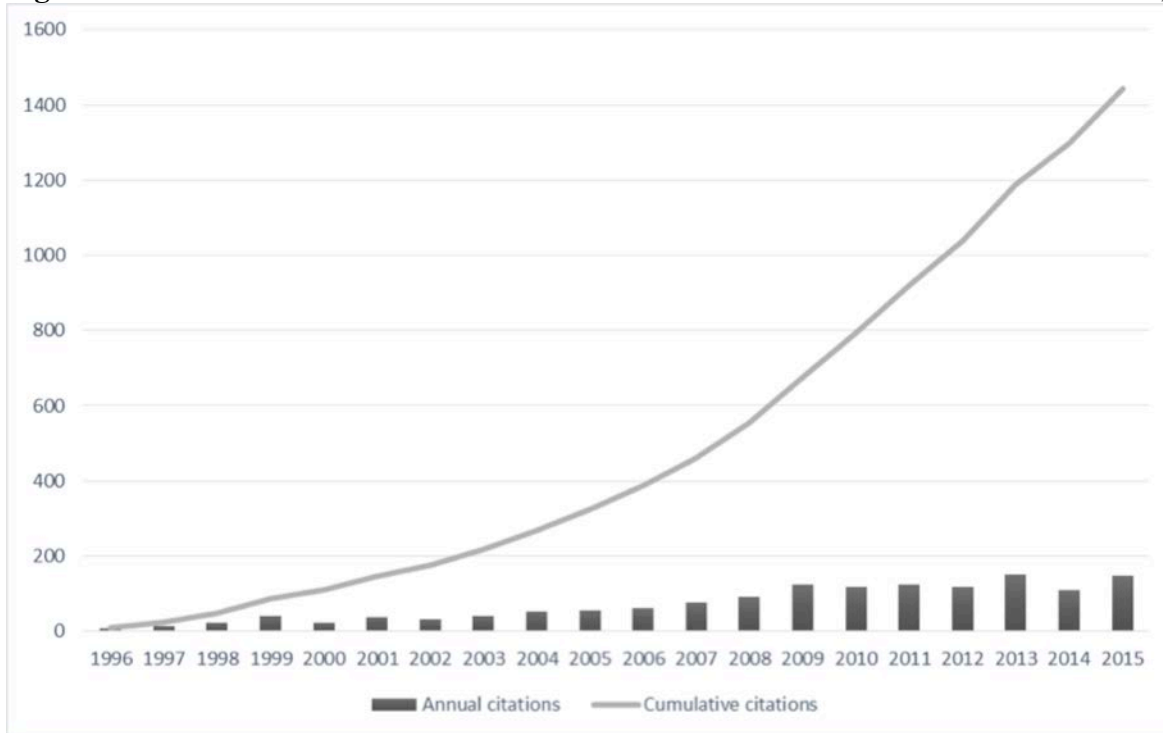


Figure 2. Annual and cumulative citations of *Banal Nationalism*. Source: Web of Science, 2016.



parallel the processes described by Billig (Painter, 2006, p. 770). Of course, none of this is to say that political geographers have passively accepted Billig's work. On the contrary, many have problematized the concept of banal nationalism and especially how it relates its supposed counterpart "hot nationalism" (see especially, Benwell and Dodds, 2011; Jones and Merriman, 2009) – an issue taken up by several of the contributors to this special issue. Extending well beyond the journal of *Political Geography*, Billig's thesis has also motivated political geographers to expand the scope of the notion of banal nationalism and push it into new terrains. This has given rise to a wide range of conceptual innovations, such as "banal geopolitics" (Sidaway, 2001), "banal securities" (Ojeda, 2013), "banal Orientalism" (Haldrup et al., 2006), and "banal terrorism" (Katz, 2007).

Re-thinking, re-formulating and re-contextualizing "banal nationalism" 20 years on

Part of an effort to take stock of these varied engagements with the concept of "banal nationalism," this special issue originated with a set of papers presented at the American Association of Geographers Annual Meeting in Tampa, which we organized to mark the 20-year anniversary of the book's publication. Bracketed by a more retrospective analysis in this introduction and the concluding interview with Michael Billig himself, the individual papers take a more forward-looking approach. Each contributor explores possibilities for creatively advancing research beyond *Banal Nationalism*, on the basis of a wide range of theoretical conjunctures and empirically-grounded research in diverse geographical contexts, including Azerbaijan, Finland, Italy, Jordan, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States.

Karen Culcasi begins the collection, with her study of "warm nationalism" in Jordan. She argues that scholars need to give more attention to the connections between nationalism's "hot" and "banal" variants, as well as the question of how nationalist performances may be "banal" for some people, but "hot" for others. Stressing the importance of accounting for the heterogeneity within nations, she examines both the production *and* reception of national maps and map-logos of Jordan. Seeking to account for the multiscalar nature of Jordanian national identity, Culcasi shows that even after "hot" nationalist events or crises have subsided, such as the 1948 Arab-Israeli War or the 1991 Gulf War, contentious identity claims are literally mapped onto nationalist imaginaries and semiotic landscapes. Seemingly banal lines and toponyms on maps, she shows, are not only rooted in "hot" geopolitics, but have the power to trigger a wide range of reactions from individuals reading or relating to them, depending on their own subject position within the region's wider identity politics.

Anssi Paasi also underscores the connections between hot and banal nationalism in his study of Independence Day celebrations in Finland, which are also rooted in mobilizing memories around "hot" geopolitical moments like war and national liberation movements. The notion of independence is typically treated with reference to state sovereignty, but Paasi argues that its nationalist significance has been underappreciated in academic research to date. Figuring centrally in the performativity of both the state *and* the nation, independence is often seen as the geopolitical "apex" for a national group. Paasi shows how the celebration of "independence days" condenses the practices of banal nationalism and, in both long-established and newly-established states, such holidays fuse the multiple spatial and historical scales of nationalist imaginaries through a set of recurring performances around the theme of independence. As in Culcasi's study of Jordan, his empirical case study of Finland shows that individual citizens have competing interpretations of the nationalist discourses surrounding the Independence Day celebrations. So while the cyclical rhythm of these spectacles works to produce a sense of unity and coherence, Paasi's *longue durée* approach highlights the spatial, temporal, and social variation of these simultaneously hot and banal nationalist performances.

Marco Antonsich furthers the first two papers' effort to populate analyses of banal nationalism in his article on ordinary people's views on "Italy" and being "Italian." He aims to correct what he sees as banal nationalism's unfortunate, if inadvertent, habit of overlooking human agency in how nationalist imaginaries and mental maps of nationally-inflected difference are produced. Applied to his focus group and photo-elicitation research at ethnically-diverse secondary schools in Milan, Antonsich extends Billig's analysis of the unremarkable "little words" (deixis) that "flag" the nation in everyday interactions between and among native and foreign-born Italians. He treats the "everyday" as a "domain of enquiry," providing a window onto the question of *what kind* of nation is made banal by ordinary people, the varying scales at which the nation is imagined, and in what contexts "here" and "we" are imagined as homogenous and undifferentiated, or heterogeneous and marked by difference. Like Paasi's analysis of the annual rhythms of Independence day celebrations, Antonsich's "eventful" approach underscores the contingent and context-dependent nature of nationalist discourses – with both exclusivist and inclusivist visions of the "nation" being expressed by the very same respondents, depending on the subject of discussion.

Natalie Koch elaborates on this theme of exclusivist and inclusivist identity narratives more explicitly in her study of nationalist celebrations in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The implicit assumption in banal nationalism, as in nearly all academic and popular accounts of nationalism, is that it is produced and consumed exclusively by citizen-nationals. But in considering two small Gulf monarchies where citizens comprise less than 15 percent of the entire populations, Koch challenges this assumption and asks, is nationalism really just for nationals? She analyzes state-controlled discourses related to National Day in Qatar and the UAE to show that the local governments are actively promoting more inclusive "civic" nationalist identity narratives to encourage statist and territorial bonding among their large noncitizen "expat" populations. Governance in these nondemocratic states works, she argues, as much through pleasure and inclusion as repression and exclusion. Extending the citizenship studies literature on noncitizen inclusion, Koch's study points to the need to move beyond considering foreign "denizens" only through the analytical frames of exclusion or diasporic identity politics, and to instead apply concepts like banal nationalism to examine how noncitizens actively participate in hegemonic nationalist rituals and to what end.

Elisabeth Militz and Carolin Schurr take a more targeted approach to the pleasures of nationalism and its many structures of feeling in their analysis of national belonging in Azerbaijan. They propose "affective nationalism" as a way to unite *Banal Nationalism's* focus on routines and the everyday with feminist political geographers' work on "embodied nationalism." Such an approach would explore how banal affirmations of the national emerge in encounters between bodies and objects. But because bodies are always marked, Militz and Schurr argue that an affective lens is needed to account for how nationalist discourses work to transcend individual differences and potentialities. Through a series of ethnographic vignettes from national celebrations and memorials, they offer a fine-grained analysis of how the Azeri nation is produced, imagined, and remembered through symbolic landscapes and soundscapes, bodily movements, and social interactions among friends and family. The authors show that national holidays and spaces, as well as the "corporeal conviviality" they facilitate, promote a more organic or intimate sense of belonging vis-à-vis official state-centered events in Azerbaijan. Militz and Schurr show that "affective nationalism" is not everywhere or for everyone the same, even when performances in a given country draw on many of the same symbols and rituals.

Lastly, Jenna Christian, Lorraine Dowler, and Dana Cuomo bring banal nationalism into even deeper discussion with feminist political geography, creatively uniting Billig's concept with recent feminist geopolitical research on fear. They argue that banal nationalism intertwines and intersects in critical ways with the work in feminist geography on how the banal or mundane is often rendered feminine and thus, apolitical or unimportant. Whereas many critics have called for transcending the hot/banal dualism that Billig explores, Christian et al. argue that it is important to keep this binary in focus and actually examine the political work that it does, i.e. how it structures thinking and makes some political processes particularly visible and renders others invisible. Drawing from their empirical work on fear among U.S. college students and soldiers subject to sexual violence, they show that hot and banal nationalism operate as a single, intertwining complex. Set side-by-side, these two cases demonstrate how fear and violence are managed and coded differently based on when and where they occur (e.g. during war or not), ultimately entrenching deeply gendered nationalist tropes and ideals. When sexual violence enters public discourse, the authors note, it is usually in the context of "hot" nationalist discussions about warfare and rape. But in their focus on the hot/banal binary, Christian et al. show how this works to erase or "banalize" sexual assault in non-conflict settings.

In lieu of a conclusion, the collection is followed by an interview with Michael Billig. Contributors to this project – most of whom are included here, but some who are not – were asked to submit questions to Klaus Dodds, who then conducted the interview (for which we thank him warmly).

Conclusions: Future political geographies of nationalism

Our sincere hope is that this special issue represents an opening for future political geographic research on nationalism, so in closing, we do not venture to make any definitive statements about what shape this may take. Rather, we will make two brief points about what we see as the overarching promise found in the set of articles that follows. First, as all the contributions illustrate, there are many productive synergies to be found in joining the research on banal nationalism with theoretical discussions both within and beyond political geography. The authors are informed by a wide range of social theorists, and contribute to interdisciplinary conversations that extend well beyond nationalism studies per se – territory, globalization, and the reproduction of the state system; citizenship and migration studies; feminist geopolitics; urban geography; memory studies; and new literatures on affect. The value of political geographic research on nationalism, we want to suggest, lies precisely in this diversity and theoretical openness. Whereas other academic fields may more strictly police their disciplinary boundaries, the diverse papers that follow all attest to the fact that political geography is no "moribund backwater" (Berry, 1969), but a thriving and cosmopolitan space of critical engagement. Just as we saw Michael Billig do in the process of writing about nationalism, a completely new topic for him when he began the project, it is through reaching and exploring new connections that political geographers will continue to make advances in research on nationalism.

Second, in addition to these theoretical connections, future political geographies of nationalism will derive further insights from exploring new or understudied empirical cases. Indeed, a key aspect of all the articles collected for this special issue is their commitment to empirically-grounded research. While several of the case studies have addressed countries that have to date received little attention in political geography, the collection nonetheless reflects political geography's historic strength in regional studies in North America, Europe, and the Middle East. In bringing together this project, we had hoped to include cases from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, but for various reasons, we were unsuccessful. Perhaps a shortcoming from one perspective, we hope that readers will actually take this as an invitation to explore the many fascinating questions raised in the subsequent articles in their research in

places not considered here. Although anxious hand-wringing over the perilous state of regional studies in geography is nothing short of a trope (Koch, 2016), it seems to us that political geographers must constantly “re-assert the regional,” as Toal (2003) suggests, through such thick accounts of a world that sadly remains “thinly known.”

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