

Metaphors to Die for:  
Towards a Rhetoric of  
National Symbols

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# National Symbols...

- fuse the nation to the state
- serve as “bookmarks” to a nation’s history
- “claw back” groups or individuals (Fiske/Hartley)
- establish boundaries and naturalize the nation;
- shore up identity and reaffirm “background reality”
- are subject to challenges, contestations, rewriting, and even erasure over time;
- are extremely context-dependent for meaning.

# Anthony D. Smith

A nation is...

“a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories; a mass, public culture; a common economy; and common legal rights and duties for all members.”

Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity*. 1991, p.14.

## Ernest Renan: “What Is A Nation?”

“a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future. It presupposes a past; it is summarized, however, in the present by a tangible fact, namely, consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life. A nation’s existence is, if you will pardon the metaphor, a daily plebiscite...”

# Permanent recursive communication

# “Bookmark” Function

# Anthony D. Smith

- “flags, anthems, parades, coinage, capital cities, oaths, folk costumes, museums of folklore, war memorials, ceremonies of remembrance for the national dead, passports, frontiers...
- ...national recreations, the countryside, popular heroes and heroines, fairy tales, forms of etiquette, styles of architecture, arts and crafts, modes of town planning, legal procedures, educational practices and military codes – all those distinctive customs, mores, styles and ways of acting and feeling that are shared by the members of a community of historical culture.”

Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity*. p.77.

# Other Potential National Symbols

- The writing system
- National monuments in general
- Stamps (as a collective sub-system)
- Allegorical figures (*Uncle Sam, Marianne*)
- Animals, both real and mythical, (eagle, dragon)
- High culture: literature, music, fine arts, cinema.
- Maps
- Business advertising
- Tourist materials

“Argentina”



“France”



“Spain”

# Top of the Totem Pole: The Flag

[http://www.cfa-inc.org/?section=testimony&subsection=testimony\\_toc&content=testimony\\_bryant](http://www.cfa-inc.org/?section=testimony&subsection=testimony_toc&content=testimony_bryant)

# Reified Memory – Externalized Trauma: National symbols often crystallize around a nation's traumatic events.

- Kosovo Battle, 1389, Serbia (St. Vitus Day)

(cf. Roudometof, in Geisler (ed.): *National Symbols, Fractured Identities*, 2005).

- Remembrance Day, Holocaust Day (Israel)

- Wailing Wall (Israel)

- “The Wall” (Vietnam War Memorial)

- U.S.S. *Arizona*

- Hiroshima Monument

Take national anthems, for example, sung on national holidays. No matter how banal the words and mediocre the tunes, there is in this singing an experience of simultaneity. At precisely such moments, people wholly unknown to each other utter the same verses to the same melody. The image: unisonance [...] the echoed physical realization of the imagined community. [...] How selfless this unisonance feels.

Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 145

***το σύμβολον***

1. Which collective needs are served by nations, nationalism, and national symbols?
2. How do hegemonic structures respond to or manipulate these needs?
3. What are the different **registers** of national symbols?
4. What kinds of counter-hegemonic spaces exist?
5. What other, unofficial 'national symbols' exist in a particular culture and what is the role they play in a culture's national or cultural narrative?

# The “Bardic Mediator”...

(Fiske/Hartley, Reading Television, 1978)

- articulates the main lines of the established cultural consensus about the nature of reality;
- implicates the individual members of the culture into its dominant value systems;
- celebrates, explains, interprets and justifies the doings of the culture’s individual representatives in the world;
- claws back such individuals from any mere eccentricity to a position of socio-centrality
- assures the culture at large of its practical adequacy in the world
- convinces the audience that their status and identity as individuals is guaranteed by the culture as a whole.
- transmits by these means a sense of cultural membership (security and involvement).

# Like mass media, national symbols...

- ...externalize and reify memory
- ...are subject to reappropriation by oppositional groups or individuals, as well as minorities who feel excluded from the myth of national consensus established by national symbols (Martin Luther King speaking at the Lincoln Memorial);
- may be erased, modified, transformed or superseded by subsequent symbolic representations

‘The People’ are “subjects’ of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principle of the people as that continual process by which the national life is redeemed and signified as a repeating and reproductive process.”

Homi Bhabha “DissemiNation” in Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration*. p.296f.