

Flagging the nations: citizen's active engagements with everyday nationalism in Patagonia, Chile

Matthew C. Benwell, Andrés Núñez and Catalina Amigo

Abstract: Geographical scholarship examining banal and everyday nationalism has tended to frame national flags as abstract and passive objects that are taken for granted and incorporated into the daily lives of citizens in mindless ways. In contrast, this paper acknowledges flags as lively material objects that can be enrolled by citizens to make political points and generate certain 'affective atmospheres'. It argues that the recognition of agency in debates concerning everyday nationalism needs to be pushed further to acknowledge the conscious and active negotiations of national objects like flags, to account for the diverse ways nations can be practised and performed by citizens. To illustrate our arguments we focus on the memories and reflections of citizens involved in protests in the Aysén region of Chilean Patagonia in 2012. During these incidents, citizens deployed different flags in provocative ways to draw attention to their reclamations and apply pressure on the Chilean state to improve socio-economic conditions in the region. The legacies of events like the 2012 protests and the associated (re)appropriation of national flags enables an interrogation of citizens' everyday identifications with nations in this border region of Patagonia. More broadly, we use the example to call for the materialities of flags as active objects to be the subject of further geographical inquiry, as one way to reinvigorate explorations of political agency and everyday nationalism.

Key words: everyday nationalism; flags; Chile; Argentina; Patagonia

Introduction

Geographical interest in nationalism has burgeoned in the last 20 years inspired by Michael Billig's (1995) call to focus academic attention on the mundane routines that reproduce the nation daily (see Koch and Paasi 2016). Billig's seminal text, *Banal Nationalism*, triggered a plethora of research that moved away from exclusively associating nationalism with extreme expressions of nationalist sentiment usually manifest outside of the western world. Instead, it encouraged researchers 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' (Koch and Paasi 2016, 1). This interest in the barely perceptible daily 'flaggings' of nationhood has, rather ironically, led to flags being overlooked in many studies of nationalism as objects that can be (re)appropriated by citizens for political ends. As Dodds (2014, 107) contends, 'Flags may well be powerful signifiers of nations, values, and geographical spaces but their very materiality is also significant.' More recent work has explored the different ways nationalism is evoked in citizens' everyday lives and how national symbols (including road signs, license plates and stamps although rarely flags), discourses and practices are interpreted, experienced and felt by diverse citizenries (see Antonsich 2016; Jones and Merriman 2009; Militz and Schurr 2016). This paper argues that the recognition of agency (human and non-human) in debates concerning everyday nationalism needs to be pushed further to acknowledge the conscious and active enrolment of national flags, to account for how nations can be practised and performed by their citizens (Merriman and Jones 2016).

We respond to Koch and Paasi's (2016) broader invitation to nationalism scholars working in different regions of the world, such as Latin America, that have been relatively

underrepresented in debates about banal and everyday nationalism (for a broader review of nationalism studies in Latin America see Miller 2006). In the example we present below, Chilean citizens living in the north of Chilean Patagonia (in the *Región de Aysén*), deployed everyday markers of nationalism in ways that deliberately highlighted their misgivings and disillusionment with the Chilean state. The staged flying of flags during protests that broke out across the region in February 2012 were affectively charged to put pressure on the state. The most significant protests in the largest regional conurbations of Puerto Aysén and Coyhaique (see Figure 1), were instigated by a number of social and labour union movements and subsequently led to several major demonstrations. The protesters accused the national government of abandoning Aysén by failing to implement promised measures to improve living conditions in the region (i.e. by improving internal infrastructure and connectivity with other parts of Chile) (Fauré *et al.* 2014). Due to its geographical isolation the cost of living in Aysén is relatively high and the provision of medical care and education is limited compared with more centrally-located regions.

Figure 1: Map of Chile showing the *Región of Aysén* (Source: authors)

The overarching complaint that connected the various claims made by the protesters focused on the centralisation characterising the Chilean state that, they argued, exacerbated the region's isolation and lowered the standard of living of its citizens. The protests which incorporated the occupation and barricading of the region's infrastructure including roads, bridges, ports and airports, were met with violent repression from state authorities (and, importantly, Special Forces sent from outside the region of Aysén) that led to a number of

serious injuries. As we discuss below, some of the protestors made and displayed improvised flags of neighbouring Argentina during these events, a potentially provocative act that requires regional contextualisation. While the Argentine and Chilean states sought to secure national territory in Patagonia in the twentieth century through tighter border control mechanisms and the establishment of 'national communities', in practice the experiences and everyday lives of citizens living in the region were and remain highly relational (Baeza 2009). For much of the twentieth century, many citizens in Aysén undertook commercial activities and studied on the Argentine side of the border, and remember regional emergencies when humanitarian assistance was provided by Argentina rather than the Chilean state (e.g. the eruption of the Hudson Volcano in 1991). This dependency on Argentina has been reduced with the construction of the *Carretera Austral* in Chile which connects the Aysén region from north to south. However, the legacies of mobilities, practices and interactions that have traversed this border remain rooted in regional memory and identity, helping to comprehend this enrolment of the Argentine flag in the 2012 protests.

In this paper we take these events as our central focus, examining how material objects like flags can be enrolled into the political responses of citizens in order to directly and purposely critique the state. We foreground the memories of local people involved in these protests as they reflected back on the disturbances that occurred several years earlier. Notwithstanding their exceptional nature, we argue that the legacies of events like the 2012 protests and the associated appropriation of national flags enables an interrogation of citizens' everyday identifications with nations in this border region of Patagonia. More broadly, we use the example to call for the materialities of flags as lively, active objects to be the subject of further geographical inquiry as one way to reinvigorate an examination of intersections between geopolitics, agency and everyday nationalism. The paper proceeds with a critical discussion

of how flags have been considered in existing debates concerning everyday nationalism and ultimately calls for greater sensitivity to the ways they are mobilised by citizens, most especially in border regions that have so often attracted the attention of nationalism scholars. The empirical material is then presented to suggest ways that geographical scholarship on nationalism might fruitfully examine citizens as agents who engage with everyday markers of nations for (geo)political ends.

Mindfully flagging the nations

Studies of nationalism by geographers and other social scientists routinely draw on Billig's (1995, 6) thesis to examine the 'ideological habits, by which "our" nations are reproduced as nations'. Rather unsurprisingly the national flag, as well as the discourses and practices that surround it, receive considerable attention in *Banal Nationalism* with an emphasis on the everyday, routine and unwaved flags that so regularly go unnoticed. When the flag is more mindfully waved by citizens it is connected to instances of 'hot' nationalism associated with places experiencing ethno-national conflict like Northern Ireland and the Balkans. In this way, the national flag is framed by Billig either as an object not consciously registered by citizens or engaged during moments of heightened nationalist tension (with that waving usually directed at an identifiable other). The empirical material presented in this paper looks beyond these extremes to think about the flag as a material object that can be actively deployed by citizens to practice and perform nationhood for particular ends.

While the agential and affective capacities of non-human material objects imbued with national meaning have been increasingly interrogated (see Edensor 2004; Merriman and Jones 2016; Sumartojo 2016), flags and their (re-)appropriation by citizens have not been

subject to similar scrutiny (although see Dodds 2010). Billig's identification of the national flag as abstract, as an object that is taken for granted and incorporated into the daily life of citizens in mindless ways has, ironically, seemed to reinforce its marginalisation in academic research (Butz 2009). Flags have become another facet of the numerous trappings of nationhood that get mentioned in passing when thinking through how nations are reproduced daily. As Fox (2017, 29, author emphasis) provocatively contends, 'The flags hang limply but how do we know that people *don't* notice them? And that by not noticing them, they are making us compliant national subjects?' Moreover, flags are constantly deployed by citizens (and states) in more deliberate, mindful and blatant ways (Benwell 2014; Dodds 2010) that are not limited to the extreme nationalistic expressions associated with separatist movements underlined in Billig's original text (see Leib 2011). National symbols can play important roles in protests or actions that challenge the 'ideological concepts, memories, and beliefs associated with one's nation' (Butz 2009, 787) and while states might like national subjects to think otherwise,

'Flags are also eminently breachable: they can be desecrated (an act of protest), inverted (a sign of distress) or manipulated in countless ways for commercial or other purposes in ways that sometimes jar our otherwise settled notions of the nation.' (Fox 2017, 39)

Radcliffe and Westwood (1996, 164), in their interrogation of nationalism in Ecuador, stress that the 'ideological work [associated with nationalism] is not only being carried out by the state', from the top down. National symbols like flags may well engender 'affective atmospheres of nationalism' that trigger certain embodied and emotional responses that are learnt by national subjects from a young age, but these can also be reinterpreted and

disrupted by citizens to produce vastly different affects (Closs Stephens 2016). In her 'I am an American' video project, Weber (2013) shows how immigrants used the US flag to generate discomfort and unease among viewers in order to shed light on stories of injustice at the hands of the state. Her project illustrates the range of feelings associated with being in the nation for different citizens that directly contest any, 'unifying narratives of the state' (Closs Stephens *et al.* 2017: 44). As Paasi (1999, 12) states, 'The meanings of national symbols, such as flags, emerge from rituals [encompassing protests] and ceremonies in which such symbols are used, rather than from the symbols themselves' (see Wood 2012 and her reference to the 'performance practices' associated with the (re)production of nationalism).

There is now a substantial literature that identifies how, 'local processes and institutions can contribute in the formation and inflection of nationalist sentiments' (Jones and Desforges 2003, 272; Benwell 2014; Paasi 1999). Understanding how and why citizens (re)produce and/or contest national discourses, symbols and practices requires an approach that is 'grounded' and cognisant of the social, political, economic and cultural dynamics of place (Radcliffe and Westwood 1996):

'Even if identities may be strongly represented in the form of abstract or concrete "official" symbols such as flags, anthems, memorial days...the meanings of the symbols may vary a lot...In this sense, local experience mediates national identities.' (Paasi, 1999, 12)

Border regions have received considerable attention from scholars interested in nationalism because they represent particular kinds of localities where national identities can be strongly reinforced by state-originating discourses and practices, as well as (re)produced/challenged by the daily experiences of citizens (e.g. Megoran 2017; Radcliffe, 1998; Radcliffe and

Westwood 1996). Paasi (1996, 53) asserts that, 'nationalism is primarily a territorial form of ideology...It aims at "circumscribing" and signifying territories in space, at creating feelings of belonging', and for this reason studies often look to the edges of the state to explore these intersections between nationalism, boundaries and the everyday lives of citizens. While work engaging with banal nationalism in Latin American contexts has been rather less well represented, several notable studies have looked at how citizens in border regions of the continent can have, 'multifaceted and complex affiliations to places within and beyond the nation, in addition to national identifications' (Radcliffe 1998, 289; cf. Grimson 2012). As Radcliffe and Westwood (1996, 160) observe in the Ecuadorean context,

'People...are aware of the contradictions generated by power-saturated national projects, and claims on their collective identification...Rather than take on board unquestioningly a nationalist agenda, they assess different elements of it in light of their own subjectivity and social practice.'

There is, then, an imperative for scholars of nationalism working in these borderland contexts to recognise the powerful ideologies and influence of 'map-makers and map-enforcers' (Grimson 2012), alongside, and in relation to, the geographical imaginations, identities and agencies of those who inhabit them (Megoran 2017, 35).

The paper we present here foregrounds the active agency of Chilean citizens from Aysén, who reproduced, (re)appropriated and marched with the national flags of Chile *and* neighbouring Argentina during protests that broke out in the summer of 2012. It was in these 'moments of encounter between bodies and objects' that certain affective nationalisms were (re)produced and (re)worked by citizens in strategic ways, to make specific political points and demands of the Chilean state (Militz and Schurr 2016, 56). Clearly, these were not 'mindless "flaggings" of

the nation but deliberate, creative and original representations and reproductions of nationalism' (Benwell 2014, 51). The protests in Aysén draw attention to how citizens can creatively summon banal national symbols of their own and *other* states in ways that have rarely been considered in research on nationalism. A focus on these mindful deployments of nations by citizens can help invigorate scholarship on nationalism by connecting it more explicitly with feminist geopolitics and its attempts to highlight, 'the less visible and marginalised sites [agents and objects] of geopolitical contestation' (Williams and Massaro 2013, 754; Christian *et al.* 2016). The literature from feminist scholars has shown how citizens can push back against, pressurise and influence hegemonic policies of the state that have direct implications for their (in)securities (see Hyndman 2004; Koopman 2011). This paper illustrates the role that trappings of nationhood like flags can play in the geopolitical interventions of citizens, in ways that avoid romanticising their agency or losing sight of predominant power dynamics at national, regional and local scales.

The empirical material presented below is the result of several periods of qualitative fieldwork undertaken in the Aysén region from 2015-2017. The majority of the research was conducted in Puerto Aysén and Coyhaique with people who participated in the 2012 protests, with some additional insights drawn from more remote villages of the region. The fieldwork encompassed 35 individual semi-structured interviews, as well as extended periods of participant observation in the region. Interviews took place in people's homes as well as key sites associated with the protests, encouraging respondents to reflect back on (their role in) events in 2012. Snowball sampling was utilised to identify those directly involved, a process facilitated by the relatively small and tight-knit nature of communities in this part of Patagonia. The research adhered to strict ethical guidelines regarding, for example, informed consent and the protection of respondents' identities (pseudonyms are used throughout).

Flying the flags

'I've shouted many times that the next flag I would use in my Coyhaique [capital of the Aysén region] would be the flag of Argentina because all of the support was from Argentina...Flags of Argentina were raised near to the borders and during the protests...I think the region needs Argentina, they react more than our own country. They're supportive. The call to Argentina was to say that we existed, that we're here and they supported us. They lived [the days of the protests] calling and sending messages, ready to help Chilean Patagonia.' (Miranda, Coyhaique, 9 December 2015)

Citizens in the region of Aysén deployed the national flags of Chile and Argentina in diverse ways during the protests in 2012. While Chilean flags were more visible throughout the disturbances (although these were also re-appropriated in diverse ways explored below), the use of the Argentine flag was particularly striking. The motivations for doing so were numerous and clearly illustrate, 'that national symbols are not passive fixtures of people's environment, but instead may yield significant...social effects' (Butz 2009, 779). In the following days, Chilean and international media published photographs depicting people holding homemade banners that reproduced the Argentine flag in rudimentary form (Figure 2). These had controversial slogans attached that appeared to be directed at the states of both Argentina and Chile: 'We feel ashamed of the Chilean state. Adopt us Argentina!' 'Adopt me! My government abandoned me.'

Figure 2: A homemade Argentine flag used during the protests (source: Sebastian Silva (AFP)

El País)

The fact that children and young people were also photographed holding these banners only increased their sensitivity for the Chilean state, given that young citizens are typically constructed as embodying and symbolising the future potential of the nation (Ruddick 2007). The national flag of another state (Argentina) was creatively produced and presented by citizens to explicitly evoke critiques of their state (Chile), ‘breaching everyday nationhood at the spatial...and political edges of the nation’ (Fox 2017, 33). The flags and accompanying phrases summoned certain ‘affective atmospheres’ of nationalism that were not so much charged with feelings of pride and identification with the Argentine flag, but instead a sense of indignation at their perceived marginalisation by the Chilean state. The work on atmospheres and nationalism has tended to emphasise the ‘affective pull’ of national-scale events and commemorations, drawing attention to how the ‘constellation of elements [place, objects, people, memory, landscape and so on] pulls together the material, sensory and affective to encourage connections among people and across time’ (Sumartojo 2016, 550). While this work has also identified the ruptures and instability inherent to these articulations of nationalism, there is scope to explore how citizens as geopolitical agents can produce and re-work the atmospheres that emanate from national objects such as flags. These can be deployed by citizens as a kind of ‘shaming gesture’ (Souweine 2005, cited in Weber 2013, 290), as was the case in Aysén, to highlight the sense of neglect and abandonment felt locally in relation to the efficacy of the Chilean state.

The making and displaying of Argentine flags by Chilean citizens went further than articulating alienation with their national government however. The flags were also deliberately deployed to target Argentina and Argentine citizens in order to encourage them to support their struggle with Chilean state authorities. This was manifest in the solidarity alluded to by Miranda, as well as the material supply of provisions from across the border:

‘Argentina brought lorry loads of supplies here, containers with supplies, I was unloading with the guys in the middle of the conflict. In Aysén 50% of the people are in Argentina as well. I have no problem with Argentina, we have more access to Argentina than to other parts [of Chile].’ (Marcelo, Puerto Aysén, 13 December 2015)

As Butz (2009, 788) contends, ‘these symbols (e.g. national flags) may become more conspicuous and thus more likely to lead to conscious or explicit outcomes when nations are unstable due to conflict’. Here, the flag of another nation was used during a period of pronounced unrest to highlight perceived injustice but also to appeal to a sense of regional Patagonian identity and solidarity that extended across the border into Argentina (see Carrasco 2017), and which had tangible results as Marcelo highlights.

Solidarity, strategy and solemnity

Given the geopolitical tensions generated by territorial disputes between Argentina and Chile, most pronounced in Patagonia during the 1970s and 80s when both countries were ruled by military dictatorships (Mendoza *et al.* 2017), it is perhaps surprising that such regional solidarity has endured (Amigo 2017). In similar ways to Radcliffe’s (1998, 275) work on the equally sensitive Ecuador-Peru frontier in the 1990s, the responses of citizens in Aysén hint

at 'the complex ways in which subjects construct, negotiate and challenge the affiliations to national territories'. As Radcliffe points out, in these frontier regions ties to the nation and its territory are not unquestioned by citizens:

'I'm Chilean but I'm Patagonian more than Chilean...Argentina is more solidary; they look after you very well, they're like a brother, not a person that you're going to go and fight. They don't discriminate and they really receive Chileans like brothers.....I consider myself Chilean because I was born in Chile; if I go to Europe then I think I'd say that I was Chilean, one carries this in the blood. But suddenly your mind comes before your heart and we say that we could have been part of Argentina.' (Julia, Coyhaique, 9 December 2015)

Exchange and co-dependence between communities on both sides of the border stretch back many decades (e.g. many people make daily border crossings for work or to visit family members, see Núñez *et al.* 2017) partly necessary because of the lack of regional investment highlighted by these protests. This is not to suggest that citizens involved in these protests and living near the border with Argentina are somehow 'post-national' (Grimson 2012). On the contrary, they were acutely aware of the power asymmetries inherent to their struggle and the socio-political ramifications of living in a frontier region often constructed as 'peripheral' from the perspective of Chile's capital, Santiago (Amigo 2017). As one man from Puerto Aysén put it, 'the Argentine flag was used [during the 2012 protests] to taunt the Chilean state, but not because we think of ourselves as Argentine. It was a strategy, a way to protest against [Chilean] state abandonment' (León from Puerto Aysén, 11 November 2017). The use of the flag of neighbouring Argentina was not a rejection of Chilean nationhood for León and his fellow protestors but was a deliberately provocative way to get the attention of

the Chilean state and politicians in Santiago. For a community where the sense of feeling marginal and voiceless in relation to state politics is especially pronounced, such provocations were considered an effective strategy for attracting wider attention and support.

While we have focused our analysis on the more remarkable use of the Argentine flag, the Chilean flag remained more prominent during the protests as one might expect given the nature of the demands being made of the Chilean state. However, even these flags were re-appropriated and deployed in ways that disrupted the expected norms and performances associated with the national flag. The Chilean flag was turned upside down and appeared with various political slogans daubed over it, a highly sensitive act in a state where the use of the flag is strictly regulated by laws that determine how it should be displayed by its citizens (*Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile* 2011). Others chose to fly black flags (often alongside Chilean flags) during protests and outside their homes making use of bin bags and other pieces of dark material they could find. Although the black flag has been associated with anarchist movements and the rejection of an identification with nationhood, in this case its use by citizens alongside the flag of Chile invoked a more sombre atmosphere. There was a sense of mourning and despair driven by citizens' perceptions of regional decline that had been exacerbated by the neglect of the Chilean state over the long-term, as well as shorter-term dismay at the violent response of security forces sent to quell the disturbances. Respondents referred to what they considered to be state attempts to kill off the region, highlighting how large tracts of land had been sold to private investors under the guise of conservation or eco-tourism (see, for example, Holmes 2014; Mendoza *et al.* 2017). In their eyes, the state was willing to intervene in and profit from the region when it suited but local people rarely reaped the benefits. The embodied act of marching with black and Chilean flags alongside one another was, then, evocative of a funeral wake, drawing attention to local

citizens' perceptions of the lack of state investment. The images of citizens with Chilean, Argentine and black flags attracted considerable coverage and were circulated on social, local and (inter)national media platforms. Significant among these audiences, for those involved in the protests, were fellow Chilean citizens and politicians living further north who, it was felt, needed to be reminded of a significant and yet forgotten constituency of the Chilean nation.

Conclusion

These examples of citizens actively 'flagging' nations are reminders that performances and practices surrounding national objects like flags are far from inevitable, stable and mundane. Indeed, they show how citizens can make, improvise and deface flags in diverse ways to generate certain 'affective atmospheres' and, in turn, make (geo)political points directed at multiple audiences. The flag did not simply hang from the mast or building during these moments of socio-political tension but neither was it enrolled for the purposes of 'hot' nationalist claims (Billig 1995). Instead, citizens deployed flags to generate quite different affects that sought to apply pressure on the Chilean state, to shame it into action, to draw attention to socio-political grievances and to emphasise solidarities with communities in neighbouring Argentina. The materialities of flags matter here given the disruption of expected performances associated with these 'sacred' and affectively charged national objects (Jaskulowski 2016). Paying closer attention to how flags are mobilised by different constituencies of the nation, then, can help facilitate understandings of the emotional (geo)political claims and concerns of citizens vis-à-vis the state.

The political effects of citizen engagements with national flags have not been significantly explored in geographical scholarship on nationalism, and yet, these relatively rare examples

or breaches (Fox 2017) offer opportunities to examine the alter-geopolitical possibilities of seemingly stable national material objects (Koopman 2011). The continent of Latin American provides fertile ground for future contributions to these debates concerning everyday flaggings of nationhood given that 'its national "identities" have always been multifold, created and re-created in a continuous process of negotiation and renegotiation with both the others without and the others within' (Miller 2006, 217). This paper has shown how engagements with provocative and calculated deployments of national flags outside of Euro-American contexts might reinvigorate studies of everyday nationalism and debates about citizen's (geo)political agency.

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