Symbols and symbolic meanings in constructions of nations and national identity
Editors' introduction

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The idea for this special issue evolved in the framework of the project Discourses of the Nation and the National, conducted at the University of Oslo (ILOS), which held the symposium National Symbols across Time and Space in September 2015.[1]

Starting from a general assumption that some crucial aspects of the "nation" and the "national" are constructed and deconstructed in discourse, and that national social formations and nationalisms are persistent phenomena although they experience transformations and reappear under the guise of transnationalism and cosmopolitanism, the project comparatively studied various aspects of the national across various discourses. Assuming that the modes of realization, visibility, and importance of the reproductions of the national vary from country to country, the project's activities (symposia, core project members' research, guest researchers' projects, doctoral projects, and guest lectures) concentrated on a range of regions and countries, with an emphasis on North American, Romance, and Slavic studies. The topics examined within the project include borders, space and identity, metaphors in identity construction, discursive construction of patriotism, urban landscapes, diaspora communities and their identity, food and national identity, and television and national identity. The realms of discourse examined include mass media, scholarly discourse, discourse by intellectual and political elites, discourse of urban planning, semi-official computer-mediated discourse, graffiti, and literature.

The symposium National Symbols across Time and Space was devoted to the widely recognized crucial role of symbols in national identity construction: this is reflected in one of the definitions of national identity as "a form of imaginative identification with the symbols and discourses of the nation-state" (Barker & Galasinski 2001: 124). We provided a platform for discussing official and unofficial national symbols, as well as symbols of cultural identity, be they concrete (material) or abstract, in the light of the assumption that nations and national phenomena have lost their significance at a time of cultural globalization. We examined how cultural globalization affects symbols and symbolic meanings. Furthermore, we discussed whether national symbols reflect universal patterns in symbolic systems, or whether they depend on the particular features of different national discourses. The topics discussed at the workshop included national day celebrations, political symbolism, the symbolic function of language, and fictional characters as symbols.

Before addressing how the four articles in this special issue relate to previous research on symbols, we provide a short overview of recent studies. Due to limited space and the fact that symbols and symbolic meanings is an extremely broad field of research (studied, e.g., within social representation theory, social psychology, peace psychology, anthropology, political science, nationalism studies, and the arts), the overview focuses on research in the twenty-first century, particularly on volumes that discuss more than one national symbol,[2] more than one region, and topics of general importance.[3]

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[1] Another special issue devoted to symbols also evolved from the symposium: *Romance Studies* 35(1), 2017. That issue contains five studies dealing with Italy, Spain, and Latin America.

[2] Minahan (2010) provides a *Complete Guide to National Symbols and Emblems* in two volumes, including all of the UN member states and some of the most prominent stateless nations.

[3] This does not mean that research discussing individual countries and regions do not provide valuable insights into some general phenomena and tendencies. Examples include Fraim (2003), who discusses the response of the

The volume by Hałas (2002) is a collection of sociological analyses examining selected European countries, Australia, and the US. The emphasis is on symbolism as a social phenomenon, and the subtopics included are political discourse and symbolic action, religious symbolism, and power. Symbolism of discourses, symbolic objects, and symbolic actions are conceived of as intrinsically related. Geisler's volume (2005) concentrates on the role that national symbols play in creating and maintaining individual and collective identity in nine countries on four continents. Among the topics discussed is the interface of the religious and the secular in national narratives in Israel, the Balkans, and Northern Ireland, fluid counter-traditions in the American South, and the multivalent figure of the Argentinean gaucho. Also addressed is the instability of certain national symbols. The contributions demonstrate that over time symbols are subject to continual challenges, changes in signification, and, in extreme cases, loss of valuation or replacement. In her volume, Elgenius (2011) discusses national flags, anthems, and national ceremonial days in a sociological framework, arguing that these are an integral part of nation building, maintenance, and change. The book has a broad European focus, particularly concentrating on Norway, France, and the UK.

Many symbols discussed in these volumes (e.g., national days) relate to nations' victories and what is perceived as a glorious past. The nationalism to which such symbolism of victory relates is the assertion of legitimacy for a nation and its effectiveness as a political entity (Mock 2012). However, there are entirely different symbols: Mock (2012) looks at symbols of defeat in Serbia, France, Greece, and Ghana. These symbols often assume a foundational role in national mythology. Emphasizing images of their own defeat in understanding their history, the author argues, exposes the ambivalence that lurks behind the passions that nationalism evokes. Symbols of defeat also glorify a nation's ancient past, whereby re-enacting the destruction of that past is a necessary step in constructing a functioning modern society.

Moeschberger and Phillips DeZalia's (2014) volume takes a broad perspective on what constitutes a symbol, to include objects such as flags, signs, language, and monuments. It explores yet another crucial aspect of symbols: their both divisive and uniting function in various conflict settings around the world. Importantly, the contributions also discuss commemorations and other dynamic events. Particularly emphasized issues are how symbols are used to perpetuate conflict and how they can be used or modified to promote unification. The volume's scope includes Bosnia, Cyprus, Rwanda, and South Africa.

Some studies concentrate on more specific topics, and on individual official national symbols (e.g., flags and national days). Such an example is the multidisciplinary collection edited by Hylland Eriksen and Jenkins (2007), which deals with flags and their significance for national identities. The case studies from Denmark, England, Northern Ireland, Norway, Sweden, and the US explore ways in which flags (mostly in contemporary contexts) are contested, stir up powerful emotions, are commercialized, serve as quasi-religious symbols, and act as physical boundary markers; they show how the same flag can be solemn and formal in certain settings, but stands for informal cultural intimacy in another. In his book covering the US, the UK, Europe, the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and Latin America, Marshall (2016) also studies flags as symbols that represent nation states and non-state actors (including ISIS, Hezbollah, and Hamas), and how they figure in diplomatic relations and events today.

American symbolism industry to the events of 9/11; Fuller (2014), who examines nation and state building in Ghana; Moreno-Luzón and Núñez Seixas (2017), whose volume examines Spanish nationalism through its diverse and complementary cultural artefacts, from "formal" representations such as the flag to music, bullfighting, and other more diffuse examples; and Inglis (2014), whose volume examines Irish cultural identity.

McCrone and McPherson's (2009) volume discusses national days in the context of debates about national identity. Its main idea is that national days are contested and manipulated, as well as subject to political, cultural, and social pressure. The discursive construction of national holidays in central Europe and the Balkans is discussed by Šarić et al. (2012).

Members of a national society are engaged daily in one or another type of "naïve consumption of national symbols" (Rosenbaum 2013: 219). In such consumption, symbols are subconsciously accepted and go unnoticed. As DeSoucey (2016: 36) indicates, it is not only state-created symbols (e.g., flags, anthems, and monuments) that imbue national cultural identities with political coherence; everyday symbols also work to link citizens emotively to each other and to their national states. In addition to state-created symbols, some other phenomena and artefacts can likewise be the cornerstones of national identity, and (can) function as national symbols, or be part of what constitutes nations in everyday life. Edensor (2002) demonstrates that national identity is revealed to be inherent in things often taken for granted – from landscapes and eating habits to tourism, cinema, and music.

Among symbols consumed on an everyday basis, a prominent place belongs to architecture and design. This is elaborated in Vale (2008), who concentrates on the relationship between the design of national capitals across the world and the formation of national identity in modernity and the role that architecture and planning play in the forceful assertion of state power. The book looks at capital cities in the US, India, Brazil, Sri Lanka, Kuwait, Bangladesh, and Papua New Guinea. Gimeno-Martínez (2016) examines national design, offering a comprehensive account of how national identity and cultural policy have shaped design, and suggests that traditional formations of the "national" are increasingly unsustainable in an age of globalization, migration, and cultural diversity. Case studies include stamps in nineteenth-century Russian Finland, and Coca-Cola as an "American" drink in modern Trinidad and Tobago.

Nations identify with different forms of popular culture that also acquire symbolic functions: for instance, music (even controversial forms) and dance. Following this idea, Vianna (1999) examines samba and national identity in Brazil, whereas Čvoro (2014) discusses turbo-folk, a "genuinely Balkan" form of resistance to the threat of neo-liberalism and its effects on a broader cultural sphere: art, film, sculpture, and architecture.

Food has also deserved some attention as a symbol of nations: Wilson (2006) provided a first multidisciplinary look at the contributions that food and drink make to contemporary European identities, including the part they play in processes of European integration and Europeanization. Food is also the topic studied by DeSoucey (2016) and Ichijo and Ranta (2006).

Sports and national identity in a number of countries are discussed by Smith and Dilwyn Porter (2004). Several studies discuss the importance of sports in particular countries: for instance, Ward (2010) analyses Australia, whereas Watson (2016) discusses hockey in Canada, and Kotnik (2007) skiing in Slovenia.

Given the assumption that nationalism is a form of public culture and political religion that draws on much older cultural and symbolic forms (see, e.g., Smith 2013), volumes dealing with nations and nationalism are concerned with symbols and their functions (e.g., Smith 2013; Young et al. 2007), as are studies dealing with rituals and performances in the forging of nations (e.g., Tsang & Taylor Woods 2014), and studies examining national identities and ideologies (e.g., Lampe & Mazower 2004).

This special issue illuminates approaches to symbolization in cultural discourses by looking at the identification crises of post-communist societies. In tackling a concrete social and

political problem, the articles reveal the importance of affective and symbolic meanings to the political process. The crisis of the political is effectively a crisis of identity set forth by institutional changes necessitated by the transition from state planning to a market system and from politically motivated conceptions of citizenship to legalistic ones defined in conventions convened by international bodies. While these institutional changes are in themselves self-evident and unavoidable, i.e. they are expressions of the condition of membership the current international order, the crisis of identity that has resulted cannot be understood in institutional terms. These articles reveal the disquiet and anxiety in the public mood created as a result of transition, reflecting and contributing to the transition from modern states to postmodern ones and from ideological to identity politics. These articles take varying approaches to the symbolization of those (national) identities. The articles may be read as complementary approaches, or as alternatives, in response to three issues.

Perhaps the most significant underlying issue that divides the articles concerns the importance, or lack thereof, of myth and memory to symbolization and to the forging of new identities. Is symbolization a process that draws, consciously or unconsciously, on a deep past of the national imaginary or is it voluntaristic – a project of contested meaning arising out of the discourse of the present? A second question is the extent to which symbolization necessarily follows the logic of binary exclusion (which clearly it often does), or, whether it can embody inclusive motifs? In short does symbolization require an "other" and if not what other discursive elements may be substituted for binary opposition? Finally, the question of symbolization of identity necessarily involves the state both the role of official discourse in national self-definition, but also the state as an object of symbolization. Here the operative questions concern the role of official discourse in guiding and defining the discourse of symbolization and how the potential divergence between official and public perceptions of national symbols is handled.

Reflecting a ethno-cultural theory of the national, Bajt argues that while national identities remained latent under the rubric of Yugoslavian unity and its official state sanctioned identity, these identities emerged again by the 1970s and were partly sanctioned by the reforms of 1974, which granted greater autonomy to the national republics that had comprised Yugoslavia. Identity-making is a process of symbolization that arises from the territorial extension of an ethnic group and is operationalized through memory. As symbols became contested, the importance of memory increases. However, memory itself is subject to fragmentation and manipulation. Common memory may be interpreted subjectively through private memories, though such potential for fragmentation, is often countered through state-created symbols, whose meanings are formalized through "repetition and ritualization" (13). On the other hand the attainment of a public memory through the ritualization while having a stabilizing effect is subject to ideological manipulation. For the most part, the constitution of new state symbols for Slovenia took place as a national debate that drew on "pre-existing regional, cultural, religious, or other affiliations" (23). Thus while the national memory is real – a pre-existing habitus of the nation – the symbolization of this memory is often manipulated for ideological purposes – a rather dangerous prospect. Consequently an alternative, a symbolization of identity that focuses on everyday life, is presented to support the process of the normalization of the new nation.

Čvoro takes a critical and ironic view of the process of national symbolization - a process which he sees as purely constructed and largely arbitrary, but also rooted in a false and arbitrary reading of the past through myth. The result is the reconstruction of culture through tradition and the incorporation of both neoliberal policies and a nationalist ethos. Indeed for Čvoro neoliberalism and nationalism are two sides of the same coin: an expression of "phallocentric heteronormativity" necessary to the reassertion of the male heroic and a means of combatting global univeralisms. Using works by Abramović and Miljanović, Čvoro presents works of visual

art (video and drawing) that parody traditionalism by representing ancient rituals of sex and death. In this imaginative rendering, eroticism and mortality define a necropolis that has become the fate of the former Yugoslavia; the eroticization of death is both the publically unacknowledged symbol of the Balkans' economic and political marginalization, and ironically the only means of its survival. In short traditionalism leads to the erasure of history and appropriation of the past, which has condemned the Balkans to selling its body, its only means of its survival. Identity has not by chosen through symbolization, but rather symbols are the by-product of a political language that is "in-between" time and cannot be located in space. The peoples of the Balkans have no defence in confronting the forces of economic neo-liberalization and pending social dissolution.

Šarić and Felberg present a discursive analysis of the political disputes around the continued presence of Cyrillic in Croatia where Latin letters predominate. The authors argue that writing systems (like language in general) can function as a symbol of national identity. The Balkans are part of an area that lies in a border zone between Latin writing to the west and Cyrillic that lies to the east. Within this zone, writing systems often reflect choices by societies determined to reinforce or alternately realign national identities. These can reflect instances of popular nationalisms or more deliberate nation-building strategies undertaken by state actors. In either case national memory, myth and tradition is "rearranged" to suit political purposes. Thus memory is not essential or given in meaning; it is arranged and interpreted. Since discourse is socially constructed and collective memory is defined as a form of discourse, it follows that the different discursive interpretations of Cyrillic script reflect different social positions and psycho-social motifs. In one Cyrillic is reflective a threat to Crotian society, while to the other it reflects the importance of cultural exchange/commonality and erudition generally. The former motive is very important to veterans – the antagonists of the narrative – for whom Cyrillic script awakens memories of the intense suffering of war against Serbia. Using an empirical method based on discourse analysis of a linguistic corpus drawn from heterogeneous sources, the authors investigate the debate around the inclusion of Cyrillic scripts in the public spaces in Vukovar, finding that the symbolic importance of Cyrillic script helps discursive communities frame their conflicting takes on Croatian identity. Symbolization then is a process of discourse that arises in the context of the current debate and contestation over the central values of Croatian society.

Kesylyte-Alliks's article investigates the contested meaning of state-created symbols – in this case, the two flags of post-Soviet Lithuania. The contestation centres on official and unofficial perspectives. Central to the article is Kesylyte-Alliks's contention that the political field is markedly distinct from the civil society. The state has the advantage of "official discourse" that can ascribe symbolic meaning to state-created objects (such as flags), while sectors of the civil society struggle to accumulate power through the discursive appropriation of symbols. Nonetheless in this case the officially defined meaning of the flags faces competition from segments of the public. Gathering official materials including records of parliamentary debates as well "semi-public social discourse", and applying linguistic analysis to her corpus, Kesylyte-Alliks considers the representation and symbolic signification of the two flags – the official tricolor and the semi-official "national historical flag". The former gained its legitimacy from its association with the overthrow of the Soviet regime; the popular uprising against Soviet rule both legitimized the flag and made it the symbol of the Lithuanian nation itself. On the other hand, the restoration of the premodern "national historical flag" was closely associated with the integrity and independence of the Lithuanian state considered apart from the nation. However, Kesylyte-Alliks finds that the discursive function of the two flags is less a matter of their inherent historical references than the discursive contexts in which they are vetted. In the Lithuanian parliament and among the political class, the independence of the state from the nation is

emphasized and both flags are seen as symbols of that institutional integrity: here the "civic" triumphs over the "ethnocentric". Within the informal segments of the public sphere, however, the Lithuanian nation is seen as essential and both flags symbolize its ownership.

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