

The corporate production of nationalism

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Abstract. States, government officials, cultural elites, and ordinary citizens are typically the leading characters in academic treatises on nationalism – cast as the primary producers and consumers of nationalist ideology. Yet this conventional focus obscures the many *corporate* aspects of nationalism. Drawing from the literature on “commercial nationalism,” this article examines the corporate production of nationalism surrounding National Day holiday celebrations in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Pairing participant observation and textual analysis of advertising landscapes, I illustrate how foreign corporations are among the most important actors in (re)producing nationalist discourse – and state power – in the Gulf states. By situating this comparative case study in the broader literature on commercial nationalism, I argue that Qatar and the UAE are in fact typical of how corporate actors around the world routinely reinforce scripts that essentialize the “nation” by drawing upon and, in effect, *producing* nationalism – and their own commercial interests.

Keywords: nationalism; commercial nationalism; political geography; Qatar; United Arab Emirates

*“Capitalist interest has a stake in the political success of the nation,
just as the nation depends on the economic expansion that capitalism promises.”
– Stephen Kemper (1993:7)*

Introduction

States and subjects are typically the leading characters in academic treatises on nationalism, but a focus on production and consumption systems draws our attention to how nationalism is intimately economic. From the perspective of political geographers, nationalism is a discourse that simultaneously celebrates and defines a particular social community, the “nation,” and usually posits that the nation and the state should be territorially congruent (Agnew 2013). As a discourse, nationalism is constituted by a wide range of practices, materialities, and spatial imaginaries, and can take on dramatically different meanings for uniquely-positioned individuals. But on the whole, scholars and lay observers tend to position government officials, cultural elites, and ordinary citizens as the primary *producers* of nationalist ideology, as well as its main *consumers*. Such figures are indeed prominent producers and audiences in most nationalist projects. Yet in focusing on the public or politically-defined aspect of these individuals’ subjectivity, this approach shifts attention away from the economic or commercial aspects of nationalism. The latter has been considered in the small but growing literature on “commercial nationalism,” which shows how corporate actors at all scales use nationalism to sell products, and use commercial strategies to promote nationalist agendas.

This is especially visible during national holidays in the West, like the Fourth of July in the United States, Bastille Day in France, or Independence Day in Finland (Billig 1995; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Paasi 2016), when corporate advertisements saturate city surfaces and other advertising spaces, acclaiming the nation and its supposed glory (see **Figure A**). As we shall see, these corporate practices are not limited to the West but have parallels worldwide – resulting from the simultaneous diffusion of the “nation-state” ideal and the deepening reach of

neoliberal state-economy configurations in the postcolonial era of globalization (Barrington 2006; Geertz 1971; Herb and Kaplan 2018). While this article considers case studies from several postcolonial countries in the Arabian Peninsula – Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – readers from the Western “core” will find the corporate practices I examine all too familiar.



Figure A. Independence Day advertisements from the United States, past and present. Source: Fair use.

It is fairly obvious that *local* companies and entrepreneurs in any setting will use nationalist kitsch to sell products, but this article illustrates how *foreign* corporations can also be key actors in (re)producing nationalist discourse and state power. To do so, I take a case study approach to explore the diverse expressions of commercial nationalism in two Gulf states, Qatar and the UAE, where I have been conducting research since 2012. Both countries are known for their rich hydrocarbon reserves, but they are also notable for the fact that only about 10 percent of their populations are citizens. Given their particular relationship between demography and political economy, many academic and lay observers treat the resource-rich states of the Arabian Peninsula as inherently “exceptional” or “aberrant” in the world order. This article resists such a framing and positions Qatar and the UAE as places that can, without qualification, inform the broader literature on commercial nationalism. Anything but political aberrations, they are simultaneously unique and ordinary – like any country from which social scientists might draw examples. An important political agenda in employing this case study approach, therefore, is to de-exceptionalize prevailing narratives about Gulf political economy and political geography (Vora and Kanna 2018; Vora and Koch 2015).

Wherever scholars might look, they will find that nationalist rhetoric and symbols pervade daily life. But nationalist discourse is especially visible during celebrations and holidays (Fuller 2004). Spatially and temporally intensifying these wider processes, holidays can make these processes more legible for scholars. Accordingly, this article is centered on the advertising, media,

and other semiotic landscapes surrounding the annual National Day holidays in Qatar and the UAE. Contextualized by participant observation during the December 2013 and 2014 celebrations in Doha and Abu Dhabi, I analyze newspaper stories and advertisements in the countries' main English-language outlets (*The National*, *Abu Dhabi Week*, and *Gulf News* in the UAE, and *Doha News*, *The Peninsula*, and *Gulf Times* in Qatar) (compiled in a database consisting of approximately 375 separate items, available with the password "national" at: <http://nataliekoch.com/gndp/>).¹

Moving well beyond the early interventions on celebration cultures in the Middle East led by Elie Podeh (2011), a substantial body of work has examined expressions of nationalism in the Arabian Peninsula – albeit still tending to focus on its “ethnic” variants. As such, my goal in this article is to further diversify this literature by examining nationalist expressions that do not only hail an imagined “ethnic national,” but also the cosmopolitan “expat” figure – whom I and others have recently shown to be key audiences in contemporary articulations of nationalism in the Gulf region (Koch 2016; Ledstrup 2019; MacLean 2017; Mitchell and Allagui 2019). Analytically, this has entailed a focus on English-language sources, which are geared toward this immensely diverse population of noncitizens. Although much of the advertising landscape is shared across English and Arabic outlets, with the former perhaps featuring more international companies, the English-language sources were of special interest for this research insofar as they offer an important lens on “civic” nationalist discourses in the contemporary Gulf states. As we shall see, the semiotic landscapes of Qatar and the UAE have particular nuances, but I argue that local trends are, in many ways, typical of how corporate actors around the world routinely transcend domestic/foreign borders and, in so doing, essentialize the “nation” and *produce* nationalism – alongside their own commercial interests.

Commercial nationalism

Economic geographers and others have always foregrounded corporate actors in their research, but disciplinary silos have meant that few from that subfield have explicitly engaged with the vast body of work on nationalism in political geography. Likewise, in reflecting on the concept of economic nationalism over 15 years ago, Andreas Pickel (2003:114) noted a trend that remains true today: “While the relationship between state and nation is a mainstay of the literature on nationalism, it has paid relatively little attention to the relationship between the nation and the economy. In part, this is a result of an unfortunate division of labour between students of nationalism and students of political economy.” Commercial nationalism, which is slightly broader framing of economic nationalism, remains a potentially fruitful topic to unite scholars in both subfields.

Achieving cross-subfield dialogue is goal in itself, but doing so may also help to sharpen geographers' critical stance on the production of nationalism more broadly. Researchers in political geography and political economy, past and present, have a shared suspicion of capitalism and nationalism, given both ideological systems' uniquely destructive and exclusionary potential (Jessop 2019; Joronen 2013; Murphy 2013). Since few geographers have engaged with the

¹ It would have been ideal to conduct interviews related to the advertising decisions discussed here, but due to limits on free speech in local newspapers, as well as the political nature of the National Day holidays, I was not able to identify respondents willing to speak on the record – though I have had many informal discussions with colleagues in the press and corporate circles over many years of working in the Gulf states, which serve as a backdrop for my broader interpretations here. There is insufficient space to elaborate here, but I have discussed these issues at length elsewhere (see Koch 2013, 2016, 2019).

literature on commercial nationalism, I explore what this work can contribute to articulating a more critical stance on nationalism. What happens to the core questions and assumptions of political geographies of nationalism – long centering citizens and public officials as the primary actors – if we instead highlight the role of companies and other market-based actors in mobilizing nationalist rhetoric?

Within nationalism studies, the interdisciplinary research on “commercial nationalism” shows how actors at various scales draw on nationalist discursive repertoires along two co-constituting uses: (a) to sell products, and (b) to promote nationalist agendas via commercial strategies (Volčič and Andrejevic 2016:2). “Nation branding” – one scalar iteration of a broader literature on place branding, is perhaps the best known thread of this work in the social sciences (e.g. Aronczyk 2013; Browning and Ferraz de Oliveira 2017; Cooke 2014; Saunders 2017; Volčič and Andrejevic 2011, 2016). Exercises in nation branding essentially mobilize nationalist narratives and imaginaries “as a competitive resource to narrate distinction and difference in global settings,” with the brand working “to manage and control this resource and create distinction and difference” (Aronczyk 2013:11), and often with private consultants supporting a government-defined agenda. Fitting into the latter use of promoting nationalism via corporate tactics, the actors considered most relevant in research on nation branding are still the citizen-subjects and public officials (corporately inclined or allied as they may be), who are framed as the primary authors and consumers of these campaigns.

There is comparatively less writing on how explicitly-defined corporate actors use nationalism to sell certain products, though a number of scholars have made important contributions in this vein in research on topics such as tourism (Frew and White 2011; White 2017) and food (Ichijo and Ranta 2016; Klumbyte 2010; Özkan and Foster 2005). Meanwhile, a handful of studies have taken a broader tack and have considered a wide range of commercial practices that are promoted via nationalist rhetoric, symbols, etc., (Aronczyk 2013; Foster 2002; James 1983; Kalinina 2017; Kania-Lundholm 2014; Kemper 1993; Molnár 2016; Pickel 2003; Seliverstova 2017). As these scholars show, when drawing on nationalist discourse and imagery, practices of consumption can be just as intentional as thoughtless. But even the latter shopping practices, “despite being performed in a mindless manner, contribute to the reproduction of nationalism” (Castelló and Mihelj 2018:568).

In analyzing the more intentional end of this spectrum, scholars have explored the role of commercial nationalism in promoting – and effectively working to normalize – the more virulent or chauvinist strains of nationalism within some countries, such as Virág Molnár’s (2016) analysis of “Greater Hungary” imagery used by far-right groups to promote their exclusivist vision of an ethnically-defined Hungarian nation. She notes a dizzying array of products that have popped up since the early 2000s, ranging from car bumper stickers to key chains, decals, magnets, pins, socks, baseball caps, wall clocks, liquor flasks, toys and board games, and even Greater Hungary-shaped cakes (Molnár 2016:50). Kitschy and playful as many of these consumables are, “once they are turned into banal everyday objects and are circulated through differentiated consumer markets, they contribute to the normalization of radical politics simply by their sheer presence and visibility” (Molnár 2016:51). Elsewhere, Karen Culcasi (2016a, 2016b) has noted a similar dynamic in the knick-knacks and other commercial products circulating among Palestinian Jordanians, as well as those associated with the “Jordan First” campaign – each drawing on a contested mapping of a particular territory and inscribing this through something as seemingly innocuous as a key chain. Individuals may relate to these items in diverse ways, but the overarching effect – as with so many commodities – is, through visual and material saturation, to naturalize the

relations that call it into being, to set them outside conversation, and to reduce them to an easily consumable identity narrative.

Ekaterina Kalinina (2017) has also scrutinized the far-right nationalist consumerism, but through the case of fashion in Russia, where there is now a large market for clothes decorated with the Russian flag, images of Vladimir Putin, traditional folk motifs, and so forth. In analyzing these products as a platform for pro-Putin propaganda, Kalinina shows how certain designers have successfully staked their careers in positioning their fashion lines with this nationalist imagery as the main selling point. Treated as a branding opportunity for designers, the avowedly anti-Western version of Russian nationalism expressed by these designers is being sold to willing buyers – in Kalinina’s framing, “consumer-patriots” who see their fashion choices as both making a political statement and an active choice to support the domestic economy. This is not very different, she suggests, from the broader phenomenon of “consumer citizenship” or “consumer nationalism” that scholars have explored in other contexts, such as wartime consumption behaviors promoted in the United States and Britain, but also more mundane practices of the everyday (Castelló and Mihelj 2018; Cohen 2003; Edensor 2002; Foster 2002; Klumbyte 2010; Mazzarella 2003; McGovern 1998; Seliverstova 2017).

Scholars of commercial nationalism recognize that it is difficult to assess the extent to which consumer citizenship is “effective,” i.e. whether “consumer-patriots” are true believers or blind trend-followers. This is the case with all nationalist performances, however, and the primary reason that nationalism scholars today prioritize practice-based methods, which focus on how nationalist discourse is expressed, materially and rhetorically, who wins and who loses by drawing on it, and what kinds of political relations get constructed in and through its use (Wedeen 1999). Yet observers still often assume that the consumerist practices associated with commercial nationalism are some kind of adulteration of a “more real” (i.e. less commercial) citizen identity, or that commercializing nationalist rhetoric and symbols automatically makes it less authentic (e.g. Kong and Yeoh 1997:235). These assumptions are problematic for various reasons, but most of all because they reinforce the sanctified status that nationalists work so hard to construct. Rather than seeing consumer citizenship as a “less real” citizen identity, Özkan and Foster (2005) approach it as just one means of producing a common national identity narrative – the medium of doing so simply being through shared consumption practices. They elaborate:

Consumer citizenship [...] is facilitated by the dissemination of images and artifacts that objectify the nation as an imagined community of consumption. State agencies, corporate entities, and special interest groups all variously participate (and sometimes compete) in creating and circulating such images and artifacts. This process of objectification entails a convergence between consumption and citizenship or national belonging. (Özkan and Foster 2005:np)

Scholars of commercial nationalism recognize that there is nothing inherently new about these processes. Rather, the literature focuses on the “constellation of inter-relations they designate, one that takes on different shapes in different regional contexts, while simultaneously responding to economic and cultural shifts related to international capitalism” (Volčič and Andrejevic 2016:2). Those differing regional contexts are why political geography is an especially important aspect of this analytic work:

Like nationalism in general, economic nationalism is not adequately conceptualised as idea or doctrine, since nationalism is at the same time always – integrative or

contentious – political action. That is, specific political actors and their problem situations must be explicitly taken into account when explaining economic nationalisms. Nationalism as economic ideology and as political action occur within particular national and transnational economic, political and cultural systems. Economic nationalism as an idea or policy, therefore, cannot be explained or evaluated outside of such historical contexts. (Pickel 2003:122)

Research on commercial nationalism helps students of political geography and political economy alike to tease apart these shifting relations between actors in all social sectors – whether they are publicly- or privately-defined, individuals, corporations, or any number of formal or informal communities.

The point of this literature is to foreground the *analysis* of specific corporate actors, but without implying any sort of *ontological* preeminence in the rhetoric and processes surrounding nationalism by recognizing that “nation making is always and everywhere an ongoing concern and that it proceeds with different emphases at different times” (Foster 2002:13). Nationalism in any given context will consist of different narrative threads or scripts. The imaginaries produced through commercial nationalism are thus heterodox and, as Castelló and Mihelj (2018:566) emphasize, “whether political or cultural, are rarely if ever consensual. Rather, they are marked by an ongoing contestation over what it means to belong to a nation.” Yet as contested as any one narrative of national identity may be, the role of such commodities and consumables is that their proprietors regard them as “material evidence of an essential national cultural identity. National culture, in other words, emerges as a collection of collectively held things, the discrete, bounded objectivity of which tangibly replicates the conceptual form of the nation itself” (Foster 2002:66).

In training the analytical lens on corporate actors, thinking through the concept of commercial nationalism draws our attention to the relationship between corporate and non-corporate actors and ideas, and how it is that different emphases arise at different times and in different contexts. Methodologically, this means examining a wide range of sites, texts, and practices – both ephemeral and more fixed. In addition to products, such as those already noted, this can include corporate advertisements. Scholars examining advertising and other media have tended to have one of two foci: some are more concerned with the intent of the advertisers or the consumers, while others, like Foster (2002:66) are more concerned “with the rhetorical form common to all ads,” and the way that they “transfer meaning to the commodities that they publicize.” Even though scholars and observers frequently discuss advertisers or “the media” or “the government” as homogeneous actors, it is important to note that not all actors that fall within these categories are “equipped with equal resources to make their version of the nation stick” (Foster 2002:5) and, likewise, that “the ability to consciously invest in consumer nationalism will also be restricted by the individual’s socio-economic standing and her or his access to goods more generally” (Castelló and Mihelj 2018:570). There are, in short, material constraints on the extent and manner in which various individuals and groups are able to participate in the financial, political, symbolic economy of commercial nationalism. This is readily apparent in the cases of Qatar and the UAE.

The corporate production of nationalism

Qatar and the UAE: Citizenship economies, corporations, and the state

Qatar and the UAE are small countries, both territorially and demographically. Their estimated populations currently sit at 2.6 and 9.4 million people – of whom only about 10 percent are citizens. Local *jus sanguinis* citizenship regimes mean that non-Qataris and non-Emiratis are not able to naturalize. The remaining 90 percent of the countries' populations are noncitizen residents, who might stay for a few months or years, or have perhaps spent their entire lives there. Temporary residency permits define these individuals' status, but there is nothing particularly "temporary" about the system. Local governments, ruling families, and citizens (all overlapping categories) benefit in numerous ways from this citizenship arrangement and, except for a few ethnic nationalist strains of critique that bubble up on occasion or among certain circles, it is abundantly clear that local economies depend on maintaining this large presence of noncitizen residents. Some of these individuals are the poorly paid laborers who receive a great deal of Western media attention, but far more are lower-middle, middle, and upper class workers (all of whom I will refer to as "expats", following local terms).

Residents of all these classes maintain the demand for a wide range of products and services and, crucially, fuel Gulf cities' housing and commercial real estate markets. Incomes are not taxed, but the consumption practices and other spending patterns of noncitizens represent a significant financial boon for the Qatari and Emirati governments, the citizen-nationals who control their revenues, as well as their noncitizen allies in all sectors. These Gulf expat populations may not be temporary, but nor are they necessarily permanent. On this account, then, it may be a stretch to define this configuration as "consumer citizenship," as in Cohen's (2003) characterization of how citizenship practices came to be defined through mass consumption in postwar America. Nonetheless, those in charge of the governmental imaging apparatuses in Qatar and the UAE are clearly aware of the importance of promoting some form of belonging among the expat populations (Koch 2016; Vora and Koch 2015). Government policy here aligns closely with the corporate sector – few actors in the Gulf states want to see these workers take their money and their labor elsewhere.

The divide between government and corporate goals, while fictitious in any context, is especially muddied in the Gulf states. A complex web of ownership structures range from being fully state- or royal-family-owned to semi-state-owned parastatals to being privately-owned but thoroughly dependent on large state subsidies or contacts (see Hanieh 2018; Ulrichsen 2016). Furthermore, outside of certain free zones, legal codes require that most private companies have a citizen "sponsor" who is a 51 percent owner, typically on paper only. Large international companies are not subject to the same rules, but their activities are nonetheless bound by certain conditions of doing business in the Gulf region, which can be immensely lucrative. So unlike Gulf parastatal entities, these companies may not have direct ownership ties to the governments or royal families, but they are often the favorites for outsized and lavishly-funded state projects. Compared to elsewhere in the world, the possibility for winning a bid for such a project is much higher in a place like Qatar or the UAE, and where profits are to be found, corporate actors are invariably astute at navigating the political terms of reaping them. It is to these political terms, then, that I turn. It is simple enough to observe that corporate actors play by the discursive rules of the game, but what role do they play in actually *producing* nationalism? And what kind of subjectivities do they facilitate or call into being through engaging in commercial nationalism?

Corporate National Day advertisements

Participating in the rhetorical flourishes of National Day celebrations in Qatar or the UAE is not officially mandated, but the semiotic landscapes surrounding the holidays suggest a strict

conformity on the part of corporate actors. Among the most visible examples of this are the full- or half-page advertisements, following a standard template seen in the figures accompanying this article online (**Figure B**). These sponsored ads congratulate the royal families and the people on the holiday, with only slight variations on the text seen in one example from Ericsson:

On the occasion of **Qatar National Day, 18th of December** and in remembrance of the historic day in 1878 when Sheikh Jassim Bin Mohammed Bin Thani, founder of the State of Qatar, set up the pillars of the Modern State of Qatar, We extend our heartfelt congratulations and greetings to High Highness **Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani**, Father Emir [and] High Highness **Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani**, Emir of the State of Qatar, and to all the honorable people of Qatar. We hope for more returns of this memorable occasion and wish that Qatar always enjoys security, welfare and prosperity under the wise leadership of High Highness the Emir.



Figure B. National Day advertisements paying tribute to the royal family leadership. Source: Fair use.

Ads from Bechtel (a major US engineering and construction company), DeBoer (a Dutch/German company specializing in temporary structures), and the ENSRV group of multinationals and state-backed enterprises (including Carrier, Bourbon Gulf, Brookfield Multiplex Medgulf, Medgulf

Construction, TRAGS) all include identical wording. The parallel advertisements in the UAE, which are just as ubiquitous, follow the same pattern. An example from the French aircraft manufacturer, Dassault Aviation, reads:

We are honored to Congratulate High Highness Shaikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the UAE, Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces and Ruler of Abu Dhabi and High Highness Shaikh Mohammad Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President, Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, and Their Highnesses Supreme Council Members and Rulers of the Emirates and High Highness Shaikh Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces On the Occasion of the 43rd National Day. Wishing the Nation more prosperity and progress under their wise leadership.

An Al-Futtaim Motors/Toyota ad congratulates the same individuals, but also names “the people of the UAE” and closes with a slightly different proclamation: “May this occasion bring progress, glory, and prosperity to the people of the United Arab Emirates.” In some cases, the backgrounds are slightly more dramatic, as with the Dassault and ENSRV ads, but most often, they are a simple standard national color, the flag, or a silhouette of the capital city’s skyline.

These advertisements begin to appear in the newspapers several weeks before National Day, but on the holiday itself, the paper consists almost entirely of them and a range of other advertisements, such as those shown online (**Figures C-E**). Some ads are less formulaic and overtly obsequious than others, but they nonetheless follow a pattern: a major international company (McDonald’s, Turkish Airlines, Mercedes-Benz, LG) “congratulates” the UAE or simply “celebrates” the National Day holiday. Ads for domestic brands are also patterned, centering on a message of being “proud to be Emirati” (**Figure D**). While not using these words explicitly, one advertisement for Falcon Pack, a distributor of disposable food packaging products headquartered in Sharjah, evokes its Emirati roots through a pervasive use of national colors and substituting an Emirati flag for what would otherwise be aluminum foil spinning out of the box in the ad’s visual centerpiece. At bottom, the Head Office in Sharjah is explicitly noted, while the branches in neighboring countries are named and marked with small and clearly subordinated national flags. Although the Falcon Pack example emphasizes its Emirateness, this advertisement is more explicitly about a particular product rather than the National Day Holiday itself.

Other companies, including a mix of domestic and foreign firms, however, center the holiday by advertising various sales and promotions associated with it (**Figure E**). Sometimes these will follow simple promotional schemes, but other times, they will include some kind of numerical twist, such as some percentage off of a product based on the year of independence that is being celebrated (as in the Clarks and PlayStation examples). In Qatar, National Day falls on the 18th of December, so many advertisers use the number 18. For example, one such promotion involved a 18-fold increase in mobile data for customers of Ooredoo, Qatar’s de facto national mobile phone company, which is headed by a member of the ruling Al Thani family. The offer was reported in an article in *The Peninsula*, which suggested that it would “enable customers to share pictures and videos of National Day celebrations on social media, and stay in touch with friends around the world,” and also encouraged customers to “share reasons why they love Qatar on its special webpage – www.weareallqatar.com – or by Tweeting their messages with the hashtag #weareallqatar” (*The Peninsula* 2013b:8). As in so many countries where holidays are heavily



Figure C. National Day advertisements from foreign companies. Source: Fair use.



Figure D. National Day advertisements for Emirati companies. Source: Fair use.



Figure E. National Day advertisements for various products. Source: Fair use.

commercialized, National Day promotions abound in nearly every sector in Qatar and the UAE. Malls have an endless parade of events to bring shoppers in for the holiday, and the examples given here just scratch the surface of the kinds of goods and services that are marketed around the holidays – from the most ephemeral like buttons, kitschy car decorations, flags, food, and fitness memberships to the more lasting commodities like electronics, vehicles, and real estate.

It is common for advertisers to use the language and symbols of nationalism in any country. But these advertisements demonstrate how foreign and domestic companies are working within the parameters of a particular discursive environment in Qatar and the UAE. Like any discourse, there are codes and conformities, many of which are unspoken and performed as ritual. In the Gulf, companies of all origin and composition participate in this National Day advertising ritual, including the ostensibly most independent internationals and the fully- and partly-state-owned entities. In my sample for Qatar, for example, the latter consisted of ads from Qatar Petroleum, Katara Hospitality, Qatar Airways, Qatar 2022 Supreme Committee, Qatar National Bank, and more. Working from the basic assumptions of research on nationalism, the participation of such companies in this nationalist ritual would appear to be logical, due to their tight association with the state and the nationalist ideals that are written into their and mission statements and the government agendas of which they are a part.

Yet, in many ways, it is no less logical to find that international companies do so as well: furthering the success of the “nation” may not be written into their corporate visions, but securing profits where they do business certainly is fundamental to their *modus operandi*. Paul James (1983) makes this point forcefully in one of the earliest studies on commercial nationalism, through his analysis of the North American oil company, Esso, and its advertising in Australia. For international companies doing business abroad, speaking to nationalist concerns is actually an extremely important terrain to master – especially for those engaged in extractive industries like oil drilling. James thus shows how Esso worked to frame its activities as *supporting* Australian sovereignty, rather than undermining it. Analyzing one advertisement from 1978, he explains:

After being mystified by the heading, “Esso’s search for oil is more than just a search for oil”, we are informed that “It’s a search for the answer to Australia’s oil energy independence”. It is only a short connotative step to the equation: Esso’s role in Australia equals Australia’s independence *per se*. Self-sufficiency in oil, and by implication Esso’s exploration, are posed as necessary for Australian national independence in general. The paradox that “we” depend on an American transnational to guarantee national sovereignty is bypassed in a number of ways. The advertisement assumes the importance of Esso’s historical place in Australia while questioning the future: “It has been important in the past, now it’s vital to Australia’s future.” (James 1983:94)

The effect of the message, he suggests is to give the impression that Esso is not an “outsider,” but “speaks as an interest entrenched ‘here’” (James 1983:94). If a company’s activities might, in some way, challenge dominant narratives about state or national sovereignty, commercial nationalism can be mobilized to prevent, skirt, or otherwise deflect potential criticisms. Yet international corporate advertisers are “not so much making false connections between a foreign company and an indigenous national heritage, as presenting the indigenous activities of the transnational as both naturally in its host’s national interest, and naturally part of its host’s national mythology” (James 1983:84).

The idea that corporate activities might challenge a state or a people's sovereignty is a hallmark of economic and resource nationalism, but the isolationist theme that most commonly runs through these narratives is not ubiquitous (Koch and Perreault 2019; Pickel 2003). Yet as Castelló and Mihelj (2018:569) argue, "the imbrications of the national and the global in consumption processes become even more pronounced when global corporations themselves incorporate the national at various levels of production and distribution." The intensified globalization of commodity markets has thus led, they suggest, to an even stronger relevance of commercial nationalism, which acts as "a mediator that ties products that could otherwise be perceived as foreign to localized practices of nation-making" (Castelló and Mihelj 2018:569). The corporate advertising related to National Day, while existing on a different plane and invoked for different reasons, is nonetheless a similar form of tribute. The endless parade of ritual advertisements – hardly a sound investment in terms of revenue generated – is nonetheless economical for companies because it affords them an opportunity to do business, albeit on terms defined by the state.

Those who place these National Day advertisements are acquiescing to a particular subject position: one that is willing and dutiful vis-à-vis the state. In his research on the USSR, Malte Rolf (2013:166) shows how nationalist rituals were an important opportunity for the Soviet leaders "to demonstrate the whole power of a regime and to document its will to thoroughly rule society." Celebration cultures were essentially "a question of the power to mobilize others" (Rolf 2013:166), and showcasing the state's ability to do so effectively is a core aspect of what is at play in the ritualistic advertisements for the Gulf National Days. Rolf and other scholars of authoritarian spectacle (e.g. Adams 2010; Mazzarella 2015; Koch 2018; Wedeen 1999) also show how these public displays are effective at making visible social and political hierarchies, and showing "individuals their particular place in it," as well as "correct" behaviors within that order (Rolf 2013:167). The ritual advertisements that glorify the royal families are thus an important way to communicate a company's willingness to serve as an obedient subject of the state, and to demonstrate their awareness of their place in local social and political hierarchies. While the ads focusing on products or sales may appear less overtly obsequious, they all work together to extend the reach of the nationalist rhetoric.

One significant result of the advertising practices of these firms (and of course the newspapers themselves) is thus that they bolster and lend credibility to prevailing nationalist tropes and ideals in Qatar and the UAE. Like all good nationalist orators, "In addressing the imagined national audience, they dress it in rhetorical finery and, then, [...] hold a mirror so the nation can admire itself" (Billig 1995:98). In this sense, Qatari and Emirati regimes do not so much "enlist" the support of corporate actors in producing nationalist discourse; rather, they set the stage for them to "go willingly" (Adams 2010:187) or "recruit themselves through everyday acts of 'national' resonance" (Kemper 1993:17). Corporate actors are key to perpetuating nationalist narratives, but it is important to note that they are not merely passive conduits in the process. James is emphatic on this point, noting of Esso, like many other multinational advertisers deploying a particular nationalist script, that "they do not merely draw upon it, but have become central in maintaining and reconstructing its significance" (James 1983:99). That is, commercial nationalism does not merely channel preexisting narratives; it works to actively constitute particular narratives. Corporate actors help to shape their direction and influence which storylines prevail over others. Far from existing in some separate sphere, commercial nationalism is indeed core to the internal machinery driving the production of dominant nationalist imaginaries.

Corporate National Day celebrations

For Qatar's National Day in 2013, *The Peninsula* newspaper carried numerous articles and photo-essays about the celebrations sponsored by foreign, domestic, and mixed enterprises, illustrated in **Figures 1-2**. In these, we see copious images of Qatari and expat workers smiling together in their tidy uniforms, national dress, or with special National Day paraphernalia, such as the ubiquitous themed scarves "Qatari Diar hails 'One Love' theme with a 'Thank You'", "Employees of Qatargas celebrate at Winter Camp," proclaim the headlines in Figure 1. And in Figure 2, Regency Travel and Tours, Katara, Ritz-Carlton, and Total are all profiled for their holiday festivities. These stories-cum-advertisements are unabashedly congratulatory and draw heavily from the imagery, colors, and other fetishized symbols of Qatari nationalism. Some companies advertised their charity for the holiday, such as Commercial Bank, ostensibly the country's first private bank established in 1975, which distributed gifts to the elderly and the Qatar Orphan Foundation, as well as bank-branded National Day badges to visitors of Doha's ultra-posh Katara retail and entertainment complex. Many activities showcase a confluence between the public and private sector actors, such as with the Qatar Tourism Authority hosting a competition for the best decorated hotel front. As seen in Figure 2, Ritz-Carlton was one participant, among countless others, which also have extravagant cakes to celebrate.

The emotive and visual feast put on display through these stories is characteristic of nationalist displays writ large. But like (and paired with) the ritual advertisements discussed above, these articles follow a strict formula whereby the worker and the company, the consumer and the producer, the citizens and noncitizens, are portrayed as coming together through their joy, their labor, and their celebration of the nation. In 2013, Qatar's National Day theme of "One Love" stressed citizen/expat unity (Koch 2016, 2019), and the newspaper coverage sampled in Figures 1-2 illustrates how corporate actors actively advanced this script – both rhetorically and materially. This is readily apparent in a *Peninsula* article on Qatari Diar (a real estate investment company established by the country's sovereign wealth fund, the Qatar Investment Authority) in Figure 2. The story tells how the company and one of its investment partners, Lusail City, are "embracing this year's National Day theme of 'One Love' by saying a huge 'Thank You' to their workforce" with a buffet lunch at their headquarters for a "group of construction workers, representing the many nationalities employed by the organization." Qatari Diar CEO, Khaled Al Sayed, is quoted as saying:

In line with this year's theme, "One Love", we'd like to thank and present our sincere wishes to the Emir H H Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and to his Father Emir H H Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani. We'd also like to thank the Qatari people and our workers, who come from 34 different countries, for successfully working together to contribute to the future of Qatar. Some of our construction workers from many different nationalities have spent many years with us and are doing a great job. We are proud of our diverse workforce and very grateful for what they have achieved together, they deserve a big thank you from all of us. (quoted in *The Peninsula* 2013c:5)

The article about Qatargas worker celebrations pull from the very same script, acclaiming the activities offered at the event, beginning with the national anthem and followed by a traditional sword dance, poetry, and distributing "special National Day gifts including flags and scarves" to employees – who are described as representing "over 60 nationalities from across the world."



Qatari Diar hails 'One Love' theme with a 'Thank You'

QATARI Diar and Lusail City are embracing this year's National Day theme of 'One Love' by saying a huge 'Thank You' to their workforce. A group of construction workers, representing the many nationalities employed by the organisation, were invited to the Qatari Diar Head office in Lusail for a buffet lunch on December 12.

Qatari Diar Group CEO, Khaled Al Sayed, said: "In line with this year's theme, 'One Love', we'd like to thank and present our sincere wishes to the Emir H H Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and to his Father Emir H H Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani.

We'd also like to thank the Qatari people and our workers, who come from 34 different countries, for successfully working together to contribute to the future of Qatar. Some of our construction workers from many different nationalities have spent many years with us and are doing a great job. We are proud of our diverse workforce and very grateful for what they have achieved together, they deserve a big thank you from all of us."

A large number of projects have been implemented in Doha and Qatari Diar, with Lusail City representatives, hosted this event, to recognise these accomplishments, which they largely attribute to their construction workers.

Qatari Diar has always placed a high value on the welfare of its construction workers, and wanted to take this opportunity to acknowledge their hard work, Al Sayed added.

Qatari Diar's construction workforce consists of a wide range of nationalities who were instrumental in the significant achievements accomplished in the development of Qatar.

Qatari Diar and Lusail City have joined the Corniche celebrations showcasing their latest developments for Lusail City in the "Qatar's Future's Tent" which will be on display from December 15 to 18.

The Peninsula

Employees of Qatargas celebrate at Winter Camp

HUNDREDS of Qatargas employees participated in the special 'National Day Celebration' organised by the Company at its Winter Camp in the Sealine area on Friday. Members of the company's management leadership team attended the celebration, along with specially invited guests.

Commenting on this occasion, Qatargas Public Relations Manager Mansour Rashid Al Naimi said: "This celebration has been organised by Qatargas to recognise the importance of National Day. This national occasion is a symbol of our dignity and reflects our happiness and pride in belonging to this great nation. This celebration is also part of our corporate social responsibility and represents our participation with the local community in celebrating national occasions. The event also provides an opportunity for Qatargas employees, both nationals and expatriates to celebrate Qatar's National Day in the company of their colleagues and friends."

The event began with the National



Anthem. There was a special 'Arha' performance (traditional sword dance) and a poetry recital session during which local poets recited patriotic poems. Special National Day gifts including flags and scarves were distributed at the event. Qatargas employees represent over 60 nationalities from

across the world and this event provided them an opportunity to learn more about the history and traditions of their host country. Several expatriate employees came from Doha and Al Khor to participate in the event and express their happiness on this important occasion.

The Peninsula

Sharq Village and Spa gears up for hospitality

ON the occasion of Qatar's National Day, Sharq Village and Spa weaves together the experiences of Arabian hospitality to create a warm and welcoming sense of traditional Qatari home life.

Sharq Village and Spa joins in the festivities with a special decoration themed in the colours of the National flag. From the moment guests enter the hotel, they will be greeted by the ladies and gentlemen who will be dressed in the traditional Qatari national "Thoab" and "Nashi", and served coffee in the true sense of Qatari hospitality.

Prior to this propitious event, Sharq Village and Spa organised a cake-cutting ceremony for guests where the hotel showcased the heritage of this country by inviting a Qatari folklore band, falcon man and henna lady to make it a memorable celebration for locals, as well as hotel guests, and residents.

"Qatar National Day is a national commemoration of Qatar's unification and independence and is celebrated on December 18 every year," said Carsten Fritz, General Manager of Sharq Village and Spa. "We are proud to be a part of the community in Doha and National Day provides the perfect platform for us to celebrate with our guests," added Fritz.

The culinary brigade will extend an unadulterated Khaleeji dining experience to hotel residents during this celebration. Chef Hassan Abdallah executive chef at Sharq Village and Spa will offer a selection of Qatari dishes in Al Uwan, while Stephen Espouy, executive pastry chef, will be presenting a delectable display of pastries designed to reflect this precious occasion at Al Jalsa lounge.

The Peninsula

Carnegie Mellon community

IN THE spirit of Qatar's National Day on December 18, Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar's Qatari Student Association (QSA) recently hosted Qatari Day. QSA is a student-led organisation that highlights Qatar's culture, heritage and tradition for the Carnegie Mellon community. During the event held on campus, students and faculty celebrated by dressing up in traditional Qatari attire for a fashion contest, sampling traditional food, applying henna, and participating in cultural sword dancing.

Carnegie Mellon hosts a variety of cultural offerings throughout the academic year, including International Day, the Tartan Carnival and yearly exchange programs between students in Qatar and the United States. The Peninsula

Figure 1. Articles marking corporate-sponsored National Day celebrations. Source: Fair use.



Figure 2. Articles marking corporate-sponsored National Day celebrations. Source: Fair use.

Similar to the Qatari Diar CEO's proclamation, the Qatargas PR Manager, Mansour Rashid Al Naim, describes the event as follows:

"This celebration has been organised by Qatargas to recognise the importance of National Day. This national occasion is a symbol of our dignity and reflects our happiness and pride in belonging to this great nation. This celebration is also part of our corporate social responsibility and represents our participation with the local community in celebrating national occasions. The event also provides an opportunity for Qatargas employees, both nationals and expatriates to celebrate Qatar's National Day in the company of their colleagues and friends." (*The Peninsula* 2013a:5)

In addition to the CEO's framing of the celebration as a kind of "corporate social responsibility," the article emphasizes its educational, and notes that some traveled quite a distance to "express their happiness on this important occasion." Like the ritual advertisements discussed above, these events and the media accounts of them are not just the domain of parastatal and state-owned enterprises. *The Peninsula* also reported on the celebrations sponsored by the French oil and gas company, Total. An entire week of activities was planned, "all with the aim of promoting the national spirit among everyone within the company." The activities included activities for employee children, arts competitions, special meals with a dress code described as "anything that represents Qatar," and the distribution of "small Qatari gifts." A company leader is again quoted, here Total's Managing Director, Stephane Michel:

We would like to congratulate all the Qataris on occasion of their National Day, and we wish them continued strength, happiness and prosperity. It's amazing to see every single person participating in the National Day celebrations, by either wearing the national dress, or by display of Qatari traditional items, and thus honoring the rich traditions of Qatar. This helps to promote a sense of unity among both Qataris and non-Qataris. (quoted in *The Peninsula* 2013d)

These articles are all evocative and demonstrate the careful discursive coordination discussed already. And though they fall outside the scope of this article, the celebrations themselves also point to the important role of commercial nationalism in concretely materializing a particular relationship between companies, workers, and the state.

In what are already decidedly paternalist power relations, the companies' practice of adorning the bodies of their employees bears a striking resemblance to how children are so often dressed up and paraded about during national holidays – both in the Gulf states and so many other countries in the world. Yet these joyous and aesthetically impressive displays of nationalism work to deflect attention or criticism from the perversity of an inherently uneven power dynamic (Koch 2015). "Affection mitigates domination, making it softer and more acceptable, but affection itself is possible only in relationships of inequality," Yi-Fu Tuan (1984:5) reminds us in *Dominance and Affection*, "It is the warm and superior feeling one has toward things that one can care for and patronize."

Neither companies nor workers are free-floating actors in this paternalist web: the National Day events are at once about companies patronizing their workers, and the companies affirming their own submission to the political configuration of a state that is their patron. As with the advertisements, the sponsored National Day celebrations are another platform for corporate actors to communicate their company's willingness to serve as an obedient subject of the state and acknowledge their recognition of proper behavior in the prevailing social and political hierarchies in Qatar and the UAE. The companies are again seen here serving as both a conduit for official nationalism and as active participants in defining the terms of that nationalism by bolstering this dominant narrative, giving it substance through helping to decorate workers, children, cakes, and hotel fronts – and to ensure that it is photographed and disseminated widely through media partners.

The literature on commercial nationalism has largely focused on how corporate actors help to advance a kind of consumer citizenship and has examined how consumers themselves come to internalize and otherwise perform a national identity through their spending behaviors and commercial decisions. The cases from Qatar and the UAE add another layer to this issue, though,

because in getting the workers to participate in the National Day celebrations and treating kitschy nationalist ephemera as “gifts” or a kind of charity, we see that companies and their leaders will also seek the same sort of affirmation that an individual might take in performing the “good” subject position that is rewarded in any economy of nationalism. That is, nationalisms everywhere frequently work through a kind of positive reinforcement that is intensely pleasurable (Koch 2016). For companies, this positive reinforcement will tend to come in the form of profits, but this calculus may be more spatially diffuse or on a longer time horizon. Although the diverse corporate practices of mobilizing nationalist scripts operate at different scales than individuals doing so, the support that domestic and foreign companies offer – both through adding their names to the display or actually coordinating bodies and material aspects of a particular display – are ultimately productive of state power in Qatar and the UAE, spoken and experienced through the language of nationalism.

“Commercial technologies of nation making,” Foster (2002:113) notes, “are not that new.” Indeed, this case study should seem quite familiar to most readers. In Qatar and the UAE, the main difference seems to rest in the way that companies must conform to certain political and legal strictures – much of which entails reproducing the nationalist narratives that glorify the countries’ leadership and otherwise reaffirming its official identity narratives. Part of what James (1983:105) sees as long-term corporate advertising campaigns, these practices “begin with, but extend beyond, the goal of engendering a good company image.” While the particular political economy of the Gulf states illuminates the lengths to which corporate actors will go to stay in good graces and to set the stage for potential profits in the future, these patterns are not unique. Commercial nationalism works in the same way in more democratic settings, as well, where discursive rules are just differently configured. The self-aggrandizing rhetoric of actors speaking in the name of liberal democracy almost uniformly frames this in normative terms, typically demonizing the ready conformity of corporations like those internationally headquartered in Europe or the US that participate in the Gulf National Day advertising and celebration rituals. They are dismissed for bolstering corrupt or nondemocratic regimes. On many levels, this is a fair critique. But it should not be taken to mean that they do not do the same thing in ostensibly democratic states. There, instead of glorifying the royal families, they participate in the very same nationalist rhetoric that glorifies notions like freedom and equality to whitewash histories of oppression and ongoing violence (Koch 2017).

Conclusion

In understanding commercial nationalism in the Gulf, it may be that “the primary goal is selling” (Volčič and Andrejević 2016:6), but this article has shown that citizens and consumers are not the only relevant subject positions that are called into being and shaped through the corporate production of nationalism; the subjectivity of noncitizens and companies are also enlisted (and enlist themselves) as subjects of state power defined through nationalist identity politics and territorial borders. By broadening the analytical lens of traditional nationalism studies to explicitly consider corporate actors, students of political geography and political economy can shed light on how the discursive disciplining of nationalism works through a number of channels that fall outside the scope of narrowly-defined public figures, governmental decision-makers, and citizens engaged in identity-making projects. The corporately-defined actors considered here do indeed use nationalism to sell products in the Gulf states, but they also use it to negotiate the complex political, symbolic, and cultural terrain that will allow them to succeed in doing business locally. Returning to my initial question of what happens to the assumptions about nationalism if we highlight market-based actors rather than states and citizens, this article underscores the need

to give much more attention to the economic factors that influence the production of nationalist discourse.

Over the six years that I have been analyzing National Day holidays in Qatar and the UAE, many people have discouraged me from reading too much into the ritual advertisements discussed here – saying that these companies just do this to check a box and move on with business as usual. Such a statement reflects the silent power of nationalism, and of its silencing power: by affirming the state-sanctioned narrative, the corporate actors help it to prevail over alternative visions of identity, place, power, and politics. As Lisa Wedeen (1999:6) notes in her now-classic study of Syria under Hafiz al-Asad, any such monopolization of discourse “clutters public space” and enlists those obliged to reproduce it as “accomplices” upholding those rules and rituals. And here again, the Gulf is in no way exceptional: these are the rules that companies so deftly navigate – and in effect perpetuate – by agreeing to play the game of seeking profits regardless of their political geography. This is significant because companies are rarely taken seriously as producers of nationalism. But as James (1983:84) argued so many years ago, firms are not passively “re-creating” preexisting nationalist imaginaries and storylines; they are actively involved in shaping and advancing them.

The abstract divides that separate democracies from autocracies are also relevant to how these practices have been interpreted in the West – not just by lay observers, but also in academic scholarship on nationalism and spectacle. In the liberal democratic imaginary, spectacle is treated as one of the distinguishing features of authoritarianism (Koch 2018; Mazzarella 2015). The history of this geopolitical imaginary cannot be fully addressed here, but it tied to the history of post-war consumer citizenship that Cohen (2003) details in the US, and is paralleled in various other Western contexts. Recoiling from the ostentatious spectacle of Europe’s fascist regimes, the postwar West began to stigmatize top-down displays of nationalism as totalitarian. Yet nationalism was not completely eradicated: instead, ritual came to unfold through more decentralized practices and with the increasing cooperation with corporate actors, as capitalism was elevated as a core aspect of identity narratives in the Cold War-era West. The result, Rolf (2013:176) suggests, was that festivities in the US essentially had no “center of control working to shape celebrations,” and to the extent that they did become coordinated and professionalized, this was left to private companies. One need only think of the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade or any other form of spectacle in Western states today to recognize the central role of companies in bolstering official or hegemonic nationalisms. Just as the various companies working in Qatar and the UAE participate in nationalist rituals, corporate actors in arguably all countries help to keep them alive. Nationalism is hegemonic in our contemporary geopolitical era and hegemony always works through discipline. In the corporate production of nationalism, we see just one example of how this discipline is exercised through the aspirations of CEOs, corporate boards, government leaders, citizens and noncitizens, as well as the bodies of workers and the material goods and experiences that circulate to allow individuals to feel that they are being respecting social and political hierarchies – if not reveling in the pleasure that comes with performing a good or obedient subject position.

All of this is to say that, the blatantly corporate nature of the semiotic landscapes surrounding Gulf National Days in no way sets them apart. Some scholars, including those of commercial nationalism, would be quick to note that this reflects a kind of neoliberal confluence whereby states are offloading “state tasks” to the corporate sector (e.g. Volčič and Andrejevic 2011:600-602). Yet when considering the nationalist celebrations sponsored and advertised by companies in Qatar and the UAE, we see that there is a far more complex chain of power relations

at work that defies the neat state/nonstate binary that such critiques of neoliberalism posit. Not only are the corporate structures, royal/elite ownership patterns, legal codes and finance spatialities, and mix of foreign/domestic enterprise far muddier (and frankly, impossible to disentangle), but simplistic critiques of neoliberalism also tend to imply a certain nostalgia for a less marketized past. *Yet as the history of political economy in the Arabian Peninsula forcefully reminds us, there was no such past.* And as the history of nationalisms around the world forcefully reminds us, commercialized or not, there is no romantic past that one might identify for *any* nationalist project. As a political doctrine positing an inherent connection between a people and a place, nationalism advances an explicitly static worldview. Whether it is companies, governments, or individuals producing it, nationalism will always be a system built on exclusions – and the diverse forms and potentialities of violence that entails.

Acknowledgements. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Gulf Studies Symposium at the American University of Kuwait, as well as the 13th Annual Northeast Middle East Politics Working Group Meeting in Hamilton College. I am grateful for feedback from discussants and participants at both events. Thanks also to Joe Stoll of the Syracuse Geography Department for his work in digitizing the newspaper data. Research for this article was supported by a Social Sciences Research Council Postdoctoral Fellowship for Transregional Research with funds provided by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, as well as grants from Syracuse University's Geography Department and the Maxwell School for Citizenship and Public Affairs. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in this material are those of the author and do not reflect the views of any granting organization. All errors are my own.

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