

Nov 04, 2016 by [Daryl Copeland](#)

Public Diplomacy, Branding, and the Image of Nations, Part I: What's in a Brand? ^[1]

I am writing today from the world city of London.

Although I will be going to see colleagues at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) next week, I confess that I have not been thinking much about whether the Brits will be able to top, or at least equal the Chinese in skillfully using the occasion of the Summer Olympics as a platform to advance their top line public diplomacy objectives. Instead, I have been busy teaching a graduate seminar on Science, Technology, Diplomacy and International Policy, and helping to organize an International Symposium on the theme of heteropolarity and world order. Today I am preparing to welcome nation branding guru Simon Anholt into my MA class, hot on the heels of a command performance on Wednesday by Parag Khanna.

In order to introduce Simon, I have been reviewing his work, and in that regard came across a fascinating exchange he engaged in a few years earlier with Craig Hayden on the CPD blog. Their repartee got me thinking - again - about the hardy perennial issue of whether or not there exists a real distinction between branding and PD.

Is one a subset of the other? If so, which is the larger construct? Does it really matter?

I'm not sure, especially because these sorts of considerations suggest that the relationship may be asymmetrical, rather than simply differentiated.

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Last fall during a presentation on the history of PD at the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) in Ottawa, Nick Cull (quoting Simon Anholt) made the point that nation brands - he may have used the terms image and reputation - are rather like the stars in the night sky. They twinkle and gleam and seem to be real, even though the actual source of the illumination will have moved light years away, and may even be extinguished. Nick was making this observation for the purpose of illustrating that the widely held perceptions of countries and nations often lag significantly behind the reality of contemporary performance. Canada happens to be an excellent example of this phenomenon. My home and native land had been coasting for at least a decade on the strength of its history as a committed internationalist, generous aid donor, peacekeeper, honest broker, helpful fixer, and disinterested provider of good offices, until it finally slammed head on into the harsh reality of failing to win a seat on the United Nations Security Council in the fall of 2010.

It appears the world has finally noticed that Canada is no longer the country of Lester Pearson - or, for that matter, of Brian Mulroney. Among Foreign Ministers, few Canadians can easily remember the names of any (there have been seven) since PD pioneer Lloyd Axworthy left office just over a decade ago. The main reason is that since his departure and the eclipse of his controversial Human Security Agenda, the Canadian diplomatic initiative has been notable

entirely for its absence. The hard reality of declining soft power has finally caught up to the True North (although even our winters no longer seem quite as long or cold...).

In large part, when it comes to nation brands, it is clearly what you do, rather than what you say that counts.

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Those with an interest in international business and commerce will be familiar with the “country of origin effect,” especially as it pertains to marketing. Certain countries are widely known for their association with particular qualities and attributes, and these may be positive or negative. If you have any doubts about that, perhaps this old saw will persuade you: heaven is a place where the engineers and manufacturers are German, the timekeepers and trains are Swiss, the designers and lovers are Italian, the cooks at hotels are French and the police and judges are British. Hell is a place where the police are German, the cooks are British, the lovers are Swiss, the timekeepers are Italian, and the engineers - who are on strike - are French.

Simply put, this is why Swiss watches, German cars and Italian clothes have cachet, and command premium prices.

In some countries, reputations are uniquely bad. Romania, though a member of the European Union, remains the land of Vlad the Impaler (Dracula), vampires more generally, and Ceaucescu. It will take considerable time for Serbia - never a power brand - to get over its association with Srebrenica, the siege of Sarajevo and Kosovo.

The perceived lot of other nations has improved dramatically - likely none more so than South Africa, which has moved from its pariah status as the home of apartheid, to the Rainbow Nation. Ireland moved from the land of famine, violence, and emigration to the Celtic Tiger, and Spain from Franco’s fascist police state to a vibrant social democracy and vacation destination.

Ironically, the latter two nations now find themselves among the ignominiously labeled PIGS.

A nation’s brand, then, can be a mixed blessing, and is sometimes fickle. That may help explain why branding - the deliberate attempt to project an image and manage a reputation - is notoriously difficult.

Can excellence in international political communications make a difference?

I will return to these issues, in the context of contrasting branding to public diplomacy, in the next entry.
